A Not-So-Nuclear Family: I Love Lucy In the Midst of the Suburban Revolution

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Lucy Ricardo showing the schedule that Ricky created for her to "manage" her time to Mr. and Mrs. Littlefield and Fred Mertz.¹

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Introduction

Ricky Ricardo, after catching his wife Lucy in the middle of one of her harebrained schemes, "Lucy! You have some 'splanin' to do!"

*I Love Lucy* skyrocketed to the top of the ratings in 1952 becoming U.S. television's first blockbuster. Even on January 20, 1953, the day of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration, more viewers tuned in to watch *I Love Lucy* than the live coverage of the president. With such popularity, the show had considerable influence on American culture, while it also reflected the society it was entertaining.

What can the germinal television show *I Love Lucy* tell us about the 1950s cultural and political conflict? The first season and a half, or the forty-five pre-maternity episodes, of *Lucy* illustrates the transition from the urban, ethnic comedy that predominated in vaudeville and on radio prior to World War II to the white, middle-class, suburban nuclear-family-oriented comedy that prevailed in early Cold War America. *Lucy*'s transgressive potential is most evident in how it both challenged and reinforced gender norms and ideals as well as raising questions of interracial marriage with its central coupling of the Anglo-American Lucille Ball and the Cuban-American Desi Arnaz on and off the small screen. Additionally, the female network forged by Lucy and Ethel challenged gender norms and ideals in a way that was remarkable and largely absent on television until the 1970s in the midst of second-wave feminism. These distinctions also account for the show's success and enduring appeal.

Susan J. Douglas in *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* recalls Lucy as the most famous female character of the late 1940s and early
1950s to defy the "compliant, womb-centered, housewife stereotype." She suggests that shows like *I Love Lucy* gave expression to anxieties over which gender would wear the pants in postwar America. She recognizes the fact that most episodes ended with Lucy "happily tamed," but claims that mothers could see women resisting and poking fun at the notion "real women" found "fulfillment" in domesticity. By the late 1950s and early 1960s when the first golden age of television was coming to an end, so too did the portrayal of more complex female characters like Lucy and Ethel and their central bond of female camaraderie. Instead, the more ideologically perfect mother and nuclear family such as on *Leave it to Beaver* became the norm.

Media scholar Jack Sher argues that *Lucy* was not a regular mirror that always told a truth about American life and culture, yet at the same time it was not a magic mirror that portrayed fantasy. Instead, Sher imagined the show reflecting domestic life through a funhouse mirror. The mirror both distorts and exaggerates reality, while still capturing a recognizable image. This paper seeks to examine the effects and affects the Coney Island funhouse mirror had on 1950s society. I ask the question: how did *I Love Lucy* reflect and shape the image of the American family and gender roles in a period of profound transformation, namely post-WWII

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3 Ibid., 51.
suburbanization and the reconstruction of the nuclear family in early Cold War America?

There has been a large amount of material published relating to the television show *I Love Lucy*. The vast majority is in the form of contemporary newsstand publications in the form of articles and books that are geared towards fans and a popular audience; however, historians and other scholars have not failed to examine the importance of the show. The scholarly work that is available does a comprehensive job of covering the feminist aspects of the show, in terms of asking the question: was Lucille Ball and/or her television alter ego a feminist or not. There has also been a great deal of attention paid to the impact the show had on the television industry, as one of the original and most influential sitcoms. Additionally, already exhausted, the issue of the pregnancy on television needs not to be expanded on at this point. Finally, what has become apparent is that scholars have chosen sides as to whether *Lucy* was harmful or helpful to the image of women.

Some historians and feminists have interpreted *I Love Lucy* as a promotion of a negative image of women. Indeed one inspiration for this project was a friend’s experience, or lack thereof, with the show. She had never seen an episode of *I Love Lucy*, not because the widely syndicated show was inaccessible, but because her mother had banned it. My friend’s mother did not want her daughters growing up thinking that Lucy Ricardo was either a proper female icon or role model and disagreed with Lucy’s subordinate status in the Ricardo household and the way that both Lucy and Ethel were treated as women. Many scholars echo these concerns.
Doyle Green in *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy Through South Park* in 2008 claims that the ideological function of the show was to promote the adjustment of women to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical. Making Lucy the object of audience scorn does this; he believes the audience laughs at Lucy instead of with her. Greene argues that the message is not hidden because any attempt of Lucy to transcend her domestic role results in failure. Specifically, he mentions her attempts to cross over from neighborhood life into the cosmopolitan world of show business. He claims that they are ridiculous and futile with Lucy’s incompetence being a, if not the, source of humor. This argument is in line with some feminist views of the show.

Tracy Floreani in “Maud Martha vs. *I Love Lucy*” discusses feminist concerns that *I Love Lucy* promoted ideological containment and upheld newly domesticated ideals of the day. She suggests that Ricky functions as an ideal material provider who rewards Lucy after she reinserts herself into the domestic space.

“What did you do? You saved our sanity,” a quote from a 1970s “Good Morning America” tribute.

Feminist theorists also argue that *I Love Lucy* was helpful for the image and status of women. Lucy constantly challenged the hierarchical construction of the relationship between male and female and attempted to reverse or displace its

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*8* Ibid., 190.

operations.\textsuperscript{10} Lori Landay in “I Love Lucy: Television and Gender in Postwar Domestic Ideology” claims that I Love Lucy suggests the failure of the domestic ideal, the rigid gender roles portrayed by popular culture, to match up with people’s real-life experiences in everyday life.\textsuperscript{11} Landay believes that the iconic and idealized gender stereotypes of the 1950s were not true to the real lives Americans led and that I Love Lucy helped to illustrate these conflicts. This would support the claims made by many 1950s housewives who described Lucy as a heroine and as having the power to save their sanity. Optimistically, humorist Erma Bombeck claimed that Lucy was the heroine of seventy million housewives in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{12}

In her master’s thesis I Love Lucy, Three’s Company, And Will & Grace: A Critical Analysis Of Changing Societal Beliefs Through Television, Dianna Lynn Weston-Dawkes suggests that there were two different ways that the audience viewed I Love Lucy when it originally aired. Weston-Dawkes cites that although Lucy’s half-brained ideas were not always successful, they confirmed “that women were capable of more than cooking meals . . . I Love Lucy gave a voice to the women who wanted to reclaim their independence, and it gave women . . . a point of view on domesticity.”\textsuperscript{13} She claimed that women loved I Love Lucy because it “made

\textsuperscript{10} Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," The American Historical Review 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1066.  
\textsuperscript{12} Karol, The Comic DNA of Lucille Ball, 39.  
challenging domesticity funny and reflected an underlying desire of the time."¹⁴ She argues that one way to view the show was as a way for women to deal with and combat their ideological containment.¹⁵ Alternately, she references Christopher Anderson's suggestion in "I Love Lucy: U.S. Situation Comedy": "[I]t is possible to see *I Love Lucy* as a conservative comedy in which each episode teaches Lucy not to question the social order." Weston-Dawkes expands on this by discussing how at the end of most episodes, Lucy realizes that she has had another failed attempt at assuming a new role and must go back to the role of domesticity.¹⁶ Weston-Dawkes's formulation of this dualistic perspective on the show as alternately challenging and undermining the status quo is an important one, which is central to this project.

The 45 episodes prior to Lucy's pregnancy differ dramatically from the subsequent 135 episodes. The beginning episodes are set in an urban environment, involve Ball performing a large amount of physical comedy, having no children, and having ample professional opportunities. The later episodes are mainly suburban (in content if not in place), are child centered, offer little professional opportunity, and focus more on consumption because Lucy cannot attempt to get into show business from the suburbs. Although only the final season is actually set in the suburbs, the tone and the focus of the show shifted prior to the actual move. It is not only possible but also necessary to classify the two differently. *Lucy* is a cultural product that reflects the ongoing suburban revolution of early Cold War America.

¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid., 19.
Understanding this revolution is critical to explaining how *I Love Lucy* functioned as a transitional hybrid in the shift from city to suburb and radio to television during the early 1950s.

The 1950s marked the rise of the suburb. Family fever was sweeping the nation as suburban domesticity began to represent the "good life" in the eyes of popular culture.17 This new life brought with it a new culture and way of living. Racial and economic exclusiveness grew as families moved from apartments to single-family dwellings. The reliance on the private automobile grew as people moved between their suburban homes and their urban workplaces.

Politicians feared that existing divisions in American society along racial, class, and gender lines would weaken society at home and damage the country's reputation abroad.18 Public policies were adopted to blur class lines. Federal funds were allocated to expand the number of affordable single-family homes in suburban developments. These funds went to improve the white working and middle-class lifestyle but people of color were largely excluded from the newly established suburban communities.19 Despite this exclusion, Americans of all backgrounds rushed into marriage and childbearing.20

In the beginning, mainly affluent families had the flexibility and financial resources to move to the urban edges. As with most social change, suburbanization

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18 Ibid., xvii.
19 Ibid., xlix.
20 Ibid., xvii.
started with the top of society and moved down through the classes.\textsuperscript{21} One of the most influential early pieces of legislation was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the GI Bill. This act created the Veterans Administration Mortgage Program. Ultimately, the goal was that the sixteen million GI's from WWII would return to civilian life and become homeowners.\textsuperscript{22} Other important legislation came a decade after the war when Congress approved billions of dollars of additional mortgage insurance for the Federal Housing Administration (FHA).\textsuperscript{23} The influx of money available for citizens to use to buy a house fueled the growth of the suburbs and opened up the market to those in the lower income brackets.

In \textit{Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States}, Kenneth T. Jackson describes the uniqueness of American suburbs from 1945-73:

\begin{quote}
Affluent and middle-class Americans live in suburban areas that are far from their work places, in homes that they own, and in the center of yards that by urban standards elsewhere are enormous.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Jackson cites five common characteristics of the new American suburb. They were all located on the periphery of urban centers. This allowed their inhabitants to keep their jobs in the city but at the same time created longer commute times. The density of the suburbs was relatively low when compared to other suburban communities around the world, especially in Europe. There was also not a sharp division between town and country, with the city just blending into suburbia at its

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Ibid., 233.
\item[23] Ibid.
\item[24] Ibid., 6.
\end{footnotes}
edges. A majority of the houses within a suburb had some level of architectural similarity as did the population have economic and racial homogeneity. Finally, and most important for their rapid growth, availability was widespread, and a family could afford a home in the suburbs even if they were not of above average wealth.25

The low cost of housing was due to a number of factors, in addition to government subsidies. Land developers took charge of large amounts of land, which they then subdivided into cheap lots. They developed inexpensive construction methods, which, as seen in their similarity, were replicated on the building of all the houses in that community. Additionally, transportation technology was improving, making it cheaper for both the construction of the houses and for commuting once people had moved out of the city. Finally, there was an abundant amount of energy available which seemed to have no limits.26 These economic factors, along with growing racial tension within the cities, encouraged families to move to the suburbs. The young families hoped to find better schools and private space, which ultimately led to the isolation of nuclear families.27

*I Love Lucy* emerged amidst the suburban revolution. It established the domestic situation comedy as television comedy's primary genre.28 The 1950s American sitcom provided images of the very place that its viewers were most familiar with, the home. At its center was the American family, although this family has been embodied in many different forms. Such representations included, but

25 Ibid., 240-1.
26 Ibid., 11.
27 Ibid., 244-5.
were not limited to, that of nuclear, extended, blended, or created families. The original televised situation comedy emerged at a moment when the nuclear family held particular sway as a result of postwar suburbanization. Although radio had the ability to broadcast sound, the lasting impressions that television left through visual images became highly controversial to a country that was worried about preserving the sanctity of their households and gender and cultural norms. Television networks worked hard to tailor their shows in a manner that reflected these concerns, as can be seen in the sheer number of early American situation comedies that personified an idealized postwar nuclear family in suburbia. One excellent example is *Leave it to Beaver*, which ran on CBS from 1957-8, and on ABC from 1958-66. Coexisting and complicating these emerging stereotypes of the American family was the situation comedy that received the highest ratings in the 1950s. *I Love Lucy* challenged as often as it reinforced the mold of the nuclear family. It exhibited a tight-knit extended, non-traditional, urban family, and for a season and a half, no children. *I Love Lucy*, in having Ethel and Fred serve as part of an extended family and Lucy and Ricky initially having no children, functioned as television writer Jack Sher's concept of the Coney Island mirror in its reflecting and shaping of the discontent that was surfacing in postwar America about the primacy of the nuclear family in suburbia. Journalist Rebecca May put it perfectly, "Laughs are Key, but Best Sitcoms Reflect Times." 

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29 Ibid., 40-41.
30 Rebecca May, "Laughs are Key, but Best Sitcoms Reflect Times," *Electronic Media Chicago*, January 14, 2002: 3.
Originally exhibiting a non-traditional and non-nuclear extended urban family, the Ricardos on *Lucy* eventually conformed and reflected the reality of many families in postwar America moving to the suburbs to raise their children. This move is symbolic of the transformation *I Love Lucy* made over the course of its run toward portraying a more domestic, idealized, and suburban nuclear family. Not only does this reflect the ongoing suburban revolution but it also sets apart the pre-maternity episodes from the ones that follow.

Adding to their historical significance and making the first season and a half revolutionary, the opening episodes of *I Love Lucy* helped shape the genre of the situation comedy for television. Further, although the show remained just as popular after this shift, it is mainly the earlier episodes that have been lionized by critics, scholars, and the popular audience. All manner of renditions of the top *I Love Lucy* episodes have been made since the show went off the air: what these lists have in common is that the most memorable episodes aired during the first season and a half of the show. "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," "Pioneer Women," "The Audition," and "Job Switching" are among the most critically and popularly lauded episodes.31

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The physical comedy on the show performed by Ball peaked at the convergence of reality and fiction with the birth of her son.\(^{32}\) When talking about physical comedy on the show, the Museum of Broadcasting mentions three shows from the first season and a half: “Job Switching,” “Pioneer Women,” and “Lucy Does a TV Commercial.”\(^{33}\) All of these shows would have cast a mother in poor light; however, they were deemed acceptable when she was just a young wife but not yet a mother. “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” involves Lucy getting drunk off of a health tonic as she slurs her speech and needs to be carried off stage. It would be irresponsible for a mother to be seen drunk, even if it was by accident; but without the responsibility of taking care of a child, the plot is not as problematic.\(^{34}\) Once the show involved a child, the comedic situations that the character Lucy was placed in shifted to include more stereotypical roles, namely that of a mother and ultimately a suburban wife and mother. An example of this shift in comedy can be seen in how the problems shifted from Lucy being intoxicated or irresponsible to having problems related to the pregnancy or with raising a child—or when the comedic tension rested with the child himself.

Further, over the course of six years, the show \textit{I Love Lucy} took on a number of different venues for its setting. The show originally was set in a New York City brownstone apartment, a decidedly urban environment. After Little Ricky’s birth, the writers moved the characters to new places through a trip to Hollywood and a

\(^{32}\) Landay, \textit{The Sitcom Reader}, 95.


\(^{34}\) “Lucy Does a TV Commercial,” \textit{I Love Lucy}, DVD, directed by Marc Daniels (1952; Los Angeles, CA: CBS DVD, 2005).
European vacation. Finally, and most drastically, the Ricardos, quickly followed by the Mertzes, moved to the suburbs. These changes drastically altered the story lines of the shows, reiterating my point that it is necessary to consider the early episodes separately.

Female camaraderie between Lucy and Ethel was also more prevalent while the Mertzes and the Ricardos formed a childless extended family. The two women were able to work together as a team against not only their husbands but also to challenge the established gender roles during the postwar era. Lucy and Ethel, before Lucy was a mother, were not representative of the image of the happy housewife that was idealized by popular 1950s periodicals. Lucy, in particular, was the opposite of complacent, instead using her female support network with Ethel to attempt to gain entry into the public sphere. Not only was this extraordinary during the time the show originally aired, but it took nearly thirty years before norms were challenged in this way on television again. Further, viewers knew Lucille Ball was a great success both in front of and behind the camera, adding to the transgressive potential of the show. This thesis will take a closer look at the first season and a half of *I Love Lucy* in three chapters.

Chapter 1, “The Family From Radio to Television in Early Cold War America,” makes the argument that *I Love Lucy* operated as a kind of transitional programming hybrid in the shift from radio to television. I will discuss the kind of programming that was prevalent on radio from the ethnic, urban, racialized comedies such as *The Goldbergs* and *Amos 'n' Andy* to the white Anglo American nuclear suburban family.
of *My Favorite Husband*. I will also cover early television programs such as *The Burns and Allen Show* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* as I explain how *I Love Lucy* fits into and transforms the televised domestic situation comedy.

Chapter 2, "The Symbolic Containment of Women," takes Lori Landay’s claim that Lucy embodied the contradictions between female ambition and traditional femininity and explores how *I Love Lucy* handled the tension, conflict, and alternative configurations of gender norms, roles, and realities in the 1950s.\(^3\)\(^5\)

Chapter 3, "Lucy and Her Dear Friend Ethel," takes an in-depth look at the friendship between Lucy and Ethel both on and off the screen within the context of female camaraderie both throughout the history of the women’s movement and on television. Lucy and Ethel both challenge and reinforce gender norms onscreen. Off screen Lucille Ball as a female comedy lead has been analyzed, and at times criticized, for trying to differentiate herself from her sidekick in a way that a male lead would not have been questioned or criticized.

\(^3\)\(^5\) Although this thesis is only looking at the first season and a half, Lucille Ball played the Lucy character on four different television shows. First, Ball played Lucy Ricardo on *I Love Lucy*, second, she played Lucy Carmichael on *The Lucy Show*, third, she played Lucy Carter on *Here’s Lucy*, and finally, she took the title Lucy Baker on *Life with Lucy*. The Lucy character in all appeared in four series that spanned over twenty years, all on Monday night. *Museum of Broadcasting, Lucille Ball First Lady of Comedy* (New York: The Museum of Television and Radio, 1984), 7 and Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 160.
Chapter 1: The Family From Radio to Television in Early Cold War America

The arrival of *I Love Lucy* on CBS-TV October 15, 1951, signaled the true end of radio... People loved both *Lucy* and TV, and decided it was lights-out time for radio.  

It was not until after WWII that television became part of the collective American conscious. Transparent and magical were two of the adjectives often used by consumers to describe the phenomenon of television when it first began coming into the home during the late 1940s. Although not widely available to consumers until the early fifties, as early as 1946 social commentators claimed that television had the ability to bring the world into the family room. For the first time, moving images were brought into the most private of places, the American home.

Before television sales boomed, the radio, motion pictures, newspapers, and magazines enjoyed rough equality in popularity. This equilibrium was upset with the invention of the television. Americans who had once spent their evening enjoying these other forms of entertainment were increasingly likely to watch television and once they started, the time they spent on the old forms dramatically decreased. The television became an important, new way to legitimate the transformation of values that were initiated by the booming consumer economy of postwar America. Television sales were welcomed as a form of "wholesome at home entertainment and innovative technology,... [they were] new and modern,

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designed for leisure time... these characteristics [were] embraced by the average upwardly mobile postwar American family." The television brought with it three dramatic changes: first, as an object, it changed the domestic space, specifically the focal point in the rooms in which it was viewed. Second, it changed ideologies by introducing new and influential cultural narratives and images into once private space. Finally, it shaped consumer identity by incorporating purchasing power into a component of national belonging. In America, it provided a way for assimilation into a classless, homogeneous, family-centered, American life.40

In the beginning, it was all made possible by the creation of the commercial television network. National networks provided news and entertainment programs via local stations to a mass audience. Sponsors, whose advertisements accompanied the programs, subsidized the cost of the programs. This system created a kind of tension within the television industry, as Walter Benjamin foreshadowed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," between television programming's exhibition or commercial value and its artistic value.41 Media scholar Robert Saudek explains that the "genesis of network radio in [the] 1920s marked an unprecedented alliance of social, economic, and technological forces, establishing a "structure" which persisted into the TV age."42

Media theorist Daniel J. Czitrom in his book, Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan argues, "Media intervene[s] directly in our intellectual and

40 Ibid., 183.
emotional lives in our politics, in our work, in our aesthetic stance, and in our collective memory."43 The media shapes viewer's conception of reality and culture, particularly popular culture.44 George Gerber's cultivation theory argues that television viewing creates shared beliefs and perceptions by viewers adopting the messages and images they see as accurate depictions of social reality.45 However, the television networks were not obligated to create shows based on reality, their sole purpose was to sell a product successfully. For a situation comedy to be popular, it needed to portray a life that the audience found compelling and continued to watch on a regular basis.46

So what exactly were these early television sets tuned into? And what kind of programming did the television networks discover attracted the largest audience? The new medium opened the door for an endless amount of creativity to go into the shaping of television programming, seemingly only limited by the imaginations of the show's writers. Although this opportunity existed, as with the system that emerged to create the radio industry, network and sponsor endorsement was vital for a program to actually be broadcast into American homes across the country. First and foremost, television was conceived as commercial broadcast medium in the style and format pioneered by its predecessor, radio.

44 Ibid., xii.
45 Weston-Dawkes, I Love Lucy, 2.
46 Landay, The Sitcom Reader, 91.
Television, however, inspired visionaries willing to fight for the realization of their dreams. For example, the creators of what would arguably become the most successful television show of its time, *I Love Lucy*, circumvented the original refusal of networks to pick up their show. It took time, along with talent, money, drive, and luck for the show's premise to finally find a home on CBS. Even the show's creator, producer and head writer, Jess Oppenheimer, had not envisioned the monumental impact the show would have on the industry. The immediate and sustained success of *I Love Lucy*, along with encouraging greater artistic freedom and autonomy in television producers and writers, helped to shape a new era of entertainment, the televised situation comedy.

**I Love Lucy: Was It Really the Most Popular and Successful Sitcom of All Time?**

"TV Guide" claims that Lucy had, "a face seen by more people, more often, than the face of any human being who ever lived." Although this is hard to prove, the show's constant syndication since it went off the air over fifty years ago has enabled millions of viewers from multiple generations to enjoy its comedy. *I Love Lucy* was first telecast by CBS on October 15, 1951. The half-hour show premiered on Monday night at nine between *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* (1948-1958), and


It's News to Me, (1951-1954). From 1951-1956, although the television shows before and after it changed, Lucy was a staple for CBS's Monday night programming. *I Love Lucy* was an immediate smash hit and, during its six years of its original run, never ranked lower than third among all television programs.\(^{50}\)

In addition to high ratings, both the television show and its actors received awards in recognition of their excellence. In 1952 and 1953, *I Love Lucy* was presented with Emmy Awards for the Best Situation Comedy. Additionally, Lucille Ball and Vivian Vance received Emmys for Best Comedienne in 1952 and Best Supporting Actress in 1953, respectively. A few years later in 1955 Ball received another Emmy for Best Actress in a Continuing Performance.\(^{51}\) William Frawley was nominated several times for Best Supporting Actor but never won.

*I Love Lucy* reached record levels of popularity, despite its relatively short run, if compared to one of television's longest-running series, *Meet the Press*, which has been on air since 1947.\(^{52}\) In 2008 the Simpsons became the longest running situation comedy, on the air for twenty years and counting. This said, Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh in "The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network," claim the successful style and format of *I Love Lucy* has never been paralleled in the history of television, a contention echoed by most media scholars, professionals, and fans.\(^{53}\) Ball continues to be held up as an example of success for female comedians on

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 1156.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 479.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 1204-1205.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 1260.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 480.
television. For example, Debra Messing of *Will and Grace*, (1998-2006), has been compared with Ball: "With her recognized talent for physical comedy and her luxurious head of curly auburn hair, which is sometimes described as red, ... Messing has drawn comparisons to the legendary redheaded comedic television actress Lucille Ball."54

*I Love Lucy* continues to enjoy widespread popularity even in 2009, fifty-eight years after its creation. What accounts for the enduring success of *I Love Lucy*? The first forty-five episodes of *Lucy* both challenged and reinforced the mold of the nuclear family. They provided a transition from radio to television as a hybrid of both urban and ethnic comedy and a white, extended, middle class, non-nuclear family. Further, its female support network sets the show apart from anything else of its time, as it was unparalleled for decades.

**Unique Alchemy of Talent: In Front of and Behind the Camera**

Long before the creation of the television show *I Love Lucy*, two performers were working their way in the entertainment industry. Lucille Ball, known as the "Queen of the B's" was working from 1935-1942 as a B-picture comedienne for RKO studios.55 Desi Arnaz was a Cuban-American immigrant bandleader who was looking to start his film career. Introduced on the 1940 set of *Too Many Girls*, the two quickly fell in love and married shortly thereafter.56 Their two-career marriage

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56 Ibid., 64.
required them to spend countless days, weeks and even months apart and, before long, Arnaz and Ball’s relationship was suffering due to their demanding vocations. The entertainment industry, especially before the studio system was dismantled in the late 1940s, required its actors and actresses to be hustled around from movie to movie, without regard to their personal lives. The negative results that it had on its members’ lives and marriages can be seen in the tension it caused in the Arnaz’s marriage. Although the Paramount decision, which was responsible for the dismantling of the studio system, was passed in 1948, Ball found that she was still constantly asked to do films that required her to spend time apart from her husband. Recognizing that something needed to be done about the stress their career choices had been putting on their marriage, Ball decided to try to convince CBS to let her and Arnaz work together on her next project, a television show.57

Lucille Ball had been performing as one of the lead characters on a popular radio show called *My Favorite Husband* (1948-1951), when its producers decided that they wanted to convert the radio show to television, as was happening with many programs in the transition to television. Ball, when first trying to find a way to have Arnaz on the television show, had the power in the relationship because she was the more successful of the two. She had the connections with the network executives and she was the main source of established comedic talent. This power structure, however, was reversed once the network officially picked up the show;

Arnaz took control and asserted authority in a way that reflected 1950s gender norms.

*My Favorite Husband* always started with the narrator introducing the radio show. Here is the opening from episode 11, Jess Oppenheimer's first script as producer and writer:

> We present *My Favorite Husband*, a new series based on the delightful stories of Isabel Scott Rorick's gay, sophisticated *Mr. and Mrs. Cugat*, starring Lucille Ball with Richard Denning. The Cugats, Liz, busy young matron, and George, busy young fifth-vice-president of the bank, are one of the few couples that we know who live together and like it.58

The major differences between the television show and the radio show were that the television show moved the central couple—an Anglo banker husband and Anglo stay-at-home wife—from the Midwest to the urban environment of New York City and that the husband's ethnicity and profession were changed from Anglo banker to Cuban-American bandleader, to incorporate Arnaz's personal and professional backgrounds.59 Additionally, on *My Favorite Husband* the Coopers had a maid, while Lucy was "the maid" on *I Love Lucy*, and the Ricardos were striving to be upwardly mobile. Like on *I Love Lucy*, there was another couple on *My Favorite Husband*, Mr. Cooper's superior from the bank and his wife, but they did not function as an extended family like the Mertzes. Instead, on the radio show there was more couple vs. couple conflict oriented around competition, unlike on the television show when

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there was more same-sex bonding. Finally, the difference in the show's titles is significant, with one talking about the male lead and the other about the female lead.

Jess Oppenheimer was head writer and producer from 1948-1951 for *My Favorite Husband* and from 1951-1956 for *I Love Lucy*. Bob Carroll, Jr., and Madelyn Pugh Davis, writers from the radio show, went on to write for *I Love Lucy*. But Oppenheimer edited and polished all the scripts to fit his views of both shows. These three formed the microcosm for both the radio and television program and were chiefly responsible for its vision. “Bossman” or “The Man Behind the Ball,” which were the titles Ball and Arnaz had for Oppenheimer respectively, demonstrated the respect the couple held for his leadership and skill. Despite the amount of trust the couple had in Oppenheimer's ability to produce a successful product, the couple faced a number of difficulties when trying to convince the network that Arnaz was right for the part of the husband on the new television show. Oppenheimer supported Ball in her attempts to convince CBS to sponsor a pilot show; however, his hands were tied because he was under contract to the network and had to follow its dictates.

CBS wanted to bring *My Favorite Husband* to television but initially refused to accept the idea of the Cuban émigré Arnaz playing Ball's television husband. The network executives were ardently opposed to the idea of a Cuban-American male playing the husband of an Irish-American woman and would not even let the radio

62 Ibid.
show’s producer and writers, Jess Oppenheimer, Bob Carroll Jr., and Madelyn Pugh write a preliminary script. Ball, however, was insistent that Arnaz play her husband and commissioned scripts from outside teams with whom she worked closely on the premise.63 The program concepts were presented to different networks. One in particular that intrigued NBC programmers had Arnaz playing a successful bandleader, Larry Lopez, and Ball playing his movie star wife, Lucy Lopez.64 A sample episode centered on plans for a quiet Lopez wedding anniversary celebration that was crashed when a Life reporter heard of the location.65

Ball, however, had reservations about this iteration of the proposed show. She argued, “The general public doesn’t think that movie stars have any problems. They think it is just party after party.”66 Here she echoed the long-standing practice in film and radio that problems in performers’ lives should be kept out of the media or at the best referred to only obliquely, if at all. Because the media and the entertainment industry worked closely together, it was possible for performers to hide many of the problems in their life that their fans would not look kindly upon or that might disrupt their personas as performers. With the collapse of the studio system beginning in 1948, this synchronicity between press, studio, and performer in the entertainment industries writ large started to change the standards for disclosure. I Love Lucy, in its final state, was successful at accommodating this new system by creating a behind-the-scenes look at the life of an entertainer but with a

63 Stefan Kanfer, Ball of Fire, 122.
65 Kanfer, Ball of Fire, 121.
66 Ibid., 122.
relatable, "untalented" central character in Lucy who did not succeed in the industry.

Once CBS realized another network, NBC, had shown interest in the program, Ball was in a position to negotiate a deal with CBS that allowed Arnaz to play her husband. After Ball had convinced the network to sign Arnaz, Oppenheimer, one of CBS's main writers, was allowed to work on a script for the pilot. He immediately threw out the program concepts that had been suggested by outsiders, instead wanting to keep the premise closer to that of *My Favorite Husband*. The radio show oriented around a central couple, the Coopers and a secondary couple, the Atterburys, with Mr. Atterbury being the president of the bank where Mr. Cooper worked. Oppenheimer's goal was to keep the same "Liz" type of character and travails of two couples that had been the roots of the comedic plots on *My Favorite Husband*.67 These elements had allowed the writers to perfect the art of working backward when orchestrating the plots, starting with a final block of a comedy scene and working to justify that final scene by finding a way to reach it logically.68 Encouraging Oppenheimer's goal while working with him to form a premise for the show, Ball voiced that she preferred playing housewife characters.69 After much deliberation with Ball, Oppenheimer issued the final premise for the show in writing:

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"I LOVE LUCY"

Created by Jess Oppenheimer

This is a title of an idea for a radio and/or television program, incorporating characters named Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. He is a Latin-American orchestra leader and singer. She is his wife. They are happily married and very much in love. The only bone of contention between them is her desire to get into show business, and his equally strong desire to keep her out of it... as show business is the only way he [Ricky] knows to make a living, and he makes a very good one, the closest he can get to this dream [of having a normal life outside of show business] is having a wife who’s out of show business and devotes herself to keeping as nearly a normal life as possible for him.70

Oppenheimer's premise gave Ball what she was looking for, characters the audience could relate to. By having a character that was not in show business, the audience could feel that Ball was struggling through real-life, though exaggerated, scenarios, just like every other ordinary American. “Real life” here is defined by female subjugation in the household; Ricky can have an unreal life, but Lucy’s must be real and normal. This premise uses women to define the norm through their removal from the public sphere, even after women and men activists had spent the past century in the United States working to gain entry to the public sphere.

Furthermore, Ball’s new housewife character took on a child-like woman reinforcing gender stereotypes that activists had been working to destroy. Yet she also continued to challenge, albeit unsuccessfully, the constraints of life as a housewife.

After the show was picked up by CBS, the power dynamic changed in Arnaz’s favor. Ball charged Oppenheimer with the title of “Bossman,” but when it came to creativity, Arnaz laid down specific ground rules for the kind of comedy that he

70 Jess Oppenheimer and Gregg Oppenheimer, Laughs, Luck... and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time (Syracuse: Syracuse Press, 1996), 139.
would and would not allow. First, neither Lucy nor Ricky would be allowed to seriously flirt with someone else. Second, Arnaz insisted on Ricky’s manhood and that he never became a “nincompoop husband.” Although the first rule was never truly breached, often times Arnaz’s character looked like a fool or was made fun of, despite Arnaz’s attempts to avoid humiliation. Arnaz and his alter ego’s immigrant status made both a foil for humor and mockery as it affected him both professionally and personally in his real life. It appears that as long as by the end of the show Ricky got his power back, Arnaz allowed the humor and that writers attempted to abide by this rule. There is only evidence of one instance in which Arnaz outright rejected a script. The script had Ricky cheating on his income tax. Arnaz felt this would have been injurious to his United States citizenship, which he personally held dear, and refused to allow it to be performed. This fear most certainly tapped into xenophobia that Arnaz was aware of about the worthiness of immigrants to be citizens. The status of the Latino immigrant was further undermined after the zoot suit riots in 1943, making it even more important for Arnaz to distinguish his character (and by extension himself) as a “model” immigrant. As the show succeeded, Arnaz’s power continued to grow not only within the partnerships with his wife and Oppenheimer, but also with the television network.

71 Carini, “Love’s Labors Almost Lost,” 44.
72 Ibid.
From “Liz” to “Lucy”: “Baby Snooks” as a Model

My Favorite Husband had struggled in its first few radio episodes, which were written by Frank Fox and Bill Davenport, writers for The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1944-1952). Fox and Davenport wrote in a much more traditional suburban family style that did not work for My Favorite Husband—had the original writers stayed aboard, I Love Lucy would have likely either looked much different or never would have existed. Because of the show’s low ratings and with Fox and Davenport needing to return to writing for Ozzie and Harriet, the head of West Coast network programming for CBS Radio commissioned Jess Oppenheimer to write a script for the program. It is hard to imagine what I Love Lucy would have looked like had Oppenheimer not stepped in. However, it is clear that it would not have been the same kind of transitional hybrid in the shift from radio to television.

In his script, Oppenheimer remade Ball’s central character of Liz Cugat into Liz Cooper. The original “Liz” character was a “gay, sophisticated, socialite [house]wife of a bank vice president,” the husband played by white actor Richard Denning. As performed by Ball on radio, the new Liz would eventually turn into a prototype for the creation of Lucy Ricardo.

Before coming to My Favorite Husband, Oppenheimer had spent six years writing character-driven comedy for the radio program Baby Snooks (1936-1947). And Oppenheimer changed the Liz character into one similar to the child character

74 Ozzie and Harriet (1952-1966) also transitioned from radio to television.
75 Oppenheimer, Laughs, Luck... and Lucy, 114.
76 Edwards, I Love Lucy, 252.
of “Baby Snooks,” who was a “wise-beyond-her-years little girl who constantly drove her daddy crazy.” In order to make the show more commercially successful as a mainstream comedy, Oppenheimer made Liz more like “Baby Snooks”: unsophisticated, scheming, childlike, and impulsive. This allowed Liz to come up with crazier schemes and act more impulsively than the original, idealized housewife persona. Oppenheimer’s changes to the “Liz” character increased certain kinds of narrative possibilities but reinforced notions about women as being more irrational, emotional and erratic, in need of protection and support. In saving the radio show, Oppenheimer laid the foundation for what was to become the iconic “Lucy” character. Part of what made this character so loved was that the audience felt she actually existed in the real-life Lucille Ball.

**Show Biz Couple**

The concept of the show biz couple, where stars play “themselves,” was not new, but rather it was part of an established entertainment tradition. The first season and a half of *I Love Lucy* fell in the middle of the spectrum of the early domestic situation comedies. Although Ball’s original vision of the show did not entail her husband and her playing their exact selves, other television shows were doing precisely this in the early 1950s. On *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, which ran on CBS from 1950-1958, Burns and Allen portrayed themselves: a married couple and comedy team working in television. The show was set in

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
Beverly Hills, often times with the episodes referencing the diversity of activities available to Southern Californians. The *Burns and Allen* show represented anything but a nuclear family by orienting around a working couple in an urban environment.\(^60\) *I Love Lucy* had similarities to this show: it too was set in an urban environment and had the real-life married couple playing themselves, *Lucy*, however, stayed closer to the domestic theme that had been established in *My Favorite Husband*.

The popularity of *Lucy* was driven by the known similarities between the Arnazes and Ricardos, which was largely a result of show publicists working to obscure the line between the two couples.\(^81\) The original premise would have allowed Ball and Arnaz to essentially play themselves, which would have made the publicist's task much easier. Problematically, had the original character premise been followed, the character of Lucy would not have been placed in such drastic circumstances because she would have been bound by the pressure to present a respectable persona. This would have changed the show dramatically because the show's slapstick comedy relied heavily on putting Lucy into physically ridiculous situations. A majority of these situations were a result of Lucy's failure—whether it was her fault or not. To put it simply, the show was funny because Lucy's failure was funny. If Lucy was a successful star, she would need to be more dignified and this aspect of the comedy would be lost. Significantly, had the show *I Love Lucy* followed

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a different formula, the program would have portrayed two very different concepts with very different notions of womanhood embedded in them. Lucy as a hapless performer reinforced all kinds of notions about women, while Lucy, as a successful movie star would not necessarily do the same thing.

From Radio to TV

*I Love Lucy* brought the domestic situation comedy to television. Broadcasting on Monday nights *Lucy* reached both male and female audiences. While there were key differences between *My Favorite Husband* and *I Love Lucy*, there were also continuities, especially with regard to gender and consumption. Indeed, use of these themes meant scripts from the radio show could be used, in a moderated form, for *I Love Lucy*. One such example of this can be found when comparing *My Favorite Husband*'s, “Selling Dresses,” to *I Love Lucy*'s, “The Freezer”:

Jess Oppenheimer describes the writers’ thought processes as they were putting together the script for “The Freezer,” “Here we decide to use a variation on a routine that had worked for us on the radio series (in an episode called “Selling Dresses”).”

Both scripts have Ball performing as a salesperson.

In the radio version of the script called “Selling Dresses” Liz’s line is, “Psst...Hey Lady...step in a little closer, you're blocking traffic. Now, don’t buy that dress, step over here. I’m in the position to sell you the very same thing for a sensational reduction in price.”

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82 Oppenheimer, *Laughs, Luck... and Lucy*, 183.
On "The Freezer" Lucy’s line is, “Psst—psst. Comere! Are you looking for meat? ... Tellya what I’m gonna do. Step in a little closer. I don’t want to block the traffic. Now, whatcha looker fer?”

The similarities between the two scripts show how the same themes were carried over from the radio to the television program. The gender stereotypes from *My Favorite Husband* that shared continuities with *I Love Lucy* during the first 45 episodes included: planning ahead, unreasonable anxiety, appearance, affordability, consumption, superstition, cleanliness, meddling, conniving, sexual appeal, anxiety, impulse purchases, budgeting time, scheming for money, and thinking actions through.

"Appendix A" cross references *My Favorite Husband* episodes with *I Love Lucy* episodes that share similar scripts and plots. It further labels the kind of gender stereotype that was evident in both the radio and television episodes. When looking at the problems that the Coopers shared with the Ricardos it is possible to see that problems with consumption played a reoccurring theme. Take, for instance, this exchange from “The Fashion Show”:

Lucy discussing her latest purchase, “A plain, simple, little dress like this--$500? I don’t believe it.”

Ethel always thinking practically, “How are you going to explain the extra cost to Ricky?”

Lucy, who never plans ahead, “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Ethel, yet again thinking practically, “Well, you can’t take it back; it’s been altered.”

Lucy realizing the predicament she is in, “Yea, and when Ricky finds out about it I’ll be altered.”

84 Oppenheimer, *Laughs, Luck... and Lucy*, 266.
Here Lucy made a purchase, which was out of her price range, that she cannot return. This personifies a stereotype that women cannot budget their money nor control their urges to impulse shop.

**Extended Urban Family**

Lucy, Ricky, Fred, and Ethel created a fictive kin network that reflected vaudeville and radio depictions of urban, immigrant, ethnic life while it also addressed the new needs and prerogatives of the post-World War II suburban revolution and lifestyle. In this way, the first season and a half of *I Love Lucy* functioned as a kind of transitional hybrid in the shift from radio to television and from city to suburb in postwar America. It is possible to lay out the spectrum of the domestic situation comedy from the 1940s to 1960s and see exactly how *I Love Lucy* fit between the vaudeville, ethnic comedy on the radio and the domestic, idealized suburban home in the late 1950s.

"*Amos 'n' Andy* (1928-60) was radio's first big hit... [T]his quiet, unassuming little comedy show out of Chicago, about two luckless but lovable black guys... reveal[ed] radio as... a new art form for the masses."\(^{86}\) It was set in New York City and created and toyed with black stereotypes as it brought a picture of ethnic, working-class, urban life to the radio. The radio show *The Goldbergs* (1929-1946) "presented the everyday life of a Jewish immigrant family living on New York

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\(^86\) Nachman, *Raised on Radio*, 273.
City's Lower East Side." This show, which also personified urban living, focused on the problems and toils of first generation immigrants in 1930s and 1940s America.

Ethnicity, race and urban living was prevalent on the radio and was not totally unheard of on early television, but white middle-class suburbia quickly became the norm for domestic situation comedies. During the first year and a half of *I Love Lucy*, the show lies between the urban professionalism of the *Burns and Allen Show* (1950-1958) and the suburban motherhood of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966). The first season and a half of *I Love Lucy* was on the other side of the spectrum from the television show *Ozzie and Harriet*, which ran on ABC. This show featured Ozzie Nelson and his real-life family playing themselves while trying to deal with the problems of the patriarchal, suburban, nuclear American family.88

*Ozzie and Harriet* was set in a quiet suburban neighborhood in California and focused a great deal on the values and ideals of the stereotypical American nuclear family living in the suburbs.89 Coming before *The Donna Reed Show*, which was on ABC from 1958-1966, *Ozzie and Harriet* foreshadowed the move of women to playing more conventional housewife roles when compared to *Lucy*. However, once Little Ricky was born, and even more so, once the characters moved to the suburbs, the show moved closer to *Ozzie and Harriet*. *Ozzie and Harriet*’s depiction of the nuclear family, while reinforcing gender norms, became the standard format for most domestic situation comedies during the late 1950s.

While Lucy and Ricky Ricardo were the undisputed stars of the show, two supporting characters played a major role in nearly every episode. The show would not have been the same without them. William Frawley, who played Fred Mertz, was a generation older than anyone else on the show. Frawley as Fred was an ideal father figure for Arnaz as Ricky, acting as a white American male schooling his immigrant friend and mentee. He was someone with whom Ricky could swap stories about the zaniness and inferiority of women and they could assure each other that they were the sane and superior ones in their marriages.\(^{90}\) As an actor, he had had over a half-century worth of experience in vaudeville, which was also incorporated into many shows through singing, dancing, and comedy.\(^{91}\)

Vivian Vance, although 22 years younger than Frawley, played Ethel Mertz, a similar counterpart for Lucy. Ethel was someone who Lucy could bounce ideas off, but she also had a knack for inspiring Lucy's plots as well as acting as co-conspirator. Ethel and Lucy as a team is the subject of chapter 3; here will be discussed the notion of two separate teams—male and female—that ultimately came together as a single, family unit.

The two couples lived in the same apartment building and created one larger family unit. The characters thought of each other as being part of one big family, which was illustrated in "Lucy is Enceinte." Ethel found out that Lucy was pregnant before Lucy could tell Ricky and responded to the news by saying, "We're going to

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have a baby!” 92 Rather than saying, “you’re going to have a baby” by Ethel saying, “We’re,” she implied that she considered the Ricardos and the Mertzes to be part of one family. Numerous themes played out because of this extended family relationship.

Fred complaining to Lucy about Ethel, “She said my mother looks like a weasel!”

Lucy tries to solve the tiff by ordering, “Ethel, apologize!”

Ethel’s not so genuine retort, “Fred, I’m sorry your mother looks like a weasel.” 93

Any member of the Ricardo/Mertz family would gladly lend a hand to help one another whenever a problem arose. In “Ricky Asks for a Raise” Lucy, Ethel, and Fred worked together to help get Ricky rehired by his boss. 94 This feat required a whole lot of effort, scheming, and even involved Fred cross-dressing, a nod to the actor and the show’s vaudeville roots. The idea of cross-dressing was not uncommon in early television but was unusual in the context of the situation comedy. Milton Berle was one of the most famous cross-dressing comedians on early television who performed skits reminiscent of old vaudeville acts. Fred’s cross-dressing illustrated how far each family member would go in order to secure the welfare of the rest. Along with maintaining each other’s happiness, communal living was a major part of their everyday lives.

Many episodes began with Ethel walking up the fire escape and entering the Ricardo's kitchen to find Lucy either cooking or cleaning. While the domestic aspect of the opening scene will be discussed later, what this also shows is that there was an open-door policy. Ethel never had to knock to be let in; she just opened the door and grabbed a bite to eat. Several episodes reinforced the openness between both apartments with doors rarely being locked. One episode focused directly on the trust and intimacy associated with allowing the couples to move freely between each apartment. "The Kleptomaniac" had Lucy, under direct orders from Ethel, going into the Mertz's apartment and grabbing a clock to sell in their women's club bazaar. Ricky had forbidden Lucy from participating in the club after an unfortunate event occurred at a party the year before and she went behind his back when she organized the bazaar. After Ricky noticed an unusually large amount of cash in Lucy's purse, he asks Fred to spy on Lucy. The two men saw Lucy take the clock and believed that she was a kleptomaniac, not knowing that Ethel told her to take the clock. 95 This threatened the trust Fred had in allowing Lucy to freely roam into his apartment; however, by the end of the episode, as it always does, the truth came out and Fred's lost trust was regained.

For better or worse, the couples often interfered with each other's relationship. In "Fred and Ethel Fight" Lucy and Ricky worked together to try to get the Mertz's relationship back on track. They were successful in resolving the initial disagreement after they discovered the Mertzes could not remember what they

were fighting about. Ricky and Lucy then start talking about how they never fought only for Fred to point out a fight they had had a month before. This brought up harsh feelings and Lucy and Ricky stopped talking to each other. The Mertzes then helped Lucy and Ricky to overcome their problems. This kind of support helped to illustrate how closely entwined the couples were in each other’s lives.

Even when problems arose wherein the couples were pitted against each other, ultimately the problems served to underscore the strength of the extended urban family bond. “The Courtroom” created comedy that was Mertz vs. Ricardo. The Ricardos bought the Mertzes a television set for their 25th wedding anniversary, but then Ricky accidentally broke it while trying to get a better picture. Fred ran upstairs and broke the Ricardo’s television set because he was so upset and the two couples had to go to court to solve the dispute. The judge laughed at the simplicity of the problem and the two couples ultimately resolved their differences. The close relationship the couples had with each other allowed for such juvenile plots because they were comfortable enough to express how they truly felt, in this case Fred expressed his anger by breaking the Ricardo’s television.

This extended urban family is not in line with the suburban nuclear model for the domestic situation comedy that would become mainstream during the second half of the 1950s. Instead, I Love Lucy created its own version of the private domestic sphere. By offering a unique hybrid of vaudeville, ethnic, urban situation

comedies on radio and early television programs *I Love Lucy* became a very successful product on early television.

**Ethnicity on *I Love Lucy***

The network was hesitant to allow Arnaz to play opposite Ball because they did not feel that the interracial couple would be easily accepted. This attitude of the network reveals a racist undertone to their casting. Additionally, Arnaz had a thick accent that most likely contributed to CBS's hesitance. Whenever Ricky's ethnicity was discussed on the show, it was made clear that he was Cuban and not misunderstood as Mexican. As a Cuban émigré in post-WWII America, Arnaz would have wanted to be distinguished from the heavily criticized Mexican population in Los Angeles. John H. M. Laslett in “Historical Perspectives: Immigration and the Rise of a Distinctive Urban Region, 1900-1970,” describes the stereotype of the 1950s foreign-born Mexican living in Los Angeles as “poorly educated, speaking little English, ... these new migrants developed into a subgroup that merely reinforced the isolation of the now heavily overcrowded East L.A. barrio.”

Further, Latin males were stereotyped as being highly sexual, representing a threat to white males for their ability to be seen by white females as Latin lovers. This image would later be personified in Ricky as a comical version of a Latin lover.

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98 Brochu, *Lucy In the Afternoon*, 102.
Despite their eventual acceptance, the couple had to put up quite a fight with the network before they would agree to allow Arnaz to play Ball's husband.

In 1950, when CBS first refused to hire Arnaz, Ball and Arnaz went on the road performing a vaudeville act in hope of proving their popularity and viability as a couple.\(^{101}\) After six months of vaudeville, the couple had received an overwhelmingly positive response from the public.\(^{102}\) Still, CBS remained skeptical of Arnaz; the couple then formed their own production company, Desilu.\(^{103}\) In "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs" George Lipsitz discusses why television networks were tentative to pick up urban, ethnic situation comedies: "The mass audience required to repay the expense of network programming encourages the depiction of homogenized mass society, not the particularities and peculiarities."\(^{104}\) It would have been risky for the network to pick up the program before it had been proven to capture a large audience. Television was more costly to produce than radio and relied heavily on sponsor support; by Arnaz and Ball forming their own company they were able to illustrate the marketability of their product.

Ricky trying to lay down the law, "And that's an ultimatum!"
Lucy, shocked, "An ultimatum?"
Ethel, feeding Lucy for the punch line, "Well, I'm not surprised."

\(^{101}\) Stark, "The Lucy Chronicles," 24.
\(^{103}\) Stark, "The Lucy Chronicles," 24.
Lucy poking fun at Ricky, "I am. I didn’t think he knew how to pronounce it."\(^{105}\)

Arnaz’s accent and ethnicity was thoroughly and expertly incorporated into the show as in, for example, a March 1952 episode "Cuban Pals." This episode involved some of Ricky’s Cuban friends who came to visit him from Cuba. Ricky had to translate the entire conversation between Lucy and his friends because they did not know English.\(^{106}\) The comedy of the scene was in the inaccurate translations Ricky gave to the couple of what Lucy was trying to say.

Another impact Arnaz’s ethnicity had on the show was his loss of power and authority as the male lead. This was exhibited in both his relationship with his wife and also the Mertzes. Ricky always forgave Lucy for everything she did. No matter what, "odd, property damaging, career jeopardizing, financially threatening" actions were taken by Lucy, Ricky loved her.\(^{107}\) This was at odds with established norms for the ideal patriarchal husband-wife relationship. The husband was supposed to always be right, but Ricky repeatedly took Lucy into his arms after she challenged the role he expected her to play. Also sometimes Lucy fooled Ricky because he did not fully understand the language or culture. An example of this was in "The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub." When Ricky and Fred were trying to find a way to keep an eye on their wives, who claimed to have dates to go to a club, Ricky suggested that he and Fred try to find dates as well.

\(^{105}\) Watson, *The Quotable "I Love Lucy,"* 61.


Fred, knowing Ricky is the younger of the two and more likely to know more available women asks Ricky, "Where's your address book?"

Ricky responds, "I burned it...I hadn't been in this country very long and Lucy said it was part of the American marriage ceremony."\textsuperscript{108}

This shows Lucy took advantage of Ricky's cultural ignorance and foreignness for her own gain. Ricky's ethnicity also caused him to lose respect from the audience, which in turn made it more acceptable for Lucy to rebel.

The Mertzes did not have this kind of unconditional love because they were an older couple that would not be expected to challenge the norms and also because of Fred's ethnicity. Fred had more power because he was an older white, middle-class man, therefore, there was less conflict in his relationship with Ethel. Ethel did not challenge Fred because he and society had made it clear that such behavior was unacceptable. The Mertz's relationship was, however, underscored by a constant general tension, expressed in snide remarks that the two constantly exchanged. This suggests that although they might not have had as many conflicts in their marriage as the Ricardos, they also did not have the same kind of love and passion.

During the first season and a half, Ricky constantly erupted in episodes of anger, which were usually in Spanish. These fits separated Ricky from the ideal levelheaded husband who was later personified in the character of Ward Cleaver on the television show \textit{Leave It to Beaver} (1957-1963) and were often a result of frustration with his wife and his emasculation. The power that Ricky lacked as a father was illustrated in a skit on \textit{The Bob Hope Show} in 1956. In the skit, the

\textsuperscript{108} "The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub," \textit{I Love Lucy}, DVD, directed by Marc Daniels (1951; Los Angeles, CA: CBS DVD, 2005).
television show *I Love Lucy* was recreated with a changed cast; Bob Hope played Ricky, Arnaz played Fred, and Ball and Vance played Lucy and Ethel, respectively. Hope as Ricky dominated Ricky as Fred throughout the show by using his ethnicity against him. He made several derogatory jokes and remarks aimed at belittling Arnaz as Fred. For example, Hope as Arnaz says to Ricky as Fred, “What happened? Did you just come back from a ‘wetback’ luau?” Using the derogatory term “wetback” both inaccurately labeled Arnaz as an illegal immigrant and insulted his actual United States citizenship. The term “wetback” was originally coined to describe Mexicans who had either swam or waded across the Rio Grande river into Texas illegally.

This skit embraced a more aggressive form of racism than on the actual show *I Love Lucy*, but nevertheless illustrated that Arnaz as Ricky on *I Love Lucy* lost power because of his ethnicity. Further, when a white actor, following a similar premise, played Ricky, he had a lot more power in the foursome. This skit was further revealing of the real-life relationship between Arnaz and Ball. Hope as Ricky played Lucy’s husband and Arnaz as Fred played Ethel’s husband. Arnaz as Fred and also Ball as Lucy throughout the skit broke character and appeared worried or jealous every time their real life spouse got too close to their staged spouse.\textsuperscript{109} Despite the fact that the entire skit was solely done as a parody, it was possible to see how Ball and Arnaz’s real life marriage impacted their performance.

Chapter 2: The Symbolic Containment of Women

The aim of post-World War II domestic ideology was to legitimate traditional definitions of gender and reinforce the separation of spheres between the lives of men and women.\(^{110}\) Ironically, this social surge occurred right after WWII, when women had already had a taste of being active participants in the paid workforce, and the opportunity for women in education was increasing. \textit{I Love Lucy} both coexisted within and complicated these constructs.

"Here I am with all this talent bottled up inside," Lucy laments, "and you’re always sitting on the cork!"\(^{111}\)

On the surface, \textit{I Love Lucy} appeared to embody the newly reconfigured postwar home, but in many ways portrayed anything but an ideal household; more specifically, Lucy and Ethel provided the antithesis for how a women should act according to popular periodicals and norms of the time. Magazine after magazine reinforced the image of a happy housewife, cooking and cleaning all day long, waiting for her husband to come home. Before the late 1950s and early 1960s when the suburban family situation comedy proliferated, \textit{I Love Lucy} explored the tension,

\(^{110}\) Landay, \textit{The Sitcom Reader}, 90.
conflict, and alternative configurations of gender norms, roles, and realities in the 1950s.112

Lori Landay, in Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture, claims that by creating comedy out of the constraints of the postwar feminine mystique, Lucy embodied the contradictions between female ambition and femininity.113 Landay argues that as Lucy's trickery both worked and backfired it reflected the underlying cultural anxieties about woman's place and power in cold war America.114 On I Love Lucy, Lucy weekly rejected the confines of domesticity and the limitations of conventional femininity by using what Landay refers to as trickster tactics, but can just as easily be called schemer tactics, such as disguise, impersonation, theft, deception, duplicity, and subversion.115 Lucy schemed for economic and social freedom and status.116 In doing so, Lucy broke the barrier between "masculine" and "feminine" social roles, spaces, and practices.117 In spite of its popularity, Landay suggests that I Love Lucy is a false depiction of the past, yet one that both yesterday and today's audiences wish was true. The show took the reality of the domestic prison of the 1950s and recast it into the escapable terrain of the female trickster.118 Further, the Lucy character was transgressive because it was played by and actress who was successful both in front of and behind

113 Landay, Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women, 160.
114 Ibid., 161.
115 Ibid., 160.
118 Landay, The Sitcom Reader, 97.
the camera. The difference between Lucy and other housewives of postwar America can be seen in Tom Watson’s description in *I Love Lucy: The Classic Moments*:

Unlike other women who may have settled for simply dreaming of such ‘luxuries,’ Lucy schemed, cajoled, wheeled and dealed to meet her goals. Nothing was too much of a challenge.119

Part of being a successful schemer in comedy is that even the most innocent and well-intentioned efforts always end in failure: think, for example, of Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp. This remained the case for Lucy on *I Love Lucy*. Not only did we want but also we needed Lucy to fail so that Ball’s comedy could triumph.120 In order for this to happen, the show used three basic schemes for its plots:

1. Lucy either wants an object, money for an object, or a glamorous experience. She goes to elaborate efforts to achieve her goal, which causes her chances of achieving it to be ruined.

2. Lucy tells a small and innocent lie which she must tell a bigger lie to back-up. In the end, she is exposed as a liar and is humiliated.

3. Lucy either tries to be independent of Ricky or to get into show business but ultimately discovers that she belongs in the kitchen.121

Nearly every episode during the first season and a half of *I Love Lucy* fit into one of these three scenarios, all of which ended with Lucy’s failure. Even in “The Audition,” which used the same script as the pilot, when Lucy’s success is confirmed with her being offered a contract, she chooses to ultimately fail because success meant competing with Ricky and removal from the private sphere into the public sphere as

a breadwinner. In addition to nearly all the shows ending with Lucy's failure, they also almost always started with Lucy performing a domestic chore or primping.

Lucy explaining to Ricky why she is not wearing her wedding ring, "Dishwater is very hard on diamond rings."

Ricky tries to call her on a promise she once made, "When we got married, you said you would never take your ring off."

Lucy replies sarcastically, "When we got married, you said that dishwater would never touch these lily-white hands!"

"Appendix B" offers a comparative analysis of the first scene of *I Love Lucy* in the first forty-five episodes. Scenes are sorted by domestic and non-domestic, and the domestic scenes are then sorted into the categories of kitchen, primping, cleaning and general domestic chore. It becomes evident that only twelve out of a possible forty-five of the scenes had a non-domestic opening. This means that nearly 75% of the episodes had a domestic opening scene. The majority were kitchen oriented, followed by primping, cleaning, and then finally, a more general domestic chore. By showing Lucy in the private sphere of her home, performing tasks domestic in nature, *I Love Lucy* reinforced the symbolic containment of women. Further, in many episodes, the conflict had not arisen prior to the start of the show; therefore, the storyline involved the characters' lives getting worse before they got better. An example of this can be seen in "The Adagio." The show began with Lucy and Ethel heading to the Ricardo's bedroom to freshen up after dinner in order to look presentable to their husbands within the confines of the home. Before the scene was even over Lucy was trying to convince Ricky to let her be in his show.

123 Watson, *The Quotable "I Love Lucy,"* 16.
After elaborate scheming on Lucy's part, Ricky decided to teach her a lesson for disobeying his demands. In the end, after much turmoil, Lucy apologized and admitted he was right, "If I could do it all over again, I'd be happy just being Mrs. Ricky Ricardo." Starting the show in such a manner suggested, "Nothing would have gone wrong had Lucy just continued to do her household chores and remained content with her life." Additionally, the moral that Lucy claimed to have learned at the end of the show, that she should have been happy just being a housewife, reinforced the idea that the proper place for the woman was in the private sphere.

Oppenheimer's favorite line ever written was spoken by Lucy when she was upset with Ricky, "Ever since we said 'I do,' there are so many things we don't." Episode six (which was initially conceived as the pilot but then revamped and placed slightly later in the series' line-up) has an infamous line that sums up the premise of the show at the very least from Ricky's perspective, "I don't want a wife in show business... Oh, honey, we've been over this ten thousand times, I want a wife who's just a wife. Now look, all you gotta do is clean the house for me, hand me my slippers when I come home at night, cook for me and be the mother of my children." But Lucy always wanted more—even though she tried to police herself as much as she was policed by others to be more conventional—and so the main source of the show's dramatic and comedic contention was defined. This main source of conflict would survive from the pilot into the first year and a half of the

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126 The pilot for the television show *I Love Lucy* was created on March 2nd, 1951 never aired, as it was not made for broadcast. "The Lost *I Love Lucy* Pilot," *I Love Lucy*, DVD, directed by Ralph Levy (1951; Los Angeles, CA: CBS DVD, 2005).
series. Lucy, although constantly trying to break out of the role of a housewife, still found herself partaking in many stereotypical activities. This dynamic tension largely accounted for the dramatic and comedic success of the show and its cast.

**Female Stereotypes: Housewives, Homemakers, and Glamorous Icons**

Historian Joanne Meyerowitz describes the stereotype of post-WWII women as, "Domestic and quiescent, they moved to the suburbs, created the baby book, and forged family togetherness." According to Meyerowitz, the 1950s domestic stereotype was drastically more complex than it was once characterized, instead being wracked with contradictions that undermined and destabilized the very stereotype even as it was created. And *I Love Lucy* both reinforced and challenged stereotypes about the 1950s woman with one of the most prominent being that the woman belonged in the private sphere.

Jennifer Jurgens and Joan Steinauer writing for a human resources periodical in 1997, used *I Love Lucy* to discuss women in the workforce. Nancy Smith, editor-in-chief of *Working Woman Magazine* argued that 1950s television was trying to keep women out of the workplace. "The [1950s] TV shows with women had them cooking, cleaning and taking care of the kids while the neighbors peered through the window for a visit." *Incentive* using *I Love Lucy* speaks to the power of the show held even into the late twentieth century. The article goes on to explain how many of the

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128 Ibid., 2.
television shows in the 1950s reflected this movement, and mentions *I Love Lucy’s* "Job Switching" as evidence.129

"Job Switching" brought up the debate of which was harder: show business, non-entertainment jobs, or housework? If you were to ask three of the four main characters on *I Love Lucy,* you would definitely get different answers. Ricky, following suit with the premise for the show, would claim that show business was much harder. Fred, the landlord, would complain about his occupation, and of course Lucy and Ethel would beg to differ, claiming that housework trumped them all. In the plot for the show "Job Switching," the characters took the afore-mentioned sides about their work. Fred and Ricky claimed that their wage-earning jobs were much more demanding than Ethel and Lucy’s daily housework routine. In classifying Ricky’s job with Fred’s, the show asserted that the entertainment industry was an industry like any other, in which performers as workers earned a wage for doing a job. This episode made no distinction between white and blue-collar labor, basically asserting that wage-earning work was wage-earning work. Lucy and Ethel were supposed to switch places with the men and find a paying job, they found that the only thing they are “qualified” for was to work in a blue-collar job in a candy factory.130 By the women taking on this job at their attempt to “switch jobs” with the men, the episode compared the work that Ricky and Fred did daily to the work that was done by laborers in a factory.

This episode dramatized the difficulties housewives had when trying to find paid work without "experience." Landay, in Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture, claims that this is revealing of dominant definitions of sexual division of labor in mass consumer culture. Feminist historians, including Joan Scott who argues against the use and acceptance of simple dichotomies, support this argument. Landay recognizes that the definition of experience, which the female characters lacked, assumes that experience could only be found outside of the home. This definition follows with the gender ideology of the 1950s, which claimed that feminity predisposed women to certain nurturing-based jobs. These jobs were part of being a housewife and did not foster skills that employer's felt were generally valuable, transferrable, or well compensated in the labor force. Although the value of being able to successfully manage a household was recognized in "Job Switching," the episode concluded with the women learning they made better housewives than paid laborers in the workforce. This episode showed the show's tendency to challenge a gender norm and then re-ingrain it, all in a single episode.

Lucy asking Ricky to clarify his request, "Budget my time? You mean, like I budget my money?"

Ricky having seen Lucy attempt to budget her money, "Heaven forbid!"

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131 Landay, Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women, 160.
133 Ibid., 368.
The cultural ideal and construct of the housewife has changed dramatically since the 1950s, including the replacement of the gender specific title with the gender-neutral term of homemaker. In her 1971 study, “Occupation: Housewife,” Helena Znaniecki Lopata defines a housewife as the woman responsible for running her home, in terms of responsibility, if only rarely in terms of ownership and possession. Lopata also states that a housewife must either be or have been married. I Love Lucy exhibits the same kind of separation of spheres between the home and outside world that was implied with Lopata's definition; however, rather than running their households themselves, their husbands had the ultimate authority.

[Lucy] and Ethel operate in a sexually-divided world in which men still have the power, the purse strings and the privileges: [Ricky] and Fred can go to the fights alone, but [Lucy] and Ethel can't go to the Copa without dates. Dates?! Where...?? A plot is hatched. Here film journalist and scholar Molly Haskell demonstrates how a majority of the scripts during the first season and a half were oriented around a power struggle between the two sexes. Ultimately, the men always end up winning. This does not mean that the women never put up a fight not to go to the fights.

Feminist playwright Wendy Wasserstein wrote in a 1999 New York Times article about Lucy as a subversive character, calling her a "Rebel in a Housedress." Wasserstein claims that Lucy's slapstick comedy stood out from other women of her

136 Museum of Broadcasting, Lucille Ball First Lady of Comedy, 12.
era such as Donna Reed and Harriet Nelson. This comedy came at the price of Lucy's character sometimes having to appear childish or easily manipulated. One of the most well-known episodes ever filmed of the show involved Ball's best physical comedy. "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," originally aired on CBS on May 5, 1952 during season one, is the episode where Lucy did a commercial for "Vitameatavegamin" health tonic. In this episode she performed over four takes trying to pronounce the name of the tonic correctly; however, with each take she drank more and more of the tonic. By the last take she could barely stand let alone speak, because she was so inebriated. This shows Lucy as being easily influenced by the alcohol and in a disheveled, inebriated state. This broke the mold of the acceptable behavior for the typical housewife, and in a way was celebrated. After all, it was not Lucy's fault in the first place for getting drunk, the director of the commercial kept asking her to repeat the line where she drank the tonic. Lucy broke the norm accidentally and Ricky could not help, despite the inconvenience it was for his performance, but find her humorous and endearing. This plot would not have worked well later in the series, when Lucy was a mother, and was an excellent example of the kind of physical comedy that was unique to the first season and a half on the series. "Lucy Does a TV Commercial" broke the mold of the stereotypical mother; however, several episodes centered their plot on personifying different gender stereotypes.

“Lucy’s Schedule” is representative of an episode built around a female stereotype, women not being able to budget their time. The episode began with Lucy causing Ricky to be late for a very important meeting with his boss. To teach Lucy about punctuality, Ricky put Lucy on a schedule and boasted to his boss about how his wife was performing like a seal. Significantly, the schedule did not stick. Mr. Littlefield speaks the moral of the lesson Ricky learned from his boss in the final line of the show, “Being a slave driver is no way to run a home, but it is the only way to run a nightclub, Mr. Manager.” The notion that women needed to be trained to perform on cue was suggested in this episode, however, it was broken down once Lucy and the other women decided to fight back. On the other hand, the stereotype that women cannot budget their time without the help of their husband was never disproven.

Another stereotype is central to “The Girls Want to go to a Nightclub”—namely the ideal physical appearance of a woman. After Ethel and Lucy decided that because their husbands would not take them to a nightclub they would go without them and with different dates, their husbands decided to go and keep an eye on them, bringing dates themselves. Fred described the kind of date he hoped to have as having a willowy figure and blonde. Although the hair color might be personal preference, the willowy figure reoccurred in a number of episodes, especially in reference to the glamorous world of stars. What kind of physical appearance related qualifications did I Love Lucy suggest were necessary to make it into show business?

In "The Diet" Ricky told Lucy that she could be in his show if she could fit into a size twelve dress. Lucy went to desperate measures in order to accomplish this feat, and in the end she was too sick to perform regularly in the show. This episode was an example of the pressures that Hollywood put on women to conform to an "ideal" size, and even further, suggested than there was an "ideal" size for the glamorous icons in the entertainment industry.

**The "Lucy" Character**

Lucy on regretting her last scheme, "For fourteen years Ricky's been trusting, devoted, understanding. And what have I been? Thoughtless, selfish, meddlesome, bungling, scheming, conniving, ehhh..."

Fred continuing for her, "Irritating, headstrong, obnoxious—"

Ethel, scorning her husband, "Fred!

Lucy still feeling guilty, "It's all right, Ethel. Let him alone. He's right."

Ethel, joining in on the game, "Well, as long as it's open season, how about petty, childish, stubborn, vain—" The Lucy character can be described by several critical adjectives; however, the audience remains enthralled by her. Although at times she might be childish, spiteful or envious, as noted by Michael Karol in *Lucy A to Z: The Lucille Ball Encyclopedia*, she can also be glamorous, kind, loving, and pitiable.

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140 A size twelve was considered relatively petite in the 1950s: today, the equivalent is a size 8 due to changes in body types of America. Kathryn Bold, "If the Vanity Fits; This isn't your Mother's Size 8. Women Now are Bigger, and so are their Clothes. Deflating the Number on a Tag Can Inflate their Ego--and Encourage Buying. But Lack of Standard Measurements also Creates Confusion," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1997, Orange County Edition ed.: 1.


The Lucy character was similar to the schemer from Roman and Renaissance classics. The schemer and Lucy both had extremely bad luck and ineptness, but above all innocence that almost invariably caused their conniving to go awry. This kind of pitiable failure helped to create comedy while at the same time created a character the audience could love. On the show *I Love Lucy*, this resulted in the kind of exaggerated scenarios that Ball describes below in her vision of the Lucy character:

A kind of everywoman, a very basic American person... I wanted [someone] Middle American, a housewife worrying about all the things housewives all over the world worry about. Domestic situations everyone could understand... just slightly exaggerated... It didn't occur to me until much later that Vivian Vance and I were doing Laurel and Hardy... Laurel and Hardy were famous for their visually appealing slapstick comedy. Ball, from this quote, would appear to have been so involved with becoming her character that she never realized what made Lucy so humorous. Much of this comedy came from the interactions between the men and women on the show.

Ricky trying to get Lucy to be complacent, "Now, honey, why don't you be a good girl? You don't hear Ethel asking Fred to buy her a new dress." In the Ricardo's and the Mertz's marriages, the husbands treated their wives more like children than equals. Not only did both women have allowances but they were constantly scolded when they did something wrong. This occurred more frequently to Lucy than Ethel because Lucy tried to circumvent her husband's

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144 Karol, *The Comic DNA of Lucille Ball*, 40.
145 Watson, *The Quotable "I Love Lucy,"* 92.
authority more often. Ricky responded to Lucy's scheming as if she was a misbehaving child who needed to be punished. He did not even hesitate to spank her and insisted that she call him sir when she was in trouble. This degrading treatment can be seen on "The Séance" when Ricky pulled Lucy out of the room by her ear.146 In treating Lucy like a child, Ricky was able to assert his power over her as his wife. Additionally, this treatment was justified by Lucy's childlike behavior at such times. Her constant crying and haphazard scheming caused Ricky and her lots of grief, which although it did not justify Ricky's dominance, helped to make it appear more natural and somehow needed.

The unequal economic power between the women and their husbands often led to one of Lucy's schemes. This was a primary source of Lucy's discontent and rebellion. Ethel, on the other hand, seemed mainly accepting of Fred, and by extension Ricky and men in general, holding the purse strings. In these plots, Lucy normally had spent her entire allowance and was trying to convince or coerce Ricky into giving her more money.147 "The Operetta" is an example of when Lucy tried to take things into her own hands. In this episode, Lucy had been borrowing money from her club's treasury, to pay for the things that Ricky would not let her purchase, to the point of completely emptying the account. Ethel was oblivious to Lucy's actions until the club needed the funds and Lucy did not have them. Lucy had to come up with a scheme in order to put on the operetta, without spending much

money, in order for her embezzlement to go unnoticed. This kind of economic problem was driven by the consumer economy and prosperity of postwar America. Gendered notions of consumption, specifically women not being able to control themselves, were reflected and reinforced in the multiple episodes of *I Love Lucy* that oriented around battles over economic resources.

**Lucy Ricardo vs. Lucille Ball**

"I'm just a typical housewife at heart," explained Ball when asked about her successful career. In the 1950s it was common for people to retain traditional definitions of masculine and feminine spheres but modify them in practice, in other words, image and rhetoric did not line up with reality. Ball's career in physical comedy was seen as unconventional because men traditionally dominated it. Ball maintained verbal acknowledgement of stereotypical gender norms by downplaying her career and instead claiming to be "just a typical housewife," which in reality she was far from. This statement, for much of postwar America, seemed more truthful than it was because of a tendency for the audience to conflate characters with actors. *I Love Lucy* overlapped closely with Ball's life and show publicists capitalized and embellished the parallels leading to perceptions of Ball as Lucy, a "typical" housewife. The viewers were not oblivious, however, to Ball's enormous success. She was well known for her talent both on stage and behind the scenes. The

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150 Ibid.
151 Floreani, *Complicating Constructs*, 185.
audience knew this while they were watching the show and in fact recognized Ball was much more than just a housewife.

Unlike Lucy Ricardo, Ball was a very successful businesswoman. Ball was the first woman to head a major Hollywood film company, Desilu Productions, Inc., which she took over in 1962 when illness forced Arnaz to retire. In just seven years, Ball oversaw the growth of the company, from only having one show, to having eighteen in all. Desilu produced two notable productions that Lucy was not in, "Mission Impossible" and "Star Trek." Finally, Ball sold Desilu to Gulf Western Industries in 1967 after she founded Lucille Ball Productions, Inc. Ball was president of her self-titled company and made her second husband, Gary Morton, vice president.152 All in all, Ball was not the failure that she played on television.

Chapter 3: Lucy and Her Dear Friend Ethel

Steven Stark in "The Lucy Chronicles" asks a great question: who loved Lucy more, Ricky or Ethel? He answers it by joking that we know for sure that Lucy loved Ethel more than Fred loved his own wife. On I Love Lucy, the women bonded against the men while Lucy, and sometimes Ethel, tried to defy their "place" and rebel against white, middle-class norms. The extended family unit portrayed by the foursome broke the nuclear family mold. Also, Lucy and Ethel's bond and teamwork both reinforced and challenged gender norms and ideals—very different from the ideological housewives who followed like June Cleaver, Donna Reed—they did not have friends or networks, but their children did. Many of patriarchy’s manifestations—ideological, institutional, organizational, and subjunctive—were challenged by the power made available to the two women through their close relationship.

Lucy trying to look at the bright side of things, "We’ve been in worse jams than this."

Ethel encouraging the false assumption that it is always Lucy’s fault when plans go awry, “Yes, thanks to you.”

Networks of kinship and friendship among women in America, dating back to the colonial period, have played pivotal roles in struggles to promote equality and structure lives. Rigid gender-role differentiation both within the family and

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154 Scott, Theorizing Feminism, 358.
society as a whole led to the segregation of the two sexes in almost every aspect of
human condition—emotional, political, cultural, and economic. From this separation
emerged a female support network that was institutionalized in events from life to
death.157 Women often spent more time within the social confines of their extended
family of female friendships than with their husbands. The emotional connections
that formed were unique from those with other members of their families.158 Ruth
Wallace and Patricia Lengermann in "Gender in America: Social Control and Social
Change" talk about the ways female friendships benefit women. They claim the
friendships help increase the worth of the female by providing both a social reality
in which males do not dominate and support when thinking through change.159
Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in Disorderly Conduct argues that female friendships
served a number of emotional functions and provides a description of how female
friendships should be interpreted: "one must relate them to the structure of the
American family and to the nature of sex-role divisions and of male-female relations,
both within the family and society generally."160

In the United States, scholars generally mark the beginnings of an organized
women's movement with the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 as activist women

157 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian
America (New York: Knopf, 1985), 60.
158 Ibid., 62.
160 Nancy F. Cott in The Grounding of Modern Feminism and Leila J. Rupp and Verta
Taylor, Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to
the 1960s also provide insight on female friendship and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg,
Disorderly Conduct, 54, 62-3.
began to organize around the “women question,” in its many forms.\textsuperscript{161} With the suffrage struggle, in particular, U.S. women started to form an identity and consciousness as a group.\textsuperscript{162} The 1920s marked the end of the suffrage movement and the beginning of the struggle for women to find their own language, organization and goals.\textsuperscript{163} Activist women in the 1950s saw themselves not as creating, but as maintaining the women’s rights movement, which they linked with the suffrage movement.\textsuperscript{164} The 1950s “resource mobilization theory,” as described by Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor in \textit{Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women’s Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s}, places an emphasis on the role of resources in determining the nature, course, and outcome of the movement. These resources included money, expertise, access to publicity, and the support of influential groups.\textsuperscript{165} Aside from the resources, the most important part of the movement was its participants, the women and the organizations they formed. Activist women’s commitment to the women’s rights movement was tied to the joy they found in participation. Lasting friendships were formed which held the key to the longevity of many organizations, including the Woman’s Party, the National Consumers’ League, and the National Women’s Trade Union League.\textsuperscript{166} Changes in the status of women can be seen reflected in mainstream television fare.

\textsuperscript{162} Cott, \textit{The Grounding of Modern Feminism}, 5.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 8.
The unique kind of female camaraderie that existed between Ethel and Lucy was relatively rare on early network television. Not until the late 1970s and early 1980s did such female teams begin to proliferate, no doubt in part due to the impact of the second wave of the women's movement and its impact on U.S. society and culture. Further, relatively few were based on physical comedy that required its female characters to shed their vanity in pursuit of a laugh. The only two female partnerships on television during the 1950s and 1960s who shared a relationship that was similar to Ethel and Lucy's were Laura Petry and Millie Halper in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), and the mothers of the married couple on the short lived show *The Mothers-in-Law* (1967-1969).\(^{167}\) Two of the main writers for *I Love Lucy*, Bob Carroll Jr. and Madelyn Pugh-Davis created and wrote *The Mothers-in-Law*, which unquestionably accounts for the similarity between the female friendships on both shows. Other shows, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *Roseanne* (1988-1997) came later and showed women finding power in their female relationships, whether family or friends.\(^{168}\) But all these shows lacked the kind of physical comedy that the female stars of *I Love Lucy* constantly were performing. The physical stunts involved the blacking out of teeth, white powder, fright wigs and rags, all of which both Ball and Vance used numerous times.\(^{169}\)

*Laverne and Shirley*, on air from 1976-1983, was one of the first successful network television shows that had a similar female friendship that also involved slapstick-

\(^{167}\) Spangler, "A Historical Overview of Female Friendships," 16.
\(^{168}\) Pegg, *Comical Co-Stars of Television*, 337.
based physical comedy. This huge gap is significant because it illustrates reluctance of the industry, despite its success, to create a show having the same female camaraderie as I Love Lucy until decades later.

In the considerable scholarly literature on Lucy, one subject that lacks in-depth analysis and discussion is that of the central relationship between Lucy and Ethel. Lynn C. Spangler in “A Historical Overview of Female Friendships On Prime-Time Television” provides an excellent introduction to the concept of the difference between same-sex friendships and friendships between men and women. However, the three paragraphs devoted to Lucy and Ethel suggest that in the end, every episode ultimately only reinforces the status quo and re-inscribes gender norms. But Spangler fails to examine the significance of the challenges to traditional gender roles and how the central relationship between the two fed into their ambitions. Also, Spangler ignores that Lucy and Ethel serve as a fictional embodiment of the importance and mutability of female networks in a patriarchal culture.

**Girl Power: Just the Two of Us**

Lucy sincerely addressing Ethel, "Oh, gee, Ethel, thanks. It’s times like these when you know what friends are for."

Ethel regretting her decision to help Lucy in her latest scheme, “If I’d known this was what friends were for, I’d have signed up as an enemy!”

Lucy and Ethel were friends until the end, despite Ethel’s constant exasperation with Lucy and her scheming. There are times when the friends had

171 Ibid., 13-23.
conflict with one another, as can be seen in Ethel's retort above, but they always made peace by the end of each episode. The lasting friendship remained constant throughout the series in its entirety; however, the dynamic changes after the first season and a half. The first episodes took place in the city, which offered both freedom and options more diverse than the suburbs. Additionally, there was no child to fit storylines around, which changed the show even while it remained in New York City. This led to the majority of the pre-maternity plots engaging Lucy and Ethel in a battle of the sexes. The two most often bonded together to present a united front to their disapproving husbands.

The battle of the sexes is illustrated in 1952's "Lucy Fakes Illness." In this episode, Lucy was upset that Ricky agreed to allow Fred and Ethel audition for his show, but not her. In response, Ricky claimed Lucy's place was, "out front in the audience." Ethel jumped into the conversation and plants the idea for the rest of the plot while at the same time sticking up for Lucy, "Ricky, I think you're being mean. If you keep Lucy from doing what she wants to do, she'll develop some sort of a complex, ... she might become depressed, ... she might even go off her trolley." Ricky listened to Ethel, but quickly dismissed her as trying to give advice about a topic in which she had no expertise. Despite the men not necessarily heeding their requests, the women found power in their relationship to, at the very least, attempt to fight back against the oppression and rules their husbands had made.

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174 Ibid., 15.
Female friendship placing the men against the women was not just limited to Lucy and Ethel's relationship. Several episodes examine women's organizations and also other female friends that Lucy and Ethel had that provided a wider female camaraderie; other women sometimes encouraged the two to bond together against their husbands. On 1952's "Lucy's Schedule," the episode operated around the power structure between Ricky and Mr. Littlefield, his boss. Ricky bragged to Mr. Littlefield and Fred about how efficiently his wife was "performing" now that he had placed her on a schedule. Ethel and Mrs. Littlefield came to Lucy and demanded that she stop following her husband's schedule because they feared a schedule being imposed upon them. The Littlefields were wealthier than both the Mertzes and the Ricardos; however, all three women formed a cross-class alliance and worked together to combat their husband's attempts to control their activities in the home.¹⁷⁶

Whether it was the power that women had potential to gain from organizations or something else, Ricky and Fred sometimes forbid their wives from participating in women's groups. These fears about women banding together—often disguised as women wasting their time gossiping together—were reflected on the show. On 1952's "The Kleptomaniac" the story started out with Lucy organizing a bazaar for her women's club behind her husband's back. Ricky had banned Lucy from participating in any club affairs after a mishap at the Fourth of July event the year before. Lucy ignored this request and maintained a leadership position within

¹⁷⁶ Landay, Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women, 163.
the club. Lucy’s refusal to follow her husband’s request illustrated the power the organization provoked in her.

"Ethel, I’ve got an idea": The Instigator of the Plan

Ricky describing Lucy’s latest idea, "My scatterbrained wife has another half-witted scheme and if you listen to it you’re out of your mind."178

On *I Love Lucy*, Vance radiated normalcy and was the character that voiced audience concerns and comments. Ethel never quite bought into Lucy’s schemes and her skepticism was apparent up until the end of each contrivance.179 Vance, as the straight character, reacted just as the audience would if they were in the scene.180 She often asked Lucy questions that revealed the lack of thought in her latest scheme. Ethel’s logic and prodding into the inner dynamics of Lucy’s plans, accompanied by Vance’s impeccable timing was key for the success of Ball’s comedy.

Many of the plots of *I Love Lucy* centered on a plan designed to get Lucy something she wanted, whether it was a career, a dress, or attention. Lucy was generally understood as the “mastermind” behind these plans, which mostly went awry. However, upon closer examination, Ethel deserved more credit than she was given. In many of the episodes, Ethel either gave Lucy the idea or helped Lucy make her plans more concrete. For instance, in 1951’s “Be a Pal” it is Ethel who was reading a book about how to fix problems in a marriage. When Lucy was upset

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178 Watson, *The Quotable "I Love Lucy,"* 97.
about Ricky not paying enough attention to her, Ethel went to the book for answers. Ethel told Lucy what she needed to do. In this episode, Ethel concocted all of the plans, and Lucy was the one who acted them out. Ethel's age and experience lent to her being both a mentor and an instigator. Because Lucy looked to Ethel for advice when she was having problems, Ethel was given many opportunities to intervene and suggest different ideas to Lucy. Ethel, by giving Lucy advice, was able to put Lucy up to activities that she herself would not dare to try due to both her age and the strict rules set by her husband, Fred. Overall, the relationship that Ethel and Lucy shared was reminiscent of the kind of "long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women," seen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was also the tension—both real and perceived—in the relationship between the actresses playing these characters.

Desi Arnaz, co-star and co-producer of *I Love Lucy*, offered a reluctant Vivian Vance the job backstage after one of her live, theatrical performances before he had a chance to consult his wife and co-star Lucille Ball. Arnaz recognized her as having the kind of talent that was needed to play Ethel Mertz. Ball, however, had other ideas. "Ethel Mertz! You don't look like a landlady ... I want a dumpy, fat woman in a chenille bathrobe and furry slippers with curlers in her hair," this was Ball's reaction when she first met Vivian Vance face to face and learned she had been cast as Ethel

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182 Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 53.
Mertz. Vivian Vance might not have looked like the Ethel Mertz Ball had imagined when the show was in pre-production, but Vance more than proved her worth.

Coming from the theater, Vance had been trained in method acting. All of the other major players had worked primarily on radio, so Vance brought valuable and useful theater training to the show and helped the directors and writers adjust to this new, visual medium. For example, Vance often helped change the blocking and dialogue to place the actor or actress in closer proximity to the necessary props, like telephones. This advice, along with her acting skills, impressed Ball and the writers, leading to a larger role for this supporting actress.

After the first few episodes were recorded, Ball recognized Vance’s importance as a supporting actress. Additionally accounting for her change of heart, Ball had started to form a friendship with Vance. This friendship lasted until Vance’s death and led to Ball asking Vance to work on future projects with her. Vance would continue with Ball, appearing on The Lucy Show (1962-1968) and Here’s Lucy (1968-1972). Tensions between Ball and Vance quickly faded in reality but have forever been encapsulated by rumors and falsehoods. The fictional catfight between the two women fell in line with notions of women as hysterical, irrational and willing to sell their souls to be the most beautiful and glamorous.

184 Pegg, Comical Co-Stars of Television, 337.
185 Castelluccio and Walker, The Other Side of Ethel Mertz, 181.
Forty-two year old Vance had to make some sacrifices in order for her to play sixty-four year old Frawley's wife and Ball's sidekick. It is hard to sort out what requirements were necessary for the age difference to be distinct and which were solely created because of Ball's vanity: it is likely that both played into the equation. One of the more practical and necessary requirements was for Vance to wear a special kind of makeup to age her skin. Additionally, before filming started there was discussion of Vance wearing a fat suit, but Vance refused, claiming that the audience would react badly if she really was overweight and Fred mocked her for this. Over the run of the show, Vance did put on weight; Vance's friends claim she gained weight with age and was always trying to diet. Rumors have long circulated that Ball demanded Vance gain weight; however, these are false and most likely stemmed from a fictitious contract Ball had written as a joke for a cast party. The contract had a number of items relating to Vance's appearance, including that she was to gain five pounds a week. Ball obviously wrote the contract in response to rumors already in circulation, and this fake contract only exacerbated the rumors.

Vance's actual contract did include some requirements that probably were tied less to necessity and more to Ball's insistence on standing out as the star. Vance was banned from wearing false eyelashes, a rule likely set by Ball to remind Vance that she was always to be the more glamorous of the two. False eyelashes would not have made Vance look significantly younger, which was made clear when Vance

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186 Pegg, *Comical Co-Stars of Television*, 112.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid., 185.
190 Ibid., 182.
ignored the rule and wore them undetected for months before Ball noticed. After Ball confronted Vance about her breaking her contract, Vance claimed that if she had not noticed for that long, it obviously did not make a difference whether she wore them or not. Ball allowed Vance to wear false eyelashes from that point on. Another issue that Ball was concerned about was the color of Vance’s hair. Vance had blonde hair that Ball felt did not look different enough from her own hair on film. Because of this, week after week Vance had to deal with the hairstylists playing with the tone of her hair color as they tried to make it appear different from Ball's red hair, when recorded in black and white.

The emphasis that has been placed throughout scholarly and popular literature on Ball’s demands would have likely been accepted without question had Ball been a male lead making such demands about her comedic sidekick. Instead, they were accompanied by an accusation that Ball was simply irrational and indulging personal concerns. Because Ball was a woman playing a female lead, a different lens has been used to analyze the entire situation, and the issue of vanity has been brought up when it would likely not have been with a male lead seeking to differentiate his character from his male sidekick counterpart.
Conclusion

Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of television sit-coms. Media reshapes our perceptions of the past. Media in the form of syndication drastically reshapes our perceptions of the past. According to Karen M. Stockard in "Bewitched and Bewildered: The Effect of Syndication on Sex Roles," syndication of old programs potentially works to inhibit or retard social growth relating to sex roles and gender expectations. Stockard describes how it is a self-promoting process: first, companies recognize that there is an audience for syndicated television shows and see a potential to make money. Second, older shows are seen as less objectionable to parents because other prime time offerings are more offensive. Third, children are exposed to images and portrayals of men and women in traditional power struggles and modes of interaction. The problem is not with the show itself, but the audience watching the show, specifically a young or uneducated audience. When audiences lack either the sophistication or education to reconstruct the show in its original context, they incorporate it into their current perception of both historical and current norms. When these audiences watch *I Love Lucy*, they see an image of Lucy learning her proper place was in the home and

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194 Ibid., 52.
Because of this, Stockard warns that although syndicated television is without boundaries of time and is a reflection of various stages of cultural growth, it ultimately is a "graveyard of dead images that refuse to accept the reality of their own demise." But Lucy's enduring success was not just about reinforcing the status quo by containing Lucy in domesticity: there was also the appeal of the show's challenges to the white, suburban norms, Lucy and Ethel's teamwork as well as the "mixed" marriage at the center of the show.

Ball and Arnaz sold the series of I Love Lucy to CBS for six million dollars. When played in syndication, the satin heart was created to replace the animated commercial plug for Philip Morris cigarettes, the show's original sponsor. I Love Lucy has been shown on a number of different channels, including Nick at Nite's "TV Land," which offers collective memories of American life, described by Landay as "misappropriated images of how family life never really was." Further, the original I Love Lucy continues to generate revenue and find audiences in a new form; in 2005 the show was released on DVD. Despite its long-lived marketability, I Love Lucy remains a vibrant cultural document of the postwar era in which it was created.

WWII left behind a feeling of uncertainty with the American people who then looked to the home as a "secure private nest removed from the dangers of the

195 Ibid., 50.
196 Ibid., 51.
outside world. 199 Americans wanted and needed to feel liberated from the past and assured in the future and turned to their families for this protection. In the early 1950s, most Americans believed that the best way to thwart the threat of communism and the dangers of the cold war was to promote family stability. 200 While attempting to return to normalcy after the Depression and war, conservative political leaders promoted family stability through codes of conduct and public policies to downplay the underlying conflicts that were bound to reemerge at some point in the future. This political and cultural shift promoted an image of an ideal nuclear American household as a way to win the war against communism. I Love Lucy changed to adhere more closely to an early Cold War suburban domestic ideal, a need brought ever closer to home given the chilling real-life events such as the success of HUAC.

The Cold War was markedly different from WWII in that it was not oriented around an actual war in the traditional sense. Instead, the struggle was ideologically based between two superpowers and exhibited little physical conflict. The United States and the Soviet Union wanted to increase their power and influence across the globe. Many leaders of the United States believed that the real threats to American world domination were internal. One of the most significant examples of what turned out to be an unjustified fear was the rise of McCarthyism. McCarthyism was fueled by the suspicion of the new secularism, materialism, bureaucratic

199 May, Homeward Bound, ix.
200 Ibid., xviii.
collectivism and consumerism of the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{201} It targeted individuals who were suspected of having communist ties and had the power to completely destroy lives. This powerful manifestation of a fear of communism was something that consumed the everyday life of many American's throughout much of the Cold War.

Even Lucille Ball, television’s biggest star, was vulnerable to the effects of the fear of communist subversion. At the height of the show and its star’s popularity in the fall of 1953, newspaper and radio gossip columnist Walter Winchell revealed that Ball had appeared in a closed session before HUAC several months earlier to address charges that she had once registered to vote as a member of the Socialist party in 1936; in effect, his revelation was tantamount to accusing Ball of being a member of the Communist Party in early Cold War America.\textsuperscript{202} The rest of the press jumped on the story, unable to leave this volatile rumor alone and playing word games with Ball’s red hair.\textsuperscript{203} The \textit{Los Angeles-Herald Express} ran a headline in three-inch letters, “LUCILLE BALL NAMED RED.”\textsuperscript{204} Hundreds of members of the entertainment industry would have their careers ruined after being blacklisted as suspected members of the communist party, which provoked Ball and Arnaz to take action to prevent the same from happening to Ball. Originally, Arnaz wanted to purchase the \textit{I Love Lucy} timeslot for thirty thousand dollars to explain Ball’s story of innocently registering many years before to please her grandfather. However, this drastic a move was not needed to clear her name. Instead, when introducing the

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., xxii.
\textsuperscript{202} Carini, “Love’s Labors Almost Lost,” 44.
\textsuperscript{203} Landay, “Millions "Love Lucy,"” 25-47.
\textsuperscript{204} Landay, \textit{The Sitcom Reader}, 96.
next show, Arnaz included in his speech a few tear-filled lines about Ball’s innocence. The audience roared in approval and from that point on, as Arnaz claimed, the only thing red about Ball was her hair.\footnote{Carini, "Love’s Labors Almost Lost," 44.} The show’s popularity conquered even America’s fear of subversion. Gossip columnist Hedda Hopper was a friend of Ball’s who actively worked to help clear her name. Ball and Arnaz were grateful for her support as is reflected in a thank you letter they wrote on September 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1953: “Dear Fabulous: You have proved to be not only a great friend, but a helluva reporter. How can we ever thank you, except to say ... that if you’re ever in a mess, S.O.S.”\footnote{To author from Kathleen Feeley: Ball and Arnaz to Hopper, September 25, 1953, Lucille Ball folder, Hedda Hopper collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.}

In the end, \textit{I Love Lucy} helped revolutionize the new television industry. Oppenheimer incorporated different aspects of domesticity into his scripts as comedic tools, some accurate and some not, making a major impact on postwar America. It’s hard to say whether it would have been possible to make a more effective product, but looking back at the success \textit{I Love Lucy} has seen over the years, it is pretty safe to assume that they exceeded all expectations.
### Appendix A: Continuity of Gender Stereotype From My Favorite Husband to *I Love Lucy*

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Appendix B: Comparative Analysis of First Scenes in First 45 Lucy Episodes: Domestic vs. Non-Domestic

Of the first forty-five episodes nearly seventy-five percent take place in the private sphere of the home.

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