

A THOUSAND TV SHOWS:  
APPLYING A RHIZOMATIC LENS TO TELEVISION GENRES

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by

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Someone recently asked me what High School Nettie would think about having written a 300+ page document about television shows. I responded quite honestly: “High School Nettie wouldn’t have been surprised. She knew where we were heading.” She absolutely did. I have always been pretty sure I would end up with an advanced degree and I have always known what that would involve. The only question was one of how I was going to get here, but my favorite thing has always been watching television and movies. Once I learned that a job existed where I could watch television and, more or less, get paid for it, I threw myself wholeheartedly into pursuing that job. I get to watch television and talk to other people about it. That’s simply heaven for me. A lot of people helped me get here. I thank them all in person constantly, but I want to ensure that their contributions are clear.

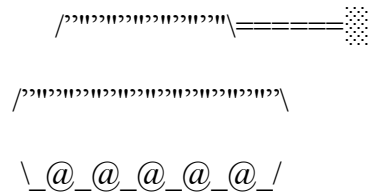
My family has been endlessly supportive of what I wanted to do with my life. They have never told me that my goals weren’t achievable. My parents often encouraged my movie watching habits, and certainly forced me to critically examine what it was I was watching. They were also always happy to answer questions about *I Love Lucy* or what life was really like in the 1960s. My siblings have been a huge help along the way. Josiah has frequently been an informal research assistant, watching *Davy Crockett*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and countless others for me when I didn’t have access and he did. Naomi loves to keep me in my place, calling me out when I get too far down my academic rabbit hole, but also enlisting her psychology degree when my mental health would go awry. She was also nice enough to give me a couple nibblings to cheer me up whenever necessary. So, thanks for Enid and Calvin! Finally, Nathan helped to get me to this point.

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## ABSTRACT

One frequent technique for studying television is through genre. However, with the complex television environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many genre studies do not adequately account for how generic television programs intersect other generic traits. This study probes how genre works within complex television narratives and proposes a new way of thinking about genre. Through Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of the rhizome, I will suggest an interconnected understanding of genre characteristics. The television landscape is a complex, dynamic structure; the assortment of programs and the traits of those programs differ greatly from one moment to the next. Therefore, this study will propose a meta-theory that enables studying this landscape. The theory of the generic rhizome challenges simplistic readings of television texts; opens texts up to endless possible interpretations and insights; and it flattens cultural hierarchies. In two studies, which look at sitcoms and Westerns, I tease out this theory and study television shows in a way that mines, rather than flattens, the complexity of the medium.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Television has always been a medium in transition. The programs on television morph and evolve, as is the nature of most entertainment forms. Thus, it is nearly impossible to point to one moment in which a television revolution occurred. Nevertheless, television of today is vastly different than television of the 1940s and 1950s. Many critics and scholars (e.g. Lotz, 2007; B. Martin, 2013; Sepinwall, 2012) have argued that a revolution has occurred, and point to specific moments that suggest a dramatic turn in television. This study will suggest that the complexity these scholars are pointing to has always existed, but has been ignored because of the dismissive perspective many take towards early television programs. Nevertheless, the incredible array of television options decry a change in standpoint in how we think about television. Any change in television must be matched in the ways that television is studied. Therefore, I will examine the changes in television, how genre is influenced by those changes, and how these changes alter the way scholars should study television genres.

Most scholars and critics set the beginning of this television revolution in the 1980s, with the premiere of *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), when television producers and audiences began to search for and discover deeper possibilities in television. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this evolution made slow but steady progress with shows such as *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), and *ER* (1994-2009; Sepinwall, 2012). This evolution firmly took root and completely altered the look of television, with no turning back, with the premiere of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). *The Sopranos* ushered in an entirely new form of television that featured programs both on cable (e.g. *Deadwood*, *The Wire*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mad*

*Men, Breaking Bad*), and on broadcast networks (e.g. *Lost, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 24, Friday Night Lights*). Over the last 20 years, the changes are clear through the reactions of the television industry, television audiences, and television scholars.

Critics tend to be the most effusive in their commendation of the revolution. Maines (2013) heaps praise on the “ambiguity, complexity, surprise and sophistication” (para. 7) of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), finding it a “truly great” (para. 2) program with few other shows reaching its caliber. Those few other shows are the ones emblematic of the revolution: *The Sopranos, Mad Men, Dexter*, etc. Jurgensen (2013) is slightly more generous with the rest of television, attributing the popularity of “serialized programs” to the fact that they “unfold over multiple seasons [giving] viewers more time to develop relationships with their characters” (para. 14). Similarly, McNamara (2013), who is frustrated by the proliferation of white, male, anti-heroes in the “blooming ... high-quality serialized fiction” (para. 3), sees “glimmers of hope” for diversification of these characters within new series such as *Louie* (2010-present) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present). She argues that these shows maintain the high standard of quality television today, but do so while expanding how she perceives of “quality television.” The reasons for this high standard of television are numerous. Auteur showrunners, those individuals who usually created the show and lead the development of the series with a “clear, creative vision” (Dawn, 2010, para. 2), such as Matt Weiner (*Mad Men*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and Lena Dunham (*Girls*) are frequently heralded as the bringers of “a fuller storytelling experience” (Dawn, 2010, para. 5).

However, a more common motivation for this narrative shift is attributed to competition from new technologies. This began with the rise of HBO. HBO started out as

a literal “Home Box Office,” showing recently released films and sporting events. These options, vastly different than the typical television fare of the 1970s, opened the door at HBO for its original programming by forming a network identity of more risqué material, or “breasts and curse words” (B. Martin, 2013, p. 48). This risqué attitude was also enabled by the lack of any governmental regulation. Because HBO is a cable station, it is outside the reach of the FCC, so is free to present whatever material it wants, breasts and curse words included (Auster, 2005). This lack of regulation, plus the reputation HBO garnered through showing high quality films, created a space for innovative television to be fostered. Critics also suggest that the “rivalry” between premium cable stations HBO and Showtime, with programs such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), *Homeland* (2011-present), and *Dexter* (2006-2013), brings in audiences and “churn[s] out a generation of riveting television” (Frail, 2014, para. 1).

While there have been numerous technological changes during this period of time, the most common technological shift to which this revolution is attributed is the rise of online streaming services and the original programming of those services. Because of the physical ways that these online streaming services have altered the television watching experience, and how the means through which programs can be produced has changed, Hoyle (2014) suggests that “Netflix is changing the way that we think about what television should be” (para. 4). Hughes (2015) suggests that the biggest, most important change comes with the way viewers are easily able to cultivate their own television schedules. Online streaming services do not have to cater to wide audiences, as broadcast networks do, nor do they need to prove to be the best show in a particular time slot. Niche audiences thrive in the online streaming environment.

Nevertheless, television remains the primary medium for most Americans. According to a Time magazine report (Luckerson, 2014), the number of people watching online video is up, but actually only spend about a “tenth of the time they spend watching TV” (para. 4) doing so. O’Reilly (2015) points out that while the number of U.S. homes with a subscription to some online streaming service is up, that does not mean that their media consumption has changed. Rather, “the amount of media consumption per day is actually up as consumers have more choice about the way in which they view content. And the more devices and services they have, the more content they consume” (para. 10). Television is still being watched; the devices on which it is watched have changed. A particularly telling form of evidence of this is that people continue to refer to these “online original programs” as “television,” even when they are no longer ever presented on a television set. The very meaning of “television” is being altered and many of the techniques used to distinguish television from other forms of media are disintegrating (Van den Bulck & Enli, 2014).

Poniewozik (2015) posited online original programming as an entirely new narrative genre. He suggests that because of the ease with which people can binge-watch this kind of programming, many of the narrative conventions have changed. For instance, episodes no longer have to repeat information because they assume that viewers have just watched the previous episodes. For the same reason, more stories can be told within a single program. Poniewozik suggests we should no longer consider this form of media simply an outcropping of television – with an absence of cliffhangers, multiple-act structures, and week-long episodic breaks, the attributes that make a program television have disappeared online.

Just as films of the 1950s became bigger and more spectacular to combat the growing threat of television, television shows are embracing the new complexity afforded by the exhaustive options online and on television. Within this complex television environment, it is especially important to reexamine the structures of television that contribute to its current complexity. One element of television that continues to shape both how stories are told and how stories are understood is genre. Since drama and literature have existed, they have been categorized by their physical and thematic characterizations, most famously in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle says the types of "arts differ from one another in three respects: for they do their *mimesis* (a) in different matter (in-what), (b) on different subjects (of-what), and (c) by different methods (how)" (Aristotle, Atherton, Baxter, & Whalley, 1997, p. 47). In other words, every piece of art imitates the other through its medium, its subject matter, and its aesthetics. Since that point, genre theory, regardless of medium, has studied some variation of this premise. However, genres of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially those on television, are vastly different than genres of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and are even different than television genres of the 1940s, which I will examine in more depth in the following section.

In this complicated televisual world, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (Television Academy) has attempted to control and restrict the boundaries of genre through its Emmy Award category rules. In 2015, they introduced new rules regarding what qualified as "comedy" and as "drama." The new rules are simple: anything approximately thirty minutes long is a comedy and anything around an hour is a drama. From there, series producers/executives can petition for their series to be eligible for a category that does not align with its length. The series is then judged on how much

of it is funny (Albiniak, 2010). Even Aristotle would agree that a comedy is more length, and not necessarily based upon how often it makes someone laugh. Instead, genres are complex, intricate distinctions that cannot easily be quantified through formal attributes.

Alongside the sophistication of television, genres become increasingly complicated. For example, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige said that he doesn't believe in the superhero genre. Instead, "[Marvel Films] are all very different movies. They all happen to be based on Marvel characters and Marvel comics, but from a genre and a cinematic perspective, they're all very unique" (qtd. in Schwartz, 2015). Similarly, Fox TV Group chairman Dana Walden observed about new series *The Orville* (2017), it "clearly pays homage to Star Trek, that clearly was inspired a lot by Star Trek," but "most shows have some DNA of previous shows" and *The Orville* is much the same (qtd. in Placido, 2017, para. 6). Both these executives are able to discern an important attribute of 21<sup>st</sup> century genres that the Television Academy seems to be having trouble understanding – genres are not simply groups of texts that share related forms and formulas, rather genres are a complicated mixture of forms, formulas, themes, ideologies, and tropes that work together to create a unique television program. Rather than oversimplifying genres, as the Television Academy appears to, scholars must rethink the ways genres work to construct texts, and vice-versa. We must rethink genre altogether.

As television has changed, the way genre contributes to the construction of a program has also changed. In the same ways that television studies must constantly reconfigure the language and theory used to study complex television, genre theory also must stay up to date with the current trends of a given medium. On television, this means re-examining how genre works in complex television. Rather than setting up a series by



the pre-established generic guidelines, recent television appears to pick and choose the parts of a genre that are most relevant and appealing to that particular program.

Examining this new approach to television is my aim in this study. I will examine the ways genre is used today by both producers and audiences. I will then look more closely at the 21<sup>st</sup> century television landscape to situate what complex television means. By doing so, I will be able to establish a basis from which I will launch a new theory of genre. This new theory will account for the ways genre is actually being used today, without eliminating all previous genre studies. My theory of genre will use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of the rhizome as its frame. This rhizomatic genre theory will account for the nomadic characteristics of genre that stretch across both programs and time, whilst not imposing any hierarchical understanding upon genres, and will allow scholars to study genre without losing the integrity of previous genre studies, while still accounting for the fluid nature of generic boundaries.

### **The Importance of Genre**

Before I can establish this new theory of genre, I want to clarify why such generic categories are still important. Recently, authors Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro (2015) discussed Ishiguro's genre-transcending book *The Buried Giant* and the necessity of genre categories. Ishiguro says, "I get worried when readers and writers take these [genre] boundaries too seriously, and think that something strange happens when you cross them, and that you should think very carefully before doing so" (para. 5). They both express the idea that genre categories appear to be "crumbling" (para. 43) and seem to be the domain of "publishers and bookshops" (para. 22). Gaiman and Ishiguro's conversation is emblematic of the complicated discourse currently surrounding genre –

on one hand, genre has become incredibly complicated, and on the other, genre seems irrelevant because of the frequency with which texts transcend the categories.

While genre may not be something everyday people are this directly concerned with, it is something almost everyone is likely to associate with the media – all forms of the media. So, why does genre remain important? Altman (1999) refers to four different ways viewers and producers use genre:

- Genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes [*sic*] and patterns industry production;
- Genre as *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- Genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- Genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience (p. 14).

In other words, genres work as a starting point for viewers and producers. In today's complicated television milieu, to be discussed more below, genres as label and as contract come to the fore. Additionally, genre as blueprints and structures work as the norm that television narratives work to deviate from. Let's explore labels and contracts before turning to complex television and how genres work as blueprints and structures.

Imagine trying to choose a new TV show based solely on a plot description. You might select something you'll end up enjoying, but you also might find something that you hate. Knowing part of what the series will be like before you begin watching can help to sort through the hundreds of possible choices and avoid television missteps. These

generic traits – Altman’s “contract” – situate the viewers to the content and themes located within the show. Viewers use their understanding of this contract to decide what shows to watch and which to disregard. Genre works as a simple way of sorting through all the choices – a viewer may like particular generic traits, so will gravitate towards certain shows based on those traits. Even as complicated narratives work to transcend generic boundaries, the programs usually continue to feature enough characteristics of one genre to help audiences choose which programs are most appealing to them.

Let’s take a recent, personal example to explain this use of genres. As a busy graduate student, I rarely have time to watch current television (even though I study it), especially not to binge online streaming series. As a result, I have not seen many of the new Netflix original programs. Another reason is that none of the series really appeal to me. I prefer uplifting, humorous shows. Most of the Netflix original programs, such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present) and *House of Cards* (2013-present), don’t sound like they would fit onto my “must watch” list. I know I’ll get to them in time, but when I’m busy I don’t make the time to watch shows like this. However, when a series premiered that did fit into my preferred generic characteristics – *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present) – I immediately dropped everything and binged the series. I utilized my knowledge of genres and my generic tastes to negotiate recent television premiers to choose what to watch. Using generic traits to sort through the numerous television options in this way is why genres are still relevant.

Distributors – television networks and online streaming services – also use genres to enable viewership, Altman’s (1999) “label.” The most straightforward way to examine this labeling is to look at the everyday breakdown of genre categories. Television

broadcast networks use genres to advertise and program their series. Certain evenings or blocks of time will be situated specifically for particular genres. For instance, ABC's infamous "Thank God Its Friday" (TGIF) primetime-programming block featured family-oriented sitcoms, such as *Full House* (1987-1995), *Family Matters* (1989-1998), and *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000; Bozell III, 2000). Television cable networks tend to be much more directly associated with particular genres. TLC is well known for its family-friendly, self-improvement reality television. USA has long featured character-centered, serialized dramas and comedies. These networks, then, focus more on the differences between the programs, rather than having to establish each show's genre.

Where genres are used more directly is with online streaming services. Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon categorize their available programs by genre; each does so differently. Hulu is the most traditional in their genres. The breakdown of Hulu's genres runs thusly: TV – Genres – Comedy – Sitcoms/Late Night Comedy/Sketch Comedy/British Comedy/Romantic Comedy/Satire/Stand Up Comedy/Comedias (Spanish-language comedy). Meanwhile, Netflix has both the broadest categories without subdivision and the most oddly specific. If a viewer is browsing the Netflix content, searching for a situation comedy, they can only look at "TV Comedies," but no further sub-categories. However, at the same time, the "home" screen of Netflix features suggestion categories with oddly specific genres. For instance, friends have told me about suggestion categories including "TV War and Political Drama" and "Jews in Baseball." This suggestion mechanism originates in Netflix's analysis system. According to Madrigal (2014), a group of "specially trained" analysts "watch films and tag them with all kinds of metadata" (para. 10) to create "altgenres" (para. 9). These altgenres

breakdown and reform the characteristics of television shows and films to their base attributes, including "social acceptability," romance rating, whether the ending is happy or sad, and the characters' jobs (para. 63). Netflix's altgenres are emblematic of the complex genre milieu and of the need to retheorize how genre works. However, the altgenres only appear in suggestion form and are not easily browse-able; consequently, the genres of Netflix primarily serve as a means through which the service can tailor their content and not as a way for viewers to find a program. Finally, Amazon Instant Video's search function points most directly to the complicated genres of most television. One can select a genre from the long variety given (Kids and Family; Action and Adventure; Animation; Comedy; Documentary; Drama; Exercise and Fitness; Fantasy; Horror; International; Military and War; Musicals; Mystery and Thrillers; Reality TV; Romance; Science Fiction; Sports; Westerns). From there s/he can browse by preferred mood, theme, subgenre, TV network and studio, actor, and/or director. The moods and themes run the gamut, from exciting and feel-good to gritty and suspenseful (even for comedies).

Clearly, genres function not only for viewers, but also for distributors to help viewers negotiate all their options to find a series. These everyday ways that genres are used point to the continued relevance of genres, as well as why genres must still be examined in media cultural studies. Genres are still being used in this complicated television environment, but rather than using them as discrete categories into which series are placed, as they clearly are on Netflix and Hulu, the use of genres by distributors like Amazon, and the altgenre suggestions from Netflix, points to genres as being used as an intricate interlocking set of characteristics.

Genres also provide certain tropes and themes that form the basis of all stories. Writers and directors select the narrative progression of their programs and the evolution of their characters through the generic characteristics inherent in their program. As television has moved into a realm with significantly more complex narratives, to be discussed in the next section, genre characteristics are used in a more disjointed fashion. Rather than aligning with what a genre program is “supposed” to be like, complex television narratives are much more likely to pick and choose the best generic characteristics to tell the story. In this way, it is important to examine genre more broadly; to investigate the ways that those characteristics are spread across programs, rather than how specific texts fit into specific genres.

Through their traits, television programs also enact specific discourses and narratives. Kamberelis (1995) says that

Meanings embodied in texts are negotiated in concrete situations of social exchange, not through abstract individual mental processes or universal social structures; yet the discursive tools for embodying those meanings are provided by the material and discursive organization of the social/discursive practices themselves (122).

In other words, through the use of specific tools, such as aesthetics and characterizations on television, texts create a framework through which audiences can negotiate meanings. Genres work as a process through which audiences and industry professionals negotiate identities, ideologies, and narrative elaboration. Some media scholars, such as Fiske (2011), would refer to this idea as “intertextuality.” Ott and Walter (2000) describe the two different understandings of “intertextuality” found within media studies. The first, as

championed by Fiske (2011), is a way that “*audiences* unconsciously create meaning by utilizing their vast knowledge of cultural codes learned from other texts” (p. 429, emphasis original). The second, suggested by scholars such as Collins (1992), is “an identifiable *stylistic device* consciously employed by the author in in the case of the media producer, to invite a particular audience response” (p. 430, emphasis original). Ott and Walter suggest a divide between these two conceptualizations of intertextuality. In doing so, they are, unconsciously, discussing the rhizome. They talk about how “a text exists within an endlessly expanding matrix of intertextual production” (p. 431) and that “texts are neither self-contained, nor individually authored; they are endlessly permeated by a social ensemble which is itself a textual ensemble.” (p. 432). They discuss “mapping the concepts of intertextuality” (p. 440) and “the lifetime of unconscious textual baggage audiences bring to their reading of mediated texts” (p. 442). However, they also suggest that some texts are more intertextual than others. They propose texts like *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *The A-Team* (1983-1987) as very intertextual and suggest that *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998) is not as intertextual. Here is where the rhizome can pick up the slack. First, the rhizome eliminates the cultural elitism that elevates a text such as *Ally McBeal*, which Ott and Walter (2000) repeatedly turn to as the epitome of intertextual television, and denigrates *Dr. Quinn*, as Ott and Walter (2000) do when they say that it doesn’t “encourage viewers to identify with other [fans]” or “contribute to a sense of self-satisfaction” (p. 441). The rhizome presents both of these texts as on an equal playing field; they each negotiate internodes in the same ways, simply to different presentations of their stories and discourses. The second way that the rhizome can fill in the gaps suggested by Ott and Walter’s (2000) work on intertextuality is through those

ways the texts negotiate their internodes. Perhaps *The A-Team* is more intertextual in the ways identified by both Fiske (2011)– through the paratextual discussions of the series – and Ott and Walter (2000) – the use of the letter A and its connections to *The Scarlett Letter*, “A+ work,” and “Grade A eggs” (p. 433). This simply means that the series draws upon more internodes than *Dr. Quinn*. While *Dr. Quinn* looks like a Western and little more, it does a lot to further discourses of Native American’s plight, women’s rights, etc. We should not neglect the rhizomatic ways that *Dr. Quinn* is being influenced by internodes, even if those internodes are not as obvious as they are with *The A-Team*. Thus, the generic rhizome takes the possibility of intertextuality and extends it, actualizing its potential by illustrating the generic, ideological, and discursive hybridity of even apparently singular texts.

That being said, scholars such as Radway (1986), suggest that we must find new ways of studying the confluence of ideology and text. She says,

although ideology is itself a structure or a system for coding reality, which is to say, a system of rules for generating messages, that system is nonetheless the product of specific, material practices, which are themselves organized in a particular and historical fashion . . . we need to understand how the ideological formation is ordered internally, that is, how its various constituent components interact (p. 106).

The need for studying this confluence is even more important in today’s complex television landscape. Theorizing genre as more than simply a series of categories is imperative. Understanding that television is a rhizomatic structure made up of programs and characteristics allows scholars to closely examine those ways that meaning is



constructed outside the boundaries of genre. Meaning is often embedded within certain genres. Dramas tell of suffering. Romances elaborate upon love. A family sitcom “presents an idealized version of a ‘typical’ American family momentary mini-crises and a portrait of imperfect, nonheroic folk who are nonetheless good people” (Mintz, 1985, p. 108). Westerns ruminate on the human condition. And yet, sometimes, a program does more than is contained within the ideological or storytelling sphere of the genre. Sitcoms frequently talk about love and suffering. Dramas can present “nonheroic” characters. Understanding television through the rhizome can account for these shifts and can enable readings of the texts that negotiate such genre-shifting. Television programs subvert and transgress the norms of both ideologies and narrative assumptions for myriad reasons. They do so because television characteristics are a rhizome.

As an example, let’s take *Girls* (2012-2017). *Girls* is about “The assorted humiliations, disasters and rare triumphs of four very different twenty-something girls: Hannah, an aspiring writer; Marnie, an art gallery assistant and cousins Jessa and Shoshanna” (“Girls,” n.d.). This series is extremely intersectional, as investigated in *HBO’s Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege* (Shaw, Mitchell, & Watson, 2015). The essays in this volume explore *Girls*’ representation of body politics, dating, archetypes, feminism in the 21st century, race, etc. The series does a whole host of things in a variety of ways. It uses innovative aesthetic techniques, such as the raw realism of the sex scenes, to enact a 21st century sensibility. The rhizome enables the ease with which the series does so. By studying it through the rhizome, not only do the obvious intersectional politics Shaw, et al. (2015), come to the fore, but also that, despite the raw realism and the discussions of the human condition, this program is still a

sitcom, if we take Mintz's (1985) understanding of the genre: "The sitcom is a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting" (p. 115). The four main characters, Hannah (Lena Dunham), Marnie (Allison Williams), Jessa (Jemime Kirke), and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) live their lives and encounter the same kinds of problems week after week, usually disagreements with each other and outsiders over love and work relationships. At the same time, *Girls* is a deep drama that ruminates on the lives of single 20-somethings living in New York City in the 21st century. It is the anti-*Friends*, in the ways that showrunner Lena Dunham strives to create an authentic depiction of this lifestyle, while still maintaining the brevity and humor the sitcom format allows. The rhizome lets the show draw upon characteristics of both dramas and comedies to create its overall story and messages.

### **Complex Television**

The key to this new theory of genre, and that which makes it important to do now, is the narrative complexity (Mittell, 2015) – which has been called “peak TV” (Sepinwall, 2015), “quality TV” (Thompson, 1996) and “complex TV” (Mittell, 2015) – of 21<sup>st</sup> century television, the time Lotz (2007) refers to as the “post-network era.” The differences between “peak TV,” “quality TV,” and “complex TV” are not distinctive, but for the purposes of this study, are relevant. In 2015, FX CEO John Landgraf used the term “peak TV” to refer to the outrageous amount of television available, but also used it to suggest that because of the overwhelming amount of television available, audiences are no longer able to wade through the assorted choices to find the truly great television (Paskin, 2015). He did not go on to elaborate upon the attributes of said programs, or to

delineate the parameters of “peak” television. Instead, he issued the phrase as a warning – that there is no more “up” to go to and television can only go down from here.

Thompson (1996) was the first scholar to compile a definition of “quality TV” out of the uses other scholars and critics had individually used. He creates a list of twelve attributes of quality TV: it is not “regular” TV; it has an artistic pedigree through its producers; it attracts a well-educated, wealthy, young audience; it struggles with cancellation on broadcast networks; it has a large ensemble cast; it has a memory; it creates entirely new genres; it is more writer based than other television; it is aware of itself; it is more controversial; it “aspires towards ‘realism;’” it achieves critical acclaim (Thompson, 1996, pp. 13–15).

Mittell (2015) does not create such a list, but his focus is much more on the narrative attributes of 21<sup>st</sup> century television. In discussing complex TV, he “considers different storytelling strategies used by serial television to create engaging storyworlds through a range of complex techniques of narrative discourse, including playing with temporality, constructing ongoing characters, and incorporating transmedia” (p. 10). Both of these scholars discuss issues that are relevant to this study, specifically Thompson’s idea that “quality TV creates a new genre by mixing old ones” (p. 15) and Mittell’s tracing of “changing narrative paradigms” (p. 10). However, because I am focusing particularly on the narrative complexity that requires a new configuring of genre theory, I am going to favor the term “complex TV” over “quality TV,” because of the connotations associated with the word “complex” over “quality” – the suggestion that it is about more than the production values, etc.

Within narrative complexity, Altman's (1999) remaining two levels of generic uses, blueprint and structure, work as the foundation from which modern television deviates and out of which a new theory of genre becomes necessary. Many scholars have studied the 21<sup>st</sup> century television landscape and have identified a narrative and aesthetic shift. They have identified the reasons for this shift, as well as the attributes therein.

### **Attributes of the shift**

One of the earliest scholars to identify an aesthetic shift on television is Caldwell (1995). He says:

In many ways television by 1990 had retheorized its aesthetic and presentational task. With increasing frequency, style itself became the subject, the signified, if you will, of television. In fact, this self-consciousness of style became so great that it can more accurately be described as an activity—as a performance of style—rather than as a particular look (p. 4-5).

While Caldwell's main focus is on the aesthetic style of television and how it is shifting in the mid-1990s, he hints that such "televisuality" will lead to more sophisticated content in programs as well. He points to shows such as *Moonlighting* (1985-1989) as

suggest[ing] that their audiences are neither aesthetically stupid nor solely interested in character or plot, as traditional dramatic theory assumes. Rather, regular investments and manipulations of style indicate that audiences must in some way find pleasure and engagement in a weekly aesthetic game that demands stylistic decipherment (p. 91).

Caldwell refers to the style of programming that derives from this trend of complicated aesthetics and audience readings as "boutique programming." He is comparing "mass-

market” programming to smaller programming, intended for a more niche, sophisticated audience, “Boutique television, then, became a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity went hand in hand with social relevance and viewer discrimination” (p. 110). This boutique programming sought out different audiences than the “mass-market” programs, and thus was able to be more discriminating in their themes, content, and style, as their audiences were more discriminating in their choosing of the program. In most ways, Caldwell’s “boutique programming” equates to what is typically called “narrowcast programming” today – “targeted to distinct and isolated subsections of the audience” (Lotz, 2007, p. 5). Caldwell’s work anticipates the programs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but by doing so calls attention to the non-linear progression of this television revolution. As I mentioned earlier, there is no one moment that can be pointed to as the turning point in the revolution. Caldwell’s writing suggests that the shows of the 1980s and 1990s were as complex and the programs we identify today as complex.

Indeed, Sepinwall (2012) notes that today’s revolution was built on the backs of earlier series, “particularly the ones created from the early '80s onward” (p. 7). These building blocks of complex television include *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), *Cheers* (1982-1993), and *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). Each of these shows contains elements of narrative complexity that have become the norm today, in shows such as *Oz* (1997-2003) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). The changes that occurred make sense in the history of the medium and gradually took footing to become today’s norm. Sconce (2004) sees that the difference between early television and recent narrative is that “story worlds (diegesis) [are] as crucial an element in its success as is storytelling. What television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for

in depth and duration of character relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment” (p. 95). The story world is all the events that occur within the confines of the series and make it come to life and appear to be “real” to its regular viewers. By embracing the diegesis, programs are achieve greater depth and character development.

These story worlds are just one element of narrative complexity. Mittell (2015) also says, “Complex television employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode” (p. 18). Utilizing terminology from Newcomb (1985), Sconce (2004) similarly differentiates between “cumulative narratives” (p. 98) and “amnesia television” (p. 101). In the first, the stories build up over time to create complex plots and characters. In the second, the plots and characters all reset at the end of the episodes and forget everything they learned or anything that occurred over the course of that episode. He also argues that this second kind of program rarely exists anymore. This move away from amnesia television towards cumulative narratives is emblematic of the television evolution – this has been an ongoing process since the mid-1980s (when Newcomb was writing).

This cumulative narrative style focuses on creating stories that have an impact on the overarching plot and characters. A series such as *Cheers* used its cumulative narrative to “condition viewers to the basic idea that their TV shows weren't disposable, that it was possible to see characters transform beyond just seeing sitcom kids get older with each season” (Sepinwall, 2012, p. 11). Cumulative narratives let their characters learn and grow, instead of resetting them back to who they were before the lessons of the episode.

Another important aspect of complex television is its willingness to take risks. For most of its early days, television was focused on “embracing a strategy of imitation and formula that often results in a model of ‘least objectionable content’” (Mittell, 2015, p. 32). However, as the medium moved into more complex narrative styles, producers were more willing to take, as HBO executive Carolyn Strauss puts it, a “let's see what happens' attitude rather than a 'we need to know exactly what happens every step of the way” (qtd. in Sepinwall, 2012, p. 24). Additionally, the focus became less centered on broadcasting and more into narrowcasting. Thompson (1996) talks about NBC’s move away from a “Least Objectionable Programming” model in the 1980s and how they moved towards striving for “critical acclaim” by aiming for “specialized segments” of the audience (p. 39). By not trying for huge audiences, producers were able to take risks because they would not be worried about alienating sections of their audience. This attitude, taken by both producers and by studio executives, opened television narratives up to a whole new range of ideological possibilities. As a result, shows such as *Miami Vice* (1984-1990) led to *The Wire* (2002-2008) and to *True Detective* (2014-present).

It must be pointed out that not all television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is complex TV. There are still remnants of the earlier styles of television – particularly within network sitcoms and crime procedurals. Matthews (2014) points out that *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) draws more viewers than *Community* (2009-2015), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *The Mindy Project* (2012-present) combined, and that reruns of *NCIS* (2003-present) and *NCIS: LA* (2009-present) bring in, far and away, more viewers than *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), with the former getting 10 million each and the latter 7 million viewers in the same week. However, the broader complex television ecology is

influencing those pure generic programs. The generic rhizome will account for that influence. By breaking down the constituent characteristics of complex programs, the rhizome allows scholars to trace where those characteristics are seen in other programs. Those programs can be the complex television programs that pick up attributes of a variety of genres, or they can be the simple genre programs that feed primarily off their own genre, but also reach briefly into other genres for one or two innovations.

Narrative complexity emerged in the early 1980s and evolved and developed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s to the television we see today. This complexity is evidenced in the aesthetics, overarching storylines, and risky themes of programs. Early complex television showed that having “strangeness” within a series was no longer “a barrier” for success; rather, if the story was told in a compelling way, with compelling characters, audiences would come and stay (Sepinwall, 2012, p. 14). However, simply doing these things is not enough for the success of complex television. This narrative complexity was a gradual evolution that was triggered at the very beginning of the medium. Certain aspects of the television environment enabled these complex programs to take root and become normal.

### **Reasons for the Shift**

Every technological innovation and every cultural shift has repercussions in various ways. Studying the environment that these technical and cultural shifts create is called media ecology and looks specifically at how the medium itself creates “possibilities of communication and social impacts” (Mittell, 2009, p. 405). Therefore, I want to look at the television ecology occurring towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century out of which the post-network era emerged. The aspects that instigated this shift are twofold:



first, there were more technological advancements in the early 2000s than in the entire history of television (Mittell, 2009); second, because of its longevity, plus the attention it was garnering, television started to be accepted as a viable art form, in much the same way cinema has been accepted (Newman & Levine, 2012). By mapping this ecological setting, we can have a greater understanding of why complex television emerged. Consequently, I will discuss why it's important to retheorize this complex television environment at this precise moment.

Starting in the 1980s, technology worked to threaten a traditional, synchronous, live usage of television. Home video and VCRs enabled "time-shift[ing] programming, disrupting flow and allowing viewers to watch television on their own schedule" (Mittell, 2009, p. 416). Time-shifting allowed viewers the ease to watch and re-watch programs at their own pace (Lotz, 2007, p. 59), making them more discerning. As time-shifting technologies increased, through the introduction of DVDs, DVR, and Video-on-Demand (VOD), television producers began to take advantage of the possibilities such discerning viewers desired. Stories contained elements that required viewers to "rewatch in order to notice the depth of references, to marvel at displays of craft and continuities, and to appreciate details that require the liberal use of pause and rewind" (Mittell, 2015, p. 38).

Additionally, the programs have to retain the audiences' attention so they don't choose another program out of the hundreds of possibilities. Uricchio (2004), writing before the rise of online streaming service, observes that the rise of technologies will cause a rise in the "active zapper," the active viewer who will change the channel at the slightest provocation (p. 173). He discerns several strategies used by producers to "maximize continued viewing," such as "sharpening program hooks before ad breaks" to

hint to viewers what is coming later in the show. These strategies have virtually disappeared and are not relevant with online original programming, but suggest the ways that producers have to overcome technological advances. In the complex television atmosphere, stories became more complicated and intricate, because these technologies allowed audiences to devote the necessary time to digest these complex narratives.

DVDs, DVRs, and VOD also fostered faster watching of programs. Viewers were likely to wait for the entire series to be released on DVD, so they could “binge” the series in quick succession instead of waiting for each episode on a weekly basis (Mittell, 2009; Sepinwall, 2012). This style of television viewing makes the experience “more immersive and attentive” (Mittell, 2015, p. 39). Complex narratives thrive in this immersive experience. The commitment of viewers to television through time-shifting and/or binge-watching nurtures an ecological setting in which the cinematic aesthetics, complicated storylines, and risky themes emblematic of complex narratives thrive.

These technological advancements also allowed audiences to become more discriminating in their program choices. No longer were viewers restricted to the four broadcast channels. In addition to the hundreds of stations on cable, mobile technologies and streaming services create a huge number of options for viewers to choose from. Lotz (2007) identifies these as “convenience technologies,” which make viewers more deliberate in their television use (p. 59). As a result, audiences became more fragmented, more niche, more “boutique” (Caldwell, 1995). These fragmented audiences found plenty of options and producers established audiences for programs that would previously never had been successful. The industry started to refigure what “success” meant. The more channels that sprang up, the size of the audience shrank; the industry recognized that “a

consistent cult following of a small but dedicated audience can suffice to make a series economically viable” (Mittell, 2015, p. 34). As a result of these smaller audiences, the options feel more personal for the viewer. The connection between a programs’ content and the audience’s interests have become more directly intertwined. Parks (2004) refers to this style as “flexible microcasting” and suggests that it causes television programs to be “about developing narrowly defined yet infinitely flexible content that commodifies layers of individual identity, desire, taste, and preference” (p. 135). Complex television is empowered by flexible microcasting, the personal aspect of television, and the smaller audiences that accompany personalized television.

The internet enabled the wider range of audience members, and of shows with smaller audiences. The internet “made it easier to discuss and make sense of shows that might have seemed too challenging back in the day” (Sepinwall, 2012, p. 5). Suddenly audience members could consult with each other on the intricate level of the plot twists, Additionally, smaller series that would not have gotten traction before the spread of the internet were able to flourish.

Digital time-shifting technologies, convenience viewing, and the accessibility of other viewers through the Internet made the early 2000s the ideal environment for complex narratives to emerge. However, before this revolution could be complete, audiences, producers, and scholars all had to accept television as a viable, legitimate medium, where complicated plots could find a home. In the early days of the medium, television was seen as film’s lesser cousin – a good place for news, but nothing worthwhile was on television.

Williams (1974), in his book establishing many of the standards of early television studies, refers to television as an “inferior visual medium” to film (p. 22) and to the “unacceptable degree” of loss of quality (p. 59). Television has frequently been compared unfavorably to film, as the opposite of the cultural spectrum (C. Geraghty, 2003). The illegitimate nature of television, especially compared to film, is pervasive throughout much of the early days of the medium. Lotz (2007) says, “Because cinema predated television as a screen technology, its norms and capabilities have long served as the standard against which television had been measured – and consistently found inferior” (p. 71). However, once critics began talking about television in the same way that they spoke of films, television was able to start becoming more legitimate. Newman and Levine (2012) argue that, while the quality TV movement edged television towards legitimacy, what finally pushed the medium into full legitimation was “cultural elites” associating it with other, pre-established mediums such as film (p. 7). Legitimation itself is built upon a hierarchy; something else must be less legitimate than quality television. Other forms of television – such as reality and network programs – currently hold this illegitimate position (Newman & Levine, 2012). Therefore, legitimation is directly intertwined with the complex TV movement, and its advocates. The rhizome bolsters legitimation of all programs, finding strength, quality, and importance everywhere.

Between this legitimacy and the ease with which audiences could view television and cultivate their own programming, the television environment has evolved considerably from its beginnings. Therefore, my goal in this study is to examine genres within this new television environment, as well as the historical precedents that established this environment. Because the keys to this new television ecology are its

flexibility and constant changes, a new way of thinking about the entire system is imperative. I have discussed the ways in which producers and audiences use genres to make sense of the multitude of texts currently available, but I have not yet touched too much on how producers use genres to create texts. With the advancements just discussed, the narrative possibilities have become virtually endless. Scholars, such as myself, are likely to study programs through a generic lens, because there are still huge advantages to this approach, such as investigations into narrative devices, audience preferences, ideological turns, etc. By adopting the generic rhizome, those studies can become more fruitful. Complex television no longer sticks to a set allotment of generic rules; rather, these programs reach into a variety of genres and cherry pick the best parts of that genre. As a result, they take on the history and impact of those generic characteristics. Additionally, by thinking of genre as a generic rhizome, scholars can study the characteristics of a program in association with the characteristics of a genre, without limiting their field of study to specific, concrete generic boundaries. Thus, a program's meanings from outside those generic boundaries can be investigated.

### **Preview**

In order to create and study this theory of rhizomatic genres, I establish what the current landscape of genre theory looks like. Since the days when Aristotle used genres to study drama, genre has been a primary means of literary/film/television study (depending on the prominent media of the moment). To breakdown and retheorize genre theory, it is important to ascertain what genre theory itself actually is. Once I have laid this groundwork, I discuss the current state of the theory of the rhizome. The rhizome was initially theorized by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a post-modern alternative to the

traditional, hierarchical, arboreal way of conceptualizing thought. Scholars (e.g. Fernandez, 2001; Ibrahim, 2014; Riddle, 2013; Robinson & Maguire, 2010) have applied this usage to other interconnected media, but none have done so to the degree I intend. After establishing both of these theories, I unite them to create a theory of rhizomatic genres. This study establishes a new way of thinking of television genre, one that more accurately emulates the complex genre interactions emblematic of 21<sup>st</sup> century television.

To tease out the ways that this new theory can successfully trace the connections between generic characteristics and television programs, I examine genre from two different perspectives. First, I look at sitcoms across history to see the ways that this particular genre has been gradually influenced by other genres. By looking at the stylistic, ideological, and culture influences on sitcoms, through an examination of the programs themselves, paratexts surrounding the programs, and paratexts regarding television in historical eras, I show the ways the sitcom has been changed and is, in fact, one cog in a complex rhizome.

Second, I look at how television Westerns have influenced other genres. Westerns are an interesting phenomenon on television because they were the dominant genre for a very brief period of time in the 1960s, but have since virtually disappeared from television, with one or two exceptions at any given time. By examining Westerns within the idea of the generic rhizome, I uncover the ways that Westerns still influence other generic programs without being physically present on television. One of the primary attributes of a rhizome is that it contains “asignifying ruptures” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9), where it can be broken, but the broken piece can regrow elsewhere. To study how Westerns have acted as “asignifying ruptures,” I look, again, at the programs

themselves and the paratexts surrounding the programs. However, this time I establish what the characteristics of the Western are and search for those characteristics individually in other series, particularly in television eras without any direct Westerns. In this way, I show the ways that the rhizome works to maintain genres even if they have seemingly vanished from screens.

Genre is incredibly important. An evolution has long been occurring on television and genres work to help audiences make sense of the multitude of options available. Genres are an interlocking series of characteristics that work together to create new and innovative programs, as well as tell stories and enact discourses in innovative ways. Academia must keep pace of these changes. If scholars, no matter what field they are in, persist in utilizing genre theory as simply a means of definition and categorization, they will no longer be accurately discussing how genres work. A television genre study can use a rhizomatic conceptualization to both study a specific program and consider how that program fits into the larger television milieu. We must take into account the changes in the media environment and use them to our advantage. Retheorizing genre is just one step in an intricate process of reconsideration that must occur to keep up with the complex television environment. Television programs have started sampling characteristics from a variety of genres. Genre study should reflect that sampling.

By utilizing a rhizomatic theory of genre, television scholars will be able to analyzing, examine, and discuss the attributes of a television's genre in a more complex way. Generic attributes can include the ways the story is told, both narratively and visually, the formations of the characters, and the thematic arcs of the programs. The generic rhizome will broaden the possible ways scholars can study these attributes.

Rather than only focusing on what the attributes of sitcoms bring to a show such as Parks and Recreation, scholars can also examine the ways that politics, dramas, documentaries, science fiction, fantasy, and other cultural influences also contribute to readings of the series. Consequently, the possibilities are nearly endless for how a show is molded. In the complex television environment of the 21st century, the majority of television shows are transcending genres. The generic rhizome allows scholars to examine how that transcendence contributes to the inner workings of a program – which is at the root of most television research.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Genre is one of the most straightforward and recognizable ways that both critics and audiences have of discussing and identifying the media. Today's media environment is a complicated confluence of narrative and style that transcends a single medium; television has come a long way since *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and the early days of the medium. Because of today's more complicated television atmosphere, scholarship needs to continually update its methods to keep up with the changes present. One of the essential elements of today's genres, in most areas of genre studies, is that the boundaries that used to separate genres are frequently blurred. Kamberelis (1995) says

[Genres] evolve, expand, and get inflected in different ways over time. This occurs because the people and collectives who engage in material and discursive practices informed by genres do so within ongoing historical trajectories, thus blurring the distinctions between genres, creating sub-genres and new genres, and re-inscribing old genres in new practices (p. 160).

As a result of the ways that genres change, studies of genres, especially those examining television genres, are moving towards repeated discussions of "hybrid" genres, rather than working to conceive of any overarching theory of genre that accommodates this interrelation of generic categories. At the same time, the traditional categorizations of television, such as genre, remain necessary to make sense of the barrage of television choices available. Therefore, while television scholars need to keep considering and studying the ways that genre categorizations work on television, finding new ways, specifically finding one overarching theory of genre, to do so is imperative because of the changing ways that the television milieu utilizes genre.

## Genre

Far more complicated than simple categorizations, genre has been in existence as long as there has been drama to categorize. Indeed, in *Poetics*, Aristotle (Aristotle, Atherton, Baxter, & Whalley, 1997) laid out how to study genre and the definitions of the two major genres - tragedy and comedy. Genre theory has changed very little since. The primary purpose of genre studies have been to situate texts within certain genres and to see how the conventions of those genres are utilized in that text in order to examine the means through which stories are undertaken and meanings are created (Altman, 1999). The definitions of those genres may shift according to the needs of the scholar, and the texts within a particular genre may shift as well, but the intent of genre scholarship remains the same. Only in relatively recent years have discussions of the ways generic-hybrids are prolific on television become common. To eliminate the need for such repetitive discussions of hybrid-genres, and to overcome the problems with a simplistic, shifting definition of a genre, an entirely new, meta-theory of genre must be created. To begin a discussion of such a theory, I provide an overview of genre study, discuss how genre study came into existence, and how it has changed over the years. I begin with a clarification of what I mean by “genre.”

### **What is Genre?**

While the definition of genre would seem to be reasonably straightforward, since it is a word with an accepted dictionary definition, genre theory, marketing techniques, and audience acceptance shows that the reality is quite different. As discussed in the previous chapter, rather than only meaning “a. kind, sort, style; b. *spec.* a particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular

form, style, or purpose” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), genre is a complex theoretical term utilized by people differently in disparate situations.

Throughout the history of media and drama, genres have been studied in a variety of ways. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) outline five shifts in literary genre theory, in chronological order. These shifts are important to understand because they show the different ways that genre has been studied throughout the history of genre scholarship, as well as the changes that have occurred in the field. I will discuss each of the stages in turn, before turning to the final stage of genre theory, the cultural studies approach, which is the most unified and reflective of how I want to proceed in this field.

While these shifts have not all translated to television genre studies, they have all influenced television genre scholars, in that elements of these approaches can still be seen in television genre scholarship. The first is the Neoclassical approach. Here, "a theoretical, trans-historical set of categories (or taxonomies)" is used to "classify literary texts" (p. 15). This is a simple way of using *a priori* categorizations to group texts. The Structuralist approach argues that genres shape the texts, rather than the traditional, Neoclassical thinking, in which texts create and shape genres. This approach is particularly noteworthy because of the emphasis placed upon the power of genres to exert some change upon texts, rather than simply being a means of categorization. The Romantic approach rejects this idea of genres as shaping texts, instead arguing that texts "achieve their status, in fact, by exceeding genre conventions" (p. 20). The primary importance of this approach is its focus on the deviations of generic conventions, rather than the ways a text abides by its rules. For the purposes of this study, deviations from generic conventions are much more telling, because they point to influences outside the

genre – influences that can be conceptualized within the generic rhizome. Within the Reader Response approach, the focus moves from how a text is shaped, to what audience members gain from a text. In this approach, critics and audience members use genre to make an argument about a text. Genre is used as a "localized and even temporary explanation of a text" (p. 22).

Finally, the cultural studies approach looks at the relationship between genre, texts, and culture to explore "the way genres organize, generate, normalize, and help reproduce" society and culture (p. 23). These different approaches are not temporally grounded by Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), but an historical trajectory is situated through them. Therefore, the most recent and most currently utilized approach to genre is the cultural studies approach. However, theorizing a generic rhizome requires openness to a variety of approaches. I will primarily draw upon the cultural studies approach because it approaches genre broadly and with the same intent I propose. Nevertheless, the emphasis on what genres do to texts from the Structuralist approach, the focus on deviations in the Romantic approach, and the role that audience members play in the Reader Response approach will all be important in conceiving a new theory of genre.

Campbell and Jamieson (1978) identify different approaches throughout the history of rhetorical genre studies. More importantly, however, they identify similarities. These include:

- 1) Classification is justified only by the critical illumination it produces[,] not by the neatness of a classificatory schema;
- 2) Generic criticism is taken as a means toward systematic, close textual analysis;
- 3) A genre is a complex, an amalgam, a constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements;
- 4) Generic analysis

reveals both the conventions and affinities that a work shares with others; it uncovers the unique elements in the rhetorical act, the particular means by which a genre is individuated in a given case (p. 18).

These “constants,” as Campbell and Jamieson call them, across genre studies are true both in rhetoric, and in other forms of media genre studies. For our purposes, the ideas of these constants can all influence the generic rhizome.

Mittell (2004) also analyzes different approaches to genre, but specifically within the context of television genres. His analysis looks at the approaches through the questions they pose. The first approach poses "*questions of definition*" (p. 2), which works to identify the formal elements that delimit the boundaries of a given genre. However, Mittell observes that this approach has not been common in television studies because of the lack of emphasis in television on formal characteristics. Additionally, he feels that by focusing only on the formal aspects of a genre, the larger cultural importance of the genre is neglected. The second approach asks "*questions of interpretation*," and closely explores the relationship between texts and culture "by interpreting the textual meanings of genres and situating them within their social contexts" (p. 4). This approach is, according to Mittell, the most widely used and influential. Nevertheless, he also outlines several problems inherent in this method. Primarily, "textual meanings" can differ between critics, so is not a reliable means of categorization. The meaning of a genre, then, "does not necessarily cohere with the ways in which the genre is actually culturally experienced" (p. 5). "*Questions of History*" is the final approach to genre that Mittell observes and he argues that it overcomes many of the shortcomings of the other two approaches. This approach focuses on the "changing dynamics" and the "actual

cultural life" of a genre (p. 6). Because of this emphasis, this approach "is more applicable to understanding genres in cultural practice" (p. 6) than the other two approaches. Using one or more of these approaches, television genre theorists typically examine programs on a case-by-case basis, examining how genre works in that specific case. This case-by-case approach is typical across genre theory, and reflects closely how audiences and industry professionals conceived of genre – thinking about how a text fits into a genre, rather than how genres work as an elaborate, intertwined web of traits.

In many respects, however, genre theorists and critics have conceived of genre quite differently from the audiences and industry professional approaches discussed in chapter one. Genre theorists usually examine what genre does, as a “*process* rather than a static category” (Edgerton & Rose, 2005a, p. 6), rather than as a “*blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production” (Altman, 1999, p. 14). In other words, theorists tend to perceive genre as a means through which audiences and industry professionals make sense of the media, culture, and even themselves; whereas, audiences use genres as an identification process in order to select programs similar to programs they have an established preference for. This difference is, in many respects, summarized through Todorov’s (1975) distinction between *theoretical* genres and *historical* genres. Theoretical genres, which Feuer (1992) sees originating within literary studies, come from ancient writers’ works in poetics and in hypothesizing about potential genres. Historical genres, which Feuer (1992) sees as primarily generating from film and television studies, come from the physical texts, rather than in theory. In this way, despite Feuer’s differentiation based on medium, theoretical genres are the realm of genre critics and historical genres are for audiences and industry professionals.

Miller (2012) similarly differentiates between historical and theoretical genres. She observes “it's instructive to see genres as vernacular rather than theoretical constructs, categories that have meaning to those who create and engage them rather than to external observers who seek to explain them” (p. 130). Her use of “vernacular” here she later conflates with Todorov’s historical genres, suggesting, “Historical genres systems are open, constantly changing in accordance with the needs and fancies of the community; they have meaning to the community of use” (p. 130). The opposite aspect of genre, the theoretical genres of Todorov, “have meaning to the theorist” (p. 130) that may or may not match up with the historical genres. These differences separate genre use and genre theory considerably. As theorists and audience members, scholars must work to compress this difference as much as possible in order to accurately study how texts are shaped by genres and producers and are shaping genres and audiences.

Feuer (1992) defines the task of genre theory as, “making ... [categorical] divisions and of justifying the classifications once they have been made” (p. 138). Paré (2002) suggests that genre theorists “fuse text and context, product and process, cognition and culture in a single dynamic concept” (p. 57). Ongstad (2002) defines genres as “ideological immanent blurred sign systems for communication, and they work dialogically with rheme as available superior theme patterns for sufficient wholeness and finalization of utterances” (p. 302). In other words, he sees genre theory as a form of semiotics that takes into account historical context and intertextuality to see the meaning within genres.

Most genre studies either define the boundaries of a genre or situate a text or group of texts within a genre. Early film genre theory, for example, began with film

theorists “delineating, defining and categorizing particular screen genres, thereby enabling critical engagement with the structures of repetition/variation, similarity and difference within and between film productions” (Cornea, 2010, p. 7). All of these definitions of genre criticism, as representatives of a much larger number of studies, are centered specifically on the study of texts, or at least a theoretical grounding for how to study texts. However, studying genres is more than texts, more than films or television, as suggested by Paré and Ongstad. Genre works as a means to make sense of texts – both in the ways that audiences simply select a program and also as a way for audiences to interpret the program and larger cultural trends.

Mittell (2004) sees genres as “constituted by discursive processes,” and that by studying them we can look at how “definitions, interpretations, and evaluations all intermingle with cultural power relations” (p. 23) to create and maintain cultural categories. Moreover, Frow (2015) observes that genre should not be examined “in terms of the intrinsic structure of their discourse but by the *actions* they are used to accomplish” (p. 14). He goes on to say that genres themselves are shaped by the “rhetorical actions that are performed in response to [the genre]” (p. 15). Additionally, Miller and Fahnestock (2013) say, “there are many ways to define genres, with some looking internally, to linguistic features and clusters of features, and others externally, to discourse communities and social interactions or recurrent rhetorical situations” (p. 1). These definitions suggest there is more to genre study than the identification of certain texts within generic boundaries and focus, instead, on how genres are being used within larger cultural and societal structures. Mittell, Frow, and Miller and Fahnestock all suggest that theorists can and should move beyond examining what a genre *is* to theorize



what a genre *does*. However, these ways forward into genre theory hinge upon a basic understanding of genre as bounded, formal and thematic characteristics, both by the theorists and by the audience members that are the target of much theory.

Audiences tend to see genres as a basic way of classifying and distinguishing between types of media. According to Turner (2008b), audiences use genre “through its inscription in publicity, in the listings in the TV guide, in the repertoires of cultural knowledge around individual personalities and other intertextual experiences” (p. 7) to frame expectations. This understanding of genre typically comes from how the media industry itself utilizes genres. Genre in Hollywood works as a kind of “creative toolbox” (Feuer, 1992, p. 142), enabling certain tropes that make narrative production easier and expected. Genre works for producers as a kind of “point of departure” that helps to create a network (or series) brand (Edgerton & Nicholas, 2005, p. 251). As a result of this expectation and branding, audiences are able to make sense of and interpret genre films/television shows more fluidly along the lines intended by the producers. Generic expectations work to guide audience members through what will happen on the show and how to react to those events (Mittell, 2009). When a program fails to meet the expectations of its assumed genre, audience members can become dissatisfied with or intrigued by the result. Genre programs must constantly update and alter the expectations in order to retain an audience’s attention. Turner (1999) refers to this as the conflicting role of the genre film: “to confirm the existing expectations of the genre, and to alter them slightly” (p. 100).

Audiences expect their media to fit within certain generic bounds; theorists work to identify those boundaries. However, even within this particular idea, there remains

disagreement over what precisely is meant by “genre.” The incongruity comes through Mittell’s (2004) observations regarding the cultural role that genre plays. When an audience member goes to watch, for example, a sitcom, they would be unlikely to recognize the cultural impact that viewing will have in their life. Mittell examines how audience members make sense of talk shows, class, and cultural hierarchies and finds that many of the definitions of the three are intertwined and cannot be separated consciously. Because audiences are not likely to be aware of this sense-making, thus creating an incongruity between generic reality and generic theory, a cohesive definition of genre remains elusive.

The primary problem in achieving this cohesion is that most people, whether they are audience members or theorists, take their personal understanding of genre as a given (Altman, 1999, p. 11). Rather than challenge or reconfigure genres, modern genre studies tend to examine specific genres from one of multiple lenses:

1. Identifying the boundaries of the genre and what texts fit within that genre (eg., Creeber, Miller, Tulloch, & British Film Institute, 2008; Garner, 2013; Grabowski, 2006)
2. The ways that genres have changed over time (eg., Edgerton & Rose, 2005b; L. Geraghty & Jancovich, 2008; Long, 2015; Woodman, 2005)
3. Analyses of how genres are utilized as cultural categories (eg., Altman, 1999; Frow, 2015).

There are problems with all of these approaches. Primarily, as observed by Turner (2008a), genre studies tend to be circular, because they are based around a critic’s construction of genre boundaries, and anything that doesn’t fit within this “idiosyncratic”

definition (p. 8) is dismissed by the critic – even in relation to cultural categorizations. Similar to this critique, Altman (1999) discerns that the distance between the critic and the text can be very problematic, “the role of the critic is to stand aside and watch the effect of institutionally produced texts on unsuspecting subjects” (p. 28). Consequently, the genre theorist has a skewed sense of how genres actually work for audience members. The result of this disconnect is, as Turner (2008a) noted, that genre studies can be “prescriptive,” in that they maintain “an ideal version of the genres and [criticize] any departures from this ideal” (p. 8). These definitional studies can generally be problematic because of the “medley of ways in which individual genres have been identified, with classification deriving from a varied list of gestures embracing subject-matter, mode of address, style, audience effects, and so on” (Ryall, 1998, p. 328).

Utilizing the three forms of genre theory as a launching point and taking these problems with current genre theory into account, in this project I endeavor to create a new theory of genre that reflects both the theoretical grounding I have established above and the real-world usage of genre as a sorting mechanism. This new theory will discuss individual genres within a larger generic framework, by breaking them down to their constituent characteristics - the aspect of genre that remain the most salient to both theorists and audience members. The characteristics will then form an interlocking net of genres, into which any television program (or other medium’s programs) can be placed. This new theory will be a more accurate depiction of how genre functions today because of the ways it flattens any hierarchies inherent in genres, and will enable a more present-day understanding of how individual programs blur generic boundaries. Additionally, this theory will create a way for scholars to conceptualize genre that is a cohesive blend of

previous genre theory, while situating in a mode of thought that allows for an intermingling of characteristics not previously accounted for. This theory will extrapolate from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of the rhizomatic thought. However, before turning to rhizomes, I first want to examine alternative conceptions of genres – after all, I am not the first to identify the hybrid nature of television genres.

### **Alternate Conceptions of Genre**

Genre studies have long recognized that genres work in a variety of ways. In the last 20 years or so, studies of genre have frequently worked to accommodate the various conceptualizations of genre. These alternative conceptualizations can be based upon the medium, examining how television genres are different than film, for example; can be focused on the ways that the differences in medium effect how genres work; and can examine the ways in which these differences shape new genres, looking at a new conceptualization of genre-mixing. This section will examine these different conceptions.

Most genre theorists acknowledge that television genres work vastly differently than film or literary genres. Primarily, because of the “institutional aspects” of television’s relationship with genre that Neale (2008) enumerates – “scheduling regimes, modes of production, the varying demands of advertisers and audiences” (p. 6), television has a closer relationship with genre than film or literature. Additionally, Neale (2008) notes that the fragmentation of the television audience makes genre identification even more important, because genres, as previously discussed, allow viewers to choose particular programs. Additionally, the complex television milieu of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century requires that more television programs turn to genre-crossing hybridity. White (1985) suggests:

... the combination and reconstruction associated with [television] genre development have reached a point where conventional categories have become blurred, or even disappear. In the process the traditional designations lose force both as a standard of coherence with respect to individual programs, and as a principle of differentiation among programs (p. 41).

In fact, in the 30 years that have elapsed since White made this assertion, this “combination and reconstruction” has become the cornerstone of television. Much of Mittell’s (2015) argument for the rise of complex television is based on television’s ability to transcend genre distinctions. He calls complex television “a site of tremendous genre mixing, where conventions and assumptions from a range of programming categories come together and are interwoven, merged, and reformed” (p. 233).

Feuer (1992) argues that when literary genre theory is applied to television, the emphasis ends up focusing on “structure over development” – that is, how the narrative works, rather than any changes or cultural impacts of the series – and the continued focus on “the ‘sameness’ of television.” She observes that television genres “evolve” over their lifespans; not that they have “‘progressed’ or become ‘better,’ but rather that [they have] become different” (p. 151). However, as outlined in the previous chapter, the past 20 years have seen even more evolution in all genres through the complex narratives that technologies and the acceptance of television as a legitimate medium enabled.

Much of the reason for this evolution is a result of the numerous choices available to viewers. Before the cable era, viewers could only choose programs available on one of a handful of network stations; for the "first thirty-five years of American television, when the broadcast networks – CBS, NBC, ABC, – controlled more than 90 percent of the

audience" (Anderson, 2005, p. 65), a standard was established for how television should work and viewers kept returning to the same programs, the same stations, the same routines. Shows evolved gradually, through the influence of cultural shifts, but there were very few dramatic leaps, like the ones that occurred with the rise of HBO. Once cable stations numbered in the hundreds, viewers had a plethora of choices at any given time. Consequently, producers had to work harder to create interesting and different programming. One frequently used alternative was genre boundary crossing, thereby creating new angles on television stories.

To escape claims of the “sameness” of television programming, – that is, ‘if you’ve seen one sitcom, you’ve seen them all’” (Feuer, 1992, p. 151), many television programs deviate from any “pure” generic form (White, 1985). Instead, numerous generic conventions intermingle to create a new take on the story. White (1985) observes that in these kinds of television programs, “no single genre can adequately account for the narrative and dramatic practices of the show as a whole, while its shifts in generic register remain identifiable” (p. 43). Basically, the general attributes of the program follow the conventions of its dominant genre; however, there are aspects of the program that are influenced by disparate generic conventions. Consequently, the program is only vaguely within the genre it’s marketing and production process places it.

Numerous scholars have examined this use of hybrid-genre. Rose (2003) refers to this deviation from standard generic forms as an “assemblage of [generic] elements” (p. 2). Woodman (2005) refers to the same deviation as “cross-genre mating” (p. 939). McAllister (1992) says “TV shows often are ‘recombinants,’ or splices of two or more previously existing, and successful, types” (para. 4). These studies present hybrid genres

as a fact, but do not account for the larger complexity that the rhizome can. Rose, for instance, introduces a journal volume devoted to genres, and the potentiality of hybrid genres, in which various scholars examine specific genres/shows.

Meanwhile, Woodman's (2005) study looks specifically at how *The Prisoner* (1967-1968) is, itself, the result of the "mating" of a variety of genres, namely the spy thriller and science fiction. He asks a series of questions of the series,

Where do these [generic] categories applied to *The Prisoner* originate? Are these categories sufficient to contain all of the genre elements of that exist within *The Prisoner*? Or is the show such a mix of different genre elements that it is impossible to categorize? (p. 942)

He then responds that "there is no simple answer to these questions" (p. 942). The rhizome provides an answer to all of the questions. Woodman then traces the attributes and assumptions about the series as both science fiction and spy thriller. He describes the ways that the advertising campaign for *The Prisoner*, and its association with star Patrick McGoohan, situated the series as a spy thriller. Then he complicates that reading by suggesting a science fiction lens also "seems appropriate [to a reading of the show] given many of the themes and elements of mise-en-scene" (p. 941), as well as through the myriad producers of the series who had connections to science fiction series. He complicates his analysis further by suggesting that McGoohan believed that the series was neither a spy thriller nor science fiction, but was, instead, "surrealistic" (p. 947). Woodman is dismissive of this analysis, insisting that, "Nonetheless, because of elements within the text, the production of the series, and the audience's reaction, *The Prisoner* is conceptualized as at least partially a science fiction series" (p. 947-48). He goes through

an individual episode and demonstrates how the series has the attributes of both a spy thriller and science fiction. He notes that the show's "fluid use of genres confounds any conception of generic categories as fixed and stable" (p. 954). He suggests that Mittell's (2001) conceptualization of generic hybrids accounts for this confounding. But he also suggests that generic hybrids and studying texts through that lens is not enough, saying "it is through the thorough examination of individual television shows and episodes on the various levels of text, production, audience reception, and social context that the complexities of genre in TV can be best explored" (p. 954-55). Woodman (2005) is suggesting the need for a more complex understanding of genre that accounts for all kinds of influence, not simply limited to the ways that the text works or that culture shifts. He also never answers his question of whether "these [generic] categories [are] sufficient to contain all of the genre elements" found in *The Prisoner*. The rhizome would. The rhizome frees critics from the rigidity of the genre categories, while also encouraging them to look closely at the genres at the basis of the analysis to interrogate all the ways that internodes from anywhere and everywhere are influence that text.

McAllister's (1992) study examines a specific case, *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (1989-1993), as a recombinant genre. He looks at the ways that the teen comedy has been "altered" to make it "it easier to fit this genre with the stereotypical doctor television program" (p. 61), as well as how the show has been reconfigured to appeal to both teens and adult women. McAllister calls both of the genres that *Doogie Howser* draws from, teen and doctor dramas, "very malleable and easily combined with other [genres]" (para. 8). He then identifies shifts in the teen comedy and suggests that such shifts are what enabled the two genres to be combined. He briefly mentions elements of these programs



that lie outside the generic boundaries, but only identifies the ways they have been used within those genre categories. For instance, McAllister mentions the use of direct address in *Doogie Howser* and relates it to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Parker Lewis Can't Lose* (1990-1993), and *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), but does not even suggest that there are connections to *Star Trek's* Captain's log, or *M\*A\*S\*H's* letters home, or the diary kept by John-boy on *The Waltons* (1972-1981; "Captain's Log," n.d.) In fact, the article does mention Hawkeye's letters home on *M\*A\*S\*H*, but as a change in doctor programs to make the doctor's "personal lives . . . stressed more than in the past" (para. 21). More alarmingly, McAllister (1992) suggests that the show negotiates each of the genre's "themes and morals" to create two separate plots, one pulled from genre, only to have "the plot with the most potential for celebrating mainstream values, feel good resolutions, and dominant institutions (the family or medicine)" win as the "governing resolution" (para. 30). Using the rhizome would not suggest that either genre worked as the prominent solution to the problem, but that such a solution was the best for the situation, despite the genres in which it was placed. Additionally, the rhizome allows for discussion of the influence of outside genres, not just the recombining of a set of bounded categories. McAllister ends up arguing that the two genres work together to create a "safe" television program in *Doogie Howser*, which accounts for its success. The rhizome would allow critics to argue that *Doogie Howser* was successful because it was a complicated teen doctor drama that drew on multiple internodes to create a dynamic, fascinating story.

Whether the amalgamation of genres on television is called "hybrid," "assemblage," "cross-genre," "recombinants," etc., the idea behind it remains the same:

genres are a complicated intermingling of characteristics and must be perceived as such. Discussions of the hybridization of genre are what initially spurred me to reconfiguring genre altogether, not because hybrid-genre studies are wrong, but because they do not do enough. There are several aspects of this hybridization that need to be expanded. Hybrid genres remain constrained by the limitations of genres. This approach to studying television can be very enlightening through its examination of new generic forms. However, it also limits those examinations to what is included within the genres. Influences outside the genre cannot fully be explored. Genre scholars clearly acknowledge that genres are more complex than hybrid scholarship implies, as they identify elements of programs that are influential, but are outside of the hybridity. Therefore, the generic rhizome would fill in those gaps and enable a well-rounded examination of the various internodes influencing television programs.

Genre hybridization is when two genres come together, typically through the aesthetic or storytelling aspects of a program, to create something entirely new. This approach does not neglect ideological imaginings, with discussions of discourses at the fore of most genre studies. That being said, the generic rhizome can encompass a larger array of potential perspectives than the two or three genres within a hybrid genre analysis account for. A program can easily reach outside any of its apparent genres to find meaning. The rhizome enables studying those storytelling or ideological transgressions. Take, for instance, Garin's (2013) discussion of *Felicity* (1998-2002), *Alias* (2001-2006), and *Fringe* (2008-2013). In this essay, the author intends to look at the relationships between these three series to "vindicate certain traits of [*Felicity*] that work as narrative seeds for [*Lost*], traits that in spite of being undeveloped or naive are essential to fully

grasp the evolution of Abram's work" (p. 48). This initial statement points to a strength and possibility of his analysis, but he negates some of that strength by suggesting that *Felicity's* traits are not as fully developed as those in *Lost*. He frequently nods to the complexity of these series, such as when he says, "when thinking about *Fringe*, we may consider the televisual narrative as the most fertile ground for a form of storytelling in exponential mutation" (p. 52) and the ways in which he juxtaposes these shows with others outside their genre, as when he suggests that *Felicity* draws inspiration from "Agent Cooper's recorder in *Twin Peaks* and the magical powers of *Bewitched*" (p. 50). At the same time, he continually lauds J.J. Abrams as being an innovator in the ways that he combines genres and becomes self-referential in his texts. None of this is bad or even goes against the rhizome. But the use of genre "shading" (as Garin [2013] calls it) limits what conclusions can be drawn. Not only do the ways that Abrams combines generic tropes make the programs more interesting and demonstrate the evolutions as the director as auteur, but they also open each of the texts up to alternative ways of viewing. Garin presents one such reading but does not suggest that alternative interpretations are possible. He also does not consider the cultural shifts that would result in such texts. The generic rhizome does consider these aspects and opens all three of these texts to myriad internodic influences. The generic rhizome creates epistemological possibility.

There are also practical advantages to the generic rhizome. First is the need to have a meta-theory that encompasses all genres. Without a broad theory of genre that accounts for this genre-hybridity, programs retain the stigma that the Hollywood industry imposes upon them, as discussed in the previous chapter – that they exist in isolation from other genres and are solely "comedies," "dramas," "action/adventure," etc. As a

result, scholars must individually describe the process in which the text they are studying acquired its characteristics. By creating a macro-theory of genre, I will establish a way to study individual programs through a generic lens, but one that allows for the generic intermingling common in the media today, as well as a way to study genres more broadly, in the fluid, changing way that reflect the reality of genre evolution.

Hybrid genre studies are also frequently based on a hierarchical assumption of genres. In most discussions of genre hybridity, the text in question firmly rests within one category – say, science fiction – but the scholar endeavors to argue that it has elements of another – perhaps, soap opera. The first genre is frequently privileged. The prominent genres (comedy, drama, fantasy, etc.) are often “primary” genres, while others are seen as “subsets” of those genres. Lauerbach (2013), in her analysis of election night broadcasts, identifies a hierarchy of “constituent genres and sub-genres” (p. 136). She observes, “Genres can be mixed within one text, where they can occur in hierarchical order and in generic chains” (p. 138). This hierarchy can be problematic. Similarly, Todorov (1975) suggests a whole host of genres as being subsets of the fantasy genre – science fiction, horror, fairy tales, etc. This hierarchy is relatively dated and no longer holds. In fact, in many respects, the only reason that one genre would be subsidiary to another is simply chronological – one came first. However, if these ideas are placed within the rhizome, then the hierarchy is removed and only the chronology remains. Hybrid genres come about because time and cultural circumstances suggest new formations of old formulas.

Additionally, genre hybridization is frequently suggested as an unusual event. In his discussion of hybridity, Jasinski (2001) observes that “Aristotle recognized that it was possible to blend or combine elements from different genres in a specific speech or

written text” (p. 270). Hybrid genres have been relevant since Aristotle, yet they are still treated as though they are unusual. In the media, as previously discussed, genre-mixing is what keeps audiences interested in new programs. Accepting that genre-hybridity is the norm is necessary, especially when focusing on today’s television environment.

The rhizomatic approach to genre will fill in these holes in hybrid genre studies. Because of the ways that the genre rhizome flattens and expands genre possibilities, genre hybridity can be just the starting place to look at how various genres, as well as other aspects of culture, contribute to a single text. In his discussion of the genres, Kamberelis (1995) observes that “Because they are constituted in use within multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory practices within multiple interrelated collectives and institutions, genres and genre systems are also emergent, self-organizing, and dynamic” (p. 120). The rhizome is a broad way to theorize these genre systems. The rhizome will create a meta-theory that can encompass all hybridizations, is completely non-hierarchical and will not privilege any genre or generic characteristics over others, and the focus is on the texts within genre hybridization, not on the process through which these genres are created. The rhizome does not find these trends to be unique or different, instead accounting for their normalcy. These aspects of the rhizome will augment the current possibilities of hybrid genre studies to create a wider genre landscape for scholars to draw upon.

As yet, the closest anyone has come to examining hybrid genres as a new generic phenomenon – rather than isolated cases – is Jason Mittell (2004). Mittell chooses to utilize the term “genre mixing,” and occasionally “fusion,” instead of hybridity because he feels it is truer to the actuality of how genres come together on television (p. 154).

Jamieson and Campbell (1982) use the term “rhetorical hybrid” to describe generic hybrids because they feel that it “emphasize[s] the productive but transitory character of” generic hybrid combination. However, Mittell finds that “genres can – and often are – mixed through the various discourses of generic definition, interpretation, and evaluation that constitute genres as cultural categories” (p. 155). The difference between these two ideas is how “transitory” Campbell and Jamieson find the characteristics. They see that generic hybridity is governed by rules and those rules bind the hybrid to a given rhetorical situation. Mittell makes no such claims. He wants to investigate how genre-mixing works culturally. These generic hybrids are not one-time mixes, but contribute to the overall understanding of that medium’s genres. Once scholars disengage from studying genre simply through texts, genres are not *dissolved* through genre mixing, but are instead *heightened*.

In other words, despite what other scholars have long contended regarding genre hybridity, Mittell argues that genres are becoming more important as they become more mixed. He suggests that the “juxtaposition” of “generic assumptions” can heighten and “highlight” those aspects of the text (p. 157). For instance, Mittell looks at how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) uses the generic tropes of both horror and teen drama to “make each genre’s norms richer and more vibrant through clever practices of fusion” (p. 157). This is useful in forging ahead on theorizing genres at a broad scale. Mittell enacts his ideas of genre mixing study by looking at specific examples of genre mixing – *Soap* (1977-1981) and *The Simpsons* (1989-present). However, he does not examine what this genre mixing looks like in a larger, macro sense. By theorizing a larger scale understanding of genre, such as the rhizome I propose, the recent shifts and the

“juxtapositions” that Mittell discusses can be used to make sense of how genre is actually working across the board, rather than in just a few specific circumstances.

Clearly, television genres are not specific, separate categories; rather they are in a constant state of flux. However, theorists have not yet attempted to theorize this different understanding of genre at a broad level. Indeed, in the conclusion to his collection on genre, Rose (2005) presents a survey of genre studies, both regarding hybrid and standard genres. He highlights studies throughout the course of television history, but never once mentions any theorist presenting an overarching theory of all television genres. The studies he presents look at individual genres, their boundaries, and the texts within those boundaries. The reliance that much early television had on generic conventions made these studies unquestionably relevant. But as television moves away from generic conventions and blurring boundaries, it has become necessary to stop conceiving of genres individually and create a more cohesive conception of genres as a whole. Therefore, I intend to step back from studying the boundaries of genres and the texts within those genres to theorize a more complex understanding of how television, and consequently online entertainment media, can be generically conceptualized through the ways the distinct characteristics of the genres intermingle to create new versions of genres. I argue that this complex genre configuration is best conceptualized through the metaphor of a rhizome.

### **Rhizomes**

Exploring genres as rhizomes does not completely disrupt any prior research into genres or genre-mixing. Instead, a rhizomatic perspective allows scholars to conceive of genres as intertwined, which influence and shape each other. Studies of hybrid genres

examine the generic influences on a single text or single genre; rhizomatic mapping of genres will show the interrelatedness. Once related concepts begin to overlap each other, as genre hybridization points to, studies of those concepts must grow to encompass all these crossovers. By theorizing a rhizomatic concept of genre, I propose a way of thinking about genre that takes genre-mixing as an inherent part of the programs' production and reception and, instead of elaborating upon hybrid genres, looks at how the hybridization occurs, while opening the texts to a plethora of interpretative possibilities. First, I will break down Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theoretical construct of rhizomes. Second, I will look at the biological definition of rhizomes and how these forms of root systems actually work. Finally, I will interpret these definitions into my own definition, intended primarily for rhizome neophytes, like me, and create a theoretical conception of rhizomatic genres.

### **Philosophical Definition**

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) sought to theorize the rhizome as an epistemic conceptualization of critical thinking, specifically looking at power and culture. I use the theory they set forward for the primary purpose they intended - to establish a new way of looking at an abstract concept, one that is free of hierarchical, bounded constraints. They contrast the traditional nature metaphor used to describe thought processes – the tree – with a non-hierarchical, circular metaphor – the rhizome. Their argument is that we tend to think of concepts as branching out from a central point, like a tree. However, they argue that “nature doesn't work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 5). I concur that a rhizomatic perspective offers a more



natural metaphor for understanding concepts such as thought processes, literature, and, for our purposes, genres, because they are complex, non-hierarchical, and have “no beginning or end;” they are “always in the middle” (p. 25). The rhizome, thus, can function within “any network of things brought into contact with one another, functioning as an assemblage machine for new affects, new concepts, new bodies, new thoughts” (Parr, 2010, p. 233).

Six aspects create the theoretical rhizome. If most of these six are distinguishable within the “abstract entities of the world, including music, mathematics, economics, politics, science, art, the ecology, and the cosmos,” (Parr, 2010, p. 233), then that entity can be conceptualized as a rhizome. The first is that “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything” (p. 7). A rhizome is held together by “semiotic chains” that create meaning through an amalgamation of “linguistic, . . . perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive” acts (p. 7). These discursive acts can join together at any moment, without any unconscious hierarchy, as would be assumed in an arboreal discussion of the acts. This connection links to Deleuze and Guattari’s second element of the rhizome, heterogeneity. This refers to the difference between rhizomes and understanding. Instead of connecting a linguistic signifier to a signified, rhizomes allow for chains of meaning to link “regimes of power and specific historical circumstances” (Buchanan, 2010). In this way, rhizomes allow meaning to be created without interpretive reliance upon a strict dominant, hegemonic understanding, but can include a variety of diverse acts.

The third important element of a rhizome is its multiplicity. Any structure discussed regarding a rhizome is imposed from the outside; the nature of a rhizome does not require any structure. Instead, “there are no pre-determined positions or points within

a rhizomatic multiplicity, only lines along with random nodes arising at the haphazard intersections of them” (Holland, 2013, p. 39). In other word, a rhizome does not contain any clear lineage of ideas; rather, rhizomes are a series of haphazard intersections out of which, ideas (which Deleuze and Guattari call “plateaus,” discussed in the final section of this chapter) arise.

Deleuze and Guattari turn next to discuss rhizomes’ abilities for “asignifying rupture.” This is that biological principle that a rhizome “may be broken, shattered at given spot, but it will start up again” (p. 9). Because of the way rhizomes work, because of the multiplicity and complex interconnectedness of nodes, rhizomes can be shattered at any point in the semiotic chains, but they will be able to regrow from the separated parts. In terms of how abstraction works, ideas mutate and change, frequently breaking apart from oppressive norms; however, because of the nature of rhizomes, “there is no guarantee that it won’t return again under a different guise”(Buchanan, 2010). Those ideas are not gone; they’ve just briefly been separated from the larger thought rhizome.

The final two elements of the rhizome pertain to how to study it: Cartography and Decalcomania. Deleuze and Guattari observe that a rhizome is a “*map and not a tracing*” (p. 12, emphasis original). For Deleuze and Guattari, a tracing is an examination of a fixed object, something that is concrete and fixed – this is what they mean by “decalcomania.” These tracings can be studied within the larger context of the map, where the map is a broad examination of “tendencies and potential for change” (Holland, 2013, p. 40). They say, “Plug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 14). Tracings can be good starting

points from which to examine the larger rhizomatic map – but we cannot neglect the larger map and only look at the tracings (Buchanan, 2010).

Deleuze and Guattari observe, “Thought is not arborescent, and the brain is not rooted or ramified matter” (p. 15). Additionally, they are “tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much” (p. 15). So, they propose a postmodern conceptualization of the thought process that breaks from this arborescent discourse that has been so dominant for so long – the rhizome. By doing so, they enabled a conceptualization of thought that accounts for the fluid nature of actual thought processes. “The rhizome conceives how every thing and every body – all aspects of concrete, abstract and virtual entities and activities – can be seen as multiple in their interrelational movements with other things and bodies” (Parr, 2010, p. 233). The theory of the rhizome has been disseminated so thoroughly that Deleuze and Guattari are almost always associated with the word “rhizome” by philosophers. The criticisms lobbed at *A Thousand Plateaus* tend to not be based around the rhizome, but rather around the revolutionary intentions of their theory and whether this revolution is feasible (Best & Kellner, 1991). The argument is typically centered on whether or not conceiving of thought as rhizomatic does any good and is going to circulate broadly. However, the heart of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis is “an attempt to think through fragments” (Zayani, 2000, p. 97) and that uniting of fragments, in the rhizome, persists with little criticism.

Indeed, numerous scholars have repurposed this conceptualization of the rhizome over the years for multiple purposes (eg., Eco, 2014; Fernandez, 2001; Ibrahim, 2014; Riddle, 2013; Robinson & Maguire, 2010). For instance, Riddle (2013) looks at how typical understandings of “youth,” as “over-coded categories such as age, race, class,

gender and sexuality” (pg. 45) are simplified. Instead, he conceptualizes youth as a rhizome, because of how it allows an “unbounding [of] the subject from subjectivity, unlinking [of] the self from traditional categories” (p 46). Robinson and Maguire (2010) suggest that rhizomes could work as a model for the organization of information, because of their “seemingly clear relevance to a networked hypertextual environment” (p. 607-608). Fernandez (2001) observes the necessity of “a completely new understanding of literacy as a complex and constantly evolving skill, embedded in interwoven sets of knowledges, deployed in innumerable settings, and using existing and yet-to-be-invented technologies” (p. 9). She suggests the rhizome as the answer, because “within a rhizome ‘thinking means to *grop* one’s way,’ making connections. Making connections is precisely the point” (p. 69).

Nearly any abstract can be thought of a rhizomatic. Therefore, the rhizome can be utilized in a multitude of ways. Because the “rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21), the concept can be applied to diverse forms of philosophy and critical thinking. The power comes from the rhizome’s “refusal to become over-coded . . . Instead, the rhizome is able to form a plane of unbounded multiplicities” (Riddle, 2013, p. 46). By applying this post-modern conceptualization onto genres, genres take on a wider, more complex elaboration than ever previously conceived. Rather than simply being a way of categorizing texts, genre becomes an interconnected assemblage that individual programs, as well as audience members, can draw upon to create and make sense of culture and television.

## **Biological Definition**

Before I work on establishing my own theory of the rhizome, I want to examine the rhizome as a biological term. By understanding how an actual rhizome works, I will more easily be able to discuss how the generic rhizome creates individual programs out of a swarm of generic characteristics. Additionally, we will see where many, if not all, of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas behind their rhizome originated.

A rhizome is "a mass or tangle of roots that allow a plant to expand underground in a non-hierarchical fashion" (Castree, Kitchin, & Rogers, 2013). Three aspects of the rhizome make it the ideal metaphor for conceptualizing genre. The first is that rhizomes are extremely complex systems. Second, rhizomes can be separated at any point in the system and continue to grow in a different location. Finally, rhizomes are the underground stem and root systems of myriad plants (E. Martin & Hine, 2008). Understanding how rhizomes work in each of these ways will enable me to create a working theory of rhizomatic genres.

While rhizomes appear as, and are often assumed to be roots, they are, in fact, stems from which roots sprout. Rhizomes are a series of internodes that connect leaves and buds, sprouting from nodes. These nodes can be at a variety of stages of development (K. R. Stern, Jansky, & Bidlack, 2003, p. 100). In other words, rhizomes are very far from what they appear. Rather than being roots, in the way that non-scientists understand roots, rhizomes are an interwoven set of stems out of which roots and leaves can appear, at different times and at different places. These roots are called "adventitious," which means they arise "at unusual places" rather than at any predictable or expected location (K. R. Stern et al., 2003, p. 100). More than anchoring plants and providing them with

water and minerals, as roots do, rhizomes store energy to be used later to create new roots and, indeed, entirely new rhizomes (Lerner & Lerner, 2004). Thus, rhizomes are frequently found on perennial plants, such as peonies or ferns, that “persist from season to season” (Allaby, 2012).

Rhizomes are able to “propagate the plant vegetatively” (E. Martin & Hine, 2008), or to reproduce by simply growing new shoots and roots when separated from the larger rhizome. The genetic material of the plant is stored within the rhizome; therefore, when a piece of the rhizome is cut away, the genetic material is able to rebuild that plant anew. As long as there is a node in the section of rhizome cut away, a new plant can grow (K. R. Stern et al., 2003, p. 269). Because of this, there is no hierarchy to a rhizome:

A rhizome does not start from anywhere or end anywhere; it grows from everywhere, and is the same at any point. As such, a rhizome has no center, which makes it difficult to uproot or destroy; you might think of a mold or fungus, which can reproduce from any cell (Klages, 2012, p. 74).

The rhizome is a complex organizational structure out of which a plant can easily reproduce year after year. However, we must also remember that it is part of something larger, more obvious, more useful.

Examples of plants with rhizomorphous stems include irises, grasses, ferns, sugarcane, arrowroot, ginger, potatoes, and aspen trees (Lerner & Lerner, 2004; K. R. Stern et al., 2003). The rhizomes themselves are underground systems and rarely seen. Instead, what people know about these systems manifests in the flowers, trees, ferns, and grasses they see, and in the myriad foods they eat. Enjoyment of these plants does not require any deeper understanding of the rhizome system that created the product.

In relating the rhizome to genre, three elements are important. Rhizomes are complex and rarely what they initially appear to be; rhizomes can reproduce out of themselves, when cut off from the rest of the system; and rhizomes are the underground root system that creates various plants. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) utilize these same aspects to theorize how systems of power and culture can be conceptualized using rhizomes. I shall use both Deleuze and Guattari's aspects of the rhizome and the biology of the rhizome to propose my own theoretical map of rhizomatic genres.

### **My Usage**

The six elements of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of the rhizome – connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania – as well as the three major aspects of the biological rhizomatic entity – its complexity, its reproduction method, and its relationship to a larger plant – all contribute to my theory of genres as rhizomes. I have identified four assumptions that ground my theory of the rhizomatic genre, that originate in my research of both rhizomes and genre.

The first assumption is that television genres are not discrete, bounded categories. Rather than the separate categorizations found in industry actions, such as marketing, scheduling, funding, distribution, etc., for television shows, genres exist as a web of interconnected themes and styles out of which shows are born. Genres remain important because they are the structure that holds the rhizome together – without those themes and styles (which originated in particular genres), the nodes cannot germinate. In this way, genres become virtually indistinguishable from one another. Yet, we still need genres to make sense of the actions enacted through the programs through the four uses of genre, outlined by Altman (1999), and examined in the previous chapter: blueprint, structure,

label, contract (p. 14). The threads of the genres combine to create wholly new programmatic genres, but still retain the necessary traits of the genre, which have persisted for long enough that they continue to be the associated with the genre, for audiences and producers to create meaning.

Second, television shows are the nodes of the rhizome. These are the moments when the “internodes” of the rhizome come together and a stem or a root grows. These can occur anywhere in the rhizome, simply at the meeting of two internodes. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this same idea as “plateaus,” or “any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend the rhizome . . . Each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau” (p. 22). Therefore, in genre, as previously discussed, the internodes are the thematic and stylistic elements that constitute the boundaries of that genre. In the rhizome, the internodes stretch from one node (television program) to the next and create something new because of what other internodes have intersected at that node. The basic form of the node would remain the same, but would bear slightly different characteristics because of the influence of the disparate internodes.

Additionally, we can discuss here the influence of culture and history. Just as a rhizome absorbs and stores energy and sustenance through dirt and water, the generic rhizome absorbs ideologies, norms, and beliefs through the cultural and historical situation in which it is placed. Therefore, the internodes of a rhizome are the characteristics of a genre; the nodes are the television shows that are created out of the intersections of those internodes, and the soil in which the rhizome is placed are the cultural and historical circumstances of the genre. Ideology in particular becomes salient



in this understanding of genre. Ideologies are embedded in multiple layers of a television genre. First, genres themselves can retain aspects of a particular genre. A teen comedy is likely to present upper class characters negotiating their identities in a variety of spaces. Historical dramas heavily feature hegemonic representations of masculinity and privilege, while also neglecting issues of class and race. However, individual programs can negotiate such ideologies in myriad ways. Thus, ideologies can become a part of an internode, rather than simply the soil in which a program is situated. For instance, Cinéma vérité shooting styles can reveal cracks in hegemony through images of poverty and loss. In this way, the rhizome can investigate the ways that even programs which appear to uphold the status quo work to subvert certain discursive strategies.

The third assumption of the theory is that any part of the rhizome can be removed without detriment to the larger unit. A genre could disappear from the television rhizome, but that doesn't mean that the genre has been eliminated altogether. The consequences of this are, for our purposes, two fold. The first is that the section removed can regrow elsewhere. The section that disappears from television could still regrow on the Internet, in film, in books, etc. Second, elements of that removed segment remain in the initial rhizome, it cannot disappear entirely, and, as a result, those internodes can continue to influence other areas of the rhizome. That is, the characteristics of a genre are likely still present in the rhizome, but the genre itself has been subsumed by the other characteristics. The internodes of that genre may re-knit themselves somewhere down the line into the old genre, or into something entirely new. In other words, just because a genre is no longer observable, that does not mean it should be discounted altogether.

Finally, the genre rhizome allows for the mapping of genre. This metaphor for genre will not enable scholars to predict patterns in genre nor to categorize texts within certain genres. Instead, understanding genre as a rhizome will allow scholars to conceptualize generic television programs as part of a complicated entangling of characteristics, rather than as a singular moment. The genre rhizome enables a way to theorize genre that eliminates the categories without also eliminating the need for generic characteristics. Additionally, scholars can utilize the genre rhizome to trace particular generic characteristics to see where they are present across their history and to observe what other genres are contributing to rhizomatic nodes, television shows.

In other words, scholars can “zoom in” on particular sections of the rhizome map, Deleuze and Guattari’s “tracings,” and follow the lines of certain genres. By doing so, many of the typical practices of genre theory can still be enacted. The three primary lenses through which current genre scholarship occurs that I identified earlier – situating texts within particular genres, tracing genres over time, and examining genres as cultural categories – typically engage a rather close examination of texts, historical eras, and/or cultural shifts. The “tracings” described by Deleuze and Guattari enable scholars to do such close examinations. The genre studies that examine specific genres and specific programs are not invalidated; instead they simply become a part of a larger generic system. Scholars then “zoom out” to see how their individual tracing fits into the larger genre rhizome. Genre studies are no longer complete without situating the generic characteristics and/or programs within the larger landscape of the rhizome, to see how and where they are being influenced by, and are influencing, other parts of the rhizome.

Genres and rhizomes are both extremely complex concepts. However, by placing them in concert with each other, scholars are better able to see how genres intermingle and to map out the relationships between genres. As previously discussed, television of the 21st century is focused on complex narratives (Mittell, 2015). These complex narratives require that television studies keep pace with the new technologies and acceptance that the medium has garnered. Therefore, understanding how the confluence of genre and generic characteristics create this complex television environment is paramount. Characteristics remain at the fore of discussions of genre, with viewers and with producers/distributors. We have to create a new way to conceive of genre to fully appreciate and understand the ways that the narrative conventions of these complex narratives have come into existence. In this way, the genre rhizome can also be used to examine the fluid nature of genre over time. The rhizome itself is neither static nor new; it has existed from the beginning of television. Therefore, one kind of tracing that can be examined is the influence of culture and other genres on specific nodes/internodes over time. Finally, by examining the interworkings of genre, we can also learn more about how television genres work differently than other medium's genres, and the influence each medium itself has on culture as a whole – the ground is never quite the same after a plant has taken root.

A new conceptualization of genre must occur in television studies, and media studies more broadly. The complicated narrative milieu that has taken root on television, and on the Internet, has made many of the traditional means through which we study texts outdated. Therefore, most of the terminology used to study these texts must be reconsidered and problematized. I have undertaken to do so with genre. Genre is a

fundamental way we think about television programs, because of the ways we use genre to make sense of ideologies embedded within programs, as well as simply how we decide which programs to watch. However, identifying genres as separate, discrete entities – as much genre scholarship has done up to this point – does not reflect the complexity of current television. By reconceptualizing genres as rhizomes, media scholars will have a more complex way to read of television programs.

In the next chapter, I will outline two studies I undertook, which align with the types of analyses enabled by the generic rhizome. By doing so, I interrogated how this theory can be put to use by future scholars. These two studies encompass two separate elements of the generic rhizome. The first looks at how programs within a particular tracing of the rhizome retain specific, similar characteristics, while being influenced and altered by the rhizome surrounding it. To embark upon this analysis, I examined situation comedies, one of the genres that has persisted in a coherent form since the early days of television. The second study looked at the asignifying ruptures of the rhizome to see how characteristics of a genre that has disappeared from the rhizome can still influence other parts of the whole. This analysis is centered on television westerns. Westerns have a long history in Hollywood and on television but go through a series of ups and downs. Some decades are overrun by television westerns, while most others have barely any on screen. My analysis is centered specifically on those years without westerns to see where else on television the characteristics of westerns may be persisting. These two studies engage with the theory of generic rhizomes in two ways: first, they show how these kinds of studies can work and, second, they help to work out any problems with how the theory is conceptualized.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Traditional genre studies focus on one of three approaches: generic definition, generic participation, and generic application. The first traditional approach to genre studies is generic description. Here, the critic is attempting to simply map a genre – what are its characteristics, what is constituted within a genre, etc. The second type is generic participation. This form of analysis is looking at whether or not a text falls within a particular genre. The final type of generic criticism is generic application. This form is judging whether or not a particular text is a “good” representation of the genre (Foss, 1996). Since the generic rhizome intends to extend, rather than eliminate, how genre theory works, I begin with these traditional methods of genre studies. By doing so, I can adapt these traditional generic approaches to the rhizome, as well as adapt the generic rhizome to problems uncovered through these traditional methodologies. However, the rhizome does not account for any judgments of texts, therefore I did not do any “generic application” analysis. Instead, I did one “generic definition” study and one “generic participation” study. These two form the basis of the generic rhizome in any future studies, so must be tested here first.

To refine how the generic rhizome works on television, I mapped two different genre clusters. The first is a generic definition analysis. I looked at a long established, clearly defined genre to examine how the characteristics of the programs of that genre have changed. I traced this genre over its televisual history to see how it has been influenced by other genre’s characteristics and by cultural trends to show how different it has become over the last seven decades. The second is a generic participation study. I examined a television genre with deep roots, but that has virtually vanished from today’s

screens. Upon closer examination of this genre's base characteristics, I looked at how they are present in other television programs today, thereby investigating the ways in which those programs' characteristics participate in the generic rhizome.

### **Which Genres?**

The genres I have selected for these two studies are sitcoms and Westerns. Both of these genres are well studied and dispersed on television screens. Sitcoms, which I selected for the longevity study, are considered "one of the staples of mature broadcast television" (Creeber et al., 2008, p. 78) and "the center of primetime network programming" (Mintz, 1985, p. 107). Clearly, this genre has the stalwart nature that I'm looking for in this study. However, it has also had to adapt considerably based upon the time in which it is being made. As a result, it is "one of the most powerful sites for both discourse creation and discourse circulation" (Staiger, 2000, p. 2). This is because the "half-hour format fits the audience's attention span; situation comedies can reflect rapidly the interests of the contemporary audience; and the humor of sitcoms flatters viewers who feel superior to the sitcom characters or identify with their plights" (p. 2). Therefore, studying the influences on the sitcom, and the ways that these programs are a part of the larger rhizome is important. Because of how much it has been studied, how long the genre has existed, and how much change has occurred within the genre, I have chosen to study it over its long-life.

The second genre I studied is the Western. The Western is a very interesting television genre because of the way it "flourished" in the early days of television only to suffer a "precipitous decline" by the 1970s (Barson, 1985, p. 57). There are years when Nielsen's top rated TV series lists are dominated by Westerns, and many more years

when not a single one can be found on the ratings list. However, eventually, the Western began to spawn “several generic hybrids” including “the domestic Western of *Bonanza* (NBC, 1959-1973), comedies like *F Troop* (ABC, 1965-1967) and even a nineteenth-century espionage Western, *The Wild, Wild West* (CBS, 1965-1969)” (Creeber et al., 2008, p. 20). My argument is that once the Western appears to disappear from television screens, it has actually dispersed into alternative generic forms, taking up residence in private eye shows, space travel shows, etc. Rather than attempting to identify specific genres that the Western morphed into, I looked at individual shows that contain traits of the Western to see how the Western continues to persist, even after its television heyday. By doing so, I elaborate upon the idea of the asignifying rupture inherent in the rhizome – that characteristic that allows sections of the rhizome to be split apart, but without losing the integrity of the rhizome or the traits that were dominant in the lost section.

These two studies are formatted very differently to reflect both the varying style of genre studies and the different emphases of the analyses. The sitcom analysis is primarily historical. This enabled me to trace the changes, and changing influences, of the genre in different ways than has previously been examined. Since my emphasis here is looking at what other television, societal, and cultural influences have altered the sitcom since its origins, the historical study is necessary. The Western analysis is situated in the current, or very recent, television environment. Rather than tracing the history of the Western, I utilized previous studies of the genre to apply traits of the Western to current television programs. The emphasis here is on the ways that the Western continues to influence other television, even without being an active presence on screens. Therefore, the historical aspects of the study are less conspicuous.

## **Procedures**

Studying the breadth of these two genres is an enormous undertaking. Therefore, I want to spend a bit of time explaining how I made this task more manageable. I will lay out the types of analysis I did and how I tackled this study. Then I establish a working catalogue of texts to work from – because I did not watch every sitcom and Western from the beginning of television.

This study will be a combination of textual analysis and historical analysis. I watched, as previously stated, a selection of sitcoms in each decade since the 1950s and examined the style and themes of these programs. I then traced how those traits have changed from one decade to the next, in the traditional style of the descriptive analyses. For Westerns, I established the basic traits that existed in the early days of the television Western. Then, using paratexts in conjunction with the previously established outline of traits, I looked for those same traits in programs during eras without any Westerns on air, thereby applying the traits to new programs in the style of the generic participation analyses. After doing these analyses, I have a better idea of what the actual generic rhizome looks like and how it works, in addition to being able to extrapolate how it can be useful to future genre studies.

### **Textual Analysis**

Textual analysis has a long history in both literature and film, but has arrived relatively recently to television studies (J. Gray & Lotz, 2012). The legitimization of the medium and the increase in time-shifting technologies, which allow scholars to repeatedly view programs, enabled the rise of television studies as a viable field. With the rise of complex television (Mittell, 2015) textual analysis has become significantly more



normal and important in television studies. Television studies utilizes textual analysis of the characteristics of a program to discuss the discourses imbedded within texts. Stokes (2013) suggests that genre works as both a semiotic category – in that everything within the genre shares the same “codes and conventions” – and a narrative category – genre programs all follow similar plots (p. 150). Additionally, Devitt (2009) observes that, “form shapes textual substance in particular ways; it shapes response to textual situations in particular directions. Without form, of course, there is no text to interpret, no action” (p. 30). Therefore, my goal with textual analysis is to look at the ways in which sitcoms and Westerns both follow genre categorizations and how they deviate from these boundaries. In this way, I traced the changes in the genres over time.

I did so by using textual analysis to focus on the semiotic and narrative trends of the show. Multiple scholars (Bordwell, 2008; Butler, 2010; Mittell, 2015) refer to this as "poetics" and differentiate from stylistics in that poetics focuses on "the physical manifestation of theme and narrative"(Butler, 2010, p. 20). The goal of television textual analysis is to examine "how a text might tell us something about the cultural system that surrounds it more generally" (J. Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 36). Therefore, the focus tends to be on the ideological significance of aesthetics and narrative trends, a more firmly semiotic form of analysis, which "attempts to reveal how these layers of encoded meanings are structured into television programs" (Fiske, 2011, p. 6). In other words, poetics looks at *how* a program is constructing its narrative to be able to make sense of why certain discourses are prominent. Stokes (2013) discusses the importance of discourse analysis in media studies to examine the ways in which programs “convey the ideology of a culture,” that it is “one of the means by which values and ideals are

reproduced culturally” (p. 144). Before any study can fully encompass a textual analysis of discourse, we must examine the ways in which a series is physically constructed.

Television has its roots in radio. However, what has always differentiated television from radio is the way it looks. While it is only recently that television has distinguished itself visually as being on par with film, with programs such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), the aesthetic choices of television have always contributed to how it is able to tell its stories. Fiske (2011) suggests that elements of camera work, lighting, editing, music, casting, setting, costume, make-up, action, and dialogue can all contribute to the codes imbedded within a text. Butler (2010) discusses the ways in which "descriptive" analyses of television can "deconstruct" a text to its frame-by-frame elements of *mise-en-scene* (p. 6). Since I looked at *how* the program uses style, not what meaning-making that program is using the style to accomplish, I do not delve quite so deeply into the minutiae of the style. However, by focusing on the poetic aspects of the programs, I look at the larger aspects of *mise-en-scene*, those that dominate and change across the series. Campbell and Jamieson (1978) observe that “formal similarities establish genres, and the forms relevant to genres are complex forms present in all discourse” (p. 18). As I watched these programs, I looked closely for what formal, stylistic choices are made on the series and how those choices contribute to the overall meaning of the program. My goal was to examine the format of the programs for elements that either fit within or deviate from the traditional genre framework. Elements can be either aesthetic or ideological; both contribute to how audiences read a genre.

One study that famously uses textual analysis to examine the ways that audiences interact with the text is Radway’s (1984) analysis of romance readers where she extends

beyond the women themselves into the texts they enjoy. She looks at attributes of these texts, the stories and the characters, to identify certain elements that draw the readers to them. These attributes include the lack of triangular relationships (two characters competing for the affection of a third), the personality traits of the heroines, and that they fit into a traditional story arch. These example attributes are representative of what any textual analysis could potentially identify – character traits, narrative patterns, etc. While Radway is studying literature and I am studying television, her textual analysis demonstrates both the importance of such work to genre study (she is identifying traits that align and deviate from the romance norm) and how this work can do more than simply look at the text. She draws connections between the narrative aspects of the romance and why these readers enjoy them.

My textual analysis focuses on similar aspects of the narrative, but refrains from making any assumptions about why audiences like/watch them – simply because that is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I focus on the elements of the programs discussed previously. First, I look at the narrative arc of the program. How does the story unfold? In a program such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014), for instance, the framing narrative and layers of embedded stories are what make that program particularly innovative. If this program were included in my analysis, I would be interested to see how that frame shapes the stories told and what other places we see that frame being utilized. Second, I look at the aesthetic elements of the program (the *mise-en-scene*, which can include camera work, lighting, costume design, set design, etc.). What does the program look like? *Sherlock* (2010-present), for example works to create an environment that is visually stunning and situates Sherlock and Watson very differently from each

other. The *mise-en-scene* surrounding each character is very different. Where I particularly probe this kind of program is in what these different looks contribute to the characterization and where these kinds of aesthetics originate.

Third, I look at the characterizations. Who are these people and what makes them who they are? Much of this research will reach beyond textual analysis into historical analysis and paratexts, to be discussed more below. However, elements of characterization are embedded in the programs. For instance, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) has a group of fascinating characters. Looking at how they grow and how the actors alter their performances, as well as the aesthetic decisions surrounding those characters, can elucidate a lot about the programs themselves, as well as culture in general – through examining what characters and traits are emphasized. Finally, I look for what kinds of stories are being told. This can be simply a matter of overarching stories, but also of larger cultural discourses. Any program can be examined in this way, and in all the ways that I have previously mentioned, but these discourse-based analyses can run the gamut of issues. For instance, one could look at feminism on both *American Horror Story* (2011-present) and *Blue Bloods* (2010-present) and come to very different conclusions about culture's understanding of feminism, or could come to very similar conclusions. Therefore, my emphasis is not on what conclusions the programs are taking, but rather on what stories/themes/ideologies are being undertaken and how the previous three elements of textual analysis are contributing to these stories. The premier element of textual analysis is to not look at any of these elements in isolation. They all contribute to a whole – that whole is what I actually want to be studying, and how that whole contributes to the larger rhizome.

Textual analysis is the primary way that television studies scholars examine programs. By examining the stylistic and thematic aspects of a program, I identify the basic generic characteristics located in that program, such as the “location, visual style, and *mise-en-scene*” that classify a program as within a particular genre (Stokes, 2013, p. 150). Because I looked at these characteristics in many programs over the entire history of these genres, I can examine how the characteristics of the genres have changed over time. The influences upon the genres that trigger these changes, such as cultural mores and television trends, situate these programs within a larger generic rhizome. However, to fully analyze how the rhizome works, I did not simply look at programs. I also examined the paratexts surrounding programs and the cultural and television contexts within which the programs were created. I did so through historical analysis of the eras in which the programs were produced.

### **Historical Analysis**

To create this broader picture of these genres, I looked at the industry circumstances that lead to the production of the shows, the critical reception of these programs, and the cultural trends that influence the programs’ production and reception. This helped me to understand how and why the programs adapted in the ways they have, as well as to account for any changes that may not be based in the generic rhizome. To do this analysis, I relied on paratexts from the time period and from modern eras looking back on these programs, as well as other historical research on these programs/genres.

In many respects, historical analysis of the media is an attempt to reconstruct the atmosphere in which programs were produced and viewed. Simply watching a series is not enough to fully understand how it was received and why certain aspects of the

program evolved in the ways that they did. In the absence of the physical programs, scholars can use the documents surrounding a program to reconstruct an image of what it looked like and how it was produced and received (Medhurst, 2007). According to Gray (2010), paratexts are all the materials audiences are exposed to before, during, and after a film or television program that enhance their relationship with that text. He says paratexts act as “book covers” (p. 4), helping to “condition our entrance to texts, telling us what to expect, and setting the terms of our ‘faith’ in subsequent transubstantiation” (p. 25), meaning the ways we will be transformed by the text. Paratexts can include “opening credit sequences, trailers, toys, spinoff video games, prequels and sequels, podcasts, bonus materials, interviews, reviews, alternate reality games, spoilers, audience discussion, vids, posters or billboards, and promotional campaigns” (p. 3). All of these things work to create the overall experience of the film or television program, because each piece of extraneous material tells viewers something about the film or program. Gray makes it clear that the “text” of the program is not limited to those bounded within the film or television narrative, but all the paratexts also contribute meaning.

In this way, it is imperative to study the paratexts of any television program, to fully understand the ways it is creating meaning. Similar to genre, Gray says

Decisions on what to watch, what not to watch, and *how* to watch are often made while consuming hype, synergy, and promos . . . by the time we actually encounter "the show itself," we have already begun to decode and to preview its meanings and effects (p. 3).

The “hype” that he is speaking of is embodied in paratexts. These decisions are the same that genre enable. Genre and paratexts both aid viewers in choosing what to watch and

how to watch. Therefore, studying the paratexts that shape a series are very important to this particular study to see what genre a program is situated within through the paratexts.

Additionally, paratexts are important to study for an historical analysis because they help to encapsulate the experience of watching a program at its actual point of origin. By examining paratexts, a scholar can recreate a televisual experience more fully than simply watching a series, because there is more of a sense of “what it was really like” in that time period to see how a program was advertised, how it was received, what other things were occurring at the time, etc. As Gray says, “there is never a point in time at which a text frees itself from the contextualizing powers of paratextuality” (p. 45). Consequently, we cannot neglect paratexts as a signifier of meaning in historical studies.

Assorted journalists and scholars have scrutinized both genres that are my object of study since their inception. Because of this proliferation of writings, finding paratexts about these programs was not difficult. Using the academic writings about these genres generally and about the shows specifically as a starting point, I focused on critical writings about the shows, especially at the beginnings and ends of seasons and series. These tend, at least today, to be times when critics reflect on programs. I used these reflections to discuss the ways that critics perceive the characteristics, and changes in characteristics, of that program. I also looked at critical writings about programs past their finales. Recent journalism on classic television can prove to be enlightening in regards to the cultural impact, and importance in history, of a series. Finally, I looked at academic scholarship about the specific programs that I looked at and the genres broadly. These studies were not simply useful to point me toward historical coverage of an event, but also gave some indications of why these shows have survived the tests of time to

remain stalwarts of their genre. By looking at why a show has become a paragon, I traced a historical lineage of a genre, and also trace the changes, which brought me to the generic rhizome.

Paratexts are just one level of historical analysis. They provide a glimpse into the process of meaning making behind texts, but a hole still remains in situating texts historically. Therefore, a broader examination of the cultural circumstances into which a text was born was also examined. All texts are born out of some particular cultural circumstance; rhetoricians refer to this as the “rhetorical situation” (Bitzer, 1992). The elements that have created that specific rhetorical situation must be taken into account when discussing the characteristics of the situation. Fiske and Hartley (2003) refer to the bardic function of television because of the ways that television: composes messages to confirm dominant culture; organizes messages according to the needs of culture; occupies the center of culture; and, thereby, works as the core of culture, etc. (chapter 6, section 1). These are not the only ones given for why television is bardic, but are the ones that centrally concern this study because of how they construct the relationship between television and culture. These cultural influences on television, and the influence of television on culture, are historically situated and, therefore, must be examined. These cultural influences can include both the televisual world – what else was on TV – and the real world – what was happening in America at the moment. Mittell (2004) refers to the “*cultural life* of television texts” and how scholars must look

at how shows circulate in a range of spheres of practice. The text is certainly a nexus point, providing a clear boundary for analysis, but these boundaries are



permeated by the larger processes by which the text is activated as a cultural object (p. 124).

Historical contexts present the world in which a program was born – nothing is created in a vacuum. Studying the context creates a picture of the relationship between programs and culture.

Gray and Lotz (2012) see that historical contextual analysis devotes attention to television's "historical placement, the temporal environment, and the sociocultural moment in which texts, audiences, and industries find themselves" (p. 123). To do so, scholars look for the "ways in which meaning is established *between* texts, and to search for ways in which any given program's meaning is prefigured by that which comes before it, or changed after the fact by subsequent programs" (p. 124). Much of this work emerged through my analysis of paratexts; however, I also needed to look more specifically at the cultural trends of an historical decade. Therefore, as I looked at the paratexts associated with a program, I looked beyond coverage of that program to see what other stories were being covered at the same time. Through critical and scholarly discussions of these programs, important cultural moments became clear. By looking at a show specifically within these contexts, I could see what America looked like while that program aired, outside of simply the program itself.

Additionally, I looked at what other shows were being aired at the same time, what other programs were nominated for awards in those years, what films and books were popular, etc. These other media trends specifically speak to the generic rhizome. Gray and Lotz (2012) refer to television as "its own thriving society and culture, populated by countless programs, audiences, and industries" (p. 124). To fully understand

how genres are intermingled, we need to be able to look at the context in which they are produced – both the American society that forms the audiences and producers, and the programs that came before and after in order to influence the attributes of a program. Contextual analysis provides a greater understanding of how the rhizome exists. For instance, 1970s television was dominated by sitcoms produced and written by Norman Lear. What did this mean for the television environment? What did it mean in the sitcoms themselves, but then how, also, did this one man's influence alter (or not) television generally? Similarly, shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977) and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) are famously known for tackling issues of feminism and working women. Do other shows on during the same periods also address these same issues? How do they tackle feminism and women's rights? These are questions I asked and answered in my contextual analysis of sitcoms.

To trace aspects of the generic rhizome, to investigate how it works and theorize future directions for other studies using this rhizomatic approach to genre, I did textual and historical analysis of two different genres. I used programs throughout the history of the genres to identify the attributes that make up the programs within the genres. I then was able to trace what alternative generic attributes influenced the changes that have occurred over history. Additionally, I used paratextual and contextual analysis to examine how audiences receive the texts and what cultural trends affect the texts. All of these factors contribute to the overall meaning created by a text, and they all influence the aspects of the rhizome. I demonstrate the ways the rhizome works through tracing sitcoms and Westerns throughout their history.

## Sitcoms

To map how a single genre is altered over time by the characteristics of other genres and by cultural and social influences and to look at how the generic rhizome can describe genres, I decided to study one of the longest running genres on television – the sitcom. Starting in radio, the sitcom has always existed on television and continues as one of the most prominent genres, even if it has declined in popularity. However, the popular sitcoms of today tend to look quite different than the first sitcoms. So, I looked at the generic and cultural influences on the sitcom as a whole to examine why we should not think of this as being an isolated genre.

To map this genre, I decided to look at the most popular and influential examples of the genre throughout its history. I recognize that less conspicuous entries may also have been influential, but chose to focus on these prominent examples because I feel they are the *most* influential and the ones that are likely to be most widespread in their influence. Therefore, my catalogue of sitcoms was created using Nielsen ratings lists (Brooks, 2015; Brooks & Marsh, 1995, 2007) and Emmy Award nominees (IMDb staff, n.d.), as well as four different critics’ “Best Television” lists (Brunner et al., 2013; Fretts, 1993; Fretts & Roush, 2013; THR Staff, 2015). After compiling these lists and picking out the sitcoms from each, I looked for which shows occurred on at least three of the lists in each year. Then, I selected the shows that were present on the lists in at least three years of each decade.<sup>1</sup> This list, however, was lacking in the last 5 years, because fragmented viewing and narrowcast programs have created a television environment in

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<sup>1</sup> The one exception to this is *Father Knows Best*. I chose to include this program even though it was only on my lists for two years in the 1950s because the only other show of the era is *I Love Lucy*, which ended before *Father Knows Best* appeared on my list and I wanted to be sure to have shows from all of the 1950s.

which viewer ratings are no longer representative. Additionally, because I examined how the currently complexity on television shapes and is shaped by the rhizome, it was important to look to the wide array of television possibilities. Television ratings, as conceived in the traditional sense that Nielsen still stands by, preclude those possibilities. Therefore, to truly get a representative array of 21st century television, it was imperative to drop any popularity requirements and focus, instead, on acclaim. Using FiveThirtyEight.com's "Best of the Best" lists from 2014 and 2015 as the model (Munguia, 2014, 2015), I compiled similar lists for 2010-2013 using the same sources. The final selection of programs is presented in table 1 (see appendix A).

This calculation ends with forty-one different sitcoms to watch. Because this continues to be a very unwieldy amount of television to work with, I did not attempt to watch all of each series. Instead, I developed a familiarity with the series. Therefore, I watched at least twenty-five percent of each season of each series. For a season with twenty-four episodes (the average season length of these shows), I watched at least six episodes. These episodes were dispersed across the season, including the first and last episodes and at least one during two of the "Sweeps"<sup>2</sup> periods. By focusing on these times, I was able to observe the major moments that occurred during that season. This assortment of episodes covered enough of the series that I have a sense of how each season progressed and how the show gradually evolved.

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<sup>2</sup> Sweeps weeks are times in a year, February, May, July, and November, when the Nielsen Ratings company collects ratings data on 2 million audience members (Nielsen, 2016).

## Westerns

Another important aspect of the generic rhizome is that genres can disappear entirely from the screens, but their attributes persist in alternative forms that transcend genre boundaries. To study this, I decided to examine a genre that barely exists on television today – the Western. Westerns, both on television and in film, have been written about extensively. Therefore, I utilized previous scholarship to establish the basic characteristics of these Westerns. I then examined television programs that may have those attributes, but that aren't Westerns through keywords on cataloguing websites such as imdb.com and through plot synopses in texts such as Brooks and Marsh (2007). I also made use of TVTropes.com, a wiki that defines television tropes and identifies programs that use those tropes.

After identifying possible Western-themed programs using keywords and plot synopses, I used paratexts and contextual analysis, such as academic studies examining these shows and critics' coverage of the programs, to look at these possible shows and to find places that the characteristics are still present. Much of this analysis was based on my own intuition and knowledge of the plots of series. Foss (1996) observes that

The critic speculates that a genre of rhetoric may exist. The critic's suspicion of the presence of a genre is not to be confused with a preconceived framework that predicts or limits the defining characteristics of the genre. Rather, the hunch simply serves as a prod to the critic to begin an investigation to see if a genre exists and, if so, what elements characterize it (p. 229).

Using key words and plot synopses, I used my own instincts, in the way that Foss suggests, to search amongst television to find possible secret-Western programs. Once I

identified possible alternative series, I did textual and paratextual analysis of these shows to determine how the Western characteristics are still prevalent, relying primarily on paratexts to tell me ways that critics and scholars perceive these Western characteristics within these non-Western shows (even if they may not realize that the elements they are identifying are characteristics of a Western).

Television is a vast expanse of options, especially in today's complex television era, and narrowing those options down to a manageable amount of programs while still maintaining enough to create a picture of the television era is a complicated task. Therefore, I did my best to create a catalogue of sitcoms and Westerns to work with that are disparate enough to fully illustrate the dimensions of the genre. The dimensions of the genre create the rhizome and I could not fully grasp the possibilities and impossibilities of rhizome until I knew exactly how these genres fit within a rhizomatic frame. My focus was only on two sections of the television rhizome, but those two sections will give an adequate glimpse of how the rhizome works, why it is important to conceptualize, and how it can be utilized in future genre studies.

This analysis focuses exclusively upon television genres, but the lasting impact of this study can reach beyond television studies. By mapping these two genres and looking at the influence of the television rhizome, I show how television genres interact and influence a variety of programs. These same methods can be used to examine any number of other forms of genres. Genres can be limited to the various forms of media, but actually are not. Instead, genres can look at the various academic methodologies or at the different majors at a university or at the different kinds of books on a bookshelf. Any and all of these can be examined through their genres. Applying the generic rhizome to these

different ways of conceptualizing genre can enhance scholars' understanding of the ways that these genres intertwine. This study looks specifically at television genres; that does not mean that this theory of genre is applicable to only television. The generic rhizome transcends medium and can, and should, be applied anywhere.

## CHAPTER 4: HISTORY OF TELEVISION

The generic rhizome presents a way to look at programs from a larger scale than previous genre research. To demonstrate and test the ways in which the rhizome does this, I present two different genre television clusters: the sitcom and the Western. As outlined in the previous chapter, these studies are very different in design. One looks at the programs since the genre's inception; the other investigates programs since the genre's virtual extinction. Despite their differences, one element of both of these studies remains the same: they both require an element of historical analysis. In the sitcom study, I examined sitcoms throughout television history. For the Western study, I used previous historical scholarship on Westerns as a basis from which to study programs currently on television. One of the innovations of the rhizome is that it draws upon generic characteristics not only on contemporary television or in contemporary culture, but also on the long history of those same characteristics. Therefore, before I can truly begin discussing these studies, I want to set the stage a little bit more broadly. Before I lay out the intricacies of sitcoms and Westerns, I want to better understand how they came into existence and where they stood throughout the history of television itself.

I will, consequently, take a bit of time here to discuss the history of television. Histories can be undertaken from a number of different perspectives: by the individuals who stand out in each era, Golden Age-ism, simply by decade, etc. However, each of these approaches can be problematic. Lacey (2006) says that the major problem with historical media research is that scholars tend to construct histories as linear, cause-effect narratives. These narratives do not present realistic understandings of how society functions and, as Mittell (2004) says, are simplistic retellings. Additionally, these



narratives are typically told through individuals (Lacey, 2006). While Hilmes (2009) suggests that one form of industry history is told through authors, Lacey suggests that such a history focuses only on “geniuses” and thus, neglects other factors that contribute to the context and production of programs. Finally, Lacey also finds “Golden Age-ism” problematic. This is when scholars suggest that certain time periods in history are better than others. For example, numerous scholars (Comstock, 1989; Wheen, 1985) refer to the late 1940s – early 1950s as the Golden Age of Television. DeFino (2014) observes, “In nearly every generation, one can find ‘key’ works of television to support the notion of a ‘Golden Age’” (p. 15). Consequently, Golden Age-ism can be meaningless, since any era can retain some element of excellence. Additionally, Golden Age-ism can easily dismiss certain time periods and certain texts and not see these as worth studying.

The primary goal of the generic rhizome is to eliminate the assumption that some texts and time periods are not worth studying. Therefore, I have organized this history in a similar fashion to the way that the rhizome works: by the influences upon programs. First, I investigate the programs themselves: what was on television? Then, I look at what happened in the television environment, both technologically and culturally to influence these shows. Finally, I look at the audience: who was the target of the programs and how might that alter the programs? This will set up a context into which I can to dive much deeper to look at the various strains of the rhizome. DeFino (2014) says of scholars:

It is immensely satisfying to take the long view of any story, no matter how sordid. Though the edges may look ragged and chaotic up close, with distance they seem smoother and interconnected. We draw general conclusions to avoid the messiness of having to account for the ragged edge of things, the incoherence,

the gaps, and lapses. The same can be true of the close-up view, where every detail seems fraught with significance. With enough critical attention and cleverness we can imagine we see the universe in a grain of sand (p. 18).

To start these analyses, I want to take the long view of television. This will give me a smooth surface from which to zoom my microscope. The rest of the analysis will specifically be looking for those “ragged edges” and figuring out how they came to be. Because there is a whole universe of atoms and molecules in a “grain of sand,” but to understand the fully, we have to understand the rest of the universe too.

### **Programs**

Programming is the central component of the generic rhizome. The programs themselves are what holds the rhizome together and where we, as scholars, can view the rhizome at work. Therefore, it is necessary to use the programs as the backbone of this historical analysis. I will begin by looking at what kinds of programs developed throughout the history of television, before turning to what outside influences acted upon those programs.

In 1961, newly appointed chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Newton Minow gave a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) that shook the networks. He said,

When television is good, nothing . . . is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse . . . Sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and . . . keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland. You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally

unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, Western badmen, Western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials – many screaming, cajoling, and offending . . . (qtd. in Mesce, 2015, p. 27).

He then ended his speech by suggesting that networks who did not clean up their programs licenses would not be renewed (Wheen, 1985). By this point in television history, networks had been perfecting their programming for at least thirty years. In 1928, a Schenectady station broadcast the world's first television drama, *The Queen's Messenger* (Ritchie, 1994, p. 21). However, as those thirty years elapsed, and the spread of television grew, programming moved from being aimed at the elite to being a media of the masses.

*The Queen's Messenger* was typical of early television programs (especially once the technology had been perfected and became more widespread). Television drama in the 1940s and 1950s was primarily original plays broadcast live, and was aesthetically influenced by Broadway theatre (Paterson, 1995). This era worked as a springboard for young thespians looking to get their start. Included among the entertainers who got their start on television are: Paddy Chayevsky, Rod Serling, Gore Vidal, William Gibson, Sidney Lumet, Arthur Penn, Paul Newman, George C. Scott, James Dean, Sidney Poitier, Jack Lemmon, Grace Kelly, etc. (Abramson, 1995). These eventual luminaries emphasized the written word over the spectacle, and focused on new dramas every week, rather than continuing serialized stories (Marc & Thompson, 2005). Many television historians call this era, where anthologized live theatre predominated, the Golden Age of Television. Wheen (1985) observes, "Considering that the plays were transmitted live, it

is remarkable how many of them have endured in the memory without the benefit of continual repeats” (p. 102). Every time a play was “rebroadcast,” it was simply staged again live (Wheen, 1985). In the early days of television, between live play anthologies and the vaudeville-esk comedy-variety shows that predominated, theatre was the primary influence on programming.

A secondary influence came with radio. Before and concurrent with the rise of television, radio was cultivating its own slate of programming, which included: “variety shows, game shows, news, talk shows, children's programs, soap operas, cop shows, Westerns, dramas, and situation comedies (‘sitcoms’)” (Mesce, 2015, p. 19). As the primary broadcast medium at the time, radio was highly influential. NBC, CBS, and ABC, the so-called “Big Three” broadcast networks, all got their start in radio. The radio networks behind them, Radio Corporation of America (RCA, which eventually became NBC and ABC) and Columbia Phonographic Broadcasting System (eventually shortened simply to the Columbia Broadcasting System, CBS), were “simply diversifying or technologically embellishing the broadcasting business” by adding television to their holdings (Marc & Thompson, 2005, p. 56). Thus, it is not surprising that they simply took pre-established program formats, and even programs themselves, and re-configured them for television. Once audiences became larger and the price of the live dramas grew, the networks fell back on their radio stalwarts as the main source of programming.

At the same time, a third influence began to take over television: film. As television was beginning, NBC and CBS strived to keep television separate from film and their own domain (Marc & Thompson, 2005). Hollywood suffered greatly as a result and, rather than continue to shun the new medium, worked out deals with the networks to air

old feature films. The most important of these deals was between fledgling network ABC and Hollywood heavyweights Walt Disney and Warner Brothers. Both of these companies produced weekly film series for ABC. Warner Bros.' entry was *Warner Bros. Presents* (1955-1956) while Disney's was *Disneyland* (1954-1991; Marc & Thompson, 2005; Paterson, 1995; Wheen, 1985). The popularity of these programs caused the other networks to make similar arrangements with film studios.

By the end of the 1950s, American television networks had a stable arsenal of programming options, of which the most prominent and popular were sitcoms and Westerns. However, the programs within these genres eventually looked very much like each other and echoed similar themes too closely. Sitcoms all began to look identical, as did Westerns, and the programs in most other genres as well. A television comedian of the 1950s, Ernie Kovacs, observed, "There's a standard formula for success in the entertainment medium, and that is: Beat it to death if it succeeds" (qtd. in Mesce, 2015, p. 32). This repetitive nature, as well as the increasing emphasis on violence and mayhem is what caused Minow to rage against the "vast wasteland" of television.

CBS took Minow's threats very seriously and, as the leader in ratings and prestige, took the reins in programming diversification. The most successful program that emerged at this time was *The Defenders* (1961-1964), which "took on such subjects as abortion, racism, and even the political blacklisting practices of the television industry" (Marc & Thompson, 2005, p. 83). Despite Minow's threats, *The Defenders* was a rarity on television at the time. Minow's threats were mostly overlooked as he resigned from the FCC just two years after his divisive speech and, that same year, Lyndon Johnson, who owned a television station, ascended to the presidency. In the place of these hard-

hitting dramas, a slue of sitcoms set in rural locations took control of the screens – including *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), and *Petticoat Junction* (1963-1970; Marc & Thompson, 2005). As Comstock (1989) observes, the 1960s became known as the era of “the repetitive filmed serial” (p. 33). The 1970s was the era when change finally came to network programming.

The 1970s is the era in which historians start using the term “quality” to describe programming. With shows such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977), and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983) on the screens, the “quality” designation was mostly limited to sitcoms (DeFino, 2014). Marc and Thompson (2005) refer to this time as the “Relevance” era and stress the importance of shows such as *That Girl* (1966-1971), *I Spy* (1965-1968), *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* (1967-1973), and *60 Minutes* (1968-present) in spear-heading a move towards openness regarding the role of women, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and simply a more mature, topical outlook on culture. While these shows would eventually prove to be the forerunners of relevant programs such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) in the 1980s, the 1970s first devolved into what Mesce (2015) refers to as “The Silly Season” (p. 49). This was a move away from relevance and towards “fluff, fantasy, and broad comedy” in programs such as *Happy Days* (1974-1984), *Laverne and Shirley* (1976-1983), *Mork and Mindy* (1978-1982), *Fantasy Island* (1977-1984), and *Charlie’s Angels* (p. 49; 1976-1981). While this era of “fluff” continued into the 1980s with prime-time soap operas such as *Dallas* (1978-1991) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989), other, edgier programming also found its way to television.

The era of *Charlie’s Angels* was also the moment that *Roots* (1977) premiered on screens; *Happy Days* and *Barney Miller* (1974-1982) were both on television at the same

time. As *Hill Street Blues* was taking the stage just two months after the mystery of “Who Shot J.R.?” was being resolved on *Dallas*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, “relevant” and “fluff” programming battled for audiences’ attention. By the 1980s, these types of prominent, popular programs would establish the groundwork for what we today still consider typical for programming. In other words, the 1980s is “when television became itself and when the faintest imprint of what its future might hold could be discerned” (Comstock, 1989, p. 35).

This was the same time that HBO first came into existence (see DeFino, 2014; Mesce, 2015). While the network itself did not really take off until 1983, it had viewers starting in 1972. HBO started as a cable network for airing Hollywood films and sporting events, but by the 1980s had entered into the television documentary game with aplomb. They also experimented with scripted series throughout the 1980s, with standouts such as *Tanner '88* (1988) and *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996). Finally, in 1992, HBO premiered its first “great scripted series” *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998; DeFino, 2014, p. 81). This show was set the foundation for the other HBO comedies such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), *Girls* (2012-2017), and *Entourage* (2004-2011). Primarily, *The Larry Sanders Show* was “a striking break from everything else on TV and became – and remains – one of HBO’s most acclaimed original series and a perennial example of what pay TV could (and can) do that broadcast TV can’t (or won’t)” (Mesce, 2015, pp. 193–194). This ability to do something different than the broadcast networks is what led to the creation of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *The Wire* (2002-2008), etc., which led to pressure being put on other cable networks, as well

as the broadcast networks, to create television at a comparable level, and what eventually led to today's complex television milieu discussed in chapter one.

This very brief history of programming on television suggests a couple of things: first, that while today's television appears much different than television at its start, many of today's television conventions were firmly in place by the 1980s; second, that historians do not devote much time focusing on the more nuanced changes from one era to the next, instead looking at the dominant programs and how they were different and unique; finally, that the history of television is a rich source of discussion about genre and how various attributes work to influence programming. The generic rhizome will branch off from this history to find new ways of studying these same eras and trends.

### **Influences**

Before I embark on that more specific analysis, however, I want to look more expressly at the areas of history that influenced the trends in television outlined above. These will be technological, cultural, and related to the viewing audience. By looking for these influences, I will establish a point from which I can dive deeper into the rhizome.

### **Technology**

Most television histories discuss the technological innovations that went into creating and improving television. This is to be expected in many respects. Television is a vastly different technology from both radio and film, albeit with similar roots. The technology worked to form much of what was played on television. For instance, television critic Gilbert Seldes observed the way that the technology of television effected what was on it, "The style of acting in television is determined by the conditions of reception; there is simply no place for the florid gesture, the overprojection of emotion,



the exaggeration of voice or grimace or movement, inside the average American living room"(qtd. in Abramson, 1995, p. 48). That is, the small size of television screens, focus on the written word, and the limited amount of camera movement prevented large, overly dramatic acting styles.

In fact, the move from the first Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s to the more familiar genre-based fare of the 1950s and 1960s forward is often attributed to the ease with which American families were able to get television sets. The primary reason that the early days of television is considered the Golden Age is because of the elitist programs that were on it, but producer Gerald Abrams has spoken about how that idea, of the “elitist” nature of television is a misnomer: "You have to remember that in the '50s, most people in American didn't even have TV! I'm not saying it was elitist to own one, but having a TV was not a given then the way it is now" (qtd. in Mesce, 2015, p. 29). Consequently, programs were aimed directly for the richest 9% of the population and these were intellectuals and “partisans of the arts” who specifically desired dramatic programming (Marc & Thompson, 2005, p. 73). However, the number of televisions in America grew to 85% by the end of the decade and the programming changed to match the now-mass aspect of the medium.

Nevertheless, television technology still governed many of the programs. Recording technologies gradually emerged that allowed for more flexibility in viewing. The first stage of recording technology was for the television networks themselves, they were no longer confined to showing all programs live, but could reorganize their schedules for more convenient viewing (Abramson, 1995). Additionally, programs could be recorded for one studio or network and sold to other companies around the world

(Wheen, 1985). For the viewers, however, until the invention and success of the VCR in the 1980s, television remained centered around time. Deciding what show to watch was very dependent simply upon what was on at that moment. As Comstock (1989) says, the “predominance of time over program availability means that the decision to view television typically precedes the decision over what to view” (p. 46). As a result of this, television became a very “present” medium (Ritchie, 1994), in which the turn around rate was so fast (compared to film) and viewers were forced to watching programs at the same time so everyone in the country (more or less) were watching the exact same cultural moment (Marc & Thompson, 2005).

Despite the emphasis placed on technological innovations across television histories, we need to remember that television is significantly more than its technology. Marshall McLuhan famously observed, “the medium is the message,” in order to point out the interconnectedness of a technology with its cultural influence. However, because of the “lesser” status of television compared to film, and the emphasis on it as a medium for the people based in “escapist” entertainment (Paterson, 1995, p. 97), television is often seen as only being a technology and not worth studying as anything more. For instance, *The Moving Image: An international history of film, television, and video* (Wyver, 1989), which presents itself as “the first time” an “outline history of both the cinema and television” has been compiled (p. 1), does shockingly little to present television as anything more than a technology that influences film occasionally. Of the two chapters that focus on television specifically, one looks at the technology, production process, and market, while the other focuses a bit more on the cultural significance. As a result of the technological deterministic stance embodied by most television histories, I

want to take a moment to look at television solely as a cultural object and at the ways that cultural significance influenced its programming.

## **Cultural**

A central tenant of the generic rhizome is that culture and society are constantly influencing programs. The key word here being “constantly.” Since this history aims to be a broad look at television, it would be nearly impossible to account for every single cultural or societal pull that worked to change some aspect of television programming. That is one of the goals of the generic rhizome, but in a very specific sense (for example, how did third-wave feminism effect television of the 1990s?). Instead, for the moment, I want to look simply at the role that television has played in culture – because its significance has not always remained the same. Television’s waxing and waning importance is one reason why television has not always held a position of esteem, or as an object of critical inquiry. Therefore, it is important for our purposes to understand what television has the potential to do, and what producers/executives felt that television was doing, to understand why certain programs were made in the ways that they were.

Smith (1995) observes that the “inventors of television” perceived television “as an extension of telephone, radio, theatre, cinema” that was a “means for delivering information and entertainment,” but that television has “gathered to itself a range of functions beyond the entertaining and informing of audiences” (p. 2). That difference – between simply entertaining/informing and doing more to influence audiences – is the most important cultural element of television that can affect its programming. If all that television is purposed to do is to “entertain and inform,” then programs can be simply variety shows and news; but if television does more than that, programs can be edgier and

work to accomplish more. As the importance of television became clear as time went by, programs started to attempt to tell more complex stories, as outlined above.

Television was frequently “accused of lacking intrinsic merit or purpose” and did not “achieve its educative potential” (Paterson, 1995, p. 97). Thus, television was seen as being simply an escapist medium by elitist and scholars, and sometimes even audience members. In the 1960s, when networks were still reacting to Minow’s “vast wasteland” censure, they were also dealing with a “Blue Sky” movement that was arguing for cable markets across the country and against cable regulations. The most important aspect of this Blue Sky movement was the focus on the potential of television. DeFino (2014) discusses how the Blue Sky movement drew “attention to the dearth of educational, cultural, and public access television,” thus creating PBS and eventually to the early days of “quality television” in the early 1970s (p. 37). Assorted groups of people – executives, governmental leaders, audience members, etc. – across the history of television have seen the potential for what it could do for society.

Television itself very much mirrors society. In the 1960s, there was a rash of spy television programs – such as *Mission: Impossible* (1966-1973) and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-1968; Wyver, 1989). This was occurring because, according to historian Les Brown,

The year that Nixon was running for President against Hubert Humphrey, he was running on a law-and-order platform, and nine of the ten top-rated shows were law-and-order shows - that is, they were police shows or Westerns or something with a good and a baddy, and the lawman prevailed. So that told you something about the mood of the country (qtd. in Wheen, 1985, p. 136).

The mood of the country is frequently echoed in this way on television. An argument can be made, however, for the opposite to be true as well. In many respects, television tells American society how to act and what to think about certain societal issues. According to Smith (1995),

Television has come to delineate for us the boundaries of transgression; beneath the most routine or trivial entertainment the medium operates as a subtle instructor, with the complicity of the audience. It offers a continuous flowing river of experience from which we have come to draw much of the substance of our identities (p. 2).

Television works to inform society how to react to certain ideals, moments, etc.

Television is “as much about coming to terms with the problems of life, reality seeking, as escaping from them into fantasy” (Paterson, 1995, p. 97). Television does significantly more than allow audience members to escape their lives.

The early 1970s is when this idea starts to be put into action. The programs in the 1970s, by creating that balance between gritty dramas and fluffy melodramas, allowed audience members to both deal with the dark reality around them – which took the shape of the war in Vietnam, the ongoing Cold War, the after-effects of the Civil Rights Movement, etc. – and to escape from that same reality. Television in the 1980s and 1990s, all the way through today, continues this trend. The most obvious evidence of this is the way that television moved away from simply being selected because “it’s what’s on” to being “appointment TV.” These are the programs viewers schedule their lives around because they absolutely must watch them. These programs feature “detailed and constantly evolving stories” (DeFino, 2014, p. 11), as well as complex character

developments, and artistic cinematography. These programs were the precursors to the complex television we have today.

While today there is no longer a need to make an “appointment” for television viewing, some viewers frequently do. Programs such as *The Bachelor* (2002-present), *Scandal* (2012-present), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) continue to be viewed at their appointed time because audiences do not want to miss out and, thus, fear being exposed to spoilers by friends, family, and co-workers in person and on the internet. There still exists “appointment TV” in the world of convenience devices. However, the binge watching practices encouraged by streaming services such as Netflix can be equated to appointment television. These kinds of programs have such detailed stories and characters that binge watching is almost a requirement to keep up with all of them. The stories are told in a manner that requires watching one after another and would not stand-up nearly as well on a weekly basis.

Over the history of the medium, television has gone from being something viewed as escapist entertainment to something that has the ability to influence viewers, to being an essential part of American culture. Television is the primary means of entertainment and information to most Americans. The producers and executives behind television programs utilize this knowledge to create their programs, which both influence and are influenced by culture. The next element of influence I want to look at is the viewers themselves. Who is it that is being influenced by television and how has that audience, both perceived and real, changed over the years?

## **Audiences**

By the 1980s, the demographics of television audiences had basically leveled off. The primary viewers were: children in elementary school, adults older than 55, adult women, people of lower socioeconomic status, and African Americans and Hispanics (Comstock, 1989, p. 44). However, getting to that point did not happen immediately when television started. As previously discussed, television was initially an elitist medium, primarily targeted to upper class audiences – those few people who owned televisions. As the number of homes with television grew, and the demographics of television owners changed, so did the programs.

Initially, network programmers assumed that these “affluent big-city viewers” wanted to watch news, sports, and dramas (Ritchie, 1994, p. 198). Dramas were especially pushed, perhaps because, as audiences grew, executives saw them as attractive to middle-class, upwardly mobile viewers (Paterson, 1995, p. 97). However, these same executives, as well as advertising sponsors, quickly realized (or perhaps simply decided) that what audiences really wanted was “not social realism but entertaining escapism” (Wheen, 1985, p. 123). Therefore, the programs reflected not the elitist viewers of the early days, but a lower-brow mentality. Nevertheless, “these popular programmes [sic] have had a huge impact on audiences – they are a common currency for discussion world-wide – although they are not highly regarded by critics” (Paterson, 1995, p. 103). The popular programs did not, necessarily, live up to the hope perceived by critics in the early days of television, but did serve to bring in viewers, which appealed to both the networks and the sponsors.

The ideal audience for sponsors is the 18-49 demographic. In the endeavor to corner the market on these viewers, the networks grew broader and more shallow (Mesce, 2015, p. 114). The programs outlined above that embodied Minow's "vast wasteland" gave viewers lots of options to choose from – these options were nearly all targeted to that ideal 18-49 demographic. However, the broadcast nature of television, to be appealing to as many people as possible, left many holes in the audiences. HBO and other cable networks attempted to fill those holes. Networks were trying to get as many audiences as possible; HBO was able to focus on creating the best content it could. The basis of this freedom is HBO's focus on "narrowcasting" – as discussed in chapter one, narrowcasting is "a marketing strategy by which programming is specifically designed to attract a target audience" (DeFino, 2014, p. 40). HBO was not trying to get huge swaths of society to watch its programs; rather it was aiming a specific program to a specific audience. These audiences included older viewers, for whom "well produced, intelligently written" biopics such as *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991) and *Mandela* (1987) were created (Mesce, 2015, p. 147); and young families, for whom programming was modeled specifically with "kid-friendly programming [on] at times of day when kids were most likely to have access to the family TV" (Mesce, 2015, p. 165).

The demographics of television have continued to change vastly since these practices in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, almost all television has moved towards a "narrowcast" perspective on programming. The networks still endeavor to bring in as many viewers as possible, but the abundance of alternative options, including both cable and the internet, mean that all audience numbers are plummeting. Producers, executives, and sponsors must work even harder to draw an audience for their specific program.



Many of the efforts that HBO went through to fill in holes are occurring throughout the television environment. Channels target themselves for very niche demographics; programs are aimed specifically at one group of people.

### **Conclusion**

In many ways, television has changed since its inception in the 1930s. However, in many other ways, television remains exactly the same. The types of people who watch television have been more or less firmly set since the 1950s, and the influence that television has on these people has always remained the same. What has changed is how executives and sponsors treat those people. Network programming went through a good deal of change depending on how many hefty subjects the executives felt audiences could handle. One of the goals of the generic rhizome is to look at those shifts more closely to investigate what exactly contributed to the programming changes. In the next chapters, I will be doing this specifically for sitcoms and Westerns. By undertaking these investigations, I am not simply figuring out how exactly the rhizome works, but also be looked at the cultural importance of the genres on television itself and on audiences more broadly. The changing element in television is not what it can do, but how the industry utilizes that power. The rhizome will look at how that power and influence works, and how it changes.

## CHAPTER 5: SITCOM ANALYSIS

Sitcoms are perhaps the most ubiquitous form of American television. Everyone has heard of sitcoms and probably has some association with one or two. Part of the reason sitcoms are so pervasive is because the genre can include a huge range of programs. From *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), in which a family group explores their everyday lives and the shenanigans they regularly get involved in, to *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and its lack of hijinks and, instead, focus on societal dialogues and the humor inherent within bigotry. From *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), focusing on nothing while managing to also comment upon hegemonic discourses to *Veep* (2012-present), following the everyday life of a less-than-typical character in an extraordinary circumstance. The wide array of types of programs classified as “sitcom” points to a more complicated understanding of what a sitcom is. This chapter will suggest that a rhizomatic framework is the best way to conceptualize these twists of sitcom differences. The immediate nature of television creates a media ecology that reflects the aesthetics, identity, and ideological mores of society and/or cultural at a given era. The nebulous nature of sitcoms enables the media ecology of a given era to permeate each program differently. Thus, sitcoms can tell a huge range of stories. This chapter will investigate just some of those stories and the different rhizomatic attributes that enable those stories.

The generic rhizome is based primarily upon four axioms: 1) that genres are not bounded categories; 2) that shows and thematic/stylistic elements form the structure of the rhizome in their role as nodes and internodes; 3) any part of the rhizome can be removed without detriment to the whole; 4) the generic rhizome allows for mapping of genre. By considering genre within these four axioms, the flexible, ever shifting

definition of this genre functions more coherently. Sitcom cannot possibly be a singular object, otherwise *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Broad City* (2014-present) could not all be one thing. Instead, “sitcom” is a multiplicity, “an entity that originates from a folding or twisting of simple elements” (Tampio, 2017), united for marketing reasons, but generally amorphous in practicality. Sitcoms are best understood as individual programs that draw inspiration from a myriad of sources including other television shows, other forms of media, and cultural shifts.

As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, and as the forth of the Rhizomatic Genre Axioms above reflects, the purpose of the rhizome is to map cultural trends. This analysis will do just that. I will demonstrate that sitcoms are a cluster of nodes/programs that retain specific characteristics of other “sitcoms,” but that these characteristics change over time. I will examine the ways in which they may change based upon characteristics/internodes originating outside “sitcom” programs. This analysis cannot possibly trace every single characteristic back to their origin. In fact, tracing characteristics to their origination imposes more intentionality and linearity upon the rhizome than necessary. Instead of tracing all the internodes of the “sitcoms” area of the rhizome, this analysis will examine a few specific characteristics to demonstrate the ways in which the generic rhizome works. In the previous chapters, this study has ruminated on the ways that producers, audiences, and marketers use genres. By examining some of the ways that sitcoms are influenced by other shows and culture through the generic rhizome, this analysis will demonstrate that genres are necessary, but genres do not function as categorization, but rather as sets of characteristics that producers can draw upon to create their perfect program.

By studying a program as a confluence of characteristics rather than as a member of a particular category, that program can prove to be much richer in content and more powerful as a tool for discussion. When we treat sitcoms as a singular construct, we are then precluding any possibility of difference amongst the programs. Audiences would not tune in for such strictures. If sitcoms are part of a complex web of characteristics, audiences and producers have a wider assortment of types of sitcoms. The complex television environment that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century was made possible by the generic rhizome. The past sixty years of television adaptation across the rhizome have intermingled generic traits so thoroughly that individual genre categories are no longer recognizable. This analysis will examine an assortment of characteristics that are featured in the selected programs. I will demonstrate the ways that these characteristics manifest across “sitcoms,” as well as how their success or failure impacts their future and/or their usage on other types of programs.

I will map broad strokes of the rhizome. I will be examining specific internodes – characteristics – and looking at places they intersect with nodes – programs – along the rhizome. At times, I will ruminate upon where the internodes originated and why they may have assumed prominence at that precise moment in time. The culture in which programs come into existence influences all the internodes leading into that node. Therefore, I will analyze changes in era and culture that affected the implementation of certain characteristics.

However, before any of this analysis can begin, a starting point needs to be established – not of the rhizome, but of the sitcom. The first axiom of the generic rhizome is that genres are not bounded categories. Those categorizations are what audiences,

producers, distributors, etc. start from when thinking about a television show. The rhizome shows that, although the shows may start with these basic genre characteristics, they draw upon a huge range of other characteristics as well. Therefore, I need to establish what the common-sense definition is before I can investigate the characteristics that go into creating and changing the programs that audiences and producers situate in the “sitcom” genre.

### **Axiom One: Genres are not Bounded Categories**

What is a sitcom “supposed” to look like? As previously discussed, genres fulfill certain roles for audiences, producers, and distributors. A television story is likely to begin life as the simplest idea, sometimes only as a nebulous form. One beginning form is through a genre’s most basic characteristics. Consequently, to be able to examine the complex attributes that feature in sitcoms, and as a result demonstrate how genres are not simplistic, we must define what the baseline is into which these rhizomatic characteristics feed. Generally, sitcoms are considered the most simplistic form of television. Feuer (2008) says the sitcom has “a framework so simple and easy to recognize that the sitcom is, literally, child's play” (p. 83). This analysis will demonstrate that such simplicity is not accurate. Therefore, we need to lay out what the expected framework of a sitcom is. Definitions of sitcoms typically break the characteristics down into three areas: the structure of the narrative, the characters, and the ways that the shows handle ideologies.

First, sitcoms are short and episodic. Every half hour episode begins with the characters at whatever is considered “normal” for them – whether Lucy (Lucille Ball) and Ricky (Desi Arnaz) happily at home or Barney Miller (Hal Linden) and his detectives

hauling in criminals. Something occurs, usually at the hands of the main character, that disrupts that normalcy. Either misunderstandings or miscommunications (or downright lying) occur that generally manages to exacerbate the misunderstandings. Eventually, typically through the ministrations of another “savior” type character, the main perpetrator is forgiven, the shenanigans are put to rights, and everything returns to normal (Jones, 1993; Marc, 1997; Mintz, 1985). The traditional sitcom does not deviate from this narrative structure. Mintz (1985) refers to the “finite” nature of the episodes, in which “a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour. . .,” and that these episodes are “cyclical” because “the normalcy of the premise [undergoes] stress or threat of change and [becomes] restored” (p. 115). Episodes of traditional sitcoms generally follow the same guidelines, find concrete closure, and “return to normalcy” (Newcomb, 1974).

Sitcoms nearly always contain the same set of characters. Mintz (1985) suggests that the familiarity integral to sitcom characters derives from their history, originating in significant theatrical moments such as the *commedia dell’arte*. However, he also observes that what makes sitcom characters unique is the fact that audiences “get to know them well over a period of time often many years in length, and they rarely remain flat characters for very long” (p. 117). These characters are familiar because they are nearly always variations on a singular theme: that of the family. Mintz observes that sitcoms exhibit “an idealized version of a ‘typical’ American family” (p. 108), and Hartley (2008) furthers this idea by suggesting that there are two types of sitcom: family/domestic sitcoms and “sexual exploration” sitcoms (p. 79). However, he also suggests that sitcoms stretch the “typical American family” into a “not-quiteness” that

can define a large range of family types and family attributes – he specifically draws attention to “monster families, (*The Munsters* (CBS, 1964-6)), vampire families (*The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-6)), witch families (*Bewitched* (ABC 1964-72)), and alien families (*Third Rock from the Sun* (NBC, 1996-2001))” (p. 79). Feuer (2008) then takes the idea of the family one step further to suggest “in every case (even in a science-fiction setting such as *Red Dwarf* (BBC 1989-99)), the sitcom seems to require the presence of a quasi-familial structure in order to satisfy the needs of the viewer” (p. 83). She elaborates that even workplace or friend oriented sitcoms still have familial values, but are separated from the “typical American family” domestic sitcoms because:

The nuclear family is considered an ideologically conservative social unit that supports the status quo of ‘family values.’ Therefore, to base a sitcom on a nuclear family is to affirm rather than question the status quo. Following this point of view, sitcoms that undo the nuclear family are in a sense critical of it as a social institution; the alternate families that develop are social alternatives to the nuclear family status quo.

In other words, both *Friends* and *Father Knows Best* present images of families, but only one of these would be considered a “domestic sitcom” because it fits within the hegemonic realization of nuclear American family. Those shows that don’t, which run the gamut from *M\*A\*S\*H* to *Transparent* (2014-present), present an image of family that is so antithetical from that idealize image, that they appear to be questioning the very notion of a nuclear family. Thus, they are situated as “workplace” sitcoms or without any sort of designator. Nevertheless, there is a fundamentally familial aspect to all sitcoms and sitcom characterizations.

Regarding ideological discourses, sitcoms exist within the liminal space between upholding hegemony, albeit through adapting to ideological shifts, and bending against hegemonic pressures. Scholars are fairly split about whether sitcoms are dominantly defiant or compliant. Feuer (2008) believes that sitcoms are “ideologically flexible” and that “the sitcom has been the perfect format for illustrating current ideological conflicts” throughout its life (p. 83). Similarly, Mintz (1985) suggests, “the boundaries of sitcom’s premises are as flexible as its structure is rigid” (p. 108) and that “very premise has its meaning, every characterization, every episode's theme, even every joke and comic "bit of business" has its messages. Sometimes the communication is overt or manifest” (p. 119). On the other hand, Marc (1997) pushes against any ideological flexibility and instead says:

The sitcom, despite several attempts to push it in deviant directions, insists on a portrayal of reality that can best be defended with statistics. It is worth noting that in the early seventies, with the successes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and the Norman Lear programs, the sitcom went through a significant expansion of subject matter. But the character of that expansion tends to highlight the genre's unflappably centrist political psychology (p. 20).

Marc is arguing against shows as taking a more political perspective on discourses, even as they were opening their ideological boundaries. This apolitical perspective on television is born out of the “Least Objectionable Programming” (LOP) movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The LOP standpoint was: “since there were so many people in the audience, and since sheer volume of exposure was what advertisers paid for, it didn’t make sense to alienate anybody” (Ozersky, 2003, p. 4). According to Ozersky, much of



the reason that there was a rise in countercultural programming in the later 1960s and 1970s was less of an ideological imperative to fight against hegemony, but more of a move to draw in a new, different audience.

Generally, sitcoms have ideological flexibility, but that is, of course, dependent upon the era in which the show was produced and the advertisers who are paying for the show. If the era calls for loud, subversive voices, as the 1970s did, then advertisers are much more willing to tolerate resistant programs. However, most eras are not so politically charged and sitcoms only traverse “acceptable” ideologies. Instead, three different treatments of integration emerge. First, there are the “traditional” sitcoms, in which the characters seem blissfully unaware of any ideological problems in the world. From time to time, these shows focus on larger societal discourses, or those discourses abut against the stories, but they generally shy away from those big picture stories. The second level integrate these ideologies into their plots in the natural ways that the characters would encounter these issues in their everyday lives. In this way, the shows are implicitly resisting societal problems. Finally, there are self-aware sitcoms that endeavor to lay these ideologies bare and confront the inherent problems in society. These sitcoms use discourses to tell their stories, but endeavor to advocate for total resistance. To fully understand the ways that discourses permeate sitcoms, we must keep these different treatments in mind. While the variations in these treatments are in some ways linear and based in historical progression, this is not always the case. In these rare instances, the rhizome is influencing the discursive dialogue. Furthermore, sitcoms very rarely fit within one single treatment throughout their run; rather, they are likely to occasionally delve into a more self-aware or implicitly resistive approach. These varying degrees of

handling ideologies also speaks to the ways that such discourses treat the hierarchies within those ideologies. The rhizome enables television programs to engage with ideologies to different extents, that includes the power dynamics within those ideologies. Power cannot be ignored or flattened within the rhizome; the way that power is engaged with changes dependent upon the situation, the cultural moment, and the kind of sitcom. The rhizome enables that hierarchy to be studied.

Different treatments of discourses are essentially distinguished via the relationship between discourses and the stories of the show. On traditional shows, discourses are tangential to the plots. The characters might encounter them, but with no frequency or deliberation. Implicitly resistive sitcoms recognize that the lives of the characters are consistently intertwined with societal discourses. Therefore, these characters confront and disrupt hegemony with considerable purpose, but without regularity. Finally, those discourses serve as the primary impetus for self-aware sitcoms. These shows build both their overarching and their episodic plots around drawing attention to hegemony and combating problematic ideologies.

Exemplary sitcoms should have particular traits. They have a very clear structure, which unsettles, muddles, then reverts to the status quo. They are all centered around some kind of family group – even if that “family” is quite far outside the traditional American nuclear family. Over the course of this analysis, it will become clear that very few sitcoms actually fit into this definition. Nevertheless, there is an additional distinction regarding sitcoms that needs to be explored: that of intentionality. Intentionality is not something that I can actually, definitively prove in many of these cases. However, I can infer certain ideas about the overall purpose of the series because of the ways it

approaches its stories. The distinction of intentionality lies at the root of the ideological complication previously dissected. The reason that some scholars see sitcoms as being naturally apolitical is because a great many are, they maintain a kind of "traditional" perspective, focusing on comedy and not on politics. But there are an increasingly large number of sitcoms that refuse to conform to ideological pressure and insist upon telling alternative stories in unique ways. These sitcoms may not always succeed in their goals, but their goals are clear from the pilot: to embark on something entirely different.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish these sitcoms - which run the historical gamut from *All in the Family* to *Veep* - from those traditional ones – from *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) to *New Girl* (2011-present). Throughout this analysis, two flexible strategies will be referred to "traditional" and "ambitious" sitcoms. These are static distinctions, which can change and dissolve under a variety of circumstances. Those circumstances are much of what makes up the rhizome, so will be an integral part of this analysis.

### **Axiom Two: Shows and Characteristics form the structure as Nodes and Internodes**

Now that we have established what the scholarly imagining of a sitcom looks like, we can break down the constitutive elements of the sitcom to understand both the ways in which the sitcom is entwined in the rhizome, and where those rhizomatic influences arise. The rest of this analysis will be devoted to the connections between nodes through internodes. Deleuze and Guattari say, “A rhizome has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle” (p. 25). That being said, reading something without any beginning or end is nearly impossible. Therefore, to ameliorate the discordance that rhizomatic thought processes are built upon, I have organized the nodes and internodes into three major categories: narrative structure, aesthetics, and characterization. I will delve into these

each in turn, and by doing so will demonstrate the ways that sitcoms are rhizomatic. Additionally, because a major element of the generic rhizome is that culture influences all aspects of the nodes, I will integrate discussions of how these shows negotiate ideologies within the discussions of the characteristics.

Throughout this analysis, I will set up dichotomies; sitcoms are either traditional or ambitious, either single camera or multi-camera, either about a singular person or about an ensemble, etc. These binaries do not conform to the multiplicity of a rhizome. Therefore, these binaries should be taken as prominent options. Consider the internodes as roads that producers traverse. Occasionally, they come to a fork in the road. That fork, like a real piece of cutlery, has more than two options. Most sitcoms will choose one of two options, so this analysis will be investigating those options. That does not exclude other options. Instead, it focuses on the most salient for each level of this analysis.

### **Narrative Structure**

All of the television shows in this analysis have two things in common. Those two things were the guiding force behind the selection of the shows in this study. These two things are also exclusively narrative based. That is, the two unifying forces behind sitcoms both shape the structure of the stories. These shows are all thirty minutes long. These shows are also intended to be funny. These are not the only striking structural features of the sitcoms. However, nearly every other piece of these shows is shaped by its length and its humor.

**Humor.** Before sitcoms engage with ideologies or aesthetics, they are, above everything else, comedies. Therefore, the first thing we should discuss is the ways that sitcoms leverage humor. Early sitcoms can easily be divided into two categories:

slapstick and domestic, although the line between these distinctions becomes more nebulous as time goes on. Slapstick comedies, of which *I Love Lucy* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* are the early examples, derive their comedy from physical stunts. The characters narrowly avoid disaster through carefully choreographed sequences. Even the opening credits of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* demonstrate this: Rob (Dick Van Dyke) enters the house where Laura (Mary Tyler Moore) and Ritchie (Larry Matthews), as well as Buddy (Morey Amsterdam) and Sally (Rose Marie), are there to greet him. He moves towards Buddy and Sally. In the early seasons, almost every time he made this move, he tripped over an ottoman. However, every so often, he would manage to step around and not fall over. In the later seasons, he steps around the ottoman more frequently than he falls over it. Nevertheless, the sequence still presents as funny because of the suggestion (and memory) of that pratfall. This level of humor is consistent throughout *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, as well as *I Love Lucy*. Very few sitcoms after these early shows were purely slapstick. Rather, they combined pratfalls with domestic troubles. The other primary form of sitcom in the early days of television is the domestic. These types of shows, like *Father Knows Best*, *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), and *Bewitched* (1964-1972), focused on miscommunications and misunderstandings rather than hijinks. On *The Andy Griffith Show*, nearly every plot centers on Opie (Ron Howard), Barney (Don Knotts), Aunt Bee (Frances Bavier), or one of the other towns people getting into some kind of trouble, and not telling Andy (Andy Griffith) about it. Andy then figures out there is some kind of trouble and sets about putting it right, while probably also trying to teach the perpetrator a lesson in communication (which they cannot actually ever remember, or the show would no longer have its primary impetus).

Both these types of sitcoms rely on elements of the other to exist, primarily because all early sitcoms are set in the home, so they must contain some elements of domestic life. However, there was a move towards more slapstick style humor, so even *Father Knows Best*, with its uptight parents and constant preaching, moved towards pratfalls and hijinks in its later seasons. Shows such as *All in the Family*, *Family Ties* (1982-1989), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Roseanne* (1988-1997), *Frasier* (1993-2004), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) are primarily influenced by domestic sitcoms, but with minor influences from slapstick. As sitcoms moved away from the house, and comedy moved beyond simply slapstick, the comedy had to be derived from other sources.

*Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977) presented a new kind of sitcom that is entirely removed from any domesticity and, instead, created humorous situations in the workplace. Early episodes of this show still attempted to use the domestic tropes, by having Mary (Mary Tyler Moore) and Rhoda (Valerie Harper) feverishly searching for love. None of these stories lasted for more than a single episode and after Rhoda left the show, they declined in frequency. Instead, the focus became on the newsroom and the dynamics between Mary, Lou (Edward Asner), Murray (Gavin MacLeod), Ted (Ted Knight), and Sue Ann (Betty White). The farther along the show progressed, the less the focus became on Mary and more on the rest of the group. Thus, the ensemble comedy rose in prominence. There are several ways that *Mary Tyler Moore* created its humor, but much of it was born of putting the characters in different situations or different configurations and simply having them go about their lives. The characters themselves are played very extravagantly and with certain flaws that are, inherently, hilarious. For

instance, in one episode, Murray is overlooked again for his role in the newsroom, so he leaps on a chance to be executive producer for Sue Ann's "Happy Homemaker" show. When it turns out that Sue Ann rules her roost with an iron fist (a very sweet iron fist), Murray is miserable. The juxtaposition of Sue Ann's sickly sweet demeanor, her insistence upon getting her way, and Murray's march towards his breaking point creates many laughs. Some of these are visual – Sue Ann forces Murray into wearing a dress that she needs to tailor for the series – but most are situational and based in characterization and word play. Lou comes in as Murray is standing in the dress and Sue Ann scurries off to find more pins. To justify wearing the dress, Murray says, "She didn't have a dummy big enough [to wear the dress]." He pauses, Lou looks at him, and the audience laughs, "Maybe she did," he continues, resigned. Later sitcoms such as *Taxi* (1978-1983), *Cheers* (1982-1993), *Friends*, *The Office* (2005-2013), and *Modern Family* (2009-present) take their cues from *Mary Tyler Moore's* ensemble standards, working to generate humor through unusual pairings of characters and miscommunications.

In the late 80s, with the premier of *Seinfeld*, another style of humor opened doors to an entirely different form of comedy: absurdist satire. *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development* (2003-present), *30 Rock* (2006-2013), etc. endeavored to make comment on society in one way or another, but do so in such an over-the-top way that it becomes absurd. This form of comedy is common among the ambitious sitcoms, particularly those in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that seek to do more than simply entertain. Each show takes on something different: *Seinfeld* tried to comment on everyday life and friendship; *Arrested Development* took on the very wealthy and the government; *30 Rock* attacked television norms and the conservative-liberal divide. These shows do much more than this, but

these aspects of satire are their primary sources of humor. *I Love Lucy* situated its characters as ordinary people with ordinary hijinks; *All in the Family* created characters that everybody could relate to and, therefore, laugh at/with. Absurdist satires endeavor to make their audiences laugh at society at large, not simply themselves.

The various kinds of comedy and the different approaches that sitcoms take to everyday situations, and the humor within those situations, work within the rhizome to influence the perceptions audiences have of “reality” as well as humor. The rise of ambitious, absurdist sitcoms in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century suggests a move in the goal of comedy and the ways that comedy can influence people. Rather than simply accepting and continuing a status quo, these comedies are focused on disrupting norms, whether on television or in society. The ways that sitcoms have moved towards satire and cultural commentary and away from slapstick and domestic comedies demonstrates the rhizomatic influence of culture.

**Awareness.** Sitcoms are one of the most enduring genres of television – that is the primary reason I selected them for this study. Because of this, the standards of the sitcom are well known, as established in the introduction to this chapter. As I watched sitcoms throughout history, I was able to observe certain elements of the programs becoming tropes. Typically, these tropes become well-worn once they are either turned on their head or are acknowledged by the show itself. Early sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best* set up these basics. Much of the comedy of *I Love Lucy* is not terribly different than today – perhaps this is why it has endured so steadily. The reliance on physical comedy and miscommunication/understanding remains a trope of all comedy, especially slapstick films. Here I want to focus on how shows that followed *I Love Lucy*



have made use of the same kinds of comedy. Similarly, *Father Knows Best* set the standards for domestic comedy. While this form of humor does not hold up quite as well as *I Love Lucy*, it still establishes a baseline from which all domestic sitcoms derive.

Though not all of the shows that I watched acknowledged the tropes of the genre, they all utilized them in one way or another. Many of the shows, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, took this use one step further and, in some way or another, tipped their hat to the long history of comedy that came before them, then used that history to attempt something entirely new. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* is able to directly discuss comedic tropes because of Rob's job as head writer for the Alan Brady Show (a sketch comedy show in the style of *Your Show of Shows*). He and fellow writers Buddy and Sally spend their time talking about what is funny. Usually, if they dismiss something as "old hat," it will later occur within the episode as riotously hysterical (at least the studio audience seems to think so). For instance, in the second season, Rob says that toothache gags are not funny, but then gets one (literally moments later) and falls into extreme slapstick to express his pain. This particular usage of the toothache gag is funny, despite what Rob says. Similarly, the first season of *Bewitched* features opening voice-over commentary on the role of the housewife – all of which Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery) quickly violates. These are comments that are inherently funny because a) it is a sitcom and b) we know Samantha, there is no way she is going to be a "typical housewife."

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004) similarly finds the characters discussing the plot of the series and commenting upon the actions. This is primarily done through analysis of Carrie's (Sarah Jessica Parker) relationships with Big (Chris Noth) and Aiden (John Corbett) and the other women trying to determine who she will "end up with," the

inevitable conclusion of the series. Though this type of conversation does not comment upon comedy, it does comment on the tropes of the genre – that the characters’ lives are usually neatly tied up by the end. In this case, the commentary is less on sitcom tropes and more on the other genre that *Sex and the City* is clearly drawing upon – the romantic comedy. The women of *Sex and the City* frequently acknowledge the tropes of the romantic comedy and either turn them on their heads, as with Samantha’s (Kim Cattrall) unwillingness to “settle down,” or simply by discussing what is occurring and giving in. In this way, shows become self-aware, but instead of attempting something entirely new, they utilize the standards of the series to do something important. Most of the other ambitious sitcoms that come after *Sex and the City* are similarly self-aware.

Other ways that ambitious and traditional programs use the tropes of genres to tell their stories can be found in *Will & Grace*, where Grace (Debra Messing) and Leo (Harry Connick, Jr.) are married in a sweeps-stunt for *The Today Show* (in the diegesis of the show), which also occurs during sweeps in an episode which also just so happens to be the 100<sup>th</sup> episode of the series. They mock the stunt briefly before giving into it, just as the series producers decided to utilize a trope for comedic purposes. On *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), there are multiple episodes where Sheldon (Jim Parsons) and Amy (Mayim Bialik) discuss the antics of the other characters with a level of distance, particularly by analyzing the “theory” behind their actions, but then that theory is clearly put into action, either on purpose as an “experiment” or simply in the way that the plot unfolds. Again, because the audience understands these tropes, the conversations that Sheldon and Amy have intentionally acknowledge the tropes to create humor.

Another level of acknowledgement exists simply by listening to when the studio audience (or laugh track) begins to laugh. On *Cheers*, for instance, they frequently begin laughing before the payoff of the joke/set up, because they know how it's going to turn out (and they are almost always right). One episode of *M\*A\*S\*H* banks on the audience's knowledge to create a joke, in which Charles (David Ogden Stiers) spends an entire year (compressed into a single episode) planning to bet on the Dodgers to win the World Series. Unfortunately, this is the year when the Dodgers famously, unexpectedly, lose the National League to the Giants in the "Shot heard round the world" tiebreaker, so the audience is fully aware of how this situation will end. The more Charles pushes for the Dodgers, the more hysterical the audience gets.

*Everybody Loves Raymond* uses this anticipation for great effect. For example, during the flashback where Debra (Patricia Heaton) gives birth to Ally (Madylin Sweeten), the panicking birth trope (where the mother is forced to give birth in an unusual location) begins. They set up that she is in labor, in the back of Robert's (Brad Garrett) police cruiser, which is stuck in traffic. She screams that the baby is coming now and Robert, trained in basic emergency services, rushes into the back to deliver the baby. After much screaming and panicking, he reveals that the baby is not, in fact, coming, and Debra was just having a very severe contraction. The audience is hysterical throughout this sequence, but the true payoff comes from the violation of the trope and the reveal that everything they expected is wrong. Allie is safely born in a hospital.

The final way that shows acknowledge the genre is by pulling back one way or another and confronting the reality of the genre in some way. This is usually accomplished by having one character write the show into their reality. These moments

are not normal across all television, but happen with unusual frequency on sitcoms. One of the oldest examples of this is *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (“I Should Write a Book About This,” n.d.). Rob writes a book based on his life in the final episode of the series, and Alan Brady decides to produce the series with himself as the star. In fact, because of this plot twist, the series comes full circle. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* was originally piloted as “Head of the Family,” a vehicle for Carl Reiner, which told a fictionalized account of his time as a writer on *Your Show of Shows*. CBS and Reiner decided to recast Van Dyke into the title role, and Reiner switched to the Sid Caesar-esk role of Alan Brady (Cullum, n.d.). Brady embodies many aspects of Reiner’s real experiences, albeit to a slightly different conclusion.

Other series do similar methods of writing the show into their own “reality.” The final episode of *Roseanne* reveals that she (Roseanne Barr) wrote a book based on her life, but changed major elements of it – including who her daughters married and that Dan (John Goodman) did not survive his heart attack at the end of the previous season. On *Seinfeld*, Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld) and George (Jason Alexander) decide to write a pilot about their lives (in much the same way that Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David wrote *Seinfeld* based on themselves), and spend much of season 4 discussing the pilot, thereby discussing the series itself and what is funny and what isn’t. There are a many conversations, amongst the group and with studio executives, about whether or not a “show about nothing” could be funny and successful. The decision on the show, which has been wildly successful for four seasons, is that it would not work and the show-within-the-show never goes beyond the pilot (until the final moments of the series, which serves as the catalyst for the foursome being put on trial). Finally, on *30 Rock*, Liz (Tina

Fey) pitches a series to director of programming Kenneth (Jack McBrayer) that is essentially *30 Rock*. He turns her down because all its featured elements are on his “television no-no list.” The series is later pitched to him (because he’s apparently immortal) by Liz’s great-granddaughter and then he seems to be more receptive.

These kinds of acknowledgement, this pulling back to blatantly point that the show is simply a television series, can also occur in smaller ways. For instance, season 6 of *Frasier* begins with him (Kelsey Grammer) talking about starting a new job. He says, “I’d like to say how honored I am to be taking over this slot. Obviously, I have some rather big shoes to fill – my predecessor here was much beloved. But I have never been one to shrink from a challenge and I’m sure we’ll enjoy many happy years here together in my new home.” That year, NBC moved *Frasier* to a new time slot, replacing *Seinfeld* after nine years. Thus, *Frasier*’s opening speech acknowledges this move.

*30 Rock* does similarly meta things frequently. At the end of one season, Liz turns to Jack (Alec Baldwin) and says, “its been a great year,” to which Jack responds, “Its May, Lemon.” A season opener finds Jack welcoming everyone to season four, which turns out to be the name of the restaurant they are eating in. But probably the most meta moment, aside from Liz’s *30 Rock* pitch to Kenneth, is in the 6<sup>th</sup> season when Tracy (Tracy Morgan), suffering from lack of sleep, shouts, “We’re on a show within a show. My real name is Tracy Morgan!” They are indeed.

Meta-awareness is prominent on sitcoms because of their humorous nature. However, the comedic nature of sitcoms does not negate their influence upon other types of shows through their use of meta-awareness. For starters, by altering tropes, any future sitcom (or comedy of any kind) will have a different set of tropes to acknowledge and

alter. Additionally, quite a few different shows use meta-awareness for both comedic purposes and to tell their stories. For example, *Supernatural* (2005-present), a fantasy series that uses humor frequently, finds most of its comedy through meta-awareness. Most famously, *Supernatural* features an episode, “The French Mistake,” where the main characters – Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) – fall into an alternate universe where they are actors named Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles who star in a TV show called *Supernatural*. Shows also frequently use anticipated reactions – for instance, on *House* (2004-2012), Dr. House (Hugh Laurie) nearly always discounts lupus as the disease causing the unaccountable trouble. In the final season, one of the cases is traced back to lupus, despite House’s claim that “its never lupus.”

Finally, the characters creating their own series is also something that is frequently seen in other types of television. Recently, this occurred in *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016), where Rory (Alexis Bledel) writes the story of the Gilmore girls. Additionally, on *NCIS* (2003-present), Agent McGee (Sean Murray) writes a book based on the lives of the main characters. These are by no means the only ways that shows, especially sitcoms, are aware of their generic traits. However, these are some of the ones that we can see spreading into other series. More serious or dramatic series might use these tropes as moments of levity. Or they may see how successful twisting tropes can be and use them to tell their own stories.

**Story Multiplicity.** Most television programs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have an ensemble cast, telling the stories of multiple characters at the same time. However, before the 1990s, sitcoms usually featured one or two people as the main characters and the stories always centered on them. Take, for instance, *All in the Family*. Every story

typically centers on Archie (Carroll O'Connor). The other characters – Edith (Jean Stapleton), Mike (Rob Reiner), and Gloria (Sally Struthers) - appear within the story, but usually tangentially to the primary character's story. At times, one of the other characters will take on the primary role; there are episodes devoted to each other family member. Compare this to, say, *Frasier*, where Frasier is the primary character, but in a single episode, Frasier, Martin (John Mahoney), and Niles (David Hyde Pierce) will all have their own stories. These stories are told in parallel, frequently with parallel themes. Other shows are much more likely to have parallel stories. Consequently, storytelling is one way that sitcoms have been rhizomatically influenced by other series. The most famous kind of television program to tell multiple stories simultaneously is soap operas. Soap operas were traditionally reviled because of their numerous, convoluted stories; only people who stayed home all day long, those perceived as without jobs and meaningful purpose, would be able to keep up with the numerous stories unfolding. Multiple stories progressed slowly into other forms of television.

Telling such parallel stories was frequently featured in *Barney Miller* (1974-1982). Although Barney was the main character, his role was primarily as mediator between the stories of the other detectives. The other detectives would come and go from the precinct solving crimes and arresting offenders, usually multiple crimes/arrests in a single episode. These different stories would then all come together at the end, typically with Barney solving some conundrum that unites all the other cases. This style of storytelling is told much more frequently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In one episode of *Modern Family*, the children are asked (off screen by the “producers”) about lessons they have learned from their parents. The stories of Manny (Rico Rodriguez), Luke (Nolan Gould),

Alex (Ariel Winter), and Haley (Sarah Hyland) are then each told, with those lessons being conveyed in the end. Again, the stories parallel, but come back around to a central theme in the end.

Between *Barney Miller* and today, there was a slow progression in instituting multiple story lines across sitcoms. *Cheers* featured very few stories in its early episodes, instead focusing primarily on Sam (Ted Danson) and Diane's (Shelley Long) romance. But, as the show progressed and Diane eventually left, the show moved more toward an ensemble and told the stories of all the regular bar patrons equally. Usually, however, there continued to be one primary story, with others unfolding in the background, typically as something for the other characters to discuss when the primary person is not in the room. *Family Ties* similarly presented an entire story in the background with other characters while Alex (Michael J. Fox) struggled with the travails of his everyday life.

Conversely, *The Cosby Show* would frequently tell two stories: one with the children and one with Claire (Phylicia Rashad) and/or Cliff (Bill Cosby). These stories would be told simultaneously and only sometimes would come together. From time to time, one story would remain wholly unresolved, because the other eventually took prominence. *The Golden Girls* also has at least two different stories going at once, with combinations of the women. These stories do not always come together in the end, but, with *The Cosby Show* and *The Golden Girls*, the stories can work as fodder for one character to advise another, in whose story they are not involved.

Storytelling has progressed a lot since the early days of television, but it has done so in stages, primarily originating in soap operas, and rhizomatically spreading into primetime series slowly. These stages have all influenced today's television, especially



beyond sitcoms. There is a movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century towards larger and larger ensembles. Shows like *Glee* (2009-2015) continued to add characters, and those characters' stories, throughout their runs. Shonda Rhimes' shows, *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), *Scandal* (2012-present), and *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-present), all feature large casts, every member of which has a character with a complex storyline. For a time, these types of series were called "primetime soap operas" and included shows such as *Dallas* (1978-1991) and *Melrose Place* (1992-1999). The term "primetime soap opera" typically means a very specific kind of show, but any plot with parallel stories could be categorized thusly.

In fact, arguably, the only form of television today that does not necessarily tell multiple stories at once are procedurals. *Criminal Minds* (2005-present) tells only the case of the Unsub-of-the-week. However, they divide up the team to investigate different elements of the week's crime so it seems like there are many things happening at once, even though only one overall story is unfolding. Additionally, the longer a procedural persists, the more likely they are to delve into the stories of the main characters, which occurs during cases. *CSI* (2000-2015) moved from telling individual stories across the series to having murderers target the characters and their families over the course of several episode or even entire seasons.

A different version of telling multiple stories occurred in the fourth season of *Arrested Development*. Unlike the previous three seasons, the fourth season unfolded in a *Rashoman*-style, with each story being told in turn from the perspective of a different character. This way, the audience cannot fully comprehend the entire story until they have seen every episode, as one episode will only tell, for example, *GOB's* (Will Arnett)

story of the span of time, then the next episode tells Lindsey's (Portia de Rossi) story that occurred in the same period. While many sitcoms use the *Rashoman* trope for a single episode, *Arrested Development* is the only show to attempt it for the entire length of a season. This complicated storytelling occurred because of the complicated shooting schedules of the cast (M. Stern, 2013). Additionally, it was one of the first Netflix original series and thus, it was intended to be binge-watched. Because of these aspects, the producers decided to attempt a new storytelling style. Other shows have yet to use this style, but that does not mean that they won't in the future.

**Narrative Memory.** There is a stereotype about sitcoms that involve how much "memory" the show has. People tend to think that sitcoms have absolutely no memory and reset the characters from one episode to the next (Newcomb, 1974; Sconce, 2004). This is true to an extent on early programs, nevertheless, to maintain linearity, some parts of the history and plot must be remembered. For instance, on *I Love Lucy*, while the characters do not remember much from one episode to the next, there are times that they do. In seasons 4, 5, and 6, they go on trips, to Los Angeles, Cuba, and Europe, and for these trips, the audience must remember the events in the previous episodes to make sense of the following ones. Even on *Father Knows Best*, where the characters never leave their small town except for occasional, single-episode trips out of town, the characters still grow older. Older children Betty (Elinor Donahue) and Bud (Billy Gray) graduate from high school and go to college. They still live at home, but this slight change in their characterization is referenced frequently. The show went off the air once they grew out of the house and the premise could no longer accommodate their ages.

In today's television world, a common assumption is that every program's writers room has a series "bible" which "discuss[es] the characters, especially their back stories, and the world of the show" (Espenson, 2008, para. 4). These bibles allow the series to stay on track with the history they have created within the individual episodes. Espenson (2008) observes that "Not all shows have bibles, and when they do, they can look very different. There is no standard format. In fact, there is no standard function" (para. 2). Across the internet, there seems to be some controversy as to how many shows actually have show bibles, and how much these bibles are actually utilized. Nevertheless, the mere rumor of the necessity of such a document is born of a television environment that insists upon characters having depth that must be maintained over the course of the series.

The accusation of amnesia on sitcoms mostly stems from the lack of retention or change from one episode to the next. In most sitcoms, the characters never seem to grow and change. Rather, they get muddled in the exact same situations over and over again and never seem to learn their lessons. Though this discussion is mostly one of characterization, and to be dealt with in depth in a later section, much of it has to do with the ways the series is structured on an episodic versus on a season long basis. On traditional sitcoms, the characters cannot grow because the status quo must always remain the same – the characters have to get into the same basic entanglements in every episode, as that is the premise of the show. Shows with more ambition present characters that grow, because without that growth the characters and, thus, the program become purposeless. There are incremental differences between the ways that this manifests. On *Mary Tyler Moore*, the characters only grow minimally – and even then, it is more likely to be growth in auxiliary characters and not actually growth in Mary herself. Mary gets

better at her job, but has little more growth than that – she starts the series fully formed. Ted and Lou grew the most; Rhoda and Phyllis (Cloris Leachman) grew so much that they grew out of the series and had to be spun off into their own programs.

At the other end of the spectrum, *Cheers* is the first show that shows notable growth in the characters over the course of the series. While Sam is established as an alcoholic immediately, he has ups and downs in his progress throughout the series, and eventually confronts more complex emotional problems (including sex addiction). Diane learns the importance of Cheers and having the patrons of Cheers in her world. The multitude of characters in the *Cheers* ensemble all eventually grow. *Cheers* started out as a series about two people falling in love and became a show about this interesting group of complex people. Nearly every show after *Cheers* is some kind of ensemble that endeavored to fully flesh out multiple characters and watch them grow. This progress started with *Mary Tyler Moore*, but it was *Cheers* that really signaled how successful this formula could be. Any ensemble series – from *Sex in the City* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to *Girls* (2012-2017) to *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) – echo the success of *Cheers*. Even shows that appear to have very little growth, like *The Big Bang Theory*, do actually have their characters change over the course of the series. For these kinds of shows, the growth is only noticeable through continuous watching of the series; infrequent viewing would not reveal any dramatic changes in the characters. As a result of this growth, the characters are able to go through and overcome an assortment of imbroglios without those situations ever becoming stale.

Another form of narrative memory that is important is that it is imperative to see most of the series to understand much of what is going on. One can dip into *Cheers* for a

single episode and not be totally lost, but there are some elements that require regular viewing. This is the case for most sitcoms, no matter the era. In fact, the first sitcom that required consistent viewing is *Arrested Development*. Without viewing every single episode, the audience would be totally lost – perhaps the reason for its failure on network television. Throughout the history of television, very few sitcoms actually require constant viewing to keep up with the characters. Only those shows that Mittell (2015) would label as “complex television” maintain such an intricate series of plotlines that every episode must be viewed to follow the logic of the characters.

Narrative memory is a fascinating development in television, because today, producers seem to expect viewers to either binge-watch a series, or to tune in every week and keep up with every storyline. Though we could attribute this to the “ambition” of the series, even highly traditional series, such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *NCIS*, still expect their programs to have a deep and complex narrative history – albeit in such a way that the history is not vital to the majority of the episodes.

**Character Backgrounds.** Another way to demonstrate narrative depth is to create complex backstories for the characters. On *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Bewitched*, and *The Andy Griffith Show*, we only know what unfolds regarding the characters over the course of their everyday, diegetic lives – and that is very little. Perhaps we know where they come from or how they met, but only secondhand as part of a story told to another character. On many other shows, those backgrounds are plumbed through flashbacks as deep sources of stories. Flashbacks have a long history in Hollywood. Although there is generally some disagreement regarding what the first flashback was, one of the first major directors to utilize the flashback was D.W. Griffith

(Turim, 1989). Flashbacks in film and television frequently serve to tell a character's story through "a series of images, substituting dynamic visual expression for cumbersome verbal titles, and will provide emotional symbolic representation of a character's motivations or traits as determined by formative past experience" (Turim, 1989, p. 22). *The Dick Van Dyke Show* spends considerable time flashing back to the developing relationship between Rob and Laura – we are shown how they met, how Rob proposed, their wedding, and when Ritchie was born. Similarly, *All in the Family* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* regularly flashback to tell the stories of how, respectively, Gloria and Mike and Ray (Ray Romano) and Debra met and got married.

Contrast this with *M\*A\*S\*H*, where we know a great deal about Hawkeye's (Alan Alda) childhood and family life, but only through him recounting those events to his friends and colleagues. Being told a history is different than being shown a history. Experiencing the history makes the story become shared. Thus, audience members feel they have lived Rob and Laura's relationship alongside them. The difference is a fine nuance, but can be an important one. Other shows use flashbacks as well, but without the regularity or depth of those already discussed. For instance, *Friends* regularly looks back on the history of the friends to see how they met, as well as the infamous "what if" episode, which posits an alternate history for them. *30 Rock* also frequently uses flashbacks to make points or explore the characters from an alternative angle, but does so with such regularity that they are not thought to be special or unique, simply an essential aspect of the show's episodic narrative.

The internodes of flashbacks, in all these different styles, reach into many kinds of genres. *Arrow* (2012-present) parallels the events in Oliver Queen's (Stephen Amell)

present to his past stuck on a deserted island, learning the skills that aid him in becoming the Green Arrow. Thus, as with *30 Rock*, the events of his past are an integral aspect of the show's narrative. We can easily compare this to the *Smallville* (2001-2011) retelling of their Oliver Queen's (Justin Hartley) growth into the Green Arrow, which occurs altogether in one episode's worth of flashbacks. In this case, the flashbacks are more similar to those in *Frasier* – they take a single episode to explain how and why Frasier moved back to Seattle. A show that uses flashbacks in a style similar to *The Dick Van Dyke Show* is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which the histories of Angel (David Boreanaz) and Spike (James Marsters), and their compatriots, are dolled out over the course of the show – requiring viewers to remember the events of the previous flashback in order to make sense of the current one.

**Beginnings.** There is something enduring and significant about the episodes that bookend a series. A pilot must set up the entirety of the premise, while the finale is expected to tie everything up in a neat little bow (but not so neatly that the fans don't have something to continue to talk about). This has not always been the case. On early sitcoms, the shows started and ended with very little fanfare. On *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, the programs barely interrupt the daily lives of the characters, and they certainly never let on that any difference is coming as they near their inevitable closures. In the twenty-first century, change nearly always occurs to trigger the opening of the series – Penny (Kaley Cuoco) moves in next door, Jack becomes head of NBC programming and casts Tracy on TGS, Maura (Jeffrey Tambor) decides to reveal her true self to her family – but this was very seldom the case before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sure, some of the sitcoms throughout history do this. On *The Andy Griffith Show*, Aunt Bee moves to

Mayberry. Samantha and Darrin (Dick York) get married in the first episode of *Bewitched*. Mary moves to Minneapolis and gets a job at the television station in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. On *Cheers* and *Friends*, a vital new person comes into the lives of the set group and disrupts everything – Diane and Rachel (Jennifer Aniston). But for every change that occurs to spark a television series, another series doesn't signify any change for the beginning of the series. On *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Dick van Dyke Show*, *All in the Family*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Barney Miller*, *Family Ties*, *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, there is no significant moment that suggests why a television series about these characters would be made. The audience simply begin watching them as though these characters have always existed this way.

Historically there was no push towards any particular form of pilot; however, the twenty-first century's endless amount of television, as well as the success of recent shows with these triggering events, has caused almost all television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to have some kind of (small) triggering event. Most genres call for triggering events – science fiction, fantasy, action, etc. all have some kind of major event in the same way a film would, simply because of the nature of those shows. Other genres, such as family dramas and procedurals, have a much more organic feel and would not necessarily have any kind of triggering event. Nevertheless, *Parenthood* (2010-2015), an example of this form of organic, ensemble, family drama, features a triggering event – oldest daughter Sarah (Lauren Graham) and her two children move in with her parents. Triggering events seem like a trivial aspect of a show's narrative, but because they are the initial impression that an audience receives of a series, they are incredibly important in understanding the overall tone of the series, as well as what internodes are influencing that series. The



nebulous beginnings of traditional sitcoms speak to a desire to entertain, rather than anything more. Additionally, concreteness suggests a focus on one very clear message, an influence from film and novels, instead of radio or serialized magazines that early television was influenced by.

**Endings.** Endings, however, are much more clearly defined. Only in a small handful of sitcoms does the show provide no closure on the stories we have devoted years of our lives to; *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Bewitched*, *Taxi*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond* find the characters continuing with their lives again, we, the audience, are simply drifting out once more. The majority of sitcoms provide some form of closure. Even *The Andy Griffith Show* handed off the reins to a spinoff, *Mayberry RFD* (1968-1971), in the final days of the series, thereby presenting a clear ending point. Some are much more dramatic: *Roseanne* reveals that the entire last season had been invented by Roseanne to deal with the death of Dan at the end of the previous season, but that by doing so she had become a successful writer, telling the story of her family. Ambitious sitcoms, even those that only vaguely demonstrate ambition, manage to tie up every single storyline. *Will & Grace* did so rather dramatically with multiple time jumps in the finale to establish how the primary foursome finished out their days. Similarly, *30 Rock* flashed-forward to see Liz's great-granddaughter pitching the plot of *30 Rock* to current director of programming (the seemingly immortal) Kenneth. Other shows manage to wrap up their plots less dramatically, while still allowing their audience some lingering questions. *Friends* finds the sextet moving Monica (Courtney Cox) and Chandler (Matthew Perry) out of their apartment, leaving it for the last time – but to just head down to Central Perk for another cup of coffee. *Frasier* shows the eponymous character on a

flight headed to start his life anew in Chicago with the love of his life (Laura Linney).

Not everything is wrapped up succinctly, but we still are presented closure with the plots that we have been following.

Nearly all television follows one of these latter two choices – finding some way of wrapping up plot lines, but possibly leaving things open to go forward. The only form of television that might persist with open endings are television procedurals – shows such as *Law and Order* (1990-2010), *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Bones* (2005-2017), etc. However, with the move away from any true series and towards serials (that is, no show is truly amnesiac and, instead, every show requires a moderate amount of remembering from one episode to the next), all shows are, in fact, more likely to have some kind of resolution in the strain of *Frasier* and *Friends*.

### **Aesthetics**

Aesthetics are perhaps the trickiest part of sitcoms to discuss. Much of the reason that television as a medium has traditionally been ignored as an area of study by film and literature theorists is because it is not perceived as an “artistic” medium. Even the original television scholars, such as Raymond Williams (1974), disregarded television’s artistry and preferred to look at how it influenced audiences in terms of its discourses and storytelling. In terms of the various types of television programs, sitcoms are the lowest of the low, second only to soap operas, with the primary sitcom focus on characterization and narratives over mise-en-scene and cinematography. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of sitcoms are one of the places that they are most influenced by the rhizomatic characteristics of other programs.

**Single- vs. Multi-Camera.** The most basic aesthetic difference amongst sitcoms is, perhaps, the least obvious. This is the shooting style utilized. The difference is not based upon what the producers were attempting to do, but in where they were trying to do it. Most shows were multi-camera and filmed in front of a live studio audience. The *I Love Lucy* production team perfected the multi-camera system. The “Desilu method,” now called the multi-camera system, means that a program is filmed by three cameras running simultaneously. The major problem that *I Love Lucy* managed to solve was not of how to film the series, but how to light it. Lucille Ball said, “An innovator, [award winning cinematography Karl] Freund’s true contribution to the so-called Desilu three-camera method was not the use of three cameras – which had been done before on a number of television shows – but the revolutionary overhead lighting system that lit the entire set uniformly” (qtd. in Andrews, 1985, p. 52). According to Brant (2006), Garry Marshall was inspired by watching the multi-camera usage in *The Danny Thomas Hour* (1967-1968) to use an audience as well, because “He felt it encouraged actors to give their best effort” (p. 53). Additionally, a multi-camera style of production is generally cheaper and faster to produce than a single camera series (Butler, 2012).

The early shows that were made using a single-camera style – *Father Knows Best*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Bewitched*, and *M\*A\*S\*H* – all likely had very good reasons for not using the studio audience style of shooting. *The Andy Griffith Show* and *M\*A\*S\*H* both made extensive use of location sets, which would be impossible with a live studio audience. *Bewitched* used a huge array of special effects which would make little to no sense to an in-studio audience. Today’s single-camera shows display a desire to follow a more cinematic style of production, as well as the ability to traverse numerous locations.

Compare *The Cosby Show* to *Modern Family*. The stories of *The Cosby Show* are nearly all contained within a handful of locations – very rarely anywhere outside of the house. *Modern Family*, on the other hand, crisscrosses the three different houses of the characters, as well as their offices, their cars, and other locations around town (in addition to regular vacations). The multi-camera filming format of *The Cosby Show* ties it to specific studio sets; *Modern Family* has no such restrictions.

There is, however, nothing inherently wrong with multi-camera shows, much as they have been historically derided. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family* demonstrate that ambitious stories can be told without using locations and artistic camera work. These shows work very hard to stress their characters and stories so that the cinematic image is not lost in their productions. The move away from multi-camera and into single-camera as the standard is not a rhizomatic internode originating in any specific other kind of series. Instead, industry standards and technological innovation influenced the switch. The emphasis placed upon all sitcoms by the success of programs on HBO and other cable and online programs creates a standard of television that is firmly planted within the single-camera field. Therefore, all the ambitious sitcoms featured in this study are single-camera productions. Single-camera shooting has also decreased in expense because of the declining cost of such technologies, making the difference between single- and multi-camera productions insignificant.

Quite a few of the ambitious sitcoms look very different than multi-camera sitcoms, to a point that they are nearly unrecognizable as in the same television area. For instance, *Louie* uses handheld cameras to convey the ordinary sense of the series. Additionally, the different segments of the episodes are strung together using footage of

New York City, where the camera will dwell on the streets and people who live in them. On *Louie* (2010-present), the camerawork provides authenticity to Louis C.K.'s comedy – echoing the satire of the everyday that is the purpose of his series. Such stylistic decisions are evidence of the rhizomatic influences of documentary and independent filmmaking. The general aesthetic move on television towards authenticity – as seen on *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Jessica Jones* (2015-present), *24* (2001-2010), etc. – has influenced even the ways that sitcoms look.

**The Influence of the Studio Audience.** One of the elements of a multi-camera sitcom is that the presence of the studio audience can affect the episodes themselves. When the audience reacts with riotous laughter, the actors must pause until the laughter dies down. When the audience is sad, the at-home audience recognizes their own sadness as integral to the plot. The show with the most interesting audience reactions is *All in the Family*. Because of the diverse plots and challenges to ideologies that are an essential part of the series, the audience has very mixed reactions. Several times, the audience laughs so loudly that one of the characters, primarily Archie, has to restart his line to be heard. At the same time, when darker stories are told, such as the Bunkers finding a swastika graffitied on their front door, or when Edith nearly gets raped, the audience barely knows how to react. Since *All in the Family* is, in theory, a sitcom, the audience twitters at inappropriate moments, probably because they have no other idea what to do. But what they do know when good has triumphed– they cheer wildly when Edith finally manages to outwit her attacker and escape to find Archie.

Audiences are frequently celebratory when the main characters get the best of other, especially unlikable, characters. The audience applauds riotously as they watch

Marie (Doris Roberts), on *Everybody Loves Raymond*, gear up to obliterate Robert's emotionally abusive first wife. Similarly, when the audience of *Will & Grace* heard that Leo had cheated on Grace, they moaned loudly, vocalizing the emotions of Will (Eric McCormack), as well as the absent Grace. The studio audience signals emotions to the at-home audience, as well as helps to create a lively atmosphere for the actors to play to. On *Barney Miller*, Abe Vigoda (who played Phil Fish) clearly depended on the reactions of the audience and would frequently cheat himself towards them more just before delivering his punchlines.

Audiences are an integral part of most sitcoms from history, but have largely disappeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, except on *The Big Bang Theory*. Initially, live studio audiences established a baseline for a lot of comedy by encouraging the home audiences to laugh at specific elements of the series. Audience reactions are frequently written into scripts today – either through simple pauses on the part of the cast or by similar reactions by the characters. Those standards were established in the early days of television. Additionally, studio audiences are a phenomenon unique to sitcoms. No other fictional entertainment television genre features a studio audience. Game shows, talk shows, variety shows, etc. all have studio audiences. The primary requirement for a studio audience seems to be that the show intends to be a source of amusement. Therefore, it is a trope likely to exist on sitcoms. The lack of studio audiences on most recent sitcoms speaks to the intentionality of those sitcoms, and where the influence for the program originates.

**The Role of the Camera.** While the lack of audience does influence single-camera productions, a more important aspect is that as a result of the camera's flexibility,

the camera is able to become, essentially, another character within the story. The camera works as the avatar for the audience. The director and editors choose what elements of the story to reveal to the characters and what elements to reveal to the audience. The audience is frequently more knowledgeable than the characters, because of what they have already been told. This can work within multi-camera shows, but only in terms of editing and the sequence of scenes. In single-camera shows, the camera is able to reveal things to the audience in different ways.

The strongest examples of this come in mock-umentary style shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *Modern Family*. *The Office* most frequently stretches the camera from being a device to being a character – especially once the “camera crew” steps out from behind the camera in the last season. However, even earlier in the show, the camera communicates with characters, especially with Jim (John Krasinski) and Pam (Jenna Fischer). In one scene, Pam asks the camera for help figuring out what is going on between Dwight (Rainn Wilson) and Angela (Angela Kinsey). Later, the camera approaches her desk and begins motioning wildly at her. To the audience, the image simply goes through a series of back and forth movements, not clearly showing anything. Nevertheless, the idea is clearly that we, as the camera, are clearly trying to communicate an important fact to Pam something (quickly shown to be a tryst between the secret partners). Similarly, on *Sex and the City*'s early seasons, Carrie's column frequently refers to interviews with her friends and random other people. These quotes are shown as though the interviewees are directly telling “Carrie,” but she is never shown. Rather, they speak directly to the camera – to us.

In *Parks and Recreation* and *Modern Family*, the camera plays a role through zooms and pans. On these shows, the camera will zoom in on certain things or pan to a new part of the frame to reveal new pieces of information. For instance, on *Modern Family*, the Dunphys have all claimed to be leaving New York City to head home in two separate groups, the parents and the children. Unbeknownst to the other group, they all decided to stay extra time in the city. In one scene, Phil (Ty Burrell) and Claire (Julie Bowen) are watching David Blaine in a big crowd and Phil expresses regret that Luke is not with them. The camera then pulls back and pans right to reveal the children on the other side of Blaine's act – with Luke wishing that Phil were there. The camera reveals to the audience something none of the characters know, and by doing so places the audience in an omniscient position. *Arrested Development* does something very similar when a character or the narrator will pose a question and the camera alters its angle slightly to reveal the answer. For instance, when Michael (Jason Bateman) realizes that GOB's magic act will fail if they don't find "a pair of beautiful women's legs," the camera zooms out ever so slightly to include George-Michael (Michael Cera) more prominently, whose legs have already been established as beautifully feminine. No one vocalizes the answer; the camera expects you to understand.

The camera is able to provide more information, as previously discussed, and to withhold information – for instance on *Seinfeld* where certain parts of the story are never shown. George dates a woman who gets a terrible nose job, but this botched plastic surgery is never shown, the back of the woman's head is only presented. In this way, the audience must fill in their own idea of what is occurring (which is probably far worse than any reality they could have created).



The camera can also become a receptacle for responses – the characters can talk directly to the camera or, as Jim frequently does on *The Office*, react only to the camera (and thus the audience). Though this sometimes means the camera is acting as another character in the show, as with *The Office*, at other times the camera can take on the role of a character already on the show. For instance, on *Frasier*, when Niles and Daphne (Jane Leeves) break off their respective relationships to become a couple, the camera adopts the point-of-view of the significant others (first Mel [Jane Adams], then Donny [Saul Rubinek]). The audience then views the break up from the perspectives of these characters, rather than watching the scene unfold from a distance.

Alternatively, the characters can break the fourth wall for one reason or another. That is, the characters perceive the camera as being non-existent, but will, at times, interact with the audience – thereby breaking down the “wall” between the actors and the audience. The show that does so most frequently is *30 Rock*. The most common way that *30 Rock* breaks the fourth wall is through subtle eye contact with the camera. This eye contact usually happens to acknowledge some level of reality. In season one, Jack is supposed to be acting on TGS and Liz is giving him acting notes, one of which is to not look into the camera. At that moment, Alec Baldwin does precisely that. In another moment, Tracy speaks in very stereotypically “black” language, then makes eye contact with the camera, as though to ask “why in the world am I talking like this?” Finally, in the last season, Jenna looks (Jane Krakowski) into the camera, but Liz catches her and is confused. *30 Rock* uses these moments to achieve a meta-awareness about television.

The camera does not need to simply be a tool through which television is filmed. In multi-camera and single-camera sitcoms, the camera adopts a position. Because single-

camera productions allow freedom of movement from the camera, these shows are more likely to take on certain roles within the diegesis of the series. While the camera rarely embodies an actual character in shows other than sitcoms, it can elaborate upon or withhold information, or the characters can break the fourth wall. As an example of the first, in the final episode of *Breaking Bad*, the camera pans across a house, before settling in a corner of the room, watching Skylar (Anna Gunn), who is nestled in the left corner. She answers the phone and has a conversation about the whereabouts of Walt (Bryan Cranston). Once she hangs up, the camera slowly pushes forward on her, gradually revealing that Walt has been standing across from her the entire time (Nedomansky, 2014). On *House of Cards* (2013-present), Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) famously breaks the fourth wall as he explains to the audience his motivations and thought process regarding the events of the series. These are just two examples of ways that the camera's flexibility has been utilized in television recently. Examples such as these demonstrate the rhizomatic ways that camera positionality pervades television. Sitcoms are one specific area in which camera positionality can be particularly useful; other series adopt the internodes of meaning associated with camera work.

**Creating an active environment.** One way to create an apparently lived in and lively environment is to ensure that action continues actively beyond the primary characters. If only one story occurs at a time, and no one else seems to exist during the tenure of that story, the program can feel flat and unrealistic. On *I Love Lucy*, for example, the only action that ever occurs is between the four protagonists. There is barely any sense that other people live in the world/their apartment building, much less that these other people have lives of their own. Within the world of the Ricardos and the

Mertzes, the only thing of importance in their lives seems to be what is happening in that precise moment. Even Little Ricky (Joseph and Michael Mayer) only appears when he is narratively significant. The diegetic world of *I Love Lucy* does not extend beyond their apartment or the story of the moment. This is not the case in many other shows.

There are multiple ways that this sense of diegetic depth can occur. One way is that recognizable characters can continue going about their lives in the background of scenes. For instance, on *Barney Miller*, while one primary story will be taking place in the foreground, say, Harris (Ron Glass) and Fish are discussing their latest case, other characters will be doing ordinary things in the background, Barney and Nick (Jack Soo) are filing paperwork and paying no attention to Harris and Fish. Not everything in a shot or a scene is wholly centered on the primary action. Similarly, on *Mary Tyler Moore*, in one scene, Mary, Rhoda, and Georgette (Georgia Engel) are having a conversation as they have fondue. Georgette spends the whole scene talking to them and simultaneously dropping all her food into the fondue pot; her trouble goes largely un-noticed, but works to make the scene more natural. Characters can also come and go without any kind of regularity, but in a way that suggests a thriving community. *The Andy Griffith Show* has a group of recurring townsfolk that live in Mayberry and will pop up once in a while across the series, but not any a forced or staged kind of a way. They simply live in this town and Andy and/or Barney (or whoever) bump into them on occasion.

The main characters can also engage in their own stories, without the primary story intersecting. In an episode of *Community* (2009-2015), Abed (Danny Pudi) is fully in the background and does not engage with either primary plot. Instead, he manages to have an adventure all his own, which occurs literally in the background. He meets and

interacts with a pregnant woman, then later delivers her baby. No one ever acknowledges this background action (although it is brought up much later on the show when Shirley [Yvette Nicole Brown] has her baby, Abed casually mentions its occurring). The story does not need to be told, but demonstrates the ways that these characters continue to have lives beyond what we, as the audience, are shown. This kind of background plot does not occur very often. However, sometimes characters reference events that clearly did occur off-screen, Jenna on *30 Rock* does this from time to time, that also contribute to the depth of the world. Ross (David Schwimmer), on *Friends*, presents the keynote address at a conference, suggesting that he spends quality time doing research, even though this research is never seen or hinted at.

What happens far more frequently is that characters engage in seemingly innocuous actions in the background of a scene, only to later join the scene with their “story” becoming a part of the main plot. On *Cheers*, for example, any time a main character joins the background of a scene, that person is about to chime into the conversation. Even when the employees of the bar – Sam, Coach (Nicholas Colasanto), Diane, Carla (Rhea Perlman), Woody (Woody Harrelson), and Rebecca (Kirstie Alley)– appear to be going about their everyday lives, if they can be seen on screen, they are probably going to contribute to whatever action is happening. Similarly, on *Frasier*, occasionally, other characters move in the background of the coffee shop, but they will inevitably join the primary action. Their impetus for being present is, ultimately, to engage with the main story, rather than to suggest they simply visit the café regularly.

A more recent trend is for seemingly nameless background characters to have their own stories and adventures. These stories are never seen or heard, but are merely

hinted at when those people appear in the lives of the primary characters. The basic storytelling structure of *30 Rock* presents a fully realized world. The lives of the main characters exist beyond the episodes, but that extension is an inherent part of the narrative process, revealed in quick cuts and flashbacks. The most obvious example of this is through having background characters with clear stories too. For instance, in one episode Jack plans to cut the NBC page program. He announces this to a large group of pages, none of whom we have seen before, except Kenneth. Kenneth steps forward to protest, claiming that right as “the most popular page.” Jack scoffs, “everyone knows that Dalton is the most popular page.” The other pages start chanting “Dalton” while Kenneth looks confused. Nothing more is said about or by Dalton, but clearly there is an entire story there that we have not been party to.

Having diverse television worlds give the series depth in a variety of ways. First, depth makes the series appear to be one small cog in a very large world. The nature of several ambitious sitcoms is to show the constant lives of the characters. *Transparent* and *You’re the Worst* (2014-present) both do very little to suggest that the characters have lives outside the diegesis. Nevertheless, they situate their characters within a rich space of actions that occur just outside the diegetic world, thereby suggesting that, while we see every part of these characters’ lives, we do not get a full glimpse of their world.

Secondarily, a diverse world can work as a landscape from which new characters are drawn. If the world is only Lucy, Ricky, Ethel (Vivian Vance), and Fred (William Frawley), there is no means through which to introduce new characters. If Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) is just one of many politicians within a vast world of wheeling and dealing, then it is unsurprising that, when deciding who will run as her vice president,

Tom James (Hugh Laurie), a heretofore unseen or named character, would be lauded as the best possible choice.

Finally, in sitcoms that purport to make commentary on society, the diverse worlds serve as fodder for that commentary. Without a sense that Larry David lives in the “real” world, he would have nothing to rant about and, thus, the essential premise of his series would fail. Similarly, Louie C.K. utilizes his everyday experiences as material for his stand-up comedy. Those everyday experiences cannot exist in isolation. Both David and C.K. modeled their sitcoms after their own lives, drawing upon a world that actually exists. They managed to recreate that sense of the world within the diegesis of the series.

Sitcoms with diverse worlds are a relatively recent phenomenon. They have arisen at a time when most television programs feature intricate worlds. Thus, sitcoms have been influenced rhizomatically through other television shows with similar diegetic depth. Crime procedurals, such as *Castle* (2009-2016) and *CSI*, endeavor to emphasize busy working environments, with background action always occurring. As a result, the primary characters are just one level of action occurring in a vibrant society. Science Fiction and Fantasy programs often feature a wide range of characters who come and go at their own pace, without needing to constantly be a part of the series. *Doctor Who* (2005-present) has persisted in having characters reappear in later episodes, as simply an extended part of the main characters’ lives. These characters constitute a lengthy array of potential storylines. These shows do not necessarily make commentary, but the vast supply of “complex” television shows today work very hard to do so. The expansion of the narrative world of sitcoms is thus an illustration of how sitcoms are rhizomatically influenced by the storytelling practices of other genres featured on television today.

**Set Design.** An easily overlooked area of television sitcoms is the set design. *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Andy Griffith*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and *Bewitched* all have fairly basic sets. The houses are not overly cluttered, with the clean, sophisticated look of design magazines, the sort of style that very few homes really look like. *Mary Tyler Moore* is the first time that we really see a home that looks lived in. Not even Mary's apartment presents as lived in, rather we can look at Rhoda's attic apartment. Rhoda is a cock-sure, rebellious, feminist New Yorker, who lives in a cramped apartment fully decked out in pink upholstery (and wallpaper, and lights, and linens). This can either be a contradiction, because the feminist Rhoda would never have a pink apartment, or an insight into other dimensions of Rhoda's life. She desperately wants to get married, seeing it as the way out of her dismal life. Her mother is also pushing her towards marriage. Rhoda's mother also has a woeful misunderstanding of feminism. The Pink Apartment may echo these underlying impulses. Or it could simply be that the apartment came like that and Rhoda suffers (she constantly wants to move).

Many sitcoms of the 1970s strove to have realistic sets. The Bunker's house in *All in the Family* looks lived in and worn, as though a working-class family has lived there for most of their lives, probably 20+ years. *Barney Miller* has a reputation as being the most accurate portrayal of a police precinct on television. Miller (2005) explains:

The action was mostly off screen, the squad room the only set, and the guys were a motley bunch of character actors who were in no danger of being picked for the N.Y.P.D. pin-up calendar. . . . For real detectives, most of the action does happen off screen, and we spend a lot of time back in the squad room writing reports about it (para. 5-6).

The precinct is full of paperwork and storage cabinets, which are used to file things away in or to retrieve the necessary forms. People have long worked here, they are able to label it an historical landmark in the final episodes of the series. The set echoes that history.

*Taxi* created an atmosphere for the characters that suggests the run down, inner city filth of New York City in the 1970s. According to Brant (2006), the producers of *Taxi* went so far as to visit cab companies in New York City to get inspiration for the show. The primary taxi garage set is a full of cars and people; it is loud and never looks clean. The various characters' apartments are cramped and full of their accumulated junk – which frequently overflows the available space. Nevertheless, these characters have all figured out how to comfortably live in these places and their junk never seems to be too much and there's never a sense that they should have more or less of it – they've got just the right amount.

We can compare this endless realism with the sitcoms of the 1990s, especially the butt of many jokes – the apartments on *Friends*. These characters have sporadic employment that very rarely pays very much, and yet somehow they are able to live in luxurious apartments. Some of these quirks are explained away – Monica's apartment is rent controlled and was inherited from her grandmother; Chandler's job is never specified, so he could make an unusually large amount of money; Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) also inherited her apartment from her grandmother, and she typically has a roommate. The truly problematic character is Ross. In the early seasons, he lives in a rather small apartment in an undisclosed location. Later, he moves out and moves from his job at the museum to a job at NYU. He then gets an apartment across the street from his friends that is huge and quite fancy. This apartment is far outside the price range of an assistant



professor. It makes significantly more sense when Rachel (who is working at Ralph Lauren) moves in with him and, presumably, splits the rent. Joey (Matt LeBlanc) faces a similar problem once Chandler moves out and he has a rotating selection of roommates. Joey rarely has a steady job, and yet somehow is not wholly dependent upon roommates to afford his home.

Much of the reasoning behind the reversion from realistic set design to a “mid-century modern” (Rocelle Decorating, 2013) can be traced to a general flattening of social class across all television. Most families on television in the early 1990s through much of today are situated as upper middle class – or at least with the resources to live as though they are. This attitude is diffuse across television. Sitcom families are pretty exclusively upper middle class. They have the money to keep up with the series of hijinks found within their plots. On *I Love Lucy*, Ricky constantly grumbles to Lucy about wasting money on useless things and Lucy whines about not having the ability to buy whatever she wants, but somehow Ricky is literally always able to pay for whatever she put amiss. In fact, out of the forty shows in this analysis, only four have money troubles built into their core – *All in the Family*, *Roseanne*, *Broad City*, and *Girls*. Additionally, these shows do not really address issues of classism, because they do not interact across class boundaries. Shows that do feature a variety of social economic classes – *Cheers*, *The Cosby Show*, *Friends*, *Will & Grace*, *Community*, *30 Rock*, *Big Bang Theory*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *You’re the Worst* – typically gloss over differences.

Thus, the differences in social class that could manifest through the set design are frequently eliminated. Returning to *Friends*, Phoebe grew up on the streets of New York City, even before she was rendered an orphan and homeless, her parents still did not have

the capacity to be anything more than working class. Nevertheless, her lack of resources as a child and young adult – and as an adult as well, she is a masseuse without a steady income – has not differentiated her from any of the other friends. Joey is similarly situated as working class through his parents and upbringing, but is not really different from the others. Rachel and Chandler’s parents were quite wealthy; the Gellers (Elliott Gould and Christina Pickles) are clearly upper middle class. Nevertheless, in terms of everything but financial independence, these characters are presented as equals. Money separates them, but any money problems are typically resolved by the end of the episode.

*Taxi* and the other shows in the 1970s, as well as many of the shows in the 1980s, created dynamic discussions in which social class is an integral, if unspoken, element. The sensible, realistic environments in which the characters exist lend credence to their social class; that effect was not evident in the 1990s. The *Sex and the City* women have overly nice apartments, although all but Carrie have real, well paying jobs. In fact, *Sex and the City* directly addresses this disparity:

Charlotte (Kristin Davis): You’re talking about more than a difference in income. You’re talking about a difference in background and education. This guy is working class.

Miranda (Cynthia Nixon): Working Class?

Carrie: It’s the millennium, sweetie, we don’t say things like ‘working class’ anymore.

Charlotte: You’re trying to pretend that we live in a classless society and we don’t (She then nods to the women on the ground before them giving the main characters pedicures. The main characters look very uncomfortable).

Carrie: Ok, Marie Antoinette, we get the picture.

Although Charlotte ends up proving to her friends that there is a wide variety of social classes in the United States, that diversity continues to rarely be shown on television. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a divide between the realistic homes of the characters on *Parks and Recreation*, *30 Rock*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond* and the overly expensive, nearly ostentatious homes on *The Big Bang Theory*, *Modern Family*, and *Will & Grace*. While there are sometimes reasons for the choices made in terms of set design, those decisions are not always obvious.

Those decisions extend beyond sitcoms and are very reflective of the flattening of social class. Take, for instance, *Castle*. In this show, Richard Castle (Nathan Fillion) is clearly wealthy – he flaunts his wealth in every aspect of his life. The set for his apartment echoes his wealth – it is clean, lavish, and well decorated. Comparatively, his love interest, Kate Beckett (Stana Katic), lives in a rather ordinary apartment. Her apartment is more in the “mid-century modern” style of *Friends* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. While this feels, on the show, like a disparity between Castle and Beckett’s resources, it still provides Beckett with more resources than her career and her upbringing likely would have provided her. On the other hand, when Castle’s daughter Alexis (Molly C. Quinn) moves out of the house, she and her boyfriend live in near squalor, utilizing furniture they found on the streets. She is determined to make it on her own, without her father’s financing, and as a result drops several levels in social class.

On many early television shows, set design was not a major aspect of television. As shows became more ambitious, particularly in the 1970s, the sets became much more telling of the characters and the worlds in which they reside. This persisted until the

1990s, when there was a vast annihilation of difference. Here, the sets reverted to being a side-note to television productions. As I have illustrated in the above analysis, this transformation in set designs, and the change in what set designs convey about the characters, persist because of the internodes of discourse regarding social class and the disparities (or apparent lack thereof) between people.

**Deviating from the Aesthetic Norm.** From time to time, sitcoms adopt styles that are entirely different from the standard of both themselves and the genre. On some ambitious shows, this can be the normal oeuvre of the series. *Community* is essentially founded on the ability to tell stories in a variety of unique styles – unique episodes include a *Dungeons and Dragons* episode, a *Godfather* episode, an episode told only in claymation, an episode where they are all Muppets, etc. *30 Rock* tells specific kinds of stories in different ways, sometimes in short, unique sequences (as when Kenneth imagines everyone as Muppets) and sometimes for the entire episodes (as when Jack and Liz's choices essentially turn them into *The Dark Knight's* [2008] Batman and the Joker and the entire episode is filmed in a way that signals this).

On other series, these kinds of motifs are much less frequently used, but when they are, they are for very specific storytelling reasons. In one Christmas episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, rather than telling the normal kind of story, the main characters appear on The Alan Brady Show and perform a series of sketches and songs. At the end of the second season of *Taxi*, the drivers sit around talking about *Fantasy Island* (1977-1984), then they each imagine their own fantasies. The show then devolves into only showing the fantasies, which culminate in Elaine's (Marilyn Henner)– a giant, showstopping, musical number. *Seinfeld* very rarely deviates from the normal filming

structure, but in the final season, George is trying to rescue the Frogger arcade machine that he set records on in his youth. To do so, George must cross a busy street with it. The sequence where he pushes it across is filmed from above and almost flattened to echo the graphics of Frogger itself.

Another series that takes time out of the normal structure and aesthetics of sitcoms to tell a unique story is *M\*A\*S\*H*. *M\*A\*S\*H* is famous in its disdain for the sitcom label. Showrunner Larry Gelbert has frequently discussed the fine line that *M\*A\*S\*H* walked between comedy and drama, saying, “*M\*A\*S\*H* became famous for its ability to deliver a laugh and a cry in the same show” (qtd. in Neuwirth, 2006, p. 157). Star Alan Alda (2016) recently said he and co-star Wayne Rogers, “thought it could be more than a sitcom” (para. 2). *M\*A\*S\*H* was also the first “sitcom” to not want a laugh track playing behind the episodes. Former vice president of program development for CBS, Alan Wagner, explains

Early on, network brass – research, sales, my bosses – insisted on a laugh track. There was no way out. Gotta have a laugh track. Because they always *had* had laugh tracks. This was so people would distinguish it from a drama (Neuwirth, 2006, p. 171).

The complicated relationship that *M\*A\*S\*H*'s producers had with its laugh track – which was used sparingly across the series – is emblematic of that delicate line that the series traversed between comedy and drama. Because they were trying to comment upon the senselessness of war, as well as other dominant ideologies, the producers of *M\*A\*S\*H*, especially later in the series, utilized unique cinematic forms to show more “realistic” aspects of war.

Several episodes of *M\*A\*S\*H* exemplify this by stepping away from the protagonists to relate the horrors of war. Two episodes, 4.24, “The Interview,” and 7.4, “Our Finest Hour,” are news documentaries about the 4077<sup>th</sup> to share with “the people back home.” Cleve Roberts, an actual war correspondent during the Korean War, as well as a prominent reporter during the run of the series, interviews the primary characters about their time in the 4077<sup>th</sup>. The episodes are shown in black-and-white (as TV would have been at the time) and only show interviews, rather than any story arc. Another episode from season 7, “Point of View,” presents its entire narrative from the first-person perspective of a wounded soldier who cannot speak. The entire half-hour is shown only through his eyes. These episodes comment on the war, as all of *M\*A\*S\*H* does, in a personal, honest way.

However, stepping away from the format of sitcoms to comment upon social issues, or even the genre of the sitcom itself (as *Community* does), is very rare. Instead, most of the time when sitcoms utilize a unique story telling device, it is hedged through some kind of narrative purpose – most dominantly dreams. Even *M\*A\*S\*H* does this. One episode features the characters having to stay up for an unusually lengthy period, in the moments when they can sleep, they are haunted by nightmares about the war. Again, they turn to pastiche to ruminate on the horrors of war. *The Cosby Show* also frequently features dream sequences – although not for any ideological purpose, but to have fun in a different way. In one episode, Cliff has a nightmare where all the men suddenly get pregnant. In another, Rudy (Keshia Knight Pulliam) and Olivia (Raven-Symoné) have dueling nightmares about a fight they had before bed. These dream sequences use

elaborate editing, filming, and lighting techniques to emulate dreams – Rudy’s entire dream is filmed with a soft pink lens, and much of it is sung.

Such aesthetic decisions are not based upon the traditional definition of sitcom characteristics. Instead, the producers make use of internodes of devices from other texts to tell their stories. Without a working knowledge of *The Godfather* (1972) and *Goodfellas* (1990), episode 1.11 of *Community*, “Contemporary American Poultry,” makes only a modicum of sense. This episode finds the study group using black market means to eventually gain control of the chicken finger supply at the college. The episode is filmed in the style of mafia films. Consequently, the humor is almost entirely derived from the use of these other tropes. Just as in the episode of *M\*A\*S\*H* discussed earlier, *Community* taps into the expectations of the audience to tell its story adeptly. Such deviations from aesthetic norms are very specifically influenced by other genres. This is one of the clearest examples of rhizomatic influences upon sitcoms.

## **Characters**

Situation comedies encompass a huge range of types of shows. They all have two defining characteristics: they follow the everyday lives of the characters and they do so in a humorous way. Since I examined humor in a previous section, this section will focus primarily on the characters and the ways that the characters change on a series.

Characters exist at the core of all television shows; thus, they serve as the negotiators of discourse, as the agents of narrative, and the arbiters of aesthetics. There is no reason, in the rhizome, to explore any of these elements before or after any other element, but this section will, in many respects, focus on characters in tandem with these other elements of television shows – one cannot exist without the other.

**Sitcom Types.** While every sitcom looks at the everyday lives of characters, the facets of those lives cover a wide range of areas. The aspect of life that a sitcom explores affects the characterizations within the series greatly. Sitcoms fall in a number of specific types. The first are those household, family comedies, called “domestic sitcoms.” These explore a family and how the family grows up together. These are: *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Bewitched*, *All in the Family*, *Family Ties*, *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne*, *Frasier*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Modern Family*, *Catastrophe* (2015-present), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), *Louie*, *Transparent*. Within this category, there is nuance in terms of how the family structure and the ages of the families. For instance, *The Cosby Show* has a very different dynamic than *Frasier* even though they both explore the dynamics of fathers and sons.

Additionally, in the 1980s, a new kind of family-centered sitcom appeared simply by redefining what a family was. *Cheers*, *Golden Girls*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Will & Grace*, *Arrested Development*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, *Broad City*, *Girls*, *Master of None* (2015-present), *New Girl*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present), and *You’re the Worst* all present groups of friends whose bonds are as strong or stronger than that of a family. These shows explore different aspects of friendship, but all present that same aspect of life.

The final situation in which these comedies are situated is the workplace. Shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Barney Miller*, *Taxi*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Enlightened* (2011-2013), *Parks and Recreation*, and *Veep* all focus on a workplace. Frequently, these stories will transcend the workplace and create a family dynamic within



that workplace, or examine the balance between work and family, but the primary action and focus is within that office space.

The perspective of a series on its narratives and humor also influences the ways that characters are conceived. That is, some shows play their stories and characters straight while others deliberately push their stories and characters into the absurd. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, *Friends*, etc. all present their characters as realistic. The show might be using those characters to make some kind comment on society, but it is not inherent in the character's creation. Other shows, *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Community*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, etc., make characters that cannot (or should not) be compared to individuals outside of television. These characters are over the top to make comment upon society and stereotypes.

For instance, we can examine the different ways that feminism manifests on television. There are some television sitcoms that are famous for their feminist representations. *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Roseanne*, and *Bewitched* all present main female characters who push against societal assumptions regarding the role of women. *Bewitched's* first season makes this resistance most obvious through the opening scene voice over articulating the role of the housewife. One example comes in the fourth episode of the series. It begins with Samantha gardening. Darrin leaves on his way to work and kisses her goodbye. The scene then cuts to a later day and the plants have all died. Darrin is coming once again, so Samantha quickly wiggles her nose and the plants spring to bountiful blooms. He observes them and looks ecstatic. The following narration plays over the scene (and the audience giggles):

Among the more soul-satisfying suburban activities is that collaboration with nature that brings fragrance and beauty to the home: Horticulture. Husbands appreciative of their wives' efforts as they leave for their offices, secure in the knowledge their mates are at home digging, rather than in town shopping. In time, patience, fortitude, and loving care are rewarded by fragrant blooms, sturdy and bursting with color. Providing, of course, you have the proper soil and a green thumb... or unless you happen to be a witch.

None of the rest of the episode looks at or considers horticulture. Rather, this is an opening sequence determined to comment upon housewifery and the silliness regarding what men expect and what women do. Samantha uses magic to appear to be perfect; other women are not quite so lucky – does that make them worse wives? These opening voice-overs do not even persist through the entire first season, but *Bewitched* is easily able to find other ways to push against sexist representations. Samantha is eventually made Queen of the Witches and Darrin must reconcile his desire to have his wife at home and the honor bestowed upon her. He eventually “lets” her remain Queen.

*Mary Tyler Moore* and *Roseanne* also present feminist main characters, but without the blatant commentary on their roles. In the first episode, upon applying for the job at the news station, Lou asks what Mary’s religion is and whether she is married. Mary points out that Lou cannot ask these questions, but she answers them anyway. Lou then pushes her further, asking why she isn’t married. She says, “It does seem that you’ve been asking a lot of very personal questions that don’t have a thing to do with my qualifications for this job.” He ends up hiring her for her “spunk.” Throughout the series, Mary fights for equal rights and stands on her own in work and relationships. Similarly,

Roseanne wants her daughters to be strong women who are not tied to men. She frequently seems upset that Becky (Alicia Goranson) and Darlene (Sara Gilbert) appear to choose men over careers or college – as she fought so that they could have the opportunities that she never had. Additionally, she leads her co-workers in a walkout when their new boss makes their working environment hostile. She is open with her support for Darlene’s right to choose to have an abortion when becoming pregnant.

Mary Richard, Roseanne Connor, and Samantha Stephens are all inherently feminists, and their shows very much center around their feminism. There are lots of other shows in the 1980s and 1990s with main feminist characters, but these shows focus less on the feminism and make it clear the characters are feminists in less obvious ways. Gloria on *All in the Family*, Elaine on *Taxi*, Diane on *Cheers*, Elise (Meredith Baxter) on *Family Ties*, all of the Huxtable women on *The Cosby Show*, all of the *Golden Girls*, and Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) on *Seinfeld*. These women encounter moments of oppression and find ways to rise above or squash the oppression. Some of them, like Gloria, Diane, and *Seinfeld*’s Elaine, preach their feminism in these moments. Others, such as Clair Huxtable and the *Golden Girls*, have strong, quiet feminism. For instance, when Rudy gets her period for the first time, Clair wants to have a frank, earnest conversation with her about it. Clair believes that by presenting menstruation as shameful, women are oppressed. By teaching her daughters to be open about their periods, she is teaching them to not be judgmental. Similarly, the *Golden Girls* rarely address feminism head on, but refuse to give into men or to allow their personalities to be suppressed to appease others.

Sitcoms of the 1990s and early 2000s – *Frasier*, *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Will and Grace* – present their female characters on an equal footing to the males. Occasionally, these women are presented with uniquely female conundrums, usually because of the male characters, and then can find solutions to those problems without compromising their equality. For instance, Roz (Peri Gilpin) from *Frasier* becomes pregnant and the male characters, especially Martin, pressure her to marry the father of the baby. Roz stands up for herself and decides to raise Alice (Ashley Thomas) on her own. Roz’s single mother-hood is the source of the infrequent comedy, but *Frasier* typically makes her realize that she has adequate resources to raise Alice. These feminist-driven plots are much fewer and farther between. Instead, these shows use a post-feminist discourse, situating women and men as equals in a world in which feminism is no longer a necessity.

Most programs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century either directly challenge the idea of post-feminism, such as *30 Rock* and *Broad City*, or focus on the ways in which feminism remains extremely necessary, such as on *Parks and Recreation* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Because these shows are self-aware, it is impossible to point directly to specific moments in which the characters confront feminism and gender norms. The vast majority of the moments work to this overall purpose. The lives of the female characters of *30 Rock*, *Modern Family*, *Broad City*, *Community*, *Enlightened*, *Girls*, *New Girl*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Transparent*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, *Veep*, and *You’re the Worst* are focused on fighting the oppression faced by women. These depictions are endeavoring to counter typical representations of women by presenting a diverse array of female characters in a diversity of careers.

Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) is the go-getting assistant director of a local parks and recreation department who winds up as the Governor of Indiana (and possibly the President of the United States). Amy Jellicoe (Laura Dern), of *Enlightened*, is a pharmaceutical company executive who has a breakdown following the end of an affair and a miscarriage. She enters a rehabilitation center and re-focuses her life on bringing down the company she had previously worked for. On *New Girl*, Jessica Day (Zooey Deschanel) is a quirky, passionate teacher-turned-principal who is never afraid to stand up for her wildly liberal beliefs or to bring down the bullies who stand in her way. Finally, Lindsey Jillian (Kether Donohue) is best friends of the main character of *You're the Worst*, Gretchen (Aya Cash), and does not know what feminism means. She repeatedly asks if their attempts to focus their lives on partying and not on men or being married is “feminism.” These women are not always perfect, nor do they always have a clear understanding of what feminism means, but they do make comment on the role and representation of women in the media.

Feminist discourses are just one of the perspective that can affect the ways that the characters are created. These perspectives originate in a variety of places – a consequence of the generic rhizome – so cannot always be traced to any specific decision. However, the personification of these feminist characters can be examined through this rhizomatic understanding of genre. Mary Richards can always be compared to Leslie Knope. Liz Lemon directly references the strides that Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen) made for women. But these connections do not need to be reserved to within a single genre. Mary Richards can also be compared to Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) of

*Scandal*. Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies) of *The Good Wife* defies the “housewifey” stereotyping that Samantha Stephens overcomes.

In the same way, if sitcoms take a more hegemonic approach to discourses, those perspectives can also influence the characterizations. Character similarities can be seen from *The Andy Griffith Show*, to *Family Ties* to *Everybody Loves Raymond* to *Modern Family* to *Parks and Recreation* and beyond, in this case, the recurring theme refers to hegemonic masculinity. One can trace the shifts in hegemony through these series, as well as situate those shifts within a larger cultural shift in the definitions of “masculinity.” Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman) is a very different kind of “manly man” than Andy Taylor, but they both have similar characterizations.

**Character Types.** Another essential element of characterization is the range of types of characters in a program. Having a range of characters is particularly telling of the cultural shifts that television mirrors. Gray (2000) suggests that representations of race and ethnicity go through a series of stages that “serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view” (p. 283). These stages – assimilation, pluralist, and multicultural – pervade television and are not specific to any genre or type of show. Sitcoms are simply one facet of how these stages are enacted on television, but the ways that race/ethnicity is represented on these shows demonstrate the ways that the influence of culture on sitcoms is rhizomatic.

Sitcoms have a long history of whitewashing characters and situations. The primary and secondary characters are all predominantly white, heterosexual characters, and in several they are also mainly male. Even shows that are considered to be progressive for their era, such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Cheers*, *Taxi*, and *Seinfeld* have

almost exclusively white casts. *Mary Tyler Moore* does have a couple secondary African American characters early in the series, but they eventually disappear and are not replaced. More frequently shows cast minorities in secondary or tertiary recurring roles. Sometimes there are background characters, or single-episode guests, who raise some issue of race. *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Bewitched*, *Family Ties*, *The Golden Girls*, *Roseanne* and *Sex and the City* all feature episodes or moments within episodes that target racism or have background characters that somehow evoke the problematic of racial representations. *Bewitched* features an episode in which a young black friend (Venetta T. Rowles) of Tabitha's (Erin Murphy) comes to spend the night. However, when a schoolyard bully suggests that Tabitha cannot be sister with someone of a different race, Tabitha uses her magic to make both girls polka-dotted. Samantha explains that sisterhood has nothing to do with the color of one's skin, but with what is on the inside. As this story is playing out, Darrin (Dick Sargent) is dealing with a tricky client who, it turns out, is a racist. Once Larry (David White), Darrin's boss, discovers this, he immediately quits working with the man. On *The Golden Girls*, Blanche (Rue McClanahan), who is from Georgia, meets up with her childhood "Mammy" (Ruby Dee). This woman left Blanche suddenly when she was still very young and Blanche never forgave her. The Mammy reappears after Blanche's father's death and explains that she and "Big Daddy" were having an affair, thus she was forced to leave. Blanche insists that this would never occur because Big Daddy was "a republican." These representations are very much a one-off. There is no lingering sense of racial problems in the worlds of *Bewitched* or *The Golden Girls* but these singular episodes do make it clear that such discrimination is real and affects everyone.

A variety of shows, especially moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have more diverse primary casts, moving from the pluralist stage to the multicultural stage (H. Gray, 2000). *Barney Miller*, *All in the Family*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl*, and *Parks and Recreation* all have primary characters who are a racial minority. *Barney Miller*'s entire cast is multicultural – Harris is African American, Yemana is Japanese American, Chano (Gregory Sierra) is Hispanic, Barney is Jewish. There are, however, only a handful of shows that engage the characters' racial identities and build discussions of such identities into the very structure of the series: *All in the Family*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Master of None*.

*The Cosby Show* rarely addresses racism in the first few seasons. Essentially, the Huxtables are an average, American family – the only difference between them and all the other sitcom families of the era is their race. For much of the series, the Huxtables only vaguely reference the history of African Americans or suggest that their lives are any different from anyone else. While Cliff, Clair, and his parents frequently talk about being proud of their heritage, such as in their repeated, boasting discussions about attending a (fictional) historically Black College, there is very little talk about why this heritage is important. However, later in the series, these topics are discussed more purposefully. For instance, in season 6, Cliff's great aunt, Gramtee (Minnie Gentry), visits and talks to the children very explicitly about their great-great-great aunt Lucinda who was a slave. Denise (Lisa Bonet), Theo (Malcolm-Jamal Warner), and Rudy are talking to Gramtee about her days as a schoolteacher. She describes the one-room school and the extreme poverty of her students, and then turns the subject to slavery and the lack of resources the slaves were afforded. Rudy acts as though this is wholly new



information. Gramtee then tells about Lucinda, who learned to read from the daughters of the “owner” and became a teacher after she was freed. Assumptions about the horrors of slavery are built into this discussion, but the story also plays upon white generosity, as Lucinda was dependent upon and wanted to be like the daughters of her master.

Similarly, in the final season, Clair has a reunion with her college friends to organize a retirement party for a former professor. They reminisce about sitting at a lunch counter with that professor:

Thursday April 25, 1963. I was never so scared in all of my life . . . The sound of those heavy feet coming across the linoleum floor towards us. We just kept looking straight ahead. All of a sudden, ‘Hey Girl!’ Ooh, I knew they were right behind us. Listen, the next thing I heard was, “You look downright thirsty, Girlie,” and they poured Coke in my lap. They really got you good, Millicent; I thought you were going to lose it. They sure did. What did they say? “You ain’t getting nothing to eat.” Then they picked up this ketchup bottle and they shook it in my face. Then they said, “How about some ketchup” and they poured the stuff all over my dress. I was so glad that was just ketchup running down my dress. And you almost broke. Yeah, but I looked over there and saw [the retiring professor] sitting straight up, straight as a board, eyes dead ahead. She didn’t even look at me, she said, “Don’t. You. Move.” When Professor Cable says don’t move, you don’t move.

Again, the assumption of race and racial injustice is integral to this story, but the word racism itself is never spoken aloud, nor is the reason behind their sit-in. The early years of *The Cosby Show* mostly shied away from directly facing issues of racism. However, in

a few, later episodes of the series, such issues were confronted head on. However, they were approached through an assumption of a basic understanding of the Civil Rights issues of the era. The words “Civil Rights Movement,” “Slavery,” etc. are never used, but are an implicit aspect of those episodes. By doing so, *The Cosby Show* created a space in which further conversations could occur without alienating too many members of their audience.

Racism is also an essential aspect of the characters of *All in the Family* and *Master of None*. Edith is extremely close with Louise Jefferson (Isabel Sanford), and Lionel Jefferson (Mike Evans) is friends with Mike and Gloria, and runs errands for Archie. Archie and George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) are frequently situated as opposite sides of the same argument. George is just as bigoted against Archie, and white people in general, as Archie is against him. They never become friends, but they do reach understandings in various scenarios, such as when Archie counsels George about being accepting of undesirable in-laws (Lionel’s fiancée’s parents are a mixed-race couple). Additionally, Archie is uncomfortable when his lodge brothers want him to don blackface for a minstrel show. He also elects to not join the KKK when invited. Archie is a bigot, but even he recognizes that some things are simply too far and becomes more accepting of people by the end of the show.

While *Master of None* has not yet been airing for long enough to fully explore the ways the show will tackle racial representations, some moments dwell specifically on this. Dev (Aziz Ansari) and Brian (Eric Wareheim) spend a lot of time focusing on the sacrifices their immigrant parents had to make for their children to be successful. There is also an episode that explores why there are so few Indians on television. These plots are

the primary focus of much of the series. Going forward, there is likely to be more of these kinds of questions asked and explored.

Despite these more nuanced representations of race, the vast majority of the sitcoms in this study tread solely in hegemonic understandings of race. That is, they do not deal with race at all. Some of the most famous sitcoms of all time, such as *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, etc., do not even have many speaking minority characters (*Friends* clearly nods to this towards the end of the series when Ross and Joey date Charlie [Aisha Tyler]). Quite a few of the ambitious shows of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do have major minority characters, and occasionally will make pointed criticisms of those characters. *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, *New Girl*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* are the only shows in the critically acclaimed section of this analysis that feature major minority characters. These shows use their minority characters to problematize racial representations, but do so less frequently than on other shows. Instead, these characters spend a lot of time being more-or-less like all the other characters. In fact, one thing that some of these shows, for instance *New Girl*, does is create complicated nuanced minority characters. *New Girl* famously has “token” black characters – when main character Coach (Damon Wayans, Jr.) was no longer able to continue on the show, he was replaced by another black character, Winston (Lamorne Morris). However, Winston has grown away from being a baseball playing jock to a goofy, prank-pulling, cat-loving police officer. He has moved away from the stereotype that he initially identified with.

*30 Rock* did a similar thing with the three African American characters – Tracy, Dot Com (Kevin Brown), and Grizz (Grizz Chapman) – in creating three wholly different

representations of black men. Tracy's entourage is primarily made up of Dot Com and Grizz, two extremely tall, sturdily built, football player-looking black men. Over the course of the show, these two demonstrate their distance from the stereotypes they appear to embody. Dot Com is a college graduate intellectual who would prefer reading Russian satire to listening to rap music. Grizz is a hopeless romantic with a veiled sexual history with Liz and who ends up starring in a romantic comedy television program within the *30 Rock* diegesis. They both mostly work to keep Tracy grounded, sane, and employed.

The variety of types of characters that appear in sitcoms influence the characterizations of those individuals. Such representations mirror the cultural perspective of those character types at a given moment. This section has focused primarily on racial representations and the diversity of race and ethnicities found in sitcoms, but an equivalent survey of sexuality or class-based representations would also show the disparity in the construction of characters. In the absence of diverse characters, shows often accept hegemonic understandings of those discourses – there is no space through which to investigate representation. As a result, the characters who do exist on the shows adopt the mantle of “token” minority character, adopting the history and discrimination of all minorities. Shows that do have myriad representations also have a more sophisticated vehicle to probe representations. Thus, culture is rhizomatically influencing the characterizations in a variety of ways, based upon the range of characters and the prominence of those characters within the narrative.

**Stereotypes.** Stereotypes exist because, by relying on stereotypes, producers can quickly introduce audiences to the facets of a character's personality. In the early days of television, these stereotypes made up the entirety of a character. Ricky Ricardo is

essentially a walking, talking Latino stereotype. Sally Rogers, on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, assumes many masculine characteristics when she is within the writers' room with Rob and Buddy. Nevertheless, once anyone realizes she is a woman, or she speaks to another woman, she is suddenly extremely feminine and revels in her femininity. Most prominently, she is obsessed with the idea of getting married – seeing marriage as her way out of having to ever work again and, thus, her ideal life. Stereotypes of this ilk were rampant in early television, just as they were in early film, because of the quick way in which stereotypes bring audiences into the story and, as a result, the easy means through which such programs could entertain.

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, this began to change. Even *Bewitched* features a nuanced portrayal of a housewife – Samantha is anything but a stereotype (even while Darrin embodies every single stereotype of the beleaguered, exasperated husband). Certainly, *Mary Tyler Moore* pushes against the stereotypes of women, although Mary does frequently burst into tears to get her way with Lou. The women on this show all face stereotypes head on and defy them. Both Rhoda and Sue Ann are, like Sally, obsessed with getting married, but neither is made up simply of that dream. Rhoda is a feminist, who refuses to allow herself to be enveloped by a man. Sue Ann would be perfectly willing to succumb to a man, but her sickly sweet demeanor actually hides a sex-crazed, controlling, ruthless zealot. The men are also nuanced, from Lou, whose gruff exterior is a façade for the huggable, fatherly man underneath, to Ted who wears his stupidity and his emotionality on his sleeve.

*All in the Family* is equally complex in its characterizations. Archie Bunker is probably the most famous bigot in the history of television. However, over the course of

the series, his characterization becomes much more complex. In the eighth season, he is invited to join a “club,” that turns out to be the KKK. He is very reluctant to participate in the group, and finally refuses. The aspect of the group that pushes him over the edge occurs when they suggest targeting Archie’s own son-in-law. Despite the animosity between Archie and Mike throughout the series, he still chooses Mike over bigotry. In the final season, Archie and Edith take in Edith’s grandniece. After awhile, they realize that she was raised Jewish. Rather than force Christianity upon her, Edith insists they send her to the temple to continue her Jewish education. The episode ends with Archie buying the girl a Star of David necklace. Archie is much more than a thick-headed bigot, as evidence in his growth over the course of the series.

This complex-characters trend continues throughout the 1980s, with nuanced representations in *Cheers*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Roseanne*. After *Roseanne*, however, characters were a lot more likely to fall back on stereotypes. *Frasier*, *Friends*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond* all utilize stereotypes for humorous purposes, and do not attempt to do much to combat those stereotypes. On the other hand, *Seinfeld* relies almost entirely upon stereotypes, but to make commentary on both those stereotypes and society. Elaine is a very stereotypical career driven woman; Kramer (Michael Richards) is the funky loner; George is the misanthrope who just likes to complain (and who is revisited in a similar fashion in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*). Jerry acts as the voice of the people, through his standup, which comments on life by using his friends as absurdist satire. The other shows of the 1990s do not use their characters in similar fashions.

Moving into the 2000s, there are two kinds of sitcoms in this era and their use of stereotypes is telling – there are the straight, multi-camera sitcoms, which rely exclusively on stereotypes; and there are the ambitious, single-camera sitcoms, which work to problematize and overturn stereotypes. In the first category, we find shows such as *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family*, and *The Big Bang Theory*. These shows are primarily whitewashed and present their characters with a great deal of privilege, and barely attempt to complicate the characters beyond the initial characterizations. In the second are *Sex and the City*, *Arrested Development*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, etc. These shows push against various assumptions. The show that does this the most, and the most explicitly, is *The Office*. Here, the large array of characters and stereotypical assumptions are directly addressed using the loveable cluelessness of Michael Scott (Steve Carell). Michael hates people being categorized, but he himself frequently does so. As he pushes against the stereotypes around him – such as racial stereotypes embodied in Stanley and Darrell (Leslie David Baker), the sexuality stereotypes of Oscar (Oscar Nuñez), and the huge range of representations of women – the character illustrates the stereotypes and explains why their inherent assumptions are bad, all of which plays out as a source of humor.

For instance, in the beginning of the third season, Michael inadvertently outs Oscar to the office after referring to him as a gay slur. Michael struggles to correct his mistake, justifying the slur by saying “I would have never called him that if I knew. You don't call retarded people retards. It's bad taste. You call your friends retards when they're acting retarded. And I consider Oscar a friend.” He calls an office meeting and discusses with them the fact that Oscar is gay and pushes Oscar into kissing him, to normalize Oscar's homosexuality. Michael's efforts are a source of humor, it is uncomfortable and

funny to watch him make stereotypical assumptions about homosexuality with Dwight – Dwight is confused about Oscar’s sexuality, since Oscar doesn’t “dress like a woman.” The extreme awkwardness is a lesson against the stereotype.

Another way to look at stereotypes is to trace specific representations through their life-cycle to examine the ways that these characters began as stereotypes and whether or not they grew beyond that image. For instance, although characters in the 1960s and 1970s were more upfront regarding sex, this same openness did not extend to sexuality. There was little indication that not all people are heterosexual. *Mary Tyler Moore*, *All in the Family*, and *M\*A\*S\*H* feature singular episodes where the characters meet gay men, but this is not common for the era. The first recurring gay characters, as well as an in-depth discussion of those individuals, are on *Barney Miller*. The show features a gay criminal – Marty (Jack DeLeon) – and a gay officer, Zatelli (Dino Natali). Zatelli becomes the target of Internal Affairs Inspector Scanlon (George Murdock), who is already established as unpleasant. Barney knows that Zatelli is gay, because Zatelli told him, but makes it clear to both Zatelli and to Scanlon that he will not out the officer, because there is no crime in being gay. Scanlon puts considerable pressure on Zatelli to resign, once he discovers who the anonymous homosexual is, but again Barney, as well as the other officers in the precinct, stand with Zatelli, not with Scanlon.

Another show with frequent, prominent discussions of homosexuality is *The Golden Girls*. *The Golden Girls* is famous for presenting sex as very natural, with all of the women having multiple sexual partners over the course of the show. They talk about having sex more frequently than just about any other show of the era. Thus, it is not out of the ordinary for them to discuss sexuality as well. Dorothy’s (Bea Arthur) brother Phil



is a cross-dresser, whose lifestyle is the point of much of the humor, although he is never seen. Sophia (Estelle Getty) has a lot of trouble understanding her son's choices. Phil is, however, presented as happily married to a woman with children. Phil's sexuality is clearly not tied up with his dressing proclivities. In fact, Sophie even makes it clear that "queer" is a better word choice for Phil than "gay," because he was married with children. The series also features a gay character in Blanche's brother Clayton (Monte Markham). He spends most of the time in the closet with Blanche, but out to the rest of the girls. Eventually, he comes out to her and she refuses to accept both him and the truth. She eventually comes around once he introduces her to his partner, who he is marrying. Sophie counsels Blanche, "Everyone wants someone to grow old with, shouldn't everyone have that chance?" Through both Clayton and Phil, the Golden Girls demonstrate the nuances associated with lifestyles and relationships. Not many shows of the 1980s made equivalent strides.

*Roseanne* also featured recurring homosexual characters: Roseanne's boss/co-worker Leon (Martin Mull) and his partner, her friend Nancy (Sandra Bernhard), and, eventually, her mother Bev (Estelle Parsons) – although this occurs in the fictional season that Roseanne has created, and in the end, she reveals that it was her sister, Jackie (Laurie Metcalf), who came out. These characters engage with the primary characters about their sexuality and what precisely it means. Leon actually argues with another of Dan's friends about whether it is harder to be a gay man in America or a black man. Dan, Roseanne, and Jackie discuss what they would do if one of their children were gay. These small moments are emblematic of the implicitly resistive nature of *Roseanne*. These characters' sexuality is not a prominent plot or character trait except when narratively important.

Their sexuality is a conspicuous part of their characterization, but *Roseanne*, much like *The Golden Girls*, does not ruminate on it.

After these nuanced, resistive shows of the 1980s, the shows of the 1990s were much more heteronormative in their depictions. Even, or perhaps especially, *Friends*, which features both a recurring lesbian character and a prominent trans character, presents these characters as a source of humor, rather than of contemplation. Carol (Jane Sibbett) and Susan (Jessica Hecht) are not particularly fleshed out characters, and they themselves are not overly humorous – the point of them is to laugh at how egregiously nervous Ross gets at any mention or thought of them. This comes to the fore when Ben (Cole Sprouse) brings a Barbie with him to a visit with Ross. Ross undertakes a campaign to convince Ben to play with a GI Joe instead. When Susan and Carol confront him about this, Monica reveals that Ross used to wear dresses, host tea parties, and insist on being called “Bea.” Ross’s humiliation is clear; he drops his campaign.

The other predominant homosexual on *Friends* is Chandler’s father Charles (Kathleen Turner). Chandler explains throughout the show that Charles is a “drag queen” who dressed in women’s clothing in public throughout Chandler’s childhood, then left his mother after sleeping with the pool boy. From this description, Charles’s sexuality is clearly homosexual and his gender identity is likely transwoman, but that is not wholly obvious. All of these labels have certain definitions, which Charles does not fully embody, the most prominent of which is that s/he does not always dress in drag – but Charles is always seen in drag. That would suggest that she is a transwoman, but she continues to be called “Charles” and is never presented as anything else. Additionally, Charles’s gender identity has nothing to do with his sexuality, but on the series, the two

ideas are always intertwined – Charles dresses like a woman (and sleeps with men) or Charles sleeps with men (oh, and dresses like a woman). The characterization of Charles is only to be laughed at, not to explore the nuances of trans-individuals. Again, much of the humor is not derived from Charles per se, but from Chandler’s homophobic and transphobic reactions to his father.

These problematic depictions of homosexuality and gender fluidity can be compared to the ambitious, self-aware sitcoms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* to *The Office*, *Transparent* to *Modern Family*, a variety of homosexual characters are represented, and the nuances of gender identity are explored. Some of these, such as on *Modern Family*, hover closer to heteronormative than others, such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* with Titus (Tituss Burgess) as the embodiment of a “queer” identity. Some are very thoughtful and graceful in exploring alternative understandings of gender and sexuality, as with Maura, Sarah (Amy Landecker), and Ali (Gaby Hoffmann) on *Transparent*, and others feature the above example of Michael Scott forcing Oscar to kiss him to prove that he is understanding of homosexuality.

There is also *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*. These shows both set out specifically to take on ideas of sex and sexuality and break down barriers. They both succeed in some ways and are extremely problematic in others. *Will & Grace* features two vastly different gay men. Both Jack (Sean Hayes) and Will embody certain problematic stereotypes that they never quite grow out of. They also use words such as “homo” and “queer” as insults, in addition to Grace’s repeated, serious claim that she “turns” straight men gay. That being said, Will is a leader in the homosexual community and endeavors to help other gay men, as well as the community at large, confront

homophobia. He and Jack share the first kiss between gay men on television. They also give a presentation to the police about how to treat homosexuals and what they should not do. These boundary-expanding representations translated into the “real world” when Vice President Joe Biden said, “I think *Will & Grace* did more to educate the American public more than almost anything anybody has done so far” (Seth, 2012, para. 4). His possible hyperbole aside, Biden’s comments marked the first time a sitting vice-President had endorsed marriage equality and immediately preceded the first Presidential endorsement when Barack Obama followed his lead.

On the other end of the spectrum is *Sex and the City*. This show does not talk much about sexuality, but in the few moments it does, it presents very problematic representations. The fifth member of the circle is a gay man named Stanford (Willie Garson). He is mostly equivalent to the women, having just as many sexual partners, being just as scared as they are about appearance and impressions, and he counsels the women in the same ways. Stanford is very much “one of the girls.” His perspective is different, but continues to be tinged with femininity. In the fourth season, Samantha engages in a long-term relationship with a woman and decides that she is now a lesbian. Even while being a lesbian, she still craves heterosexual sex, but there is no suggestion that she is bisexual, just that she is cheating on her partner.

In the fifth season, the women attend the wedding of a flamboyant old friend. They are shocked to discover he is marrying a woman; they giggle about reasons this obviously gay man would marry a woman. Throughout the wedding, the foursome, plus Stanford, mock the proceedings, until the bride’s vows commence, “You are there for me in the morning, there at night, there in the good, there in the bad, there in my thoughts,

there in my dreams. But most of all my darling, you are there in my heart forever.” The camera drifts past the characters, who are moved by this speech; Carrie’s voice comes in voice over, “Perhaps we were all much too cynical. Perhaps, despite the odds, Bobby and Bitsy had found something real.” The characters are confronted by their own assumptions and realize they are wrong.

Sitcoms deal with stereotypes in assorted ways, but they all must deal with them. Television in general relies upon stereotypes to easily drop their audience into the lives of the characters. Stereotypes signal to viewers who the different people are. However, when characters never grow beyond their stereotypes, then they are problematic. Any television program can have these problematic stereotypes. The rhizomatic treatment of stereotypes is not confined to any one area of the rhizome or any one particular internode. Rather, this is emblematic of the ways that culture as a whole is influencing the rhizome. For instance, Hart (2003) uses Clark (1969)’s stages of representation to analyze representations of gay men on television. His discussion follows my analysis very clearly – with a rise at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, then dropping off in the 1980s with a few episodes featuring gay men. He then argues that gay men reached the “respect” stage in the 1990s. I would argue that we are still working to get to full respect, but that great strides have been made. Hart’s analysis looks at television as a whole, not at any specific genre. Thus, stereotypical representations of sexuality on television echo the societal norms of the time, despite the genre they are featured on.

One way that representations of sexuality have reached into the “respect” stage of representation is through creating characters whose sexuality is only one of many traits of the character. *True Blood*’s (2008-2014) Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis) is initially

presented as just such a stereotype, but eventually proves to be a culmination of a range of traits of which his sexuality is just a minor facet (Dhaenens, 2013). In fact, Lafayette is symbolic of a move today in which characters' sexuality is a minor element of their overall characterization – *Supergirl* (2015-present), *The Flash* (2014-present), *Parenthood*, *The 100* (2014-present), *No Tomorrow* (2016-2017), and *The Fall* (2013-present) all feature characters who are not heterosexual, but their sexuality is almost a footnote in their characterization. This is reflecting a movement in society towards intersectionality and recognizing the multiple aspects of a persons' identity.

**Growth.** In many respects, the point of a television show is to watch characters grow and change throughout the course of the show – or at least this is a modern understanding of television. Especially when the show is about families or features children, growing up is an inherent fact of a long running series. Nevertheless, on many early shows, growing and changing was not essential to the characters. They maintain their same characteristics. Even *Father Knows Best*, in which the characters must learn a lesson by the end of the series, tends to have the characters forget those lessons down the line and have to learn them all over again. A character will grow and change over the course of an episode, but that growth is not lasting and there is no evidence of that change later in the series.

On the other hand, a show like *Bewitched* has extremely subtle changes in some of the characters, but not in others. Primarily, Darrin never changes or even learns to tolerate his mother-in-law or magic. He maintains his total disregard for an essential aspect of Samantha's very being (except of course when it benefits him) and repeatedly insults both magic and Endora (Agnes Moorehead). Endora then tends to curse Darrin

until he learns his lesson by turning him into a monkey or something. By the end of the episode, he has to apologize to Endora before she'll turn him back. Although this happens frequently throughout the series, Darrin never learns how to handle his mother-in-law. Endora, meanwhile, eventually learns to tolerate her son-in-law. Yes, she turns him into a variety of creatures or makes him do an array of bizarre things, but later in the series, they are fairly well intentioned or she helps him in some way that he is not privy to.

For instance, in the beginning of the fifth season, Endora has decided to finally accept Samantha's marriage to Darrin, saying, "If I have to be saddled with a mortal son-in-law, I suppose he's as good as any." Darrin refuses to even listen to Endora's reasoning, or accept her wedding gift, rather, he blatantly mocks her and insists that magic does not belong in their house. Endora declares that Darrin is a "small, small man," then makes him continue to shrink to echo his mindset. He has to, as usual, apologize before she will make him normal sized again. Endora is open to Darrin, she has learned to accept him; Darrin never makes any similar concessions. What is particularly interesting about this situation is that Endora's growth is extremely unique for its era. Most shows of the time had characters who typically remained exactly the same.

The 1970s saw minimal change in this area. The characters on *Mary Tyler Moore* have some growth. Mary learns to be more confident in her abilities; Lou softens. The character that seems to grow the most here, however, is ditsy on-screen talent Ted Baxter. Early in the series, Ted is a womanizing idiot. By the end of the series, he is still extremely dumb, but has married, had children, and embraced fatherhood completely.

Similarly, Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* learns to be more accepting of others, primarily to make Edith and Gloria happy. Before the Jeffersons spin off into their

own show, Archie even councils George Jefferson on how to put up with his in-laws. Edith also grows a lot, learning how to be independent from Archie and make her own decisions. Mike and Gloria, meanwhile, barely grow up, except into their roles as parents. They continue to assume the worst about Archie, and Gloria uses childish manipulation to convince her parents to do things.

*Cheers* is the first show in which the main characters make lasting, noticeable change. Sam and Diane both must change to accommodate the other – those changes and the frustration associated with that level of change is the cause of many of the storylines. However, once Diane leaves the show, the changes that she caused in Sam remain and cause ripple effects throughout other elements of the series. By the end of the series, Sam has realized that not only is he an alcoholic (and he uses his own alcoholism to help Rebecca when she begins abusing alcohol), but also that he is addicted to sex and goes into therapy to help. Sam is alert to his own shortcomings and succeeds in overcoming many of them. The most obvious growth, however, is not necessarily in Sam and Diane, but in those around them – including Frasier.

Frasier began as a peripheral character on *Cheers* then grew so considerably that he required his own series. However, watching that growth is important to understand the influence that *Cheers* had on all other series. The simple fact that Frasier stuck around after being introduced suggests that the producers saw in him great potential.

Additionally, they were able to use Frasier (and by extension Lilith [Bebe Neuwirth]) to explore class differences, psychological discourses, and the taken-for-granted-ness of bar culture. Diane is unwilling to bow to the level of *Cheers* – she would never voluntarily hang out there, without being in love with Sam. Both Frasier and Lilith do. Lilith clearly



enjoys watching the bar patrons who are so different from her, and she seems to genuinely like Carla and Rebecca. Frasier's only friends seem to be at the bar and he learns humility from them. This kind of character development is precisely the narrative structure of *Cheers* that sitcoms (and any ensemble series) mimicked.

Some shows demand that their characters grow up – *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne*, *Frasier*, *Friends*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Modern Family*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, *Girls*, *New Girl*, etc. – while others have mechanisms in place that prevent such growth. *The Golden Girls* are old enough that there is very little change required to fully explore their lives. The characters of *Seinfeld* cannot grow, or their satire would not function properly. A lot of the satire of *Arrested Development* also centers on the Bluth's inability to learn their lessons. Not only that, but the characters that could grow – George Michael and Maebe (Alia Shawkat) – seem to learn all the wrong lessons from their parents and, instead, manage to maintain much of the Bluth obliviousness in their adult lives.

#### **Axiom Four: Mapping the Rhizome**

Four axioms ground the generic rhizome: television genres are not constrained categories; television shows are the nodes of the rhizome, the confluence of the characteristic carrying internodes; sections of the rhizome can be removed altogether without detriment to the rest of the rhizome; the rhizome enables broad cultural mapping of genre. These axioms, originating in both genre and rhizome theories, anticipate a constantly shifting, dynamic television sphere. In this analysis, I have demonstrated three of the four axioms and by doing so, have shown the ways that sitcoms are part of a larger television rhizome that contributes to their cultural importance.

First, I showed the ways in which the sitcom defies the boundaries set forth for it. The sitcom genre cannot be defined as a given set of basic characteristics, because those characteristics change from one program to the next. Instead, “sitcom” should be considered more of a sensibility – a way of approaching a television program, but one that is open to alternative influences. That way, a program can draw heavily upon the traditional sitcoms that came before it, but also upon, for example, the raw realism of cinéma-vérité to create faux-documentaries like *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. In individual pieces, these characteristics are interesting but generally meaningless; within the rhizome the individual elements of a television program suddenly become infused with import. That realism is not simply a funny affect on the part of *The Office*, it is demonstrative of a media movement towards authentic representations. The progression of internodes is not, and cannot be, linear – they can come and go from one program to the next and certainly from one year to the next. Only by looking at programs in isolation first, then as the part of a rhizome, can the significance of those traits become obvious.

I then showed the ways in which the rhizome allows for the mapping of genre using nodes and internodes. I analyzed a series of internodes and the ways that these internodes constantly influence nodes of sitcoms, as well as other types of generic television. Analyzing the constitutive elements of television programs reveals substance in places not otherwise noticed. For instance, on its own *Bewitched* appears to be a frivolous sitcom about a witch and her idiotic husband. It travails the same ground as *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*. However, by noticing the frequency with which progressive ideals are mentioned, the lack of a studio audience, the reliance on technological innovation, the growth of the characters, etc., *Bewitched* suddenly becomes

closer to *Mary Tyler Moore* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* than traditional sitcoms.

*Bewitched* was a very ambitious sitcom, not simply in its era, but in general. The generic rhizome reveals *Bewitched*'s depth in ways that a surface reading, or a reading of it as simply "a sitcom" does not.

Another way that mapping the rhizome reveals information about television shows is through the connections between societal ideologies and other storytelling devices within shows. Since culture acts less as an internode and more as the soil into which the rhizome is planted – providing nutrients – cultural influences cannot be traced as easily. However, by examining the usage of narrative devices and the ways that these devices interact with cultural norms, those influences become more obvious. As an example, I traced the use of flashbacks to deepen a diegetic world. I looked at the different ways that the flashback has been used over the history of sitcoms to examine the ways that these programs created character depth. The frequency with which flashbacks are used points to complicated narratives. Thus, the move towards "complex" television would be rife with flashbacks. However, by also looking at times when flashbacks are not used but individual complexity remains, I established that flashbacks are not a hallmark of complex television in general, but of a means to bring the audience into the story in a personal fashion. The cultural influence of the rhizome does not necessarily mean ideological tracings, but can also suggest the ways that audiences read the characters and the ways that storytelling devices reflect society.

The one axiom that this analysis did not focus on is axiom three: that any aspect of the rhizome can be removed without detriment to the whole. Such analysis is difficult to do when tracing the history of a genre, but at the same time, several devices disappear

almost entirely from sitcoms and no one noticed or cared. For instance, slapstick comedy was the persistent norm on television in the early days, but is almost non-existent today. The rhizome is not lesser for it; it is simply different as a result. Additionally, any of the nodes or internodes investigated within this analysis could simply be removed from television history altogether and the rhizome would still exist – albeit in a significantly altered state. Finally, the last aspect of the third axiom is that the traits of the removed section of the rhizome linger. This axiom will be investigated more in depth in the following chapter, but if we return to the slapstick example, we can see how this is still relevant. There are programs that continue to feature slapstick – viral videos, *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1989-present), talent contests, etc. Additionally, slapstick is used as a fall back for lots of forms of television. A midseason finale of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-present) featured a character being run over by a truck, in a moment of pure slapstick, simply because the producers thought it would be funny. Slapstick may be gone as a dominant force in television comedy, but it still governs much of the ways that sitcoms and other comedies unfold. Slapstick still persists through the rhizome.

The generic rhizome allows for nuanced readings of television programs, devices, and genres. Through examining the internodes that stretch between nodes, new connections that can reveal fascinating elements of programs are made clear. I have demonstrated one way of doing such analysis, focusing on the nodes of the rhizome and the internodes that spring forth from those shows – or that feed into the nodes. As I have done so, I have demonstrated that sitcoms are not as clear cut as many people believe, but should be included within the 21<sup>st</sup> century distinction of complex television. The rhizome prevents them from being anything but complex. The complexity of the rhizome also

allows for internodes to continuing touching nodes, even when the primary manifestations of the nodes no longer exist. The following chapter will unpack this aspect of the rhizome through an analysis of television Westerns.

## CHAPTER 6: WESTERN ANALYSIS

Three people (or maybe more) stand facing each other, guns drawn in all directions, threatening everyone. No one can move or someone's gun will go off. The individuals are likely cowboys, but they could be detectives facing off against a criminal, as in *NCIS* (2003-present), or aliens trying to blow up the Earth, as on *Doctor Who* (2005-present). The guns in question could be revolvers and rifles, or could be paintball guns (*Community* [2009-2015]) or finger guns (*Cougar Town* [2009-2015]). The results are usually the same – the good guys eventually outlast or outmaneuver the bad guys – although the route to get there may change dramatically (“Mexican Standoff,” n.d.). This is a Mexican Standoff. It is a trope of many films, but originates in Westerns such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). As a result, the Mexican Standoff has entered the public imagining as an occurrence in any genre. This chapter will examine these kinds of Western tropes – those that have stretched beyond the Western to other forms of television. The generic rhizome accounts for these apparently misplaced traits by shifting our conception of genre from one of a bounded set of characteristics to a rhizomatic confluence of traits that can be primarily centered in one type of genre, but that are perfectly suited for other generic forms of programs. In this way, so-called “Western” tropes simply become internodes generally associated with the Western. This chapter will examine these internodes and the ways that they interact with a variety of television programs. By doing so, I will look at the ways that these “Western” tropes influence the programs in which they appear.

The Western is one of the longest lasting genres on television, stretching all the way back to film serials and radio plays. Indeed, the Western appeared long before audio

and video media as serialized stories in magazines and newspapers. There was a dramatic rise in the television Western in the 1950s and 1960s, before interest in the genre suddenly dropped off and disappeared. In the 2010s, there are only a handful of Westerns still on the air – *Hell on Wheels* (2011-2016), *Longmire* (2012-present), *Frontier* (2016-present), *Quick Draw* (2013-2014), and *Westworld* (2016-present). What still exists on television today are other programs that have been influenced, whether intentionally or not, by the Western; those television programs that contain rhizomatic attributes from a variety of generic clusters, including the Western.

The rhizome can work in a variety of ways; as examined in the previous chapter, the traits of television genres can be so ubiquitous that they stretch beyond their own boundaries to influence and be influenced by other shows and other eras. In this conceptualization of genre, there are no genre boundaries. Instead, there are clusters of programs that contain the same sets of characteristics. This chapter will look at how a single genre can be almost entirely gone from television screens and yet the characteristics still manage to influence programming. This is the attribute of the rhizome called “asignifying ruptures.” A section of the rhizome can be broken off and moved without harm to the rhizome itself. That section can grow again elsewhere, and the nutrients that existed there continue to flow throughout the rest of the rhizome. In this chapter, I will argue that this is what has happened to Westerns. The “Western cluster” of television programs has nearly disappeared from screens, but the traits that predominate in those programs still exist within the television rhizome.

The Western mythos is such a strong part of American culture that it is unlikely to completely vanish from popular culture. On television, it has sprouted within other genres

that continue to uphold the characters, values, and aesthetics of the West. As Western television programs have decreased, their attributes have still upheld the values and history inherent in those programs. Therefore, I will break down the attributes of the Western hero, the Western narratives, and the Western aesthetics to look at what internodes characterized Westerns in the first place and how the mythos of the American frontier is wrapped up in those internodes. I will then suggest a few examples of shows where these attributes continue to exist and look at the ways that the mythic “West” embedded within those traits influences these series.

Once again, these attributes are organized rhizomatically, without hierarchy or structure. Hence, I have organized the following section without a sense of hierarchy or linearity. I believe the presentation order of elements enhances readability, but any implied progression is incidental. The only organization here is that within each overarching genre characteristic, the attributes I have identified are those that other scholars have suggested are prominent in the vast majority of “true” Westerns. This is not to say that these are the only attributes of Westerns. As I shall demonstrate in this chapter, a Western program is a subjective identification and, therefore, all programs run the gamut of containing “Western” attributes. Some shows contain no attributes at all, while others only seem to have Western traits. This analysis will simply be a starting place for how a rhizomatic analysis can look at programs separate from their genre distinction, thereby showing that generic attributes can exist within programs that do not initially appear to be within that genre.

This analysis is based primarily in contextual and paratextual research. Over the next few pages, I will outline the primary attributes that scholars and critics have



identified as being “Western” in three major areas: those of the Western Hero, the thematic aspects, and the aesthetics. After outlining the characteristics of each area, I identify other places on television where I see those traits. To do this, I used my own knowledge of television, as well as keyword searches on websites such as [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) and Wikipedia, and on scholarly databases. I also made great use of [TVTropes.org](http://TVTropes.org), a crowd sourced wiki of widely used tropes on television. Throughout the analysis, you will see that I identified tropes within Westerns then used TVTropes to identify where else those tropes are found. For programs I was familiar with, I simply relied upon the works of others to write my analysis. For those handful I was not, I watched enough of the series to have a sense of what the critics were referring to and how the show’s attributes fit.

### **Western Heroes**

Westerns are typically centered around one primary character. The Western hero has become an essential aspect of American media mythos. Discourses surrounding patriotism, masculinity, and the rose-tinged nostalgia regarding American history bring to mind Clint Eastwood or John Wayne, the Lone Ranger (Clayton Moore) or Marshal Matt Dillon (James Arness). These larger than life creations, in their Stetsons and spurs, persist not only as idealized representations of the past, but also as stalwart simulacra in the present. There are myriad ways to examine these stalwarts – through their nostalgia, through the problematic discourses surrounding them, etc. – but for now I want to focus on what makes them who they are and trace those attributes down the rhizome to find other television protagonists who exist within the Western Hero mythos.

Various scholars have studied the Western hero over the years and have collated attributes of him (and according to scholars, it is always a “him.” We will interrogate this

masculine predominance later). For instance, Yoggy (1995) says that Western heroes are loners, with “an acute sense of right and wrong” who “could not stand idly by while an injustice was done.” He says that they are “relatively young, strong, handsome in a rugged way; attracted to women in general” and “an expert in the ways of survival on the frontier; brave to a fault; a man of few words,” “adept with his fists and highly skilled in the use of a gun” (p. 186). Bandy and Stoehr (2012) suggest that Western heroes are “protagonists who conquer enemies, vanquish evil, and help to blaze a path through the wilderness so that a law-centered civilization can flourish” (p. 269). MacDonald (1987) emphasizes that they are “flawless types who blended strength and savvy to overcome injustice” (p. 27). Parks (1982) says:

The Western hero, then, is generally a loner. He is, however, a man in command of things, persons, and events, handling them skillfully but with a certain aloofness that preserves his integrity. He is a man of mysterious and frequently melancholy past; his future is tenuous and foreboding. He is almost always a man with one foot in the wilderness and the other in civilization, moving through life belonging to neither world (p. 58).

These attributes become much more concrete when embodied within actual people.

The Western Hero is exemplified in a handful of film and television characters from the 1930s-1950s. These characters range from the do-gooders of B-Westerns to the nuanced, tortured heroes of Adult Westerns. The Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy (William Boyd) established the prototype out of which much of the cowboy mythos was born. The Lone Ranger was “a patriotic, God-fearing, tolerant, habitless character who always used good grammar, never shot to kill, and who could ‘fight great odds, yet take

time to treat a bird with a broken wing'" (MacDonald, 1987, p. 27). Similarly, Cassidy carried "two pearl-handled six-shooters and [rode] a pure white horse . . . [he was] a 'picture of gallantry, chivalry, honesty, justice, morality, and good-natured Christian decency'" (Yoggy, 1995, p. 7). However, these one-dimensional characters did not persist for long, no matter how much they are remembered with nostalgia.

Instead, most Western heroes are "more human and consequently more believable . . . a complex mixture of good and evil, strength and weakness" (Yoggy, 1995, p. 78). Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) from *The Searchers* (1956) is heralded by many as the gold-standard of this adult Western hero. Ethan is a "'good bad man' – a person who has been on the wrong side of the law for a while . . . an outsider, a loner with no lover pattern, or best friend to need or guide him" (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, p. 190). This filmic representation appeared first on television in the form of Matt Dillon. Dillon initially appeared to embody the traditional image of a cowboy. He was tough, a man of few words, tall, etc. However, in the first few minutes of the premier, Dillon was outgunned by the antagonist and left for dead. Audiences were shocked, because for the first time on television, their hero was not invincible (Yoggy, 1995, p. 92).

Western heroes have complicated romances that rarely serve as the basis of the plot, but that can work to create motivations for the heroes; Western heroes are overtly male; they need redemption; Western heroes grow very little over the course of a series, but also have very little background to form the basis of any growth; Western heroes frequently fresh out of the Civil War; and Western heroes can wield a gun, but they don't always feel compelled to do so. These attributes of the Western hero have persisted in various forms on television since the demise of the Western in the 1970s. I intend to

examine each of these attributes briefly before turning to other television protagonists who maintain several of these attributes, as well as the basic oeuvre of the Western hero.

### **Romances**

Film Westerns have always featured romances in one form or another. These romances were most frequently relegated to the background, or to serve as the motivation for the protagonist. These romances could work as conflict that create tension between the protagonist and the antagonist of the film (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012). However, these romances did not hold over into the first television Westerns. The Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy did not get mixed up with women on their shows (MacDonald, 1987). *Guns smoke* (1955-1970) featured a romance between Marshall Matt Dillon and Miss Kitty (Amanda Blake), who Mock (2013) refers to as the “Sam and Diane of their era” (p. 97). Mock also looks at the sexually charged *Have Gun Will Travel* (1957-1963), but suggests that because main character Paladin (Richard Boone) is a mercenary and travelling constantly, he is not capable of having actual romances.

Romances in Westerns have persisted as a recurring element of the mythos, and yet they were a minor aspect of early television Westerns. The focus on these early Westerns was very much on other aspects of the hero. Nevertheless, those romances, or lack thereof, are important aspects of the Western hero because of how they persist on television. Romances have formed the backbone of a great many television shows. They also formed the backbone of film Westerns. Nevertheless, Western romances are not the primary stimulus of the series. Instead, the romances of Western heroes are either non-existent or play out in the background and have little effect on the characters. Perhaps there is some rhizomatic lineage behind the lack then resurgence of romance in television

Westerns. If there is, no scholar has yet traced such a lineage. Indeed, the only situation in which a Western hero is genuinely influenced by a romance is if that romantic interest has been lost or threatened in some way. For instance, in *Hell on Wheels*, Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) has joined the construction crew of the Transcontinental railroad in order to enact vengeance upon the soldiers who murdered his wife during the Civil War. His only motivation is to identify and murder these soldiers. He eventually grows past his need for vengeance and is able to rejoin society by asking for forgiveness and finding a new love.

### **Masculinity**

A recurring discourse of both Westerns themselves and the American mythos of the Old West is one of masculinity. Many aspects of hegemonic masculinity are mixed up in the same thoughts as those that define the Western hero. The Western hero is a “courageous, fit, and active type, eager for adventure or plagued by it, a personality formed by adversity and challenge” (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, p. 2). Those attributes all must be filled by a man, because of how intertwined they are with hegemonic masculinity. In fact, the prototypical Western hero – say, John Wayne – so thoroughly exemplifies hegemonic masculinity that Western heroes are typically the image conjured when discussing masculinity. That being said, I will demonstrate here that Western Heroes can be female using the rhizome. Just as programs exist on a spectrum of “Western” characteristics, so do characters – including the women. Once I have established the parameters of Western masculinity, I will discuss the ways that female characters make use of similar traits.

Hegemonic masculinity are the discourses that establish the idealized version of what it means to be a “man.” These discourses can change depending on era and circumstances; therefore hegemonic masculinity is not a singular set of characteristics. Instead, hegemonic masculinity is “constructed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities” (Connell, 1987, p. 183) and cannot easily be reduced to specific characteristics. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity is frequently represented through “fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, and Sylvester Stallone” (Connell, 1987, p. 184-185). Lotz (2007) ties the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity to

men’s dominant gender status in culture includ[ing] aspects such as behaviors and attitudes that assert men’s ‘natural’ place as leaders and their superiority over women and that commonly position certain men – specifically, those who are white, heterosexual, physically powerful, and educated or financially prosperous – as having greater power than others (p. 35)

Kimmel (2010) observes the recent global hegemon to exist in the American, cosmopolitan businessman (p. 144), but that historically, American masculinity has been intertwined with the violence of the American Western, “American men don’t get mad; they get even” (p. 137). Thus, the attributes of the Western hero are directly entangled with hegemonic masculinity. Many of those specific traits are subsumed into other aspects of this analysis – romance, gunslinger, as well as the *je ne sais quoi* I discuss at the end of this section.

When women are situated as Western heroes, their pastiche emulates masculine traits, or is tempered through a secondary male character who allows her to still be

feminine in other ways. In other words, women are presented either as masculine or only heroic to a point, before some man has to take over as hero. Take, for instance, Michaela Quinn (Jane Seymour) of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998). She is a woman who has a man's name, Mike, and a man's job, as a doctor. Nevertheless, she is courageous, fit, active, eager for adventure, etc. She is a Western hero, except that she is also a mother and a care-giver in ways that traditional Western heroes are not. Indeed, the traditional role of Western hero is, in fact, fulfilled by her romantic interest, Sully (Joe Lando). Sully is always around to save Dr. Quinn when necessary and to let her be feminine when she desires it. Similarly, a show about Annie Oakley (Gail Davis) ran from 1954 – 1957. This account of the famous gunslinger remains fairly true to her shooting prowess. However, she left other elements of fighting, such as physical altercations, to the male characters. Additionally, she “demonstrated other feminine characteristics, like cooking the best apple pie in town” (Yoggy, 1995, p. 26).

Despite the sense that women cannot persist as Western heroes without some male counterpart, today women feature all the characteristics of the Western Hero. This is the rhizome at work. The rhizome enables characters to manifest in ways otherwise unnoticed. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest that hegemonic masculinity is not the norm, as very few men actually enact such traits. The similarities between the range of masculinities theorized by Connell and Messerschmidt and the range of types of characters who embody the traits of the Western hero can only exist because the rhizome is at work on those characters. Indeed, in many respects, the rhizome enables characters to leave behind their gendered classifications and embody attributes separate from their

assigned hegemonic manifestations. So, while traditional Westerns may have only featured masculine heroes, the rhizomatic Western does not have such strictures.

### **Lack of History and Manifestation of Vengeance**

A recurring trope of Westerns is the mysterious backgrounds of the heroes. These backgrounds are rarely revealed fully to the audience but guide the motivation of the hero. These types of Westerns are mostly character driven and culminate in “the revelation of an incident from the past that has played a major role in making him the kind of person he is at present” (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, p. 181). One of the primary reasons for this lack of history is, as McGee (2007) observes, because “a man without a history has no real identity because identity is a function of history, of the stories we tell about ourselves, both as individuals and as members of a group” (p. 6). Therefore, these heroes are mysterious in the eyes of both the other characters and the audience. This lack of identity and history plays into the motivations of the characters. Most commonly, the mysterious history of the hero is some life-altering event for which he seeks revenge.

These heroes appear to be “on the verge of a breakdown” (McGee, 2007, p. 129) as a result of whatever events occurred in their past. Wright (1975) identifies one variant on the “classical” Western plot that is steered by the hero’s need for vengeance, thus creating that incident from the past that continues to haunt the hero. As a result of this need for vengeance, the hero breaks away from society to achieve his goals. Kirkley (1979) suggests that these heroes are typically drifters, who either came to town on purpose, in pursuit of vengeance, or simply by chance. The stimulus for the vengeance is either that the villain committed a crime for which the hero was blamed or the villain murdered a member or members of the hero’s family (Fenin & Everson, 1973). Once



these past events are revealed to the other characters and the audience, the hero becomes more relatable to the audience because we can see him “struggling with [his] present problems and past bad choices” (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, p. 223).

The Lone Ranger has just such a struggle and lack of backstory. While bits and pieces of the Lone Ranger’s origin story were told during the series, they varied from episode to episode and a limited amount of his story held true across the series: he is the only survivor of a massacre of Texas Rangers by a band of outlaws. He travels alone with Tonto to battle the enemies of law and order, including those that killed the other rangers. The death of the other rangers does not haunt the Lone Ranger in the same way that the need for revenge haunts film Westerns, such as in *True Grit* (1969; 2010) where main character Mattie (Kim Darby; Hailee Steinfeld) is out for revenge for the murder of her father. Nevertheless, the lonesome nature of the Lone Ranger and Tonto is prototypical of the manifestation of revenge in television Westerns.

### **Not growing**

Television shows, as an element of their basic structure, feature characters who grow and change. Even on early television, where this growth was miniscule, the characters’ age adapt to different stories according to their changing circumstances. An essential element of the Western is that the characters don’t grow. These characters have little to no background and the reveal of that background, and how the history informs the present, typically fulfills any growth necessary to relate to the character. As Bandy and Stoehr (2012) put it, “the Westerner simply changes from “bad man” to “good man” at a certain point in the narrative, and that is that” (p. 182). This contradiction between television and Western tropes comes out predominantly in favor of the Western – the

heroes tended to be “static and unchanging” (Yoggy, 1995, p. 76). The television Western focused on adventures, gunslinging, law and order, etc., and not on character development. Even the adult Westerns that featured character-driven plots were more concerned with morality and the nuances of ethics than with growing their characters.

One of the most famous and enduring television Western heroes is Marshall Matt Dillon of *Gunsmoke*. Dillon was “Slow to anger and aware of what drove men to criminality in the 1870s . . . He did not know all the answers; he sometimes misjudged people; he could get angry; he sometimes needed other people to complete his tasks” (MacDonald, 1987, p. 65). Dillon was one of the very first adult, complicated, fallible Western television heroes. Additionally, the series itself shifted its heart over its twenty-year run from “a series whose focus is that of a traditional hero-centered Western to a series that may be described more accurately as the continuing story of people we all know and love” (R. Parks, 1982, p. 143). Nevertheless, as Yoggy (1995) observes, Dillon himself only aged, but barely changed. This is because of the nature of Western heroes.

### **Gunslinger**

The Western hero is also a gunslinger. He does not necessarily need his weapon to enact his form of justice, but when he does need it, he can win any gun fight easily. The incredible mythos surrounding the Westerner as Gunslinger almost precludes any possibility of a Westerner not wielding a gun (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012). In reality, very few of the early television heroes killed the villains against which they were fighting. Shows such as *Hopalong Cassidy*, *The Gene Autry Show* (1950-1955), and *The Roy Rogers Show* (1951-1957) featured situations where “the ‘good guys’ never shot first and rarely killed the ‘bad guys.’ They simply incapacitated them by expertly shooting the

pistols out of their hands and then turned them over to the law for punishment” (Yoggy, 1995, p. 5). The ability to choose between killing and injuring is indicative of being a skilled shot. Being a skilled shot is imperative to being a Western hero, mostly because such skill would have been borne in him as a child shooting on his family’s farm or ranch (Yoggy, 1995).

The most prominent example of a gunslinger from television Westerns is Paladin from *Have Gun, Will Travel*. Paladin is a gunfighter-for-hire who travels around the West fighting on behalf of whoever hires him, although he also frequently does so for free. His motto was “I never draw my gun, unless I intend to use it” (West, 1987, p. 48). He would choose negotiation over violence, letting his strong code of ethics win out over his greed most of the time (West, 1987). But when necessary, Paladin would easily take out whoever he needed with a flick of his gun hand.

Western heroes are more than simply these traits, of course. These are some of the most prominent. There is, however, one other aspect of the Western hero. He will also have a certain *je ne sais quoi*; that is, there is an indescribable manner about him that is necessary to be a Western hero. That being said, I am going to endeavor to describe this manner. The Western hero is typically silent and brooding in his mannerisms. He does not share his internal thoughts or struggles with those around him. He is ruggedly handsome, but with an air of neglect or apathy towards his outward appearance. He was likely a former soldier, probably just out of the Civil War, and carries himself with composure. He has good posture and is always very sure of himself. He cares little about money or resources, preferring to live simply and by himself.

The Western hero is grounded in his enigmatic nature; television itself is based around narrative enigmas. There are many television characters that have one or two elements of the Western hero – there are plenty of vengeful men who can shoot a gun and are mostly indifferent towards romance. Even the smallest snippet of these Western internodes can influence a character and, thus, a program. A character could only feature the *je ne sais quoi* of the Western hero and none of his other traits and still have the door opened for an analysis of that individual through the Western. That’s the essence of the rhizome. Even traditional Westerns rarely featured characters with all of these traits. These are simply a handful of the most prominent identifiers of the Western hero. The characters I am going to identify here as being Western heroes feature multiple levels of heroic attributes; I will look at the influence of each of those attributes.

### **Non-Western Heroes with Western Heroic Attributes**

Using the website TVTropes.org, I identified several “TV tropes” that aligned with aspects of the Western Hero. These included: “the quiet one,” “the stoic,” “the drifter,” “the gunslinger,” “redemption quest,” “reformed but not tamed,” “the tragic hero,” and “the old soldier.” I then compiled a list of possible Western heroes based on the examples used on TVtropes. I then did scholarly and popular press research, and read plot and character synopses of shows and characters I was unfamiliar with. This process generated a list of likely Western heroes. Some of these heroes are more blatantly Western than others. The level of obviousness will be discussed in the analysis.

One set of obvious Western heroes are the Winchester brothers from *Supernatural* (2005-present). Valenzano and Engstrom (2014) specifically outline the ways in which *Supernatural* is a Western, and throughout this analysis I will revisit these observations.

But for now, I want to elaborate upon the ways in which Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) are Western heroes. The Winchester brothers lost their mother to a demon when they were both very young. Their father (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), also a Western hero, took his sons on a journey to avenge their mother's death. As adults, Sam and Dean pick up where their father left off. While Sam is in college at the beginning of the series, when his own fiancée is killed in the same manner as his mother, he picks up with Dean again on the road. The two travel from town to town destroying whatever supernatural beast has infiltrated that village.

First and foremost, the very name Winchester associates the men with the eponymous gun manufacturer, established in 1866 (“Historical timeline 1866-1899,” 2016) that became the most famous firearm in the Old West, thus aligning them with the traditions of the gunslinger. They both can wield an array of fire arms with aplomb. Additionally, they are drifters and loners. They survive off credit card scams and conning pool hall patrons; they live in dive hotels just off the highways. They are haunted by their pasts, while also letting their need for vengeance feed into their pursuit of demons. In any given situation, the Winchester brothers are the most knowledgeable authority on any given supernatural occurrence. Even when they don't know everything necessary to defeat the creature, they have the resources to uncover that information. They have a very strong moral code, instilled in them by their father, that informs their actions. At the same time, over the course of the show, they learn that their father was, perhaps, not always right about his ethics and that, at times, demons are not the enemy. They do grow and change, but not considerably and, keeping in mind that the show has now been on the air for twelve seasons, they never quite learn their lessons.

The Winchester only ever need each other; they do not rely upon romantic relationship or many other lasting friendships. Nevertheless, they do have a group of companions they can call on when appropriate. This larger group is composed of some cowboys, such as Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver), another demon hunter, but also with individuals who are far removed from hunting, such as Castiel (Misha Collins), an angel sent to assist them, and Ruby (Genevieve Padalecki), a demon who hunts other demons. The fact that the Winchester typically stick to themselves, but have friends they can call on to assist them, is prototypical of traditional Westerns. Consider *The Magnificent Seven* (1960; 2016), *Tombstone* (1993), or *Unforgiven* (1992). The Western heroes in these films recognize the limits of their abilities and call upon old partners as extra support to bring down the villains. The Winchester do the same.

Another character who is clearly a cowboy is James “Sawyer” Ford (Josh Holloway) from *Lost* (2004-2010). As a child, Sawyer’s father killed himself and Sawyer’s mother after a con man swindled them out of their life-savings. Sawyer vowed to avenge them, eventually adopting the name and persona of the con man. Throughout his young-adulthood, until the time he crashes onto the island, Sawyer is a loner and drifter, making his living conning people and moving on to the next town. He occasionally has partners, but those partners have limited on-screen personality, and he has one long-term romantic relationship before the island. This relationship, with Cassidy (Kim Dickens), falls apart because he cannot help but steal her money. Once on the island, Sawyer maintains his drifter/loner status. He does not join in with the other islanders’ attempts to live, instead taking to hoarding whatever he can find. He is mysterious and seems to be angry about his past. He is also the first character on the

island to shoot a gun, having stolen one from a Marshal aboard the plane. These things, in conjunction with Sawyer's thick southern accent, create the image of the Western hero.

As time goes by on the island, Sawyer becomes more "heroic," as that happens, Sawyer's Western heroic traits lessen – perhaps because he violates a central tenant of the hero, he grows. Sawyer joins in with the group more frequently and harbors feelings for Kate (Evangeline Lilly) and later falls in love with Juliet (Elizabeth Mitchell).

Nevertheless, the flash-sideways version of Sawyer finds him embodying a traditional Western figure, as a police officer still fighting for vengeance against the man who caused the death of his parents.

*Lost* features multiple Western heroes, including Kate Austen. While Kate is a woman, she never lets her femininity get in the way of her role as a Western hero. Instead, she almost fully embodies the persona of the traditional Western hero. She is romantically involved with both Jack (Matthew Fox) and Sawyer over the course of the series, but with neither for very long. She has a questionable history that haunts her. She killed her birth father and went on the run as a young adult (Ames, 2014). She does not grow much over the course of the series. She is also an integral part of the island group, but in such a way that she is clearly acting as the protector of them and not as an ordinary member. She stands with Jack as his second-in-command and protects her fellow islanders, but there is little sense that she is "friends" with any of the other islanders. She is always the protector.

Wiggins (1993) looks at the heroics of Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) and Al Calavici (Dean Stockwell) on *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993). She outlines the ways in which Sam is a traditional hero, what I would deem Western hero in the strain of

Hopalong Cassidy, and Al is a “tarnished hero of modern times” (p. 112). Both feature attributes of the Western hero, but Sam, who travels from location to location throughout the series, is the more traditional Western hero, with a larger number of Western attributes. Sam even refers to himself as a “time travelling Lone Ranger.” Al is a “fallible human being” who “operates on situational ethics,” while Sam is a “moral man faced with often conflicting dilemmas” (Wiggins, 1993, p. 118). Sam always encourages those around him to believe in his same moral rectitude. The show itself continually requires that both Sam and Al explore their ethical codes, but Sam’s never wavers.

The journeying aspect of Sam’s participation in the Quantum Leap experiment does not allow for him to have romances that last longer than an episode – although he is married, he often cannot remember his wife. Sam’s history is complicated, because his Quantum Leaping causes temporary amnesia, so at the beginning of each episode, Sam has no memory of his own history. The audience is made aware of certain aspects of that history, but they are largely unimportant in the overall plot of the series. He also does not generally seek vengeance, but Sam is always in pursuit of a singular goal: to get home. He never manages to get home, but is constantly leaping through time, striving to “put right what once went wrong.” He continues to jump, not simply to get home, but also because of his profound belief that God is sending him into these bodies to save people.

Another show that features several Western tropes, which manifest primarily through the heroes, is *True Detective* (2014-present). In the first season of this anthology series, the two main characters, Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson), have opposite relationships with their status as Western heroes. Rust begins the series as a very robust Western hero and gradually becomes less of one as the



series continues. Marty, on the other hand, grows into the more classic Western hero over the course of the series.

At the beginning of the series, Rust is the stoic loner who is haunted by his past. He does not seek vengeance, but is also reluctant to talk about the activities that spurred him to this point in his life. As the series progresses, that history becomes clearer – his young daughter was killed, which led to a life of drug abuse and hospitalization. Nevertheless, Rust is very clearly lost in his history and, as is demonstrated in the myriad levels of narrative linearity in the series, continues to be haunted by the actions he takes through the course of the season. That is to say, Rust is constantly in pursuit of the truth of the crime that the series focuses on. Once Marty kills the suspect, Rust clearly feels uneasy with this conclusion and eventually leaves the police force altogether to search for answers. He will not let his unease let up – Rust wants the truth, no matter the cost.

He is also very much the stereotypically masculine loner. As a Texan, who at one point asks, “I strike you as more a talker or a doer?” (to which the answer is obviously “doer”) and who has fired his gun in the past, Rust embodies the *je ne sais quoi* of a Western hero. He also only has one romance over the course of the series, but it is short lived – lasting less than a single episode – and instead he keeps to himself. That being said, by the end of the series, chronologically speaking the “present day,” Rust has lost much of what makes him appear to be a Western hero. He continues to be a loner and a drifter, but he has lost *the je ne sais quoi* and much of his motivation is spurred on by exhaustion. He also is incapable of defeating the villain and nearly loses his life in the process. As he is describing his near death experience to Marty, Rust cries unabashedly,

perhaps the least masculine trait. The series suggests, but never shows, that Rust is then able to abandon those elements that have haunted him and move on with his life.

Marty begins the series far removed from the standard Western hero, but the series gradually demonstrates the ways that he does contain internodes from the Western hero. First, Marty appears to be a happily married family man. He easily separates his work life from his home life and revels in the time spent with his wife and two daughters. However, Marty is eventually revealed to be having an affair, and has another later in the timeline. He is incapable of staying true to his wife and family, which results in his wife leaving him. There is a casualness with which Marty embarks upon his sexual activities that are reminiscent of the Western heroes' relationship with romance. Women and family are secondary to work, except to serve Marty and his story on occasion.

Marty is also free from psychological burden in the early timeline. Because of the way he claims he separates his work and his family – at one point he says, “I ain’t interested in the past.” Marty appears able to stay burden-free. However, it quickly becomes clear that the many little things about being a detective have stuck with Marty. Glaringly, Marty is infuriated by the poor treatment of children, especially little girls. Thus, when he finds that the primary suspect has been abusing two young children, he summarily executes him. Rust later uses this violent nature of Marty’s to entice him back into the investigation in the “present day” timeline. This weight of the darkness associated with his job eventually leads to Marty becoming disenchanted with law enforcement and quitting his job, becoming a private investigator instead.

Finally, Marty eventually kills the actual criminal. Where the apparent Western hero, Rust, fails, Marty is able to step up and take over that role. By the end of the series,

Marty takes on more attributes of the Western hero. He also cries while in the hospital, but because his family – the thing that he believes he has been fighting for – returns to him at last. Additionally, the camera does not linger on Marty’s tears in the same way that it did with Rust, instead tears fill Woody Harrelson’s eyes and then the image cuts to the next scene. Marty and Rust have inverse relationship with being Western heroes, but because of this their character arcs become more compelling. Marty’s story is one of finding himself and the things he lives for; Rust’s is one of finally putting his history to rest and figuring out how to get past the things that haunt him.

These eight characters are not the only characters with Western heroic traits on television. They simply serve, in this moment, to demonstrate the ways in which diverse characters can manifest an array of traits of Western heroes. Kate Austen and Rust Cohle are likely never discussed in the same breath. Nevertheless, they can both be analyzed using Western discourses because of the foundational template out of which both are drawn. Other similar Western heroes are Jethro Gibbs (Mark Harmon) from *NCIS*, the Doctor (David Tennant) from *Doctor Who*, Angel (David Boreanaz) from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) from *24* (2001-2010), and the A-Team (George Peppard, Dwight Schultz, Mr. T, and Dirk Benedict). These are all very disparate characters, but when closely examined, carry similar traits. Such internodes are imbued with the gravitas of the Western and bring with them discourses and narrative arcs that can prove fruitful in reading the characters.

The rhizomatic conceptualization of television genres suggests that all programs are drawing upon singular attributes from other kinds of programs. This influence does not necessarily dramatically alter the way the program looks or acts, although it can,

instead it infuses the program with small elements of that trope. By featuring Western heroes as their protagonists, television series do not suddenly become Westerns and, thus, carry with them the weight of ideological history that accompany such internodes. Instead, those characters are infused with the history and the narrative arcs associated with the Western hero. For instance, as a Western hero, Kate Austen becomes much more than a fugitive turned reluctant protector – she is a protector and leader of the islanders because she is haunted by her past. Like so many Western heroes that came before her, Kate searches for her place in the world while not being able to belong anywhere because she is racked with guilt over her choices. Kate is much like Shane (Alan Ladd in *Shane* [1953]), in that her history is mysterious and she knows that she cannot fully exist with the other islanders. The rhizomatic nature of *Lost*'s influences opens Kate up to being a Western hero in ways that she would not necessarily be considered otherwise.

### **Western Narratives**

Horace Greeley popularized the phrase “Go West Young Man, and grow with your country” in the mid-1800s. By doing so, he spurred not only expansion into the American West, but also an explosion of Westward expansion literature. These Western narratives encompassed a whole range of stories, not just the bildungsroman that Greeley's motto suggests. Nevertheless, Westerns have been rhizomatically influenced by two very precise places. Westerns follow the long internode of morality plays; but these narratives are also being influenced by the dominant hegemonic stance behind Westward expansion: Manifest Destiny.

## **Narrative Attributes of Westerns**

A morality play is a theatre style originating in the Middle Ages that depicts the life and struggles of human beings in simplistic scenes and characters. The actions of morality plays are “ritualized, dialectical, and inevitable” (Potter, 1975, p. 7). They present stock characters, “defined by their function” (Potter, 1975, p. 6), in order to ruminate on humanity and the choices that the individual makes. These stories are highly adaptable to any particular era or circumstance. Finally, morality plays portray a “remarkably optimistic theatrical conception of the human condition” (Potter, 1975, p. 10). In other words, morality plays are simple stories that use stock characters to illuminate the human condition; they are adaptable to ideologies and yet manage to be generally optimistic.

Westerns have long been associated either directly with morality plays or at least with the general sense of the morality play. First, Westerns are simplistic stories. They weave tales of “cattle rustling, bank robbing, claim jumping, the burning of farms, cold-blooded murder,” tales of cowboys and Indians, gunfighters, ranchers and railroads. They are tales of good triumphing over evil (MacDonald, 1987, p. 16), the nature of that “evil” and its racist implications will be discussed below. This is primarily a result of the mythic nature of the Western, in which a few themes are “embellished, twisted, reversed, convoluted . . . to produce variations” (Parks, 1982, p. 30). However, these stories also manage to tell deeper tales of the human condition – which was adaptable for any set of circumstances. As Bandy and Stoehr (2012) outline, Western writers and directors use the simplistic nature of Westerns “metaphorically to represent current political or cultural preoccupations” (p. 5) and, as a result, “had something deeper to say about the human

condition” (p. 103). The adult television Westerns moved beyond the melodrama of the juvenile programs to “probe inner qualities and personal and moral quandaries” (MacDonald, 1987, p. 62). These Westerns draw on “the range of human drama” from the history of humanity (Barson, 1985, p. 67) and elaborate upon in the standards set by morality plays.

Westerns tell these stories using stereotypical and stock characters. As outlined elsewhere, the Western is based primarily upon the life of the Western hero. In the adult television Westerns, the hero was fallible and struggled with his own morality. In a 1958 interview, William Conrad, original star of *Gunsmoke* on the radio, vocalized the importance of his character Matt Dillon saying

[He] is neither hero nor villain, but a human being. The best of us are sometimes ashamed of our thoughts, and there are times when the worst of us can be proud of our deeds. Matt Dillon is no different . . . But like most people who know the difference between right and wrong – and recognizing that justice could be done by him, probably better than by anyone else available – he has always come back to his responsibility. Matt Dillon isn’t perfect but he’s willing to try (qtd. in Yoggy, 1995, p. 86).

Dillon is prototypical of the morality play protagonist, standing up to his own internal struggle, and relatable to the audience. This focus on the individual and the ways that the individual’s struggles are relatable is standard for morality plays. As outlined above, the Western Hero is a very particular character type, and that character type is one of the elements that separates the morality play from the Western.

The other characters in morality plays are similarly stereotypical. Bandy and Stoehr (2012) say these characters “quickly convey[ed] messages of stupidity, danger, and evil, as well as to set up characters for easy laughs” (p. 60). Stock characters are relatable to the audience, and the Western’s use of good guys, bad guys, gunfighters, drunks, natives, damsels in distress, etc. allows the audience to ruminate on the themes of the Westerns in their own lives.

Westerns are also hopeful stories. Bandy and Stoehr (2012) ruminate a great deal on the optimism inherent in Westerns. They discuss the ways that John Ford, among other Western film directors, “always offers us an overall sense of optimism about the social and political advances that the Western communities depicted in his films are undertaking” (p. 187). They also observe that Western texts manage to be both “escapist fare” and “reflections of a difficult existence,” while continuing to maintain “a feeling of hope for optimistic resolution and closure” (p. 102). Bandy and Stoehr specifically look at Western films, but the same is unquestionably true for television Westerns. Good always triumphs. The townspeople always survive the machinations of the evil railroad tycoons or whatnot. American exceptionalism will always win out over whatever Other or evil society puts in its way.

Despite all of the above, Westerns are not simply morality plays. If Westerns were only morality plays, there would be nothing unique about them. Lots of television shows are similarly analogous to morality plays, but they are not then infused with the internodes of the Western. Westerns have a second level of thematic storytelling – that of Manifest Destiny. The idea of Manifest Destiny began in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early days of the American Colonies and held that Europeans were chosen to

expand across the country (Ruth, 2016b). Americans have long embraced the idea that they are the chosen people and that God has ordained that they push into new lands and conquer the primitive natives who live there. This discourse permeates Westerns, for good reason. Westward expansion was the primary means through which Americans pursued Manifest Destiny. Thus, discussions of the West and the human struggles that appeared in that situation are infused with Manifest Destiny. There are two ways of thinking about Manifest Destiny that can also spread across television programs. Those are American exceptionalism – that America is unique compared to all other countries (Ruth, 2016a) – and expansionism – the movement and exploration of new locations. While Manifest Destiny itself may not always be present in television shows, exceptionalism and/or expansionism are much more likely.

Manifest Destiny and the Western are also both based in counterpoising the protagonists with an “Other” that is culturally and racially different. Weinberg (1963) observes that the “fervid prepossession” of nationalism “is seldom compatible with respect to alien rights” (p. 11). Similarly, Mitchell (1996) discusses how “the Western cannot afford to abandon a benighted attitude toward ‘the Indian,’ since the less alien they become, the less reason remains for a genre committed to a reactionary view of cultural process” (p. 135). Manifest Destiny is inherently racist, as is the Western that represents it. Prominent Americans themselves pushed this idea. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner said “the West served to produce and entitle specifically ‘masculine’ traits in this new breed of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’” (qtd. in Abel, 1998, p. 81) and President Theodore Roosevelt referred to the “‘virility’ of the [white] race” when discussing the frontier (qtd. in Abel, 1998, p. 81). In a 1985 *Harper’s Monthly* essay, author Owen



Wister refers to Anglo-Saxon men as the only people who had “the spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency” to survive in the West. He also refers to the “hordes of encroaching alien vermin that [were turning] our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce” (qtd. in Abel, 1998, p. 82). White Americans are destined to conquer to the “Other” Native Americans, or indeed anyone who doesn’t look like them, because of their natural abilities and their God-given rights. This discourse pervades all Westerns, even those that present a more “liberal” image of natives. Buscombe (1998) suggests that this is because of the way that the Western is “locked into a certain kind of narrative in which ‘action’ is primary” (p. 43). I would add that the Western cannot escape is racist grounding simply because of the pervasiveness of Manifest Destiny and the ways that such a discourse cannot ever be separated from white supremacy.

### **Shows that are Narratively Westerns**

Quite a few genres have been compared to Westerns over the years, some of this, especially discussion of the relationship between noir and detective stories and Westerns, is based upon the manifestation of the Western hero. A myriad of the other genres are comparable because the stories make use of such thematic and storytelling internodes. To illustrate this point, I will demonstrate that supernatural dramas mirror the morality play’s devices and the Western’s focus on the individual’s God given right to triumph over the “Other.” Then I will look at space travel programs and the ways that they echo themes of Manifest Destiny through American exceptionalism. Finally, I will turn to shows outside the science-fiction/fantasy genre and ruminate on why they are harder to recognize as Westerns, but why they still exist.

As mentioned previously, Valenzano & Engstrom (2014) outline the ways in which *Supernatural* is a Western. Specifically, they look at how the series “reifies core aspects of the myth of American exceptionalism and the frontier myth” (p. 554). They examine the ways that the Winchester brothers protect American society against the “Other” – in this case, demons, who the Winchesters have been told are lesser creatures who only desire to murder humans - because God has destined that they will. Consequently, *Supernatural* presents an image of Manifest Destiny that almost perfectly mirrors the image presented in Westerns.

Joss Whedon’s supernatural universe, comprised of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* (1999-2004), presents similar understandings of morality and exceptionalism. In protagonists Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Angel, Whedon has created two heroes with many Western heroic attributes. Most prominently, they retain the *je ne sais quoi* of the Western hero. Buffy is a fully shaped, complex heroine, who does her job because it is her destiny, not because she is seeking vengeance. Angel seeks redemption and has little background in his first appearances on *Buffy*, but by the time he has his own series, Angel is equally complex and is set on his own path towards change. Both protagonists have a certain bearing and confidence that suggests the Western hero.

More importantly, both *Buffy* and *Angel* present dialectical arguments about human nature. On *Buffy* moreso than on *Angel*, the differences between good and evil are generally obvious. The further the shows progress, the more likely they are to explore the nuances of good and evil (Stevenson, 2003), but Buffy and Angel, and their friends, always triumph over evil. On *Angel*, the line between good and evil is not so clear, but that “inability to draw a firm line between good and bad, between the morally acceptable

and the morally illegitimate” is the focus of the series (Shepherd, 2009, p. 252). Evil typically manifests in stock supernatural villains that have meaningful stereotypes associated with them. However, those stock characters can also grow into examinations of the nature of evil – as with Spike (James Marsters) who grows through a series of changes over the course of the show, transforming from a ruthless vampire until he obtains a soul and sacrifices himself for love of Buffy. Angel eventually takes over management of the evil law firm Wolfram & Hart in the final season of the series, being given the ability to defeat evil with all their resources, and to fulfill his destiny.

That being said, such a discussion of human nature is not in itself an attribute of the Western. Instead, there is another layer to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that brings its Western attributes to the fore in a way that *Angel* does not –there is very little question that humans are better than supernatural creatures. *Angel*’s complicated relationship with his own status as “good” is stretched on *Angel* to become the central premise – are these creatures inherently bad? As a result, it becomes difficult to analyze the ways that *Angel* is thematically a Western; it is simply a morality play.

Buffy and her compatriots set up very clear parameters of what is good and what is evil and the lines cannot be crossed. In the few times they are – as with the characters of Angel, Spike, Tara (Amber Benson), Anya Emma Caulfield), Oz (Seth Green), Willow (Alyson Hannigan), etc. – that violation is justified as being normalized through some kind of physical transformation on the parts of the characters. Angel and Spike are only “good” when they have a soul. When Spike has his chip implant (that prevents him from being violent against humans), he is still not treated as a full member of the Scooby Gang. They cannot trust him because he is still inherently evil. Once he gains his soul, he

becomes a fuller member of the group. Additionally, vampires go through a physical transformation when they embrace their vampiric side. When Willow embraced her magical powers and endeavored to get revenge on the men who murdered her lover, she also goes through a physical transformation to make her literally darker than the normally pale skinned, red-headed teen. Her hair and her eyes turn black and her skin becomes marked with dark veins. Additionally, it is only by reminding Willow of her humanity – thereby suggesting that when she is “Othered” she cannot remember what it is like to be human and “normal” – that Xander (Nicholas Brendon) is able to calm her and, thus, defeat her. *Buffy* presents the same black-and-white level of exceptionalism that is featured in Westerns. White humans are better than supernatural creatures – dark creatures of the night. Thus, these Americans are destined to defeat all things supernatural/unnatural. .

*Supernatural* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* feature many internodes of the Western. In fact, many supernatural/fantasy television shows do. Fantasy series provide a space to examine human nature, because of the ways that they can step away from actual “humanity.” If humans are compared to other humans, the stories are relatable, but also can strike too close to home. By couching those same stories using an “Other” that does not resemble humanity, deeper, richer stories can be achieved. In Westerns, the “Other” is represented through Native Americans. In supernatural stories, that role is taken on by vampires and demons. Thus, the protagonists of these series present an idealized vision of the hero – white, middle-class, Americans – who defeats the Other without question as to motivations on the part of that Other. There is a definitive sense that the Winchesters, Buffy, and even Angel (but only when he has his soul. When he’s the vampire Angelus,

he is definitively in the wrong) are all in the right. This is the supernatural shows' twist on American exceptionalism. Additionally, fantasies allow for ideas of destiny and fate to be visible in ways that stories of ordinary humans do not. Very few non-fantasy stories bring discussions of Manifest Destiny to the fore. In supernatural shows, such discourse can take a primary role, and thus be told through the internodes of the Western.

By utilizing rhizomatic Western tropes within supernatural series, program creators are able to draw upon the internodes of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism without situating the story within the normative Western framework. Indeed, such stories have almost exclusively shifted towards a supernatural framework, because of their inherent nature allows for talk of the divine and the main characters' God given destiny to defeat the unnatural that other shows are not able to. While Westerns would never outwardly discuss Manifest destiny and the characters' privilege as "civilized," supernatural dramas are able to foreground this discussion. The characters in these shows never doubt their rights to conquer the Other.

Another genre that is frequently connected to the Western is that of the Space Travel series. These are shows that feature space travel and examine the relationship between humanity and aliens, as well as new planets. The connection between Westerns and Space travel is manifest in *Firefly* (2002-2003). Set on a spaceship called Serenity in a distant future where Earth no longer exists, this is the story of Malcom Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) and his crew as they avoid the Alliance, since Mal fought against them in the recent civil war. *Firefly* is a pure Western that just happens to be set in outer space. Many other space travel series, such as all the incarnations of *Star Trek* (the original series: 1966-1969; *The Next Generation*: 1987-1994; *Deep Space Nine*: 1993-1999;

*Voyager*: 1995-2001; *Enterprise*; 2001-2005; and *Discovery*; 2017) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), are also Westerns.

In *Star Trek*, the phrase “Space, the final frontier” opens the beginning credits. Thus, from the opening moments of the show, it is associated with the Old West. The monologue goes on, “These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission, to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.” *Star Trek* is well established as a story about expansionism. Additionally, they turn American exceptionalism on its head by maintaining adherence to the “Prime Directive,” which “prohibits Starfleet personnel from messing with the normal development of any ‘less advanced’ society” (Erdmann & Block, 2008, p. 21), suggesting that no one has the right to conquer another group. In this way, *Star Trek* endeavors to comment upon the problematic tropes of the Western.

At the same time, however, the Prime Directive is frequently violated, especially by the ultimate Western cowboy character, Captain James T. Kirk (William Shatner). Kirk is the exemplary Starfleet captain: he is respected by his crew and perfectly willing to find alternative solutions to any trouble encountered (Erdmann & Block, 2008). However, he is very likely to cast off the regulations of Starfleet and impose his ethics on new people and planets. Kirk is a projection of the Western television programs of the 1950s and 1960s. Counterpoised to the American exceptionalism imposed by Kirk is the situational ethics and diplomacy of Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart; Erdmann & Block, 2008). Serving as a reflection of the complicated morality of the 1980s, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* adheres much more strictly to the Prime Directive. Here, the new planets are their own civilizations, into which Picard at the crew of the Enterprise-D

endeavor to position themselves and learn. A third position on the perception of space as the frontier is presented in *Voyager*, which looks at Captain Kathryn Janeway's (Kate Mulgrew) spaceship/crew as they are lost seventy thousand light years from Earth. Janeway, like Kirk, must forge an entirely new perspective on humanity, but does so without the cowboy mentality Kirk is famous for. Rather, she leans more towards Picard's diplomatic approach to space-exploration, but picking and choosing moments to violate the Prime Directive dependent upon the given situations. This is a clear example of how the rhizome works in conjunction with ideological shifts. The ways that these captains negotiate the Prime Directive follow the historical ways that other cultures have been treated.

These captains and their crews present an image of space exploration as the equivalent of Westward Expansion. Outer space is simply what comes next in terms of human evolution. So, the starships *Enterprise* and *Voyager* push out beyond the limits of what is known and tell stories about humanity through new situations and new peoples. The differences between the shows echo the differences in cultural sensibilities from the eras in which they were conceived, thus reflecting the ways that both internodes and the societal soil come together in the rhizome to produce specific programs.

Similarly, *Battlestar Galactica* demonstrates a 21<sup>st</sup> century musing on human nature and the unknown in its story of the last remaining humans forging out from their decimated planet to create a new land, all the while fighting the "Other." This embodiment of the space-Western focuses more on the internal nature of humanity by, like *Firefly*, not presenting any aliens against which to set the humans, but by having the antagonists, the robotic Cylons, a creation of humans themselves. Thus, the focus in *BSG*

is not on exploration so much as on human nature, returning to that idea of the morality play so prevalent in Westerns and echoing the thematic sentiments found in many supernatural dramas discussed above. However, because it was humans' hubris that brought about their downfall, the story of American exceptionalism is the dominant narrative, and *BSG* is also a commentary on ideas of Manifest Destiny.

*BSG* has very few cliché aspects of the morality play, such as stereotypical characters and the binary between good and evil. The morals of *BGS* are purposefully ambiguous, to present "a narrative in which governmental authority is repeatedly questioned while fantasies of control and power are undermined or problematized" (Rawle, 2010, p. 139). The reveal on the series that Cylons have the ability to look indistinguishable from humans, and that they have infiltrated the ranks of the ship, calls into question the motivations of people and what makes someone good or evil. The Cylons are eventually shown to possess human emotions, thus blurring the line between human and Cylon even more. The entire show dwells on these differences and similarities. As the focus remains on human nature, the theme of *BSG* is not inherently a Western; however, joined with the vast, undiscovered setting of outer space, *BSG*'s human stories become contextualized with an undercurrent of expansionism and, in conjunction with the discourse surrounding Cylons, American exceptionalism. The humans feel they are in the right and take little responsibility for creating the Cylons in the first place. *BSG* is generally problematizing this attitude, but the mere fact of its existence brings the Western discourses to the forefront. Additionally, later in the series, prophecies by the Cylon's religion predict events of the show, thereby setting the action within an internode of Manifest Destiny as well.



The setting and situation of space-travel narratives also allow for easy connections to Western narratives. The characters are situated within the unknown, facing some form of the “Other;” they are consequently forced to examine themselves and their own actions. Later space-Westerns purposefully examine ideas of American Exceptionalism and the limits of humanity, in the same ways that Westerns have turned to self-reflection. The nature of the rhizome suggests that this self-reflection is the producers being more aware of the tropes of the Western. To reflect, one must first acknowledge what they are working from. Through the rhizome, space travel programs are able to draw upon themes of the Western to tell stories of human nature. As *Star Trek* reminds us, space is a frontier itself. By using the attributes of the Western to tell their stories, space travel series dwell upon the prevalent themes of old and update and reflect upon them in entirely new settings.

Stories with science fiction and/or fantasy settings are highly adaptable to alternative themes and storytelling devices. Stories set in the “real” world do not have the paranormal freedom that these fantastic genres afford. That does not mean that “real world” genres are not susceptible to rhizomatic influences. As we have seen in other circumstances, all genres are influenced by other texts. The Western tropes are so infused with ideas foreign to recent television – destiny, exceptionalism, clear cut morality, etc. – that the places that these tropes converge are not obvious in “real world” genres. That does not invalidate their thematic Western attributes in the ways I have previously outlined. Instead, it suggests that we need to reconfigure the definitions of those themes.

Numerous television programs explore human nature; almost none of them do so through Manifest Destiny. However, if we reconsider what “American exceptionalism”

means, then the number of shows that present a discussion of human nature within an exceptional framework is greatly increased. This framework does not look like the Western programs of the 1950s and 1960s, but it continues to be a Western. The themes are still there, their ideologies have just changed a bit. For instance, if we consider, as David Sirota (2013) does, that exceptionalism means that America's "form of safety-net-free capitalism – and the desperation it breeds – truly does breed innovation and entrepreneurship" (para. 7), then Walter White's (Bryan Cranston) motivation in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) is a tale of American exceptionalism.

White is an underpaid chemistry teacher who, upon receiving a cancer diagnosis, undergoes a five-season long transformation to become the drug-dealing Heisenberg, alienating his family and murdering his enemies. On its surface, *Breaking Bad* is not a traditional Western – despite actually taking place in the West (Albuquerque, New Mexico). White is not a hero and does not retain the optimistic lens through which all Westerns occur. However, if we probe the actual story, the humanistic struggle underneath the drug-dealing peaks through. Sirota (2013) discusses the ways in which *Breaking Bad* presents an American Dream narrative, in which White "thwart[s] his dark-skinned foreign competitors and claim[s] a market that he believes to be rightfully his" (para 10). Additionally, Mussell (2013) suggests that White enacts American Individualism, in that "his family's economic woes must come solely from him, since he has internalized the 'provider' ideal" (para. 6). These ideas of individualism and his rights to thwart those "Others" that stand against him are the core of Manifest Destiny. White's shifting morals, and the moral trauma he has been through (Horton, 2013), do not prevent *Breaking Bad* from embodying Western traits. In fact, the flexible nature of

the rhizome, and the ideological positioning of the country during *Breaking Bad*'s tenure demand that Walter White's saga be told through a Western lens. Cowboys change, White's story is emblematic of how they have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The rhizome allows for generic flexibility. Even within a discussion such as this, the rhizome twists and shifts according to need and cultural norms. Therefore, ideological understandings can manifest differently dependent upon the situation. As we have discussed, many science-fiction and fantasy programs contain rhizomatic influences from Westerns because of their ability to bring discussions of destiny and eliminating the Other to the fore. However, the nomadic and ever-changing nature of the rhizome means that Western themes and stories can also appear within "real life" genres such as dramas. The ideologies can be re-conceptualized; this is the possibility of the rhizome – it opens all the attributes up to different interpretations. The rhizome also does not negate the complexity of those ideologies. As demonstrated with *Buffy* and *Star Trek*, ideological discussions of power and race maintain throughout these series. The rhizome flattens respectability ideals, but not the cultural hierarchies of power within those texts. Hence, these texts can still engage with the complicated ways that discourses pervade society. As a result, stories that seem relegated to traditional Westerns or fantasy tales can be told in more relatable settings with applicable stakes, while also engaging a sense of verisimilitude.

### **Visual Aesthetics**

Whenever people talk about landscapes of the Old West, or even simply discuss particularly striking cinematic images, certain sequences from classic Hollywood Westerns leap to mind. Whether it is a stagecoach making its way through Monument

Valley, Shane riding off towards the Rocky Mountains, or Ethan Edwards, framed by the doorway he can never enter, disappearing into the desert, the images of Westerns tend to be even more iconic than the films' content. The same cinematic approach to Westerns did not translate to the early television programs, because of the style-less perception surrounding early television in general. For a long time television focused on the reception aspects of television and not on the aesthetic ones (Butler, 2010). Because of the small nature of the television itself, as well as the black-and-white colors of early broadcasting, having the "scale and dramatic contrasts of the feature film Western" (Boddy, 1995, p. 121) was not feasible. Combined with the juvenile nature of the first television Westerns, aesthetic considerations were scarcely made (MacDonald, 1987).

Nevertheless, understanding the full scope of the rhizomatic influence of the Western on other television programs, we must include the visual elements inherent in the Western mythos general, not specifically on television. There are three cinematic conventions of Westerns that are important for this analysis. First, Westerns emphasize fast-paced stories rife with violence. Westerns also focus heavily on the landscape and make the landscape a character in the story. Finally, Westerns are not dialogue heavy. These three conventions taken together exist on many television programs today.

Since the early days of the Western, certain elements of the Western have always persisted. These include "bold adventure, broad humor, impressive horse riding, outdoor-location shooting, and violent conflicts" (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, p. 10). The emphasis has always been on fast-paced adventure stories. Even in the character-driven adult television programs, "there continued to be brawls, shootouts, and quick-draw challenges" (MacDonald, 1987, p. 50). Westerns tell their stories through violence,

letting the pacing of the narratives follow an equivalently fast trajectory. Shootouts in particular play a “ritualistic” role in the outcome of the action (Turner, 2003, p. 229). The shootouts are iconic and end the action definitively.

The next important visual aspect of Westerns are the landscapes. In some respects, landscapes are the most important aspect of Westerns. Notice that all the examples of scenes I listed at the beginning of this section include some element of the landscape. Because of John Ford’s films, the Old West has become associated with Monument Valley, on the Colorado Plateau in Utah and Arizona (Leutrat & Liandrat-Guigues, 1998). Lingering shots that meditate on the vast emptiness or beauty of the features of Monument Valley, as well as other similar Western locations, are standard in film Westerns. Tompkins (1993) discusses the ideological reasoning behind landscapes in Westerns. She says, “the negations of the physical setting – no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort – are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this” (p. 71). Additionally, “the desert offers itself as the white sheet on which to trace a figure. It is a tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live” (p. 74). The desert and other Western landscapes present both a challenge and an inspiration to the characters, and thus the audience.

Finally, because of the focus on violence and landscapes, Westerns are not dialogue heavy. Between the “rapid horse riding, last-minute escapes from enemy threats, suspenseful chases, and determined desert crossing” and the “dramatic sense of being transported across great spaces and distances” (Bandy & Stoehr, 2012, pp. 93–94), there is very limited time for dialogue. However, television is a very dialogue heavy medium. It is then difficult to argue that Western television shows are not dialogue heavy. Instead,

I would argue that the emphasis in television Westerns is not on the conversations of the characters, but on their relationships with their surroundings and the means to the ends of the story – typically through violence.

### **Some Western Styled Shows**

Television today is generally becoming more cinematic. With the rise of HBO, Showtime, and online streaming services, the ability to see high-quality television genres has been raised as well. Therefore, it is unsurprising that quite a few shows use the same techniques as Westerns in telling their stories. These shows do not, however, have the same connections between landscape, violence, and narrative that the Western does. For instance, while *Burn Notice* (2007-2013) often looks like a love story to Miami, it does not use its Miami setting as an additional character in its storytelling. There is no sense that by using Miami as its setting, *Burn Notice* manages to say anything meaningful. Similarly, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present) juxtaposes the openness of New York City and the confined spaces of the nuclear fallout shelter in which Kimmy was imprisoned. Thus, these locations do both play a role in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. But *Kimmy* is a cheerful sitcom with essentially no violence whatsoever. So, the internodes are not those of the Western. There are many shows, especially those in the complex TV era that contain certain Westerns aspects. I will look here at four types of shows and the ways that they embody Western cinematic tropes: small town supernatural dramas such as *Once Upon a Time* (2011-present); iconic horror series as exemplified by *Bates Motel* (2013-2017); real world locations such as found in *Breaking Bad*; and fantastical universes like *Game of Thrones* (2011-present).

The first type of show that is frequently associated with its location are those set in a fictional, quintessential small town. There are multitudinous programs, especially those created for young adults, which are set in small towns, usually on the east coast, commonly in New England or North Carolina. These shows include *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), *Everwood* (2002-2006), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), etc. There is a very clear relationship between the location in which these shows are set and the ways that the characters' stories play out. However, because these shows are all rather standard dramas, they do not contain any additional cinematic attributes of Westerns. Nevertheless, small town teen dramas do contain a subset that focus on the requisite violence, action driven plot over standard drama. An example of this type of series is *Once Upon a Time*.

*OUAT* features constant action, shying away from the long conversations typical of *Gilmore Girls* and *Dawson's Creek*. That is not to suggest that *OUAT* does not feature conversations, but, as with all television Westerns, the focus is less on those dialogues, and more on the purpose of the words and how the dialogue leads to action. The focus on action and abundance of violence on these two shows begins to situate them in the Western oeuvre. The role the setting plays into these stories is what inflects these "horror" or "fairy tale" attributes with "Western" DNA.

*Once Upon a Time* ties its characters to its location in Storybrooke, Maine. When the series begins, the fairy tale characters that feature in *OUAT* have had their memories erased and live happily in their small Maine village. Again, in the same strain as other similar shows, such as *Gilmore Girls* (see D. M. Stern, 2012), Storybrooke is free from any kind of strife or struggle. Of course, Storybrooke cannot stay worry free, or there

would be no series. *Ouat* features dual storylines, tracing how the residents of Storybrooke were caught in the curse and moved from their original homes in the Enchanted Forest to this small hamlet, as well as the story of them figuring out who they really are in the “present day” Maine. Repeatedly throughout the series, the characters – including Emma (Jennifer Morrison), Henry (Jared Gilmore), Snow White (Ginnifer Goodwin), Prince Charming (Josh Dallas), Regina (Lana Parrilla), Rumpelstiltskin (Robert Carlyle), and their assorted compatriots – are thrown out of Storybrooke into a variety of other worlds and their goal is always to return to Storybrooke. The characters clearly perceive Storybrooke, and not the Enchanted Forest, as their home.

The characters visit an assortment of worlds – Wonderland, Oz, Arendelle, Neverland, etc. Then, in the fifth season, they are forced to go to the Underworld to retrieve a recently-killed Captain Hook (Colin O’Donoghue). The Underworld does not, as one would imagine, look like a vast wasteland of death and destruction, but rather as a more evil, run-down version of Storybrooke. Regina, the Evil Queen, observes, “I don’t think we’re in Maine anymore.” The show has an explanation for this – Hades (Greg Germann) has recreated Storybrooke in the Underworld to show his love for Regina’s sister, Zelena (Rebecca Mader), the Wicked Witch of the West. However, there is also a more ideological reason for this. The characters are so tied to Storybrooke and are about to meet up with a host of their former antagonists and allies. The place in which they must make peace with these people is in Storybrooke itself.

Additionally, at the end of the sixth season (which worked as a kind of storyworld reset for the future seasons, enabling many of the main actors to depart the series), Emma is in a fight against Gideon (Giles Matthey), the adult son of Rumpelstiltskin and Belle



(Emilie de Ravin). The outcome of this fight would destroy Storybrooke and the possibility for happy endings for everyone. Thus, Emma sacrifices herself (and is resurrected by True Love's kiss). By doing so, she saves her family and friends, and Storybrooke is able to continue on as the happy hamlet in Maine that it was at the beginning of the series.

Storybrooke is not particularly personified. Instead, it is simply the place where the characters find happiness. It is also the place that the characters are constantly in search of because of the peace that it brings them. Because of this, Storybrooke creates a Western atmosphere for the series. The Western atmosphere creates the characters and Storybrooke is no different. These characters are more than just fairy tale characters, and much of that representation is because of their lives in Storybrooke, not in the Enchanted Forest. In the Enchanted Forest, everything was black-and-white, in the Western atmosphere of Storybrooke, those assumptions are more complicated. The Western atmosphere of *OUAT* then can be taken in conjunction with the myriad themes of the series and certain Western discourses can be traced – for instance, a recurring discussion is whether or not villains can change their stories and get happy endings. Thus, the question of those characters' destinies is brought to the fore. When other aspects of the series are infused with Western characteristics, the discussion of the exceptionalism of this group of characters also rises to the surface. Is their destiny actually that of Manifest Destiny? Are the heroes triumphing over some disenfranchised group – because it is their God given right or are do the villains have agency over their own purpose?

*Bates Motel* utilizes Western cinematic attributes to recreate the iconic atmosphere that so dominated its source text, *Psycho* (1960). Unlike *Once Upon a Time*,

there is not a direct association between *Bates Motel* and its location in White Pine Bay, Oregon. The location is irrelevant, the way that location is personified is the key to how *Bates Motel* makes use of Western characteristics. As Ferro (2014) discusses, in the original *Psycho* movie by Alfred Hitchcock,

The Bates Mansion is the definition of creepy, and it has all the trappings of the archetypal Victorian home: the steep mansard roof, the deep porch, the ornate flourishes. Inside, its crammed with furniture, plush drapes, and knickknacks typical of the Victorian era – plus, of course, the dark secrets the mansion hides (para. 9).

*Bates Motel* creator Carlton Cuse worked to recreate this atmosphere to situate the evolution of Norman Bates (Freddie Highmore) into the murderer he is in the film (Saporito, 2015). Even though the television series has updated the action to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cuse has said that he purposeful aimed for a “timeless” aesthetic for the motel itself, “When you’re in the house and in the motel you do feel like you’re sort of floating in this timelessness and that was a stylistic choice” (Saporito, 2015, para. 8). Between the oppressive haunting of the home itself, as well as the out-of-time feel of the motel and house, *Bates Motel* evokes a definite sense of foreboding through its very location.

Within the locations, the action is not particularly fast paced or constantly violent. Instead, violence – emotional and physical – pervades every moment of the series, but with lingering reflection. *Bates Motel* covers the period of time between when Norman kills his father, while in a dissociative state, and his own death after fulfilling the events in *Psycho* (albeit with certain differences in storyline). Because of Norman’s condition, as well as the unusual relationship between him and his mother, the show is infused with

violence. However, the cinematography dwells on the situational aspects of Norman's life. In an interview with *Deadline* (Grobar, 2016), *Bates Motel*'s Director of Photography John S. Bartley talks about how he navigates the "shadowy sets" and "temperamental weather patterns" (para. 3) and makes extensive use of wide-angle lenses (para. 4). These cinematic elements – the shadows, the constant beating of rain and assorted other weather, and the wide angles – are all Western influences.

The other shows I have discussed in this section do not make as extensive use of artistic cinematography as *Bates Motel*. Lingering camera work is a device used extensively in film Westerns. By bringing such detail into *Bates Motel*, the focus of the show is not on the violence or on the conversations between the characters, but on the effect that the events are having on Norma (Vera Farmiga) and Norman's relationship, thus spurring Norman's psychosis. In Westerns, the cinematography makes the stories about more than simply cowboys and Indians, dwelling on the isolation of Monument Valley. Typically, the Westerns use the isolation of their locations of elaborate upon the Western themes discussed in the previous section. *Bates Motel* makes similar use of cinematography to compel Norman's evolution.

Another type of show is one set in a real world city, not in a fictional small town, but that takes advantage of the cultural iconography of that city to create its Western atmosphere. One show that does this particularly brilliantly is *Breaking Bad*. *Breaking Bad* is the confluence of many rhizomatic elements from both television and film. As previously discussed, it has reconfigured the understanding of American exceptionalism to present a modern version of a Western. The visual influences also suggest the Western. The show strives to use its New Mexico setting to its greatest advantage, making

extensive use of wide-angle shots and colored filters to “reinforce the desolation of the desert” (Schiller, 2012, para. 19). Director of Photography Michael Slovis works to make the locations of *Breaking Bad* echo the isolation that Walter White moves into as the show progresses. By using long shots where the characters can barely be seen amidst the horizon, the characters are isolated, miniscule footnotes in the vastness of the desert. Slovis says, “This isn’t just about looking like reality; this is about eliciting an emotion” (qtd. in Schiller, 2012, para. 5). At the same time, Slovis manages to evoke the Westerns of John Ford, while not fully the grandeur of Monument Valley. Slovis and series creator Vince Gilligan have situated their morality play about American exceptionalism within the openness of the New Mexico desert.

They have also infused their Western with violence. Gilligan (2013) himself has reflected upon his use of violence in *Breaking Bad*. He says violence exists in two forms, “One is the realistic portrayal, in which there are consequences to every violent action. The other is the cartoony version, where the moment is meant to play as funny or simply cool” (para. 2). Many Westerns use violence in the second way, to look “cool.” The heroes must triumph, so there is no question in any fight scene who will win. The hero might be injured, but he will always come back to victory. *Breaking Bad* takes the opposite approach. Gilligan insists that his writers and actors consider the ramifications of any act of violence: “It doesn’t matter whether they were dealing it or being dealt it: We figure there will always be repercussions, consequences to the violent act, for everyone involved” (para. 4). This form of action is seen much more frequently in the later, adult Westerns. Here the heroes are reluctant to engage with violence; remember that Matt Dillon fails in his first shoot-out on *Gunsmoke*. But they always end up turning

to violence in the end, no matter how much they understand the consequences. Walter White does so as well. The biggest difference between White and other Western heroes is that he does not survive his story. He dies in a shoot-out.

The shows I've discussed so far in this section are set in the "real world" and, thus, echo normal American geography. For a show such as HBO's hit series *Game of Thrones* must create an entire world in such a way that it is both relatable to the audience and fantastical to fit the setting. Additionally, *Game of Thrones* is set in a huge variety of locations on the continents of Westeros and Essos, including the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros and the expanse "Beyond the Wall" of unmapped terrain. So, the production crew uses five cinematographers in locations around the world to create these myriad locations (Goldman, 2012). By creating the world of Westeros using real locations and "embedding the action among ancient constructs and windswept environments," the world is given life (Patches, 2014). *Game of Thrones* has become famous for its raw imagery, for both the unceasing violence it portrays as well as the way in which said violence is conveyed. *Game of Thrones* is set primarily in darkness, using mostly natural lighting (Goldman, 2012), echoing the dark themes and situations in which the characters exist. Nevertheless, the producers go out of their way to ensure that the landscapes that make up Westeros are vivid. Westeros is being fought over on the series; the world must be worth fighting over.

One particular area of Westeros that evokes the traditional Western is the area "Beyond the Wall." In the North part of Westeros, a giant wall was constructed eons ago that separated the civilized kingdoms from the uncivilized vastness. The Night's Watch guard the Wall against the various nomadic groups living beyond it – including White

Walkers, wildlings, giants, etc. Main protagonist Jon Snow (Kit Harington) – in many ways a Western Hero himself – ventures into this terrain in the second and third seasons of the series, giving the audience a glimpse of the oppressive winter landscape found there. The oppressive nature, as well as the vast nothingness found within this Land of Always Winter, particularly evokes the Western. Indeed, the folk that live in this area, particularly the wildlings and the White Walkers, are very much formed through their life within this domineering environment. They are consequently personified as the “Other,” sometimes even being identified as such, thus becoming the Other of the Western. The land beyond the wall is foreign to the inhabitants of Westeros, and thus echoes the thematic burdens of the uncivilized Western expanse.

Additionally, to demonstrate the war that rages across Westeros, producers Benioff and Weiss have endeavored to stay true to Martin’s original work and “convey an accurately medieval sense of how the powerful prey upon the powerless” (Orr, 2015, para. 4). The violence in *Game of Thrones* is a “smart, carefully choreographed scene” (Rosenberg, 2016, para. 14) that fits in this “phenomenally violent world where the rich do hideous things to the poor, and where men claim full dominion over the bodies of the women” (Rosenberg, 2016, para. 8). The violence is essential to *Game of Thrones*. There are not shoot-outs in the same way as in Westerns, but the pace of *Game of Thrones* holds true to the pacing of its fight scenes. Indeed, the entire series is essentially one carefully choreographed fight in the same way that Westerns are. *Game of Thrones* may very well end with a shoot-out of sorts, which would be the logical conclusion.

The cinematic aspects of Westerns are, in some respects, both the most obvious rhizomatic influences on other shows, and the least obvious. Since there are only three

internodes that make up the cinematic Western – violence, a connection between the narrative and the landscape, and an emphasis on action rather than dialogue – it is easy to see other shows with such characteristics. What is less obvious is the ways that Western cinematic characteristics enhance the texts in which they are identified. However, throughout this section, I have identified numerous purposes that Western cinematic tropes contribute to texts. Western characteristics create universes that affect the characters' actual lives. The aesthetics of *Once Upon a Time* go beyond the simple look of a small town, but because of the rhizomatic Western cinematic influence, the setting of the action actually plays a role in the overall storytelling. Western tropes also serve to situate the characters within a certain kind of space, and thus instigate character arcs. The stuffiness of *Bates Motel* and the isolation of *Breaking Bad* contribute to the evolution of Norman Bates and Walter White. Finally, Western influences can help to create lush worlds that work hand-in-hand with characters and plots to tell the program's story. The cinematography of *Game of Thrones* creates the realistic worlds of Westeros and Essos, making each space where the characters live come to life, even without a real relationship between this world and ours.

### **Conclusion**

J. Fred MacDonald (1987), one of the foremost scholars on the television Western, was very insistent in his day that the television Western was dead. He said:

Some themes of the Western have been co-opted by other cultural forms. Aspects of its social relevance can be found in the detective story, the police procedural, modern adventure series, science fiction, and even situation. But the totality of

these criteria exists only in the Western and no amount of rhetoric can make Capt. Frank Furillo (of *Hill Street Blues*) into Marshall Matt Dillon (p. 89).

I humbly disagree. Genres cannot always persist across the years – there are too many cultural shifts and societal upheavals to maintain all genres. Additionally, if we think about genres not as categories, but clusters of traits, and as all genres as a rhizome, then such beliefs are meaningless. Nothing is truly dead in the rhizome, some of the characteristics have simply fallen out of favor for the moment, but they will rise again.

Westerns are a collection of diverse traits, that are more than simply, as Yoggy (1995) believes, programs that take place “west of the Mississippi in the continental United States prior to 1900, in a rural setting west of the Mississippi after 1900, or east of the Mississippi prior to 1800” (p. 2). The most dominant rhizomatic traits of the Western are that they: are morality plays, mixed up in discourses of human nature, Manifest destiny, and expansionism; are told through striking visual imagery, focusing on the importance of location, with an abundance of violence; and are the stories of people, one person in particular – the Western hero. Westerns are contained within these attributes and programs can feature such attributes to varying degrees. A single node of the rhizome could be the intersection of countless internodes; some programs have innumerable Western traits, others have none. In this way, pointing to a show and saying “*Breaking Bad* is a Western” is neither accurate nor useful. Instead, the rhizome allows us to point to it and say, “Here are some interesting Western-like things that *Breaking Bad* that reveal certain things about the characters and discourses.” This is not an either/or binary – a show is not tied to any genre in particular. A program is made up of a myriad of rhizomatic internodes. Where those come from is a matter of interpretation.



The Western can take on many guises; the rhizome allows us to see how anything can be influenced by the Western root structure that permeates the television landscape. Thus, everything from *Game of Thrones* to *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) could contain attributes of the Western, and they do in various ways. The question then becomes, what advantage does that bring? Consider everything you know or think about the Western, which is more than simply the collection of characteristics I have compiled here. Instead, the Western is embroiled with discourses and modes of communication from which it cannot be separated. By identifying a show with the Western genre, those discourses and styles suddenly become appropriate to discuss in relation to the show. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be read through a variety of lenses – she is a feminist, she is a teenager, the world is a morality play, Sunnydale is hell, it is a Western. Each of those different lenses reveals some new polysemic understanding of the series. As a Western, *Buffy* can be seen as primarily about the human struggle between free will and predestination. Buffy was bound to triumph in the end of the story because she is the prototypical Western Hero – but she had to go through a shoot-out to get to that point. She had to face down specific kinds of evil. She had to do so in the locations that the audience was eminently familiar with – her high school is destroyed in the end of the series. *Buffy* is about adolescence and growing up, the symbolic annihilation of her high school allows Buffy to finally embrace adulthood. Or, Buffy, who as a Western hero is both inspired and challenged by her surroundings, is able to finally overcome the landscape that has haunted her throughout her struggles and move into the literal light. This is not to say that *Buffy* is a Western. Instead, it suggests that *Buffy* in the culmination of a huge array of plot,

character, and aesthetic characteristics that come from a variety of places. By focusing on the Western elements, certain discourses, as those discussed above, rise to the fore.

The rhizome opens texts to a variety of different interpretations. The Western is just one such rich vein of inquiry. I have demonstrated here the ways in which the Western has influenced a variety of television texts. There are plenty more out there, the limits of this study prevent me from discussing them all. Nevertheless, it has become nearly impossible for me to not notice the Western traits within texts, which tends to mean I can anticipate the actions of the characters, as well as read certain moral leanings into them. Western characteristics are still all around us. The generic rhizome enables them to exist within myriad texts. By acknowledging that television programs contain such influences, the texts become open to new methods of understanding.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Humans categorize everything. From an individual's country of origin to the types of ice drifting about the oceans, we use elaborate systems of classification for any number of purposes. Genre studies are one such iteration of this excursive. Those of us who study genre identify the essential characteristics of a category and label each media text accordingly. The theory of the generic rhizome radically transforms such classification. With the rhizome, genre is no longer an act of classification but rather a tracing of the various threads of generic similarity and difference that give a television show its moorings but also its distinctiveness. The generic rhizome therefore challenges overly simplistic readings of often maligned cultural texts. Additionally, it encourages new critical readings of a text within the confines of "genre," enabling alternative understandings of a text within the myriad genres with which it shares characteristics. Finally, the rhizome flattens popular culture, dismantling the cultural hierarchies that elevate some texts to the status of significance, making them worthy of scholarly analysis, while relegating other popular texts to the margins of academic inquiry.

Television is inextricable from the rhizome – there is no part of one that exists without the other. Throughout this study, I have demonstrated the rhizomatic ways that aesthetic, narrative, and thematic characteristics, as well as cultural norms, influence television programs. I have discussed the rhizomatic mode of production, distribution, viewing, and scholarly cycles makes a rhizomatic conceptualization of television essential to generic criticism. To reconsider these aspects of the rhizome, let's take a show, one solid example, say, *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017). We can then examine in a microcosm the multitudinous findings of this study.

*Pretty Little Liars* was produced within a certain television environment – the precursors to the show and other shows on at the same time; the political environment; the technological environment; etc. These aspects of the television environment act the nutrient-rich soil into which the rhizome is planted – society is so indoctrinated with such elements that they cannot be separated from the texts themselves, nor are the producers necessarily aware of the influence that such things are having on the text. Nevertheless, those elements are an essential aspect to the program. Distributors similarly associate *Pretty Little Liars* with the environment in which it exists. “Like *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017)? You might also like *Pretty Little Liars*.” Alternatively, distributors use *Pretty Little Liars* to encourage viewers to try new series. “If you liked *Pretty Little Liars*, you’ll probably also like *Riverdale* (2016-present) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017-present).”

Viewers use programmatic association when watching television as well, although slightly differently. Rather than attempting to infuse a text with meaning or push people towards certain texts, viewers are endeavoring to find texts they will like and relate to, and then they read those texts with certain biases. As a result, they are drawn to specific texts. If a viewer were to read the synopsis of *Pretty Little Liars* on [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) (*Pretty Little Liars*, n.d.), “Four friends band together against an anonymous foe who threatens to reveal their darkest secrets, while unraveling the mystery of the murder of their best friend,” they may be drawn to or turned off by certain elements. Some elements of the series are missing from this brief synopsis: that the friends are female and that they are in high school. Other elements are highlighted that do not call to mind shows such as *Gossip*

*Girl* and *One Tree Hill*, but rather darker shows such as *Stranger Things* (2016-present) or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003).

Beyond simply the selection of the show, a viewers' interpretation of *Pretty Little Liars* is influenced by their disparate life experiences, political leanings, and social situation. They would also be influenced by the relationship between *Pretty Little Liars* and other programs that they have seen, and the ways that those other shows may evoke *Pretty Little Liars* or deviate from *Pretty Little Liars* in interesting ways. Previous viewings give us expectations of how a story will unfold. A program's relationship with those expectations can be very telling in terms of its success.

Finally, scholars utilize the whole television and cultural environment to analyze a single program. There are certain topics on *Pretty Little Liars* that demand examination: the role of women and girls (see Cerny, Friedman, & Smith, 2014; Day, 2017), sexuality (J. Mitchell, 2015), etc. However, if we consider *Pretty Little Liars* beyond these fundamental intersectional ideologies, and situate the text in the ways that producers, distributors, and viewers are, there is a rich assortment of additional ideologies, societal norms, and precursor texts that *Pretty Little Liars* can be examined in concert with. For instance, despite Netflix's "more like this" list of suggested television programs, *Pretty Little Liars* does not owe its narrative arc to *Gossip Girl* and similar teen texts. Rather, in many ways, *Pretty Little Liars* has more in common with *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847) than *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003). The television lineage of *Pretty Little Liars* is a bit more *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) and *Dexter* (2006-2013) and less *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) and *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007). The academic studies listed above do not reflect this collusion across generic boundaries. Cerny et al.'s (2014) piece, albeit from a

psychological perspective, looks at a certain character trope – the “crazy lady” – across genres and analyzes how this character is negatively impacting gender stereotypes. They do not draw lines between the genres and illustrate the ways that *PLL* or *PLL*'s representation of this character is being influenced specifically by the other representations. Mitchell (2015) examines the coming out narratives of lesbian characters within several teen dramas but does not draw lines from other genres or explore the impact of such storylines on other kinds of programs. Both of these studies are very insightful examinations of their subject matter. Using the rhizome, they could make even more insights, some of which are impossible when drawing generic lines.

As the example of *Pretty Little Liars* illustrates, television shows do not exist in isolation. One cannot produce, distribute, view, or study a program without, in some fashion, recalling other programs and the cultural setting out of which the show is borne. Certainly any discussion relating to the genre of program must be done in concert with a discussion of other texts and genres. The theory of the generic rhizome is a scholarly rendering of this programmatic relationship. The generic rhizome presents several new perspectives on television. First, it generates new avenues of meaning and, thereby, challenges simplistic readings or a complete disregard for certain programs. Second, it enables a new perspective through which to study genre television. Finally, the rhizome opens all texts up for potential examination, by not prioritizing specific texts as being more “worthwhile” than others.

### **Summarizing the Study**

Throughout this study, I have elaborated upon these advantages to the rhizome, while developing the theory and putting the theory into critical practice. In chapter one, I

broke down the reasons that such a theory is necessary in general, and specifically in today's television environment. A revolution has, according to numerous critics, been in the works since the mid- to late-1990s. This revolution, headed by HBO, the proliferation of premium cable stations, and online streaming services, has brought about extreme diversification of representation of identities and ideologies. Thus, we have entered into an era of "Peak" or "complex" television. Because of the excessive amount of television and television possibilities, genre has played an increasingly important role. Genre enables audiences to make sense of the proliferation of television options. Additionally, genre can serve as a template for producers, a marketing tool for distributors, and setter of expectations for viewers. Genre is a system of expectations; producers and distributors make use of those expectations to situate shows and draw in viewers. Therefore, I established the media ecology into which I feel the generic rhizome will be particularly appropriate as a conceptualization of all television.

In chapter two, I established the scholarly ecology into which I am situating my theory. First, I broke down the various approaches to genre theory. I examine the ways that genre theory changes from one discipline to the next – looking at literary genre theory (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), rhetorical genre theory (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978), and television genre theory (Mittell, 2004). I then ruminate upon the similarities, and, more importantly, the differences from how audiences and industry professionals distinguish genres. Several scholars (i.e. Feuer, 1992; C. R. Miller, 2012; Ongstad, 2002; Paré, 2002; Todorov, 1975) examine the differences between historical and theoretical genres. Historical genres derive from the texts and find their boundaries through the genres' real-world usages. Theoretical genres are rooted in looking forward from the

early Greeks' writings to posit potential genres. Very little of this work looks outside of texts to distinguish the characteristics of genres to societal and ideological motivations. I then follow the shifts that have occurred in genre studies and identify three primary uses of genre theory:

4. Identifying the boundaries of the genre and what texts fit within that genre (eg., Creeber et al., 2008; Garner, 2013; Grabowski, 2006)
5. The ways that genres have changed over time (eg., Edgerton & Rose, 2005b; L. Geraghty & Jancovich, 2008; Long, 2015; Woodman, 2005)
6. Analyses of how genres are utilized as cultural categories (eg., Altman, 1999; Frow, 2015).

However, none of these approaches fully encapsulates genre. As I undertake the articulation of a new genre theory, I discuss the primary alternative genre theory that could work to fill in these failings: generic hybrids. Hybrid-genre theory works from a hypothesis that a program unites two different genres to create a new generic program. Thus, this approach to genre theory does not account for the multiplicity of internodes that influence any given television program. Neither does a hybrid-genre theory eliminate a hierarchical approach. Even within the hybrid, one genre is the dominant and, thus, "more important" genre. The generic rhizome eliminates these problems.

The next section of chapter two examines the secondary element of theory that I bring in to create the theory of rhizomatic genre: the rhizome. I approach the rhizome from two perspectives: Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theoretical construction of the rhizome and the biological definition of the rhizome. In doing so, I establish six theoretical elements of the rhizome - connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying



rupture, cartography, and decalcomania – as well as three major aspects of the biological rhizomatic entity – its complexity, its reproduction method, and its relationship to a larger plant – and work to create four major axioms of the rhizome. These axioms are:

1. Genres are not bounded categories.
2. Television shows act as the nodes of the rhizome while the themes and characteristics are the internodes.
3. Any part of the rhizome can be removed and the rhizome still will function, possibly even retaining elements of the missing nodes.
4. The rhizome allows for the mapping of genre.

In the remainder of the study I demonstrated these four axioms. I created a methodological foundation and an historical background to cultivate my analyses.

The methodological foundation was established in chapter three. Here, I describe two different studies that need to be undertaken to elaborate upon the four axioms. Below I will discuss the ways in which each assumption is demonstrated in the studies, here I simply want to discuss why two separate studies were undertaken and why these specific studies. First, the generic rhizome is a theoretical framework in which a scholar can situate a critical analysis of texts. Therefore, there is not one “right way” to do a rhizomatic analysis of television. I undertook two traditional genre approaches – the generic definition (where a genre’s boundaries are defined) and a generic participation (an examination of the ways a text falls within a particular genre) – that revealed separate information about the generic rhizome. In doing so, I illustrated how the rhizome inverts the very purpose of these types of genre approaches. The generic rhizome encourages the critic to look not simply at how a genre is defined or how a text fits into a genre, but also

to look at the intertextual ways texts and genres stretch beyond boundaries to encounter other kinds of characteristics and genre forms. In doing so, I have illustrated the importance of the theory of the generic rhizome; it allows nuance in the analysis of genre that previous generic theory cannot currently account for.

That brings us to the second reason to have two different critical analyses. While both studies demonstrate the first two axioms, the sitcoms analysis does not examine axiom three and the Western analysis does not take into account axiom four. Chapter five looks at what rhizomatic internodes are present within programs and how those internodes influence the programs. However, at no point do I suggest times when sitcoms are removed wholly from their generic assumptions. Because the template for this study was a generic definition, there was no place for examining axiom three within that frame. Chapter six, on the other hand, is only nominally a generic participation study and engages very little with the idea of genre mapping. The primary purpose of the chapter is to look at the ways programs embody the ideals of Westerns, not to trace where those characteristics originated or migrated through the rhizome to a given program. Therefore, the exploration of the four axioms required two separate studies.

The first study does an historical, textual analysis of sitcoms from their earliest days (*I Love Lucy* [1951-1957]) to modern television (*You're the Worst* [2014-present]). Sitcoms are one of the most enduring television genres, so I chose to study the shifts that occurred within its long history. I chose shows that were critically acclaimed and widely watched, so as to sift through the hundreds of potential television shows, although I was careful to not suggest that any of these shows were culturally superior than any others. I then undertook to watch a random selection of the episodes of those forty-one television

shows that sifting process elucidated. I took note of the narrative arcs, the aesthetic elements, the characterizations, and the types of stories being told. I then situated these observations within their historical contexts, using paratexts and the relationships between the programs themselves. In doing so, I engaged in rhizomatic mapping, as I looked at the ways that internodes connected various nodes.

In the second study I conducted a participatory analysis of Western television shows, but demonstrated the rhizomatic aspect of asignifying ruptures. That is, I used this study to discuss the ways that a section of the rhizome can be broken off or disappear from television, but that is not detrimental to the whole of the rhizome and it does not preclude those characteristics from existing within the rhizome. I chose Western television shows because there are very few on television today, but there are a plethora of programs that retain Western characteristics. I utilized previous scholarship to create and identify “Western characteristics.” I then used paratexts, contextual analysis, and crowd-sourced websites such as [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), [Wikipedia](http://Wikipedia), and [TVTropes.com](http://TVTropes.com) to create a list of potential Western television shows. I watched some of these shows within these contexts, or found scholarship to support my list of possibilities, and I identified many programs with different Western traits.

To situate the importance of these shows within the larger rhizome, I also undertook a broad television history, found in chapter four. Here, I trace the whole of television history, examining the shifts in programs, as well as the technological, cultural, and audience driven influences upon those shifts. By doing so, I created a firm basis upon which to situate the generic rhizome. An essential element of the theory of the generic rhizome is that this is not a new innovation on television, but that today’s complex

television milieu requires a reconsideration of how television characteristics work.

Therefore, by establishing the long history of television programs and the changes within that history, I have set a groundwork for discussing how those influences are rhizomatic and how they continue to influence today's television.

### **Four Axioms of the Rhizome**

Chapters five and six are the two analysis studies. The specific content within those chapters contributes to the understanding and refining of the four axioms that form the basis of the theory of the generic rhizome. These four axioms are: (1) Genres are not discrete, bounded categories; (2) Shows are the nodes of the rhizome while thematic and stylistic elements are the internodes; (3) Any part of the rhizome can be removed without detriment to the rest; (4) The generic rhizome allows for the mapping of genre.

#### **Axiom 1: Genres are not bounded categories**

At the beginning of both analysis chapters, I confront one question head on: how do other people define this genre. In doing so, I illustrate boundaries that are generally considered to confine texts within a genre, but through the analysis of the chapter, reveal themselves to be inadequate to the task of classifying many of the programs confined within them. I do not endeavor to say that the programs within that "genre" do not abide by the "rules," but rather that the texts are more than those characteristics and that the genres are more than that small combination of characteristics. In Chapter 5 I establish the "idealized" sitcom and demonstrate that sitcoms rarely fit within that definition. Additionally, I show the ways that texts twist the traditional characteristics to tell their stories and create their characters.

One example of how a show twists a television trope to tell the story occurs in *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) when Debra (Patricia Heaton) is giving birth to Allie (Madylin Sweeten) and has an extreme contraction while stuck in traffic. The moment is built primarily upon the assumption that Allie is about to enter the world in the back of the car, but the humorous pay off actually comes when Robert (Brad Garrett) announces that this was yet another false alarm and the baby is not coming. *ELR* uses the assumptions of the audience to generate a bigger laugh. Similarly, *30 Rock* (2006-2013) makes use of the assumptions of the audience to create incongruous – and thus humorous – characters in Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan), Dot Com (Kevin Brown), and Grizz (Grizz Chapman). While these men appear to embody a range of stereotypes of both men and African Americans, over the course of the series, they subvert such stereotypes in complex ways. Tracy is not the womanizing idiot he initially appears to be, and is a loving husband who is devoted to his wife and children. Dot Com prefers reading intellectual literature over listening to rap music. Grizz eventually stars in a romantic comedy of his own devising. Both these men frequently push Tracy to explore his own heritage. They force the audience to rethink their beliefs.

Similarly, in Chapter 6, I utilize the traditional definition of the Western to identify the characteristics that make up programs identified as “Westerns.” In doing so, I was able to use those characteristics to identify other types of programs that retain attributes of the Western without the label “Western.” For instance, in *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993), the character of Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) embodies the same characteristics of the traditional Western hero. He is a loner who cannot settle down, has few romantic entanglements, and does not have a complicated backstory. As a result, he

takes on the strength of the history and themes that accompany the Western. Considering the Western elements of *Quantum Leap* therefore yields different critical insights than a traditional generic analysis focused on the show as science fiction.

**Axiom Two: Shows and Characteristics form the structure as Nodes and Internodes**

While the rhizome is non-hierarchical and constantly changing, that does not mean there is not a clear structure. That structure is made up of a series of nodes and internodes – programs and characteristics. I demonstrated the ways in which the rhizome is structured by breaking these genres down to their constituent characteristics and, in doing so, suggest that, rather than being tied to a particular category, a television show is simply the confluence of an array of characteristics. In chapter five, I identified myriad traits of the sitcoms, primarily in the categories of narrative structure, aesthetics, and characters, and looked at the different ways that these traits influence different programs – both within and outside the “genre.” I was able to demonstrate the relationship between programs and characteristics, while also demonstrating how these relationships are not static and can easily change from one moment to the next. One such relationship is found in the ways that *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) presents Sally Rogers (Rose Marie). At work and in many of her appearances on the show, Sally is “one of the guys” who can pratfall and make jokes with the best of them. She is the embodiment of a career woman. However, whenever anyone on the show remembers that she is a woman, she is suddenly treated differently and alters her behavior to become more feminine. Most of the storylines where Sally plays a prominent role are about the single goal of her life: to get married. She never talks about her career goals; she just wants to give up her job and wait on a husband. Sally’s feminism shifts depending on how she is needed for a story.

Additionally, I demonstrated how the internodal influences upon and from a text are not singular. A single text can have influences from and/or influence other texts, as well as influences from culture, hegemony, audiences, etc. A show such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979) is influenced by a large number of internodes. *All in the Family* engages with stories about racism, feminism, religion, rape, war, and class. It also makes use of aesthetic and narrative influences such as flashbacks, the ways its characters grow, and its simplistic but realistic mise-en-scene. *All in the Family* has long been regarded as one of the greatest sitcoms; using the rhizome to examine the ways it has been influenced reveals even more depth. As a show can have a large number of influences, it can itself influence many subsequent program. *Cheers* (1982-1993) is one such show. *Cheers* was the first show that was a true friend-group ensemble sitcom. As a result, all similar sitcoms that came after – *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Will & Grace* (1998-2005), *Arrested Development* (2003-present), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), *Community* (2009-2015), *Broad City* (2014-present), *Girls* (2012-2017), *Master of None* (2015-present), *New Girl* (2011-present), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present), and *You're the Worst* – were influenced by *Cheers* – especially the ways that having ensembles that grow and get their own story arcs can create compelling stories. Finally, *Roseanne* (1988-1997) was deeply influenced by cultural hegemony, but presented such discussions as normative within the lives of the characters. Prominently, storylines about homosexual characters and African American characters are presented as every day for these characters and not unusual. That being said, those stories do take up the entirety of the

episodes in which they exist. These discourses are important to engage with for the show, because of the normalcy with which the characters are likely to encounter them.

In chapter six, I shifted my focus away from the texts themselves and towards the characteristics. In doing so, I demonstrated that characteristics can persist without clear texts driving them and how those characteristics can be influenced by society, ideology, and hegemony without necessarily having a corresponding text. For instance, *Bates Motel* (2013-2017) recreates the iconic atmosphere that permeates its source text, *Psycho* (1960), through the use of oppressive locales, haunting cinematography, and lingering violence steeped in every element of the series. These aspects of the show are very similar to those of Westerns, even though *Bates Motel* retains no other cues of being a Western. The artistry of the camera work, the relationship between the characters and the spaces in which they exist, and the focus on the violence of the situation are all prominent cinematic characteristics of the Western. Thus, even though *Bates Motel* is ostensibly a thriller series, it retains important elements of the Western. Rather than using television programs to drive my analysis of Westerns, I used the internodes to guide my analysis. In this way, I identified shifts in how audiences, producers, and distributors perceive of the traits of Westerns. This is most prominent in my analysis of the thematic elements of Westerns – morality plays, American exceptionalism, and Manifest destiny – and the ways that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have turned these concepts on their heads while remaining true to the themes' purposes. For example, when analyzing *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), I illustrated the ways that the discourses surrounding American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, are in fact commentaries upon such problematic philosophies. *Battlestar Galactica* is about humans conquering the “Other” – in this case,



Cylons, a race of robots that look indistinguishable from humans – and creating a new land, because they are “in the right” and are better than the robotic Cylons. However, by having the Cylons as a literal creation of the humans, and by imbuing those Cylons with human emotions, *Battlestar Galactica* becomes a rumination on white supremacy and the logic of Manifest Destiny.

**Axiom 3: Any part of the rhizome can be removed without detriment to the rest**

At this point, the two chapters separate somewhat and the differences between the studies rise to the fore. Chapter six illustrates the asignifying ruptures evident in how Western programs continue to manifest on television while chapter five focuses on the ways that sitcoms influence and are influenced by other internodes. Indeed, the entirety of chapter six is devoted to examining what happens when nodes of the rhizome are removed altogether. In this case, the nodes are those where the “Western” internodes come together. In other words, when the requisite combination of elements are sufficient to form a Western, we recognize it as such. However, most programs on television today do not appear to be Westerns because they lack some apparently necessary internodes. Nevertheless, as I demonstrate in chapter six, that does not preclude television programs from still drawing influences from the Western internodes, even when they do not look like Westerns. I demonstrate this by breaking the Western genre down to its constitutive elements in three categories: the heroes, the themes, and the aesthetics. I then use those constitutive elements to identify television shows that contain elements of the Western, even without looking or feeling like a Western. There are two advantages to this analysis. First, it demonstrates the biological function of asignifying ruptures in the generic rhizome. Biologically speaking, any section of the rhizome can be removed from the

whole without detriment to either the whole or the section removed. Chapter 6 demonstrates how the Western nodes of the rhizome have been mostly removed, while still having the Western internodes persisting within the rhizome. Second, it shows how programs are more than their prominent genre. By demonstrating the separation of programs and characteristics, the split between texts and bounded genre categories becomes more obvious and, consequently, makes plain the importance of the rhizome as a heuristic metaphor for television studies.

**Axiom Four: The rhizome allows for mapping.**

Finally, chapter five, moreso than chapter six, demonstrates the ways that the rhizome can trace nodes and internodes to uncover the connections between them. Because of the way that chapter six separates the nodes and internodes, connections between nodes are not emphasized. Chapter five almost exclusively does this analysis. The primary aim of chapter five is to look at how the different programs are connected and how the connecting characteristics change from one program to the next. I trace specific characteristics throughout the history of television, finding specific examples through the ages, as well as theorizing additional programs that might contain similar characteristics. Such mapping can be useful in discussing how particular programs are making use of certain elements and why those elements are important. Again, television does not exist in isolation. Fiske (2011) reminds us that the readings and interpretations of texts are facilitated through the textual devices and the situations of the audiences, saying, “any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it” (p. 108). He argues that to study understandings of texts, we must understand the intertextuality of the text. Thus, “not

only is the text polysemic in itself, but its multitude of intertextual relations increases its polysemic potential” (p. 128). Therefore, looking at the direct links between shows is extremely important to understanding interpretation and how meaning is generated; the rhizome facilitates such linkage.

### **The advantages of the rhizome**

Taken altogether, television genres make up a web of characteristics that intersect to create television programs. These programs, therefore, retain elements of a variety of genres, some more prominent than others. By studying and watching television through this rhizomatic lens, scholars and audience members have a wider potential array of meaning-making perspectives. Without even realizing it, producers and distributors have always tapped into the rhizomatic nature of genre when creating and advertising programs. Very few programs remain true to the basic nature of a genre. Instead, to make a show new and interesting to watch, producers reach into other reservoirs to find storytelling techniques and topics, to prevent what Telotte (2008) calls “formulaic exhaustion” (p. 3). Similarly, distributors emphasize those other attributes to demonstrate why this particular show is innovative and worth watching.

By considering genre through a rhizomatic lens, a huge host of possibilities become clearer – for all levels of media production and consumption. Using the four axioms, which are built upon Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the rhizome, I have shown in this study the ways in which the theory of rhizomatic genres expands the possibilities for considering, creating, and studying television genres. I will reiterate some of the most important aspects of the generic rhizome, and elaborate upon why these are important to genre study, before turning briefly to how to utilize the theory going forward.

## **The problems with labeling**

One of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) central tenets of the rhizome is multiplicity. They tell us, "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines" (p. 8). The multiplicity of the rhizome creates a flattened image of genre – nothing is the beginning or ending, nothing is superior to or lesser than any other. Instead, there are only the "lines" and "plateaus" of the rhizome – the attributes and programs of television. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari say, "multiplicities are defined by the outside" (p. 9). All generic labels are created, obviously, from external forces, but the programs create within those genres push against the boundaries imposed upon them.

Take, for instance, the use of humor discussed in chapter five. Humor and sitcoms are, literally, synonymous on television. However, today many of the "sitcoms" included in the study utilize very little humor. I chose to include television programs that were thirty minutes long and claimed to be humorous in nature. While this does include many humorous shows such as *Community* and *30 Rock*, it also includes *Girls* and *Transparent* (2014-present), which deal with weighty topics and rarely caused me to laugh aloud. Instead, these shows use dark humor to comment upon those weighty topics and on society in general. The distinction of "sitcom" was imposed by me and does not encapsulate all the shows. This is the multiplicity of rhizome – each program manifests differently, and does not, therefore, fit within the strictures of the "genre."

## **Heterogeneity**

The generic rhizome is also valuable because it provides the critic with the ability to identify the traits of various programs and trace connections between them. This

perspective on television is encapsulated in Deleuze and Guattari's heterogeneity aspect of the rhizome and channels the intertextuality called for by other critics. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that "a rhizome ceaselessly establish[es] connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (p. 7). Those "semiotic chains" create connections between programs that would not previously be associated. Fiske (2011) similarly refers to horizontal intertextuality, those relationships "between primarily texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content" (p. 109). A straight line can be drawn from *I Love Lucy* to *Bewitched* (1964-1972) to *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-1977) to *Roseanne* to *Seinfeld* to *Sex and the City* to *Girls*, in terms of the depiction of women. The housewife stereotype decreases over the course of these series, moving from standard to satire to virtually invisible. At the same time, the sexual liberation of the characters and a discourse surrounding their agency within the workforce and their own lives rises. In her study of feminism on prime time television, Dow (1996) discusses *Mary Tyler Moore* in conjunction with *I Love Lucy*, *Bewitched*, and *Roseanne* (the others are not included, one assumes, because of the year the book was written). She draws parallels, but not explicitly. Lines can also be drawn to *Girls* from *Barney Miller* (1975-1982) and *Taxi* (1978-1983), through *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present) and *Louie* (2010-2015), when looking at realism and the narrative usefulness of seemingly authentic characters. Additionally, there are connections in the depictions of friend groups in *Girls* from *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Cheers*, *The Golden Girls*, *Friends*, and *Sex and the City*. These are also the connections made within the genre of "sitcom," the influences

upon *Girls* from outside this specific type of television show are far beyond the abilities of this brief rumination.

The point is that a single text, in this case *Girls*, is fruitfully illuminated by adopting the rhizome to consider its connections to other television. While scholars, critics, and audiences are very likely to examine *Girls* through its depiction of women and they have done so, as in Shaw et al. (2015), they may not connect it back to Lucille Ball or Roseanne Barr. Analyses of *Girls* are less likely to connect it to the realism of *Barney Miller* or the friend groups of *Cheers*. The theory of rhizomatic genre creates a way of looking at the connections between programs. Deleuze and Guattari say, “case by case, we can tell whether the line is consistent” (p.250). This is what the future of the theory of rhizomatic genre must look like – tracing specific lines or programs to look at the consistencies and inconsistencies of the lines to uncover the ways that programs are using those lines.

### **Assemblages**

The rhizome also opens texts to new perspectives through the subtle influence of other genres. Foucault (1970) discusses how a taxonomic perspective influences semiotic interpretations. He says, “in this way [signs] authorize the establishment of a simultaneous system according to which the representations express their proximity and their distance, their adjacency and their separateness” (p. 73). In semiotics, everything means something; Foucault is suggesting that by situating these signs within certain boundaries, the signifiers of those signs are telling in their relationship to other signs/signifiers. In the rhizome, both the proximity of generic attributes and attributes far removed from their standard genre can be telling in the interpretation of a text. Similarly,

Gitlin (1983) discusses “cultural recombination” – in which texts are reformulated and reconfigured to create new texts and bring in new audiences. Gitlin suggests that such recombinations are “part of the ground rhythm of modern culture” (p. 77).

In chapter six, I explored the ways in which deviations from the generic norm can be particularly telling with regards to the interpretations of the program. By reading a text such as *Lost* (2004-2010) through a Western lens, certain discourses and storytelling arcs become obvious. This story of a plane wreck is actually a story about the human struggle – a character such as Kate (Evangeline Lilly) will have a tragic backstory and will eventually find some form of peace, but she will first have to undergo certain obstacles. This is clear in her story arc, but also in the reading of her character as a Western hero. Since she is presented as a Western hero from the early moments of the series, reading her as such is not difficult. Specific twists regarding her felony and murderous background therefore evolve with narrative fidelity. Additionally, her motivations as the show moves forward often emerge from her mysterious past. Reading her as a Western hero opens her up to a myriad of interpretations – her relationships with Jack (Matthew Fox) and Sawyer (Josh Holloway), her status as a leader within the group, her protectiveness towards Claire (Emilie de Ravin) and the baby, etc. – can all be read through this Western hero lens and illuminated in ways that would otherwise be elusive.

The show itself is a morality play that features an abundance of violence and ruminates on the nature of forging of society in the unknown. The us vs. them binary typical of Westerns pervades the Island’s culture, and, thus, discourses of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny run throughout the series. Understanding *Lost* as rhizomatically Western helps illuminate these themes. However, by investigating

exceptionalism on *Lost*, the show becomes a treatise on the rights of Americans and the struggle of human nature in opposition to their destiny. Some of this is always present, but the Western adds an extra level of exceptionalism and supremacy on top of the destiny threads that are already there.

Another term that Deleuze and Guattari use to define aspect of the rhizome is “assemblage.” They say that “[the assemblage] is simultaneously and inseparably a machinic assemblage and an assemblage of enunciation” (p. 504). A machine assemblage is “an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another” and an enunciation assemblage is “acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (p. 88). In other words, the assemblage is the ways that aspects react to each other, both in terms of the physical being and in terms of the abstract expressions. Ott and Walter (2000) observe “The collage-like, participatory nature of intertextual media fosters an aggregative rather than sequential way of seeing and knowing” (p. 441). Ott and Walter’s idea of the “collage” nature of intertextuality can easily be paralleled to assemblages. We can further discuss these metaphors onto the rhizome through thinking about programs, the nodes of the rhizome. The machinic assemblages are those physical traits of the shows – the narrative structure and the aesthetics; the assemblage of enunciation are the discourses and character manifestations. Together they produce a complicated product that fits into today’s complex television ecology – as *Lost* does with its confluence of Western traits and science fiction/fantasy tropes.

### **Complex television and the purposelessness of the rhizome**

Today’s television environment is almost entirely made up of these kinds of assemblages. As discussed in chapter one, television today is almost exclusively



“complex television” (Mittell, 2015). Television is no longer confined as a “formulaic medium,” which “repeats its formulas complete with the same characters, the same stars, sometimes for years on end” (Newcomb, 1974, p. 22). Rather, “complex television plays with story and discourse time through episode variations on the serialize routine” (Mittell, 2015, p. 28). Therefore, ways to study these complexities must emerge in television studies. Considering television genres through a rhizomatic frame is just one new perspective on television. The generic rhizome encapsulates the ways that television “plays with story and discourse” (Mittell, 2015, p. 28) by looking at the connections these narrative complexities have with other programs.

One of the keys of the rhizome is that “there is no beginning from which a linear sequence would derive” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 328). Thus, nothing is entirely new or original. Instead, everything, especially on television, is linked to other programs both through history and through similarity. In attempting to tell stories, producers draw upon the most useful devices, rather than what is expected. In this way, television programs do

not [follow] a logical order, but [follow] allogical consistencies or compatibilities [because] no one, not even God, can say in advance whether two border lines will string together or form a fiber, whether a given multiplicity will or will not cross over into another given multiplicity, or even if given heterogeneous elements will enter symbiosis, will form a consistent, or cofunctioning, multiplicity susceptible to transformation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 250)

The producers do not purposefully combine elements to create the outcome, but are influenced by particular traits that have entered the zeitgeist in one way or another.

Indeed, Fiske (2011) suggests that postmodernism itself brings “the rejection of meaning in its affirmation of the image as signifier with no final signified; images exist in an infinite chain of intertextuality” (p. 117). There is little structure to the rhizome and the meanings generated from the rhizome can be wholly unintentional. That can mean that the rhizomatic influences are unexpected but fruitful. It is unlikely that the *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) producers or George R.R. Martin set out to create a Western fantasy epic; nevertheless, by reading the series as a Western, new discourses become obvious. Ones that would not have ever been considered without the rhizome.

### **The Rhizome throughout Television History**

Television has traditionally been perceived as a medium for the news, but not for artistry or complexity. Newcomb (1974) attributes such dismissal to the “continuing fear that a nation possessed of a dream-like ‘television mentality’ will soon develop” (p. 21) and that “television is essentially a formulaic medium” (p. 22). Williams’ (1974) agrees with this assessment, saying that television writers

usually find themselves writing within an established formation of situation and leading characters, in what can be described as a collective but is more often a corporate dramatic enterprise. Certain formulas on which the continuity depends are then the limiting conventions within which they must work (p. 57).

Both these men, who are often considered to be amongst the fathers of television studies, point to the generic formulas of television as the problem with the medium. However, they also both point to the possibilities inherent within those formulas. Williams (1974) suggests looking “for ways beyond” the “stock formulas” of television serials (p. 58) and

Newcomb (1974) says, “television creates its own version of the traditional popular arts” such that television programs are vastly different than their antecedents (p. 23).

Such scholarship on television both ignores the rhizomatic influences and opens the door for them to exist. Newcomb (1974) speaks of “complexity” on television (p. 23), just as Mittell (2015) does. The complexity has always been present; scholars have simply chosen to focus on other means of studying television programs. Therefore, it is important to undertake analysis of television, no matter its era, with aid of the critical insights offered by the theory of the generic rhizome. Within chapter five, I demonstrated that the rhizome has always governed choices made on television. Take *Bewitched*, and the supernatural aspect of *Bewitched*, as a simple example. In its own time, the success of *Bewitched* inspired *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970), *The Munsters* (1964-1966), and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966). But in fact, *Bewitched* influenced a large number of fantasy programs going forward – especially those set in the “real world.” As a result, it is important to consider the possibility of *Bewitched* as an influence on a program. Everything from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* (1998-2006) to *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) and *The Vampire Diaries* has similarities to *Bewitched*. If the rhizomatic lens was only applied to the complex television of today, *Buffy* and *The Vampire Diaries* might be examined, and thus the influence of *Bewitched* uncovered, but *Charmed* and *Sabrina* could be neglected, because of the era in which they were created.

Similarly, while the analysis of Westerns was not, strictly speaking, an historical analysis, there are still plenty of ways to examine past series through a Western lens. In chapter six, I examined some of the ways that *Star Trek* (1966-1969) and its sequels are

Westerns; this same analysis could be extended to other similar science fiction series such as *Farscape* (1999-2003), *Babylon 5* (1994-1998), *Lost in Space* (1965-1968), etc. They all deal in the same Us versus Them dichotomy and all invoke the forging of new frontiers. Similarly, many crime procedurals are Western in nature, because of the dichotomy set up between good and evil, as well as the historical lineage that maps the influence of the Western onto Film Noir, which directly lead to Crime Procedurals. Hence, looking at the history of this genre alongside the Western influences could prove particularly fruitful.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The theory of the generic rhizome transforms the scholarly act of classification. It enables analysis of the ways that texts subvert audience expectations to create new understandings of established norms. It allows consideration of the textual similarities and differences that generate meanings and challenge simplistic readings of texts. It encourages scholars to see texts as more than the sum of a generic whole, but instead as rich spaces for many characteristics to come together to create an entirely new dialogue. Finally, it flattens the hierarchy with which popular culture is frequently associated and challenges the elitism underlying the sense that some programs are unworthy of scholarly inquiry. Thus, all texts are worth studying.

With the theory of rhizomatic genres, I have created a framework through which to discuss texts, utilizing whichever methodology one so chooses. This theory is a way of conceptualizing what is happening on television. As mentioned previously, one of the central tenets of the theory of rhizomatic genres is that it can allow scholars to map the rhizome. Through using other methods, scholars can closely examine outside influences

on texts. The theory of rhizomatic genres enables scholars, audience members, and producers to consider genre as open and free, rather than confined and restrictive. This theory elaborates upon discussions of intertextuality while uniting the disparate usages of the term within media studies (Ott & Walter, 2000). Radway (1986) says, “no ideology is a simple, uniform, organic thing. It secures the consciousness it manages to create only through a congeries of varied and related practices” (p. 108). Theorists have long suggested the interconnected ways that media works. This theory finds a way of making the interconnections between texts, narrative devices, and ideologies manifest, while also uniting both usages of the word, and accounting for all televisual texts.

### **Limitations**

The theory of the generic rhizome is not fully explored within the pages of this dissertation. Indeed, because of the nature of the rhizome, no single study could possibly hope to encapsulate the entire idea. This study is simply a beginning for the process. I have laid out the reasons the theory is necessary, the scholarly basis for the theory, and have set up two studies that make use of the theory. There remains significant work to be done. The reasons for this limitation are multiple: the rhizome is dynamic, creates an entirely new theory in a space where such a theory may not be necessary, upends the system of classification that it claims to be defining, and has the potential to contain every single aspect of life itself.

First, the rhizome is inherently dynamic, and cannot be conclusively mapped. There will always be new perspectives that suggest alternative rhizomatic influences upon a text. There also are a myriad of rhizomatic influences upon a single text, and those cannot always be revealed. Additionally, cultural shifts are likely to reveal new

perspectives on the influences of a text, even older texts. For each text or characteristic or genre, as well as for each scholar undertaking such analysis, the rhizome will reveal something new and different. This is both a strength and a limitation of the theory of the generic rhizome.

Second, genre theory is a stalwart area of media studies and many genre scholars would argue that this complete overhaul of the entire field is unnecessary. Genre analyses as they stand, with careful attention focused upon the cultural, historical, and paratextual influences upon a television program, are actually already proving the influence of the rhizome. They just don't work within a meta-theory that encompasses such language. As a result, the focus is on the text or the genre, without focusing on the ways that characteristics stretch beyond one text or genre into another. The theory of the generic rhizome is not a complete overhaul of the field; instead it is a refinement of a process that is already being undertaken. Many genre theories that have been undertaken (Castleberry, 2014; Cerny et al., 2014; Day, 2017; Dow, 1996; Garner, 2013; Grabowski, 2006; Long, 2015; McAllister, 1992; J. Mitchell, 2015; Shaw et al., 2015; Woodman, 2005) could benefit from the generic rhizome, not simply for the meta-theoretical aspect of the genre, but also for the ways it opens texts up to alternative ways of looking at those texts, both within the genres and outside those confines.

Next, the theory of the generic rhizome appears to be declaring war on classification while still arguing within a framework of classification. The one does not necessarily preclude the other. As outlined in previous chapters, genres themselves remain important for producers to have a framework from which to begin creating a series, distributors to have ways of marketing programs, and viewers to make sense of the

enumerable television options. Genre theory also remains important to examine the ways that such sense-making works, as well as how the texts negotiate genre. However, theorists also must acknowledge that a generic lens can overly restrict the analysis of television. Therefore, the theory of the generic rhizome opens genre theory to an array of entirely new studies.

Finally, and as a direct result of such openings, the rhizome has the potential to contain anything and everything. Additionally, because of the ways that the rhizome flattens popular hierarchical understandings, everything within any television program could be worth studying. The rhizome thus has the potential to become an unruly, entangled mass of nodes and internodes with little rhyme or reason. While I recognize the difficulty with such a conception, I see this instead as the exciting possibility of the rhizome. Everything is connected to everything else. Media scholars have long recognized this in their discussions of intertextuality. Examining the cultural significance of such connections, no matter how apparently inconsequential, has the potential to reveal extremely consequential insights. The rhizome's vastness is not a limitation, but a strength. It enables scholars to look at texts through entirely new lenses and see things they could have never previously conceived.

### **Future Directions**

Going forward, there are myriad ways that scholars can expand and develop the theory of the generic rhizome. Most prominently, scholars can investigate other areas of the rhizome – looking at different genres, different kinds of shows, or even different eras of history. By looking at different genres, scholars can examine ways that the rhizome works within those genres in the same ways that I investigated sitcoms in chapter five. By

looking at different kinds of shows, there are many ways scholars can identify alternative rhizomatic influences upon those shows that do not limit them by genre. Finally, by looking at specific eras of history, scholars could identify the rhizomatic ways that those eras have influenced both the shows during that era, and those shows that came after, and audiences' understanding of those shows.

As for myself, I am inclined to move away from broadly mapping the rhizome and towards focusing in on specific areas of the rhizome and the ways that specific shows are being influenced. As discussed in the previous section, anything and everything can be included within the rhizome. Focusing in on those possibilities will be a fruitful source of insight on television programs. Programs that are off the air can prove to be influential on unexpected television shows, on the cultural shifts that occurred while they were on the air or after, or even on the ways we conceptualize television as a whole today. The same can be said for programs that are currently on the air. Examining these texts as they unfold and the ways that they are being influenced in real time could prove to be extremely revealing with regards to the ways that television and society are intertwined.

Additionally, looking at television tropes and the ways that these tropes have spread would be useful. There are some very specific styles of storytelling that are repeatedly used on television today – musical episodes, *Hangover*-style plot lines, etc. – and there are also new tropes emerging everyday. Those are all areas where the rhizome is at work. Looking at how these tropes work on television and how they are changing our perceptions of genres and programs would be extremely interesting.

There is also a great deal of potential in reaching beyond television. Film today frequently gets criticized for reusing plots and falling back on remakes. Looking at the



current film landscape in terms of the rhizome could also be particularly telling – is there really nothing new to be done, or are they simply testing out new formulas going forward? The same could be said for the ways that memes or viral videos work online. There’s an abundance of ways to think about newly prominent media such as the internet and video games. In what ways is the rhizome working in those spaces?

### **Conclusion**

Deleuze and Guattari ask a series of questions “Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for?” then say, “These are useless questions” (p. 25). The rhizome prevents questions of directionality from being useful. I would posit better questions for using the theory of rhizomatic genres: What are you doing? What purpose does that serve? Where else is that done? What does the link between those texts tell us? These questions are just the starting point for the possibilities that the generic rhizome allows.

#### **What are you doing?**

In this context, “you” refers to the producers of the series. What is the show doing? To answer this question, a scholar would need a particular frame that they were looking through. But once such a frame were established, the question would then relate directly to the ways the show works. This could relate to the narrative, ideology, aesthetics, characters, etc. The first step is in identifying the device to be explored.

#### **What purpose does that serve?**

After the device is identified, it would then be necessary to examine why that device is particularly telling on the television program. How does it work and what is the result? Again, this could relate to any number of elements of the show – it could be in the

interpretation, distribution, or simply storytelling of the series. To be able to fully discuss the rhizome, the purpose of a single device becomes necessary to identify. It is only when looking at the device in a particular context that a rhizomatic analysis becomes obvious. For instance, as discussed in chapter six, a show's usage of the themes of a morality play does not necessarily make it a Western. The morality play must be used in conjunction with another Western theme, such as Manifest Destiny or American exceptionalism. However, making use of such an analysis can prove extremely fruitful. Examining *Once Upon A Time* within the context of an aesthetic Western can deepen the overall purpose of the series and open it up to discussions of heroics, othering, and how the show handles discussions of destiny.

### **Where else is that done?**

Once the device and its purpose have been identified, the next step is to look for that same device being used in the same way in other places. Once those places can be identified, then the true rhizomatic analysis can begin. Knowing that these shows all display the same thematic elements of Morality play and Manifest destiny can only shape to a point. There is one last question that must be identified: What does the link between texts tell us? This question is the most important part of the theory of the rhizome. Without asking about the link, the rhizome only supplies a source of connection. The theory relies upon those connections being telling otherwise it would be meaningless. Nevertheless, there is never a clear answer to this question. Throughout chapters five and six, I worked to posit some potential importance for each of the rhizomatic links that I made. This importance could be related to the hierarchical understanding of the different television shows, to the discursive readings of the show, to the scholarly interpretation of

the series, etc. The importance of the links depends wholly upon the links themselves. That is the most fascinating potential of the rhizome, it enables a host of understandings. Everything within the rhizome is dependent upon the circumstances of the rhizome and the scholars.

The theory of the generic rhizome revolutionizes both genre theory and television studies. It challenges simplistic readings of the cultural texts circulated on television. It opens these texts to myriad possible interpretations and insights. It flattens cultural hierarchies often invoked to degrade televisual storytelling. A theory of genre that accomplishes each of these things is necessary because each of the preceding statements could accurately be directed at television itself. Television challenges simplistic readings. Television opens texts to myriad possibilities. Television flattens cultural hierarchies. Television is a space for experimentation and innovation. From *Dragnet* (1951-1959) to *The Defenders* (1961-1965), *Roots* (1977) to *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present), television has always been a place where various discourses can be engaged, inexhaustible stories can be told, unfamiliar characters can be found, and assorted aesthetics can be featured. As the preceding analyses demonstrated, television has always been complex and open. Both those programs that outwardly challenge the status quo and those that seem to align with hegemonic ideologies contain important cultural density. The metaphor of the rhizome updates the critical conception of genre to account for the complexity and nuance of television. Television should be studied in a way that mines, rather than flattens, the open and dense textual space it creates. As this dissertation has illustrated, the theory of the generic rhizome is a scholarly conceptualization of television that echoes its freedom and complexity.

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## APPENDIX A

*Table 1: Sitcoms by Decade*

*(Dates listed are the years the program appeared on my lists)*

1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2015
I Love Lucy (1951-1957)	The Andy Griffith Show (1960-1967)	The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977)	M*A*S*H (1980-1983)	Cheers (1990-1993)	Friends (2000, 2002-03)	Modern Family (2010-2014)
Father Knows Best (1958-59)	The Dick Van Dyke Show (1961-1966)	All in the Family (1971-1979)	Barney Miller (1980-1982)	The Golden Girls (1990-1992)	Everybody Loves Raymond (2000-05)	The Big Bang Theory (2010-2014)
	Bewitched (1964-1969)	M*A*S*H (1973-1979)	Taxi (1980-1983)	Roseanne (1990-95)	Sex and the City (2000-04)	Broad City (2014-2015)
		Barney Miller (1976-	Cheers (1983-1989)	Seinfeld (1992-1998)	Will & Grace (2000-05)	Catastrophe (2015)

		1979)				
			Family Ties (1984-1987)	Frasier (1993-99)	Arrested development (04-06)	Community (2010-2012)
			The Cosby Show (1984-89)	Friends (1994-97,99)	The Office (06-09)	Curb your enthusiasm (2011)
			The Golden Girls (1985-89)	Everybody Loves Raymond (1997-99)	30 Rock (07-09)	Enlightened (2013)
						Girls (2012)
						Louie (2010-2012, 2014)
						Master of None (2015)
						New Girl (2012)
						Parks and Rec (2010-2012)
						Silicon

						Valley (2014-2015)
						Transparent (2014-2015)
						Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (2015)
						Veep (2013- 2015)
						You're the Worst (2014-2015)

## APPENDIX B

### Television Shows and Films Referenced

<b>Show</b>	<b>Years Produced</b>	<b>Network/Studio</b>	<b>Creator/Director</b>
24	2001-2010	Fox	Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran
13 Reasons Why	2017-present	Netflix	Brian Yorkey
30 Rock	2006-2013	NBC	Tina Fey
3rd Rock From the Sun	1996-2001	NBC	Bonnie Turner and Terry Turner
60 Minutes	1968-present	CBS	Don Hewitt
Alias	2001-2006	ABC	J.J. Abrams
All in the Family	1971-1979	CBS	Norman Lear
Ally McBeal	1997-2002	Fox	David E. Kelley
America's Funniest Home Videos	1989-present	ABC	
American Horror Story	2011-present	FX	Ryan Murphy
Angel	1999-2004	WB	Joss Whedon

Annie Oakley	1954-1957	Flying A Productions	Louis Gray
Arrested Development	2003-present	Fox/Netflix	Mitchell Hurwitz
Arrow	2012-present	CW	Greg Berlanti, Marc Guggenheim, Andrew Kreisberg
Babylon 5	1994-1998	WB	J. Michael Straczynski
Barney Miller	1974-1982	ABC	Danny Arnold and Theodore J. Flicker
Bates Motel	2013-2017	A&E	Anthony Cipriano, Carton Cuse, and Kerry Ehrin
Battlestar Galactica	1978-1979	ABC	Glen A. Larson
Battlestar Galactica	2004-2009	Sci-Fi	Glen A. Larson and Ronald D. Moore
Beverly Hills, 90210	1990-2000	Fox	Darren Star
Bewitched	1964-1972	ABC	Sol Saks
Blue Bloods	2010-present	CBS	Mitchell Burgess and Robin Green
Bonanza	1959-1973	NBC	David Dortort



Bones	2005-2017	Fox	Hart Hanson
Boy Meets World	1993-2000	ABC	Michael Jacobs and April Kelly
Breaking Bad	2008-2013	AMC	Vince Gililgan
Broad City	2014-present	Comedy Central	Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson
Brooklyn Nine-Nine	2013-present	Fox	Daniel J. Goor and Michael Schur
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	1997-2003	WB	Joss Whedon
Burn Notice	2007-2013	USA	Matt Nix
Castle	2009-2016	ABC	Andrew W. Marlowe
Catastrophe	2015-present	Amazon	Rob Delaney and Sharon Horgan
Charlie's Angels	1976-1981	ABC	Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts
Charmed	1998-2006	WB	Constance M. Burge
Cheers	1982-1993	NBC	James Burrows, Glen Charles, and Les Charles
Community	2009-2015	NBC/Yahoo	Dan Harmon
Cougar Town	2009-2015	ABC/TBS	Kevin Biegel and Bill Lawrence

Criminal Minds	2005-present	CBS	Jeff Davis
CSI	2000-2015	CBS	Anthony E. Zuiker
Curb Your Enthusiasm	2000-present	HBO	Larry David
Dallas	1978-1991	CBS	David Jacobs
Dawson's Creek	1998-2003	WB	Kevin Williamson
Deadwood	2004-2006	HBO	David Milch
Dexter	2006-2013	Showtime	James Manos, Jr.
Disneyland	1954-1991	ABC	Walt Disney
Doctor Who	2005-present	BBC	Sydney Newman
Doogie Howser, M.D.	1989-1993	ABC	Steven Bochco and David E. Kelley
Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman	1993-1998	CBS	Beth Sullivan
Dragnet	1951-1959	NBC	Jack Webb
Dynasty	1981-1989	ABC	Esther Shapiro and Richard Alan Shapiro
Enlightened	2011-2013	HBO	Laura Dern and Mike White
Entourage	2004-2011	HBO	Doug Ellin
ER	1994-2009	NBC	Michael Crichton
Everwood	2002-2006	WB	Greg Berlanti

Everybody Loves Raymond	1996-2005	CBS	Philip Rosenthal
F Troop	1965-1967	ABC	Richard M. Bluel
Family Matters	1989-1998	ABC/CBS	William Bickley and Michael Warren
Family Ties	1982-1989	NBC	Gary David Goldberg
Fantasy Island	1977-1984	ABC	Gene Levitt
Farscape	1999-2003	Sci-Fi	Rockne S. O'Bannon
Father Knows Best	1954-1960	CBS	Ed James
Felicity	1998-2002	The WB	J.J. Abrams
Ferris Bueller's Day Off	1986	Paramount	John Hughes
Firefly	2002-2003	Fox	Joss Whedon
Frasier	1993-2004	NBC	David Angell, Peter Casey, David Lee
Friday Night Lights	2006-2011	NBC	Peter Berg
Friends	1994-2004	NBC	David Crane and Marta Kauffman
Fringe	2008-2013	Fox	J.J. Abrams
Frontier	2016-present	Netflix	Rob Blackie and Peter Blackie

Full House	1987-1995	ABC	Jeff Franklin
Game of Thrones	2011-present	HBO	David Benioff and D.B. Weiss
Gilmore Girls	2000-2007	WB	Amy Sherman-Palladino
Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life	2016	Netflix	Amy Sherman-Palladino
Girls	2012-2017	HBO	Lena Dunham
Glee	2009-2015	Fox	Ian Brennan, Brad Falchuk, and Ryan Murphy
Goodfellas	1990-2000	Warner Bros.	Martin Scorsese
Gossip Girl	2007-2012	CW	Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz
Grey's Anatomy	2005-present	ABC	Shonda Rhimes
Gunsmoke	1955-1975	CBS	Charles Marquis Warren
Happy Days	1974-1984	ABC	Garry Marshall
Have Gun Will Travel	1957-1963	CBS	Herb Meadow and Sam Rolfe
Hell on Wheels	2011-2016	AMC	Joe Gayton and Tony Gayton

Hill Street Blues	1981-1987	NBC	Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll
Homeland	2011-present	Showtime	Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon
House of Cards	2013-present	Netflix	Beau Willimon
How I Met Your Mother	2005-2014	CBS	Carter Bays and Craig Thomas
How to Get Away With Murder	2014-present	ABC	Shonda Rhimes
I Dream of Jeannie	1965-1970	NBC	Sidney Sheldon
I Love Lucy	1951-1957	CBS	Lucielle Ball and Desi Arnaz
I Spy	1965-1968	NBC	David Friedkin and Morton Fine
Jessica Jones	2015-present	Netflix	Melissa Rosenberg
Laverne & Shirley	1976-1983	ABC	Lowell Ganz, Garry Marshall, and Mark Rothman
Law & Order	1990-2010	NBC	Dick Wolf
Longmire	2012-2017	A&E/Netflix	Hunt Baldwin and John Coveny

Lost	2004-2010	ABC	J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof
Lost in Space	1965-1968	CBS	Irwin Allen
Louie	2010-present	FX	Louie C.K.
M*A*S*H	1972-1983	CBS	Larry Gelbert
Mad Men	2007-2015	AMC	Matthew Weiner
Mandela	1987	HBO	Philip Saville and Ronald Harwood
Mary Tyler Moore	1970-1977	CBS	James L. Brooks and Allan Burns
Master of None	2015-present	Netflix	Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang
Mayberry RFD	1968-1971	CBS	Bob Ross
Melrose Place	1992-1999	Fox	Darren Star
Miami Vice	1984-1990	NBC	Anthony Yerkovich
Mission: Impossible	1966-1973	CBS	Bruce Geller
Modern Family	2009-present	ABC	Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd
Moonlighting	1985-1989	ABC	Glenn Gordon Caron
Mork & Mindy	1978-1982	ABC	Joe Glauber, Garry Marshall, Dale

			McRaven
Murphy Brown	1988-1998	CBS	Diane English
NCIS	2003-present	CBS	Donald P. Bellisario and Don McGill
NCIS: LA	2009-present	CBS	Shane Brennan
New Girl	2011-present	Fox	Elizabeth Meriwether
No Tomorrow	2016-2017	CW	Corinne Brinkerhoff, Scott McCabe, Tory Stanton
Once Upon a Time	2011-present	ABC	Adam Horowitz and Edward Kitsis
One Tree Hill	2003-2012	WB/CW	Mark Schwahn
Orange is the New Black	2013-present	Netflix	Jenji Kohan
Oz	1997-2003	HBO	Tom Fontana
Parenthood	2010-2015	NBC	Jason Katims
Parker Lewis Can't Lose	1990-1993	Fox	Clyde Phillips and Lon Diamond
Parks and Recreation	2009-2015	NBC	Greg Daniels and Michael Schur
Petticoat Junction	1963-1970	CBS	Paul Henning
Pretty Little	2010-2017	ABC Family	I. Marlene King

Liars			
Psycho	1960	Paramount	Alfred Hitchcock
Quantum Leap	1989-1993	NBC	Donald P. Bellisario
Quick Draw	2013-2014	Hulu	Nancy Hower and John Lehr
Red Dwarf	1988-present	BBC	Doug Naylor and Rob Grant
Riverdale	2016-present	CW	Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa
Roots	1977	ABC	Alex Haley
Roseanne	1988-1997	ABC	Matt Williams
Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In	1967-1973	NBC	Digby Wolfe
Sabrina the Teenage Witch	1996-2003	ABC	Jonathan Schmock and Nell Scovell
Scandal	2012-present	ABC	Shonda Rhimes
Seinfeld	1989-1998	NBC	Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld
Sex and the City	1998-2004	HBO	Darren Star
Shane	1953	Paramount	George Stevens
Sherlock	2010-present	BBC	Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat



Smallville	2001-2011	CW	Alfred Gough and Miles Millar
Soap	1977-1981	ABC	Susan Harris
St. Elsewhere	1982-1988	NBC	Joshua Brand and John Falsey
Star Trek	1966-1969	CBS	Gene Roddenberry
Star Trek: Deep Space Nine	1993-1999	CBS	Rick Berman and Michael Piller
Star Trek: Discovery	2017-present	CBS	Bryan Fuller and Alex Kurtzman
Star Trek: Enterprise	2001-2005	CBS	Rick Berman and Brannon Braga
Star Trek: The Next Generation	1987-1994	CBS	Gene Roddenberry
Star Trek: Voyager	1995-2001	CBS	Rick Berman, Michael Piller, Jeri Taylor
Stranger Things	2016-present	Netflix	Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer
Supergirl	2015-present	CBS/CW	Ali Adler, Greg Berlanti, and Andrew Kreisberg
Supernatural	2005-present	CW	Eric Kripke
Tales from the	1989-1996	HBO	Steven Dodd

Crypt			
Tanner '88	1988	HBO	Garry Trudeau
Taxi	1978-1983	ABC/NBC	James L. Brooks, Stan Daniels, David Davis, and Ed. Weinberger
That Girl	1966-1971	ABC	Bill Persky and Sam Denoff
The 100	2014-present	CW	Jason Rothenberg
The A-Team	1983-1987	NBC	Frank Lupo and Stephen J. Cannell
The Addams Family	1964-1966	ABC	David Levy
The Andy Griffith Show	1960-1968	CBS	Sheldon Leonard
The Bachelor	2002-present	ABC	Mike Fleiss
The Beverly Hillbillies	1962-1971	CBS	Paul Henning
The Big Bang Theory	2007-present	CBS	Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady
The Cosby Show	1984-1992	NBC	Ed. Weinberger, Michael Leeson, and Bill Cosby

The Danny Thomas Hour	1953-1964	ABC/CBS	Sheldon Leonard, William Asher, and Danny Thomas
The Dark Knight	2008	Warner Bros.	Christopher Nolan
The Defenders	1961-1965	CBS	Reginald Rose
The Dick Van Dyke Show	1961-1966	CBS	Carl Reiner
The Fall	2013-2016	BBC	Allan Cubitt
The Flash	2014-present	CW	Greg Berlanti, Andrew Kreisberg, and Geoff Johns
The Gene Autry Show	1950-1956	CBS	George Archainbaud and D. Ross Lederman
The Godfather	1972	Paramount	Francis Ford Coppola
The Golden Girls	1985-1992	NBC	Susan Harris
The Good Wife	2009-2016	CBS	Robert King and Michelle King
The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly	1966	United Artists	Sergio Leone
The Josephine	1991	HBO	Ron Hutchinson

Baker Story			
The Larry Sanders Show	1992-1998	HBO	Garry Shandling
The Magnificent Seven	1960	United Artists	John Sturges
The Magnificent Seven	2016	MGM	Antoine Fuqua
The Man from U.N.C.L.E.	1964-1968	NBC	Sam Rolfe and Norman Felton
The Mindy Project	2012-2017	Fox/Hulu	Mindy Kaling
The Munsters	1964-1966	CBS	Allan Burns and Chris Hayward
The Office	2005-2013	NBC	Greg Daniels
The Orville	2017-present	Fox	Seth MacFarlane
The Prisoner	1967-1968	BBC	Patrick McGoohan and George Markstein
The Queen's Messenger	1928	W2XAD	Ernst Alexanderson
The Roy Rogers Show	1951-1957	NBC	Larry Kent, Jack Lacey, Roy Rogers, and Arthur Rush
The Searchers	1956	Warner Bros.	John Ford

The Simpsons	1989-present	Fox	Matt Groening
The Sopranos	1999-2007	HBO	David Chase
The Today Show	1952-present	NBC	Sylvester Weaver
The Vampire Diaries	2009-2017	CW	Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec
The Waltons	1972-1981	CBS	Earl Hamner, Jr.
The Wild Wild West	1965-1969	CBS	Michael Garrison
The Wire	2002-2008	HBO	David Simon
The Wonder Years	1988-1993	ABC	Neal Marlens and Carol Black
The X-Files	1993-present	Fox	Chris Carter
Tombstone	1993	Hollywood Pictures	George P. Cosmatos
Transparent	2014-present	Amazon	Jill Soloway
True Blood	2008-2014	HBO	Alan Ball
True Detective	2014-present	HBO	Nic Pizzolatto
True Grit	1969	Paramount	Henry Hathaway
True Grit	2010	Paramount	Joel Coen and Ethan Coen
Twin Peaks	1990-1991	ABC	Mark Frost and David Lynch

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt	2015-present	Netflix	Tina Fey and Robert Carlock
Unforgiven	1992	Warner Bros.	Clint Eastwood
Veep	2012-present	HBO	Armando Iannucci
Veronica Mars	2004-2007	UPN/CW	Rob Thomas
Warner Bros. Presents	1955-1956	ABC	William T. Orr
Westworld	2016-present	HBO	Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy
Will & Grace	1998-2006	NBC	David Kohan and Max Mutchnick
You're the Worst	2014-present	FXX	Stephen Falk
Your Show of Shows	1950-1954	NBC	Sylvester L. Weaver

## VITA

Nettie Brock has always watched and been interested in studying film and television. She holds a B.A. in Broadcasting and Electronic Media: Film Techniques and Technologies from Eastern Kentucky University. From there, she recognized that her interests lay outside the area of film production and within the realm of film theory and criticism. She then moved to San Francisco State University's Cinema Studies program, where she received her Master's degree. Once there, she shifted her focus from Film to Television, as she studied *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-along Blog*. So, as she approached her PhD and writing her dissertation, she knew her focus would continue to balance film and television but would focus more dominantly on television.

She has taught for five years at the University of Missouri, assisted teaching at San Francisco State, and briefly adjuncted at Eastern Kentucky. She has presented at numerous conferences, including the National Communication Association, Popular Cultural Association, and Central States Communication Association conferences, as well as several other regional conferences. Additionally, she is published in multiple edited works at the *Journal of Fandom Studies*.