

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone  
Projects

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

---

2-2018

### How Lucille Ball Fought the Patriarchy, While Lucy Ricardo (Indirectly) Contributed to Second-Wave (White) Feminism

Anam Rana Afzal

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/2479](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2479)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

HOW LUCILLE BALL FOUGHT THE PATRIARCHY, WHILE  
LUCY RICARDO (INDIRECTLY) CONTRIBUTED TO  
SECOND-WAVE (WHITE) FEMINISM

by

ANAM RANA AFZAL

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018



© 2018

ANAM RANA AFZAL

All Rights Reserved

How Lucille Ball Fought the Patriarchy, while Lucy Ricardo (Indirectly)  
Contributed to Second-Wave (White) Feminism

by

Anam Rana Afzal

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Date

---

Karen Miller

Thesis Advisor

---

Date

---

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

How Lucille Ball Fought the Patriarchy, while Lucy Ricardo (Indirectly)

Contributed to Second-Wave (White) Feminism

by

Anam Rana Afzal

Advisor: Karen Miller

Author Stephanie Coontz argues that our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sitcoms. In actuality, the happy, homogenous families that we “remember” from America in the 50s were a result of the media’s denial of diversity. Also, women’s retreat to housewifery after working during WWII was in many cases, not freely chosen. In his study of sitcoms, Saul Austerlitz claims that once television arrived in American cities after the war’s end, its impact was immediate and incontrovertible, and no sitcom caught America’s eye as immediately, or as thoroughly as CBS’s *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957.) The show is remembered and admired for its physical comedy, hilarious writing, great talent of its actors, and of course, Lucy Ricardo; America’s favorite red head, the female lead who fought for herself, far from a June Cleaver type.

This paper will explore *I Love Lucy* in all of its contradictions. Unlike other studies, every aspect and impact, both positive and negative will be examined. Lucy Ricardo, a 1950s housewife, contested gender roles put forth by her husband and society, while simultaneously enabling the patriarchy (by being submissive at times and often needing her husband to “save” her.) Stefan Kanfer describes these two Lucys “the control freak whose comic alter ego thrived on chaos, the worshipful TV housewife whose real marriage ended in public disaster. Ball was one in a million, an exception, Lucy Ricardo represented the rule. While Kanfer argues the differences between the actress and character, I acknowledge their protofeminist similarities. I argue that Lucille Ball was everything Lucy Ricardo wanted to be, a powerful woman working in show business.

Beyond studying the two different Lucys, white feminism will also be discussed. White, middleclass, bored housewives longing for more could relate to Lucy Ricardo and were inspired by Ball. For example, Lucille Ball fought the patriarchy by marrying a Cuban immigrant, being a working, successful mother and eventually a divorcee. Ball’s platform gave birth to Lucy Ricardo. 1963’s publication of *The Feminine Mystique* sparked the second-wave feminism movement. I argue that Lucille Ball depicted and portrayed the dissatisfied and domesticated women described by Friedan on her show throughout the 1950s. I examine the idea that Lucy Ricardo was a visual representation of these housewives facing the unhappiness issue that Friedan describes as “the problem that has no name,” thus indirectly contributing to the start of the feminist movement.

However, the show was neither feminist, nor anti-feminist. Lucille Ball just was a real

woman voicing her opinions, showing real feminine issues through comedy. There were no direct political statements being made. Ball claimed that her work was not politically motivated, but it certainly had important political resonances for some. In a magazine interview with Peter Lester in February 1980 for *People*, Ball stated, “They can use my name for equal rights, but I don’t get out there and raise hell because I’ve been so liberated, I have nothing to squawk about.” Ball was not a self-proclaimed feminist activist, but her contributions to America (Lucy Ricardo) helped lead to the 1960s feminist movement.

If *The Feminine Mystique* ignited the second-wave feminist movement in the early 1960s, I argue that by playing a character that depicted the issues women were facing as housewives on the most popular television show of the 1950s, both Lucys indirectly contributed just as much as Friedan. While there were aspects of the show that enabled gender roles, Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo did a lot for feminism—even if it was indirectly. The paper utilizes primary and secondary sources to examine the early sitcom era, popular culture, anti-communism, gender roles, motherhood, sexism, pregnancy, racial issues/tensions, family life and feminism in the 1950s and in the context of *I Love Lucy*; as well as both Lucys’ impact on second-wave feminism and legacy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: 1950s Television, Culture, Society and Politics	4
Chapter 2: A Cultural Phenomenon	13
Chapter 3: Lucille Ball: The Woman Behind Lucy Ricardo	19
Chapter 4: What Made <i>Lucy</i> Different from the Rest: Themes Addressed in <i>I Love Lucy</i>	25
Chapter 5: Two Lucys: Contradictions and Conflicts	37
Chapter 6: Indirect Contributions, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> and Second-Wave Feminism	41
Conclusion: Lucy and Lucille's Legacy	48
Bibliography	51

## Introduction

Growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I was exposed to a golden age of television from a young age. My teenage sisters and mother tuned in every Thursday for NBC's "Must See TV" lineup. I watched television history being made through *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Will and Grace*. When I was not watching new, weekly episodes, the television in my home was most likely playing the TV Land channel, rather than Disney. And I loved it. That is where they played *I Love Lucy* reruns all day.

Lucille Ball did not just make my mother laugh as kid, she taught my mother, an immigrant from Pakistan, English. This show was not just wildly popular in the United States, Lucy's is a face internationally recognizable as America's favorite redhead. It was a show my mother and so many others around the world considered timelessly funny because you did not need to understand the American language to find the physical comedy funny. I asked my mother recently what drew her to *Lucy*. She said it was nice and inspiring to watch television as a little girl in the 60s and see an ambitious female character be the lead, the star, rather than just a mom character serving her husband and kids a meal or cooking in the kitchen. My siblings and I are the few in our generation that have seen the whole series over ten times; but the majority of our peers know who Lucille Ball is and are familiar with a show that is over sixty years old-which goes to show just how important it was and still is.

As I grew up, I kept myself entertained with television sitcoms and comedies such as *The Golden Girls*, *Sex and the City*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *30 Rock*, *Parks and Rec*, *Girls*, *Ellen*, *Insecure*, *Jane the Virgin*, *The Mindy Project*, *Roseanne*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Broad City*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Veep* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. A similarity all of my favorite shows had in common? Funny leading ladies. This directly stemmed from my exposure to *I Love Lucy* as a child. It was comedy shows that had strong, feminist characters that captured my attention, rather

than shows that just used women for their sexuality or a housewife character that was usually in the kitchen. Knowing *I Love Lucy* was one of the first television shows in history that had a female lead at a time when women were still oppressed in many ways and was a phenomenal hit, I wanted to learn more about its background, influence and trailblazing. After all, so many of my favorite shows were possible because *I Love Lucy* happened first.

I attempted to explore *I Love Lucy* in all of its contradictions. Every aspect and impact, whether it be positive or negative is examined. Lucy Ricardo, a 1950s housewife, contested gender roles put forth by her husband and society, while simultaneously enabling the patriarchy (by being submissive at times and often needing her husband to “save” her.) I argue that Lucille Ball was everything Lucy Ricardo wanted to be. Ball was one in a million, an exception, Lucy Ricardo represented the rule. White feminism will also be discussed. White, middleclass, bored housewives longing for more could relate to Lucy Ricardo and were inspired by Ball. Lucille Ball fought the patriarchy and her platform to do so gave birth to Lucy Ricardo. 1963’s publication of *The Feminine Mystique* sparked the second-wave feminism movement. I argue that Lucille Ball depicted and portrayed the dissatisfied and domesticated women described by Friedan on her show throughout the 1950s. Lucy Ricardo was a visual representation of these women facing “the problem that has no name,” thus indirectly contributing to the start of the feminist movement. The show was neither feminist, nor anti-feminist. Lucille Ball said that she was making no political statements being made. But, there were political consequences. While there were aspects of the show that enabled gender roles, Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo, although indirectly, still did a lot for feminists.

The first chapter discusses early television, the beginning of sitcoms, and the power and influence television has as an art medium on American popular culture. I examine the historical context of *I Love Lucy*, focusing on 1950s cultures, ideals, politics (anticommunism), gender roles,

race, femininity and the changing role of women. Chapter two tackles the show's background, *Lucy*'s history, success, popularity (ratings,) uniqueness (sexual themes such as pregnancy, interracial couple, female star, etc.) Chapter three explores Lucille Ball's personal life and how she became a powerful woman in show business. Chapter four discusses important episodes and examples of edgy issues dealt with on the show such as pregnancy, an interracial marriage, feminism, equal rights, sexism, misogyny, contesting gender roles, female friendships, conflicts of being a wife and mother, unhappy marriages, marital problems, fighting the patriarchy in *I Love Lucy* (and in real life for Ball.) Chapter five explores contradictions and conflicts, such as how Ball and Lucy Ricardo differed (Ball's successful career and divorce, Lucy Ricardo stays a housewife.) Chapter six argues how *I Love Lucy* in the 50s indirectly contributed to the start of (white) second-wave feminism in the 60s in the context of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Finally, the conclusion reflects on Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo's legacy through a timeline of women in television after *Lucy*, concluding with the ways Lucille Ball and her character directly paved the way for female voice in television.

## Chapter 1: 1950s Television, Culture, Society and Politics

Before delving into *I Love Lucy*, one must first become familiar with its historical context. The sitcom ran from 1951-1957. In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz describes just how socially different this time period was from modern-day America. Most modern American would find gender and sexual norms of that era unacceptable. Coontz states that her students are shocked when they read sexist advice books aimed at women and especially when watching *Father Knows Best*. In an episode titled “Betty, Girl Engineer,” the teenage daughter learns it is foolish to try to do a “man’s job” because she is treated much better when she dons a nice, new dress and waits to be asked out on a date.<sup>1</sup> Psychiatrists in that era insisted that the “normal” woman found complete fulfillment by renouncing her personal aspirations and identifying with her husband’s achievements. Doctors would warn that something was very wrong if a woman or man usurped any rights and duties belonging to the opposite sex. Films and television shows would portray seriously dysfunctional families with scenes of a man washing dishes or vacuuming. Coontz argues that the hybrid idea that a white, middle-class woman can be fully absorbed with her children while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it.<sup>2</sup>

So why do so many people harbor nostalgia for the 1950s? The most atypical family system in American history is the post-WWII male breadwinner family. Job security, at least for white men was much greater than it has been for the past forty years according to Coontz. Life was more affordable, with decent housing for a single-earner family and income inequality was falling.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, 8.

Unlike in recent years, real wages were rising, not just for top earners but for the bottom seventy percent of the population as well.<sup>3</sup>

The 1950s was a pro-family period if there ever was one. Divorce and illegitimacy rates were nowhere near high as they are today. Marriage was almost universally praised while family became hailed as the most basic institution in society. We cannot forget the massive baby boom among all classes and ethnic groups that made America a “child centered” society. Birth rates went from a low of 18.4 per one thousand women during the Depression to a high of 25.3 per one thousand in 1957. The birth rate for children doubled between 1940 and 1960; and that for fourth children tripled.<sup>4</sup> The 1950s brought economic security that made growing families possible and admired.

Also in comparison to today, the era was relatively innocent. Gang warfare among youths did not lead to drive-by shootings, there was no crack epidemic yet, disciplining students in schools was not a major problem and issue and ninety percent of all school levies were approved by voters. Advances in medicine included the polio vaccine in 1954, a dramatic turning point for children and their parents. Quality of life, at least for white middle-class families was just better than it had ever been before.

According to Coontz, pro-family features of the 50s were bolstered by impressive economic improvements for the majority of Americans. Housing starts exploded after the war by peaking at 1.65 million in 1955 and remaining above 1.5 million a year for the rest of the decade. Single-family home ownership from 1946-1956 increased so dramatically that it outstripped the increase during the entire preceding century and a half. In 1940, 43 percent of American families owned

---

<sup>3</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, 35.

their own homes, while in 1960, 62 percent of families had ownership of their homes. 85 percent of new homes were built in the suburbs. The suburbs provided a place where the nuclear families found new possibilities for privacy and togetherness.

Substantial numbers of white working-class Americans moved out of cities into affordable developments. Even the lives of the working-class improved significantly. Economic prosperity and opportunity allowed working-class families to move into the middle class. The number of salaried workers increased by 61 percent between 1947 and 1957. In fact, by the mid 50s, nearly sixty percent of the population had what was labeled a middle-class income level (between three thousand and ten thousand in constant dollars. This is interesting to compare to the 31 percent in the prosperous 1920s before the Great Depression. By 1960, 31 million of the nation's 44 million families owned their own home, 87 percent had a television and 75 percent possessed a car.

According to Coontz, the most salient symbol and immediate beneficiary of their newfound economic prosperity, was the nuclear family. Household goods had the largest boom in consumer spending. In comparison, food spending increased by just 33 percent in the five years following WWII and clothes buying rose by 20 percent; on the other hand, purchases of household furnishings and appliances increased by 240 percent. Consumer spending in the 50s oriented toward the nuclear family.

In a 1955 marriage study, respondents were asked what they thought they had sacrificed by marrying and raising a family. The vast majority replied, "Nothing." Less than ten percent of Americans believed that an unmarried person could be happy. Advice books reflected what most of society thought, "The family is the center of your living, if it isn't you've gone astray."

People married at a younger age, had children earlier and closer together, completed their families by the time they were in their late twenties, and experienced a longer period living together as a couple after their children left home. For the first time, both men and women were

encouraged to root their identity and self-image in familial and parental roles. 1950s values were also new. “The emphasis on producing a whole world of satisfaction, amusement and inventiveness within the nuclear family had no precedents. Historian Elaine Tyler May comments that the legendary family of the 1950s was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of traditional family life with deep roots in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life.”<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century middle class women had happily left housework to servants, but in the 50s, women of all classes felt guilty when they did not do every house chore themselves. Surprisingly, despite the advent of convenience foods and new, labor-saving appliances, the amount of time women spent doing housework actually increased during the 1950s. Even childcare absorbed more than twice as much time as it had in the 1920s. In the mid-1950s, advertisers’ surveys reported on an increasing tendency among females to find housework to be a medium of expression for their femininity and individuality. Postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for men and women.<sup>6</sup>

Americans of all backgrounds rushed into marriage and childbearing, even though most people of color were excluded from suburbia. Elaine Tyler May argues that racial and class divisions were concealed beneath an aura of unity in the aftermath of WWII. The nation presented itself as a unified country that was politically harmonious and blessed with widespread affluence. The booming wartime economy and triumph against racist and fascist regimes allowed the “leader of the free world” to embrace its powerful international role.

---

<sup>5</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

Still, America now faced its former ally, the Soviet Union, as its major enemy. The Cold War was an ideological struggle between two superpower nations that both hoped to increase their influence and power across the globe. “Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve world domination, many leaders, pundits and observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal one: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict and familial disruption. Like their leaders, most Americans agreed that family stability appeared to be the best bulwark against the dangers of the Cold War.”<sup>7</sup> Officials promised that the combination of democracy, capitalism and economic prosperity would bring the American dream to all and that racial strife was diminishing because workers were prosperous. However, aside from this image that America wanted to sell abroad, poverty excluded many from suburban affluence and racism excluded others.

Besides the rush into domesticity, these beliefs about family stability protecting Americans from the spread of communism generated public policies that transformed American society. They blurred class lines while simultaneously sharpening racial divisions. The large infusion of federal funds into the expansion of affordable single-family homes in suburban developments made it possible for white working-class families to achieve a middle-class lifestyle. Second-generation European immigrants moved out of their ethnic neighborhoods in the cities, leaving their kinship networks and their outsider status behind. The promise of assimilation and postwar prosperity made it possible for ethnic Americans (with white skin) to blend into the homogenous suburbs. Even though they couldn’t join their country clubs and social gatherings, Catholics and Jews joined Anglo-Saxon Protestants in all-white communities. Italians, Poles and Greeks joined Swedes and Norwegians as members of the white middle class, reaping the benefits of affluence and the

---

<sup>7</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 7.

American way of life. While these were steps forward for white skinned minorities, people of color were excluded from the majority of suburban communities and were denied the benefits of American prosperity (even if they could afford them.) With few exceptions, residential segregation defined the postwar suburbs. May argues that persistent racial discrimination proved to be the nation's worst embarrassment throughout the Cold War.

This unfair and racist situation proved to be one that many African-Americans were unwilling to tolerate. Clearly, that is why the civil rights movement developed in the wake of WWII, as black soldiers ironically returned from fighting a war against racism to face segregation, brutality and discrimination at home. Black leaders also understood that the federal government needed to promote civil rights at home in order to save face abroad because the Soviet Union and other communist nations pointed to American race relations as an indication of the hypocrisy and failure of the American promise of freedom for all.

Although the majority of Americans approved of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision to desegregate public schools, as late as 1964, 89 percent of those polled in the north and 96 percent polled in the south believed that "an owner of property should not have to sell to a Negro if he doesn't want to."<sup>8</sup> Anything that hinted of a redistribution of wealth evoked fears of socialism and a threat to American capitalism. These Cold War principals were understood by civil rights leaders and so they limited their efforts to achieving political rights rather than economic justice. May argues that the focus on political rights allowed the government to support aspects of the civil rights movement, such as finally dismantling the Jim Crow system in the south; however, all while doing nothing to alleviate residential segregation or the widespread poverty that kept Americans of color at the bottom of society. American leaders promoted the efforts that the country was making

---

<sup>8</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 10.

to eradicate institutionalized racism, claiming that the situation for black Americans was improving. Yet, they allowed racial segregation to prevail in the suburbs, where the Federal Housing Authority and lending banks maintained redlining policies that prevented black people from obtaining home mortgages.

Economically speaking, America was in a state of growth and prosperity. Racially, from a prewar nation made up of many identifiable ethnic groups, postwar American society divided rigidly along the color line. Immigrants became white after the war, gaining access to the privileges and opportunities whiteness bestowed, such as life in the suburbs. Political leaders hid American poverty in rural and urban areas. Suburban exclusion denied blacks the opportunity for capital accumulation and upward mobility that home ownership provided. They were forced to reside in substandard urban housing. Left out of postwar prosperity and denied the government subsidies available to whites. Racial attitudes of white Americans in the later 1950s showed widespread support for school desegregation. Still, Americans were not enthusiastic about bringing the races into closer contact in more private and personal realms. 60 percent of whites outside the south said they would stay if a black family moved next door but only 45 percent said they would remain in the neighborhood if large numbers of people of color moved in. May states that disapproval of racial integration was strongest in the most intimate realm of life: the family. A whole 92 percent in the north and 99 percent in the south approved of laws that banned marriage between nonwhites and whites. Interracial marriage would go on to still be opposed over a decade later. Clearly, racial tensions were high, though they tried to be internationally hidden by the anticommunist American government, trying to promote a unified nation.

Politically, there was anticommunist hysteria, with political opportunists like Senator Joseph McCarthy preying upon these sentiments. McCarthyism targeted perceived internal dangers rather than external threats. It was believed that deviations from the norms of appropriate sexual

and familial behavior might lead to social disorder and national vulnerability. Severe censure was not only reserved for those suspected of ties to the Communist party, but also for gays and lesbians, who received harsh repression and homophobia. The 1950s were a paranoid era with anticommunist crusaders investigating “perverts” in the government. Communist ties and homosexuality became grounds for dismissal from jobs and justification for persecution. This “lavender” scare saw more gay and lesbian people lose their jobs than those suspected of being “reds.” To escape this unfortunate fate, homosexuals were forced to hide their sexual identities, conforming and passing off as heterosexuals. A lesbian recalled, “It has never been easy to be a lesbian in this country, but the 1950s was surely the worst decade in which to love your own sex.”<sup>9</sup>

When WWII ended and the Cold War began, the American people had increasingly felt a threat imposed by Communism, primarily because it was very real, as the Soviet Union began to develop an atomic bomb, in 1949, the Chinese government was taken over by Mao Zedong’s political regime; and in fighting both the Soviets and the Chinese, American intervention in the Korean War appeared embattled.<sup>10</sup> In her book, Caroline Emmons references Howard H. Chiang stating that the aegis of McCarthyism and its aftermath, any forms of gender and sexual expression that did not fit the Cold War ideal of heterosexual nuclear familial lifestyle were treated as domestic subversions that threatened the moral fiber and national security of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. Chiang argues that by targeting members of the gender and sexual subcultures, and forcing them to establish publicly invisible but privately tighter and more supportive bonds with one another, the oppressive postwar ideal of anti-Communism and domesticity unexpectedly cultivated the early roots of second-wave feminist and modern sexual liberation movements.

---

<sup>9</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Emmons, *Cold War and McCarthy Era: People and Perspectives (Perspectives in American Social History)* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 112.

In his study of sitcoms, Saul Austerlitz claims that once television arrived in American cities after the war's end, its impact was immediate and incontrovertible. Movie theatre receipts in cities with functioning television stations decreased by twenty to forty percent, while those cities without television saw no drop off at all. According to Austerlitz, television was usurping movies' central role in entertaining America, its immediacy and accessibility threatening to doom Hollywood to irrelevance. In its classical form, sitcoms revolved around family: the solid, stolid father; the loving mother; the kooky but well-meaning children. It adhered to a rigorous, set pattern that included a laugh track, thirty-minute length, a domestic setting and a small, recurring cast of characters. Sitcoms reflected America. Television could reflect not the America that was, but the America that we wanted.<sup>11</sup>

Television took over where radio left off, with series like *The Goldbergs* and *The Life of Riley* making the transition from one form to the next, and others, like *I Love Lucy*, adapted from radio forebears. Television held much power and influence as an art medium for American popular culture. The early 1950s were a time of unconscious "advertainment," as advertisements were included within programs to sell sponsors' products to viewers/consumers. "Celebrating its own domesticity, the sitcom was at home in our living rooms, making itself comfortable in a way the larger, more expensive, and more stolid movies could. We did not go to television; television came to us."<sup>12</sup> Television was, by the early 1950s, an established fact of American life.

---

<sup>11</sup> Saul Austerlitz, *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Austerlitz, *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community*, 13.

## Chapter 2: A Cultural Phenomenon

To better understand the backdrop to the cultural phenomenon of “Lucy TV,” one must explore the place of television in the post WWII home and how the home was portrayed on television, specifically on the most popular television series of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*. When television emerged as a mass medium in the early 1950s, American culture found a new physical and social center of the home. In contrast to its traditional center of heat, food and family activity, the new hearth connected home and the outside world, “bringing images, sounds, stories and people into everyday lives of Americans.”<sup>13</sup> In the late 1940s and early 50s, home decorating magazines depicted the television set replacing the baby grand piano as the centerpiece of the ideal living room, with the piano relegated to a less-prominent room. Landay references the 1946 book *Here is Television: Your Window into the World* to suggest that television erased the boundaries between the home and the world. Seeing events rather than only hearing about or reading about them created an immediacy that made the outside world more accessible. In contrast, media theorist Stuart Hall argues that television is not simply a “window to the world,” rather it is a locus of powerful cultural work that encodes meanings, interpretations and values that people decode within their homes and in the contexts of their beliefs and social experiences.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 1950s, despite the picture being blurry and the physical set of the apparatus being small, televisions were an expensive item. At an average of \$279, when the average price of a new house was under ten thousand dollars. Screens were usually ten to twelve inches wide and showed black and white. Reception of the broadcast image was not the clear picture we have today of course, as viewers had to tune in the signal over the airwaves and adjust the antenna to help

---

<sup>13</sup> Lori Landay, *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)*, 9.

sharpen the signal. However, even with the uneven quality and small picture, televisions quickly became common in American homes. In 1950, only nine percent of homes had television sets. Then by 1955, more than 65 percent of homes had the apparatus. Various factors led to the fast adoption of the new medium. Set prices dropped from around \$440 in 1948 to around \$230 in 1954, the growth of suburbs-where people lived far from their extended families, a new emphasis on an ideal of the nuclear family in the postwar period and the idea of television watching as a family were all contributing factors. The commonality that most families only had one television set and only three to four channels available, television during the “antenna age” fostered social cohesion, common cultural references and experiences. Unlike today’s world of cable and internet, 1950s television culture was unified.

Clearly, television had great power. Susan Douglas even argues that growing up female with the mass media helped make her a feminist, and it helped make millions of other women that too. Historians will argue that American women have been surrounded by contradictory expectations since at least the nineteenth century. Douglas argues that this situation intensified with the particular array of media technology and outlets that interlocked in people’s homes after WWII.<sup>15</sup> The media was going through a major transformation in how they regarded and marketed to their audiences that heightened dramatically the contradictions in the images and messages they produced. Television and the rest of mass media predicated on the notion of a national, unified market and their main goal was to reach as many people as possible. Television offered homogenized, romanticized images of American, which, especially under the influence of the Cold War and McCarthyism, eschewed controversy and reinforced middle-class, sexually repressed

---

<sup>15</sup> Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 15.

white-bread norms and values. Even in the 1950s, there was a rebellion against sappy representations of American life in forms such as rock ‘n’ roll, FM radio, beat poetry and literature. Douglas argues that these cultural insurgencies drove home the fact that the media market was not national and unified but divided, especially, but not solely by age. While scholars such as Lori Landay see the positives of television and *I Love Lucy* unifying the nation, Douglas focuses on the media trying to please the “lowest common denominator.” Both can definitely agree that television quickly had power to spawn a cultural phenomenon.

For decades, the situation comedy had been a successful staple of radio and so the television version caught on immediately. From 1951 to 1957, *I Love Lucy* aired 180 episodes as a weekly sitcom. The premise of the show sets up a bandleader from Cuba, Ricky Ricardo, and his screwball American wife, Lucy Ricardo, living in a New York City apartment alongside their best friends and landlords, Fred and Ethel Mertz. Little Ricky arrives halfway through season two, the couples visit Hollywood for an extended period of time in season four, then Europe in season five. The foursome even moved to the country in the sixth and final season. Through all these changes from the initial set up, the relationships between the characters that are enacted with comic brilliance remain at the heart of the show.<sup>16</sup> Author Lori Landay explored what it was about *I Love Lucy* that made it such a success, a milestone in the emerging medium of television? Some standout factors include a compelling narrative formula of likable characters, an efficient production system, and clever plots within a familiar situation, hilarious writing, magnificent comic performance, remarkable chemistry and technical genius that brought it all together and preserved it on film. Lucille Ball came to embody the promise and popularity of the new medium because of the rapid adoption of television and the savvy way in which the creative team behind and in front of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)*, 3.

cameras brought together the traditions of stage, radio and cinema to shape the conventions of television.

Landay makes it clear that no single person or star is individually responsible for the success of a television series or even for the creation of a star persona, but there is a tendency to collapse the considerable amount of creative, technical and business talent and work into a few recognizable individuals. For example, Desi Arnaz gets the credit for all the business and technical innovations while Lucille Ball gets credit for the comedic genius, when they both were actually just the public faces of highly successful collaborations of groups of people, such as the show writers. She also argues that the publicity surrounding *I Love Lucy* lingered over the details of Ball and Arnaz's real-life marriage that were incorporated into the series' depiction of the Ricardos—such as Ball's pregnancy turning into Lucy Ricardo's pregnancy as well, minimizing any differences between the stars and their characters.

While people were used to seeing the home portrayed in the movies and on radio, the level of domesticity and intimacy in home life and marriage depicted in *I Love Lucy* went beyond the representation in film, once again making it a show different than the rest. Just in the first few episodes of the series, viewers see Ricky shaving as if the camera were the mirror and the couple's bedroom as a common scene setting. This focus on the bedroom was mostly acceptable because the couple was married in real life. Still, this intimacy allowed the series to show the minutiae of everyday life in a way that was beyond the narrative conventions of film. Just showing a couple's bedroom was a major media depiction of sexuality and another contribution to feminism.

The term “Lucy TV” encompasses the unity of television culture in its infancy according to Landay, when there were only three or four channels (depending on the local market). As television was making inroads into American lives and living rooms, *I Love Lucy* was skyrocketing to previously unattainable levels of popularity. For example, the April 1952 episode titled “The

Marriage License” was the first television program to be watched in ten million homes. Keep in mind that at this time, there were a total of fifteen million operating television sets in America. Landay argues that at its crucial initial phase, television was indeed “Lucy TV.”

Just how popular had Lucy become? In the spring of 1952, on Monday nights in New York City-it seemed impossible to get a taxi. From 9:30-9:35 PM, toilets all flushing at the same time had caused the water pressure to drop in various cities because so many in the country were waiting for the new episode to end before using the bathroom.<sup>17</sup> Rosalind Dayen attributes Ball’s physical comedy, perfect timing and fantastic facial expressions to her wild popularity.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not just this, but that her and Arnaz were unafraid to address culturally sensitive material on the show, such as her pregnancy and Desi’s Hispanic heritage, which truly made the series unforgettable.

In another piece about Lucille Ball, Lori Landay argues that the cultural movement toward domesticity was the biggest factor in creating the Lucy phenomenon. Ball herself attributed the series’ success to how it made comedy out of everyday life, “We had a great identification with millions of people. They could identify with my problems, my zaniness, my wanting to do everything, my scheming and plotting, the way I cajoled Ricky. People identified with the Ricardos because we had the same problems they had. Desi and I weren’t your ordinary Hollywood couple on TV. We lived in a brownstone apartment somewhere in Manhattan, and paying the rent, getting a new dress, getting a stale fur collar on an old cloth coat, or buying a piece of furniture were all worth a story. People could identify with those basic things-baby-sitters, traveling, wanting to be

---

<sup>17</sup> Pam Pollack, Meg Belviso and Greg Copeland, *Who Was Lucille Ball?* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2017), 3.

<sup>18</sup>Rosalind Dayen, “Edwards, Elisabeth. I Love Lucy: A Celebration of All Things Lucy; Inside the World of Television’s First Great Sitcom,” *Library Journal* 136.19 (2011): 76-77.

entertained, wanting to be loved in a certain way—all the two couples on the show were constantly doing things that people all over the country were doing. We just took ordinary situations and exaggerated them.”<sup>19</sup> Landay concludes that the situation of *I Love Lucy* articulated the contradictions of marriage, gender, the battle of the sexes, and middle-class life: the things of concern to a majority of television viewers.

In 1952, *Variety* reported that *I Love Lucy* was seen by a record twenty-nine million viewers a week (based on an average of 2.9 viewers per home in ten million homes.) This was more than twice the average audience that saw a Hollywood movie in its domestic first run. Lucy wasn’t just popular for a half hour once a week. Magazines and newspapers that covered television were literally covered with Lucy Ricardo. Spring 1952 alone saw Ball featured on the covers of major national magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life* and *Look*. When Lucille Ball’s real-life pregnancy was incorporated into the series for its 1952-1953 season, the show once again redened what it meant for a television program to be popular. In “Lucy Goes to the Hospital,” the Ricardos’ baby is born and it aired in January 1953. The episode became the most watched television show ever at the time. Landay claims that the broader phenomenon of Lucy TV became so intertwined with television that the first issue (April 1953) of the weekly magazine *TV Guide* had a picture of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz’s baby on it. Throughout its run, the series never fell out of the top three rated show and its popularity continued to persist in international reruns.

---

<sup>19</sup> Lori Landay, “Millions ‘Love Lucy’: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon,” *NWSA Journal* 11.2 (1999): 25-47.

### Chapter 3: Lucille Ball: The Woman Behind Lucy Ricardo

Lucille Desiree Ball was born on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1911 in Jamestown, New York. At the age of three, Lucy and her then pregnant mother lost her father, a telephone line man named Henry Dunnell Ball when he died of typhoid fever.<sup>20</sup> She and her mother, a pianist named Desiree Hunt but nicknamed “DeDe” moved in with her maternal grandparents. DeDe gave birth to Lucille’s brother Fred in 1915. Her grandfather Fred would take her to vaudeville shows in Jamestown theatres every Saturday and to see silent movies that were shown outside in the local park during the summer. This time spent with her grandparents and their teaching her a commitment to hard work instilled in her a deep family loyalty. These outings with her grandfather led to her passion for acting out episodes and plays. Of a school production of "Charley's Aunt," Ball said, "I played the lead, directed it, cast it, sold tickets, printed the posters and hauled in furniture for props."<sup>21</sup>

Taking care of her younger cousins after her grandmother died and working odd jobs since the age of ten; including her time at the hotdog stand on the local boardwalk and working at an ice-cream shop led to Ball becoming an independent teenager. Lucille was the first in her neighborhood to get a bob haircut, which was surprising in the 1920s. She described herself as someone who wore a lot of makeup and short skirts at this time, a flapper. She loved the attention and realized that her dream was to be onstage like the vaudeville and silent movie performers. Her problem was Jamestown. “You have to understand, I am from a suburb of Jamestown. You think Cleveland or Cincinnati is bad, Jamestown is only a place to be from. To be from only.”<sup>22</sup> She was not going to become an entertainer living in the suburbs, so Lucille moved to the closest major city

---

<sup>20</sup> Pollack, Belviso and Copeland, *Who Was Lucille Ball?*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Peter B. Flint, “Lucille Ball, Spirited Doyenne of TV Comedies, Dies at 77,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 8.

that could possibly make her famous-New York City.

At just fifteen, Ball embarked on a career in show-business by attending John Murray Anderson's Dramatic School in Manhattan. She was told that she had no talent and should go back home, trying and failing to get into four Broadway chorus lines. After working as a waitress and a soda jerk in a Broadway drugstore, she went into modeling; becoming a hat model in Hattie Carnegie's salon and modeling for commercial photographers. Winning national attention as the Chesterfield Cigarette Girl in 1933 brought Ball to Hollywood as a Goldwyn chorus girl in Eddie Cantor's musical farce "Roman Scandals." The first two years in Hollywood proved difficult as she played unbilled and bit roles in two dozen movies and made two-reel comedies with the Three Stooges and Leon Errol. According to the *New York Times*, Ball then spent seven years at RKO Radio Pictures, getting numerous lead roles in low-budget movies. "She was typed and mostly wasted in films, but a few roles suggested her talents- a cynical young actress in "Stage Door" (1937), a temperamental movie star in "The Affairs of Annabel" (1938), a rejected lover in the 1939 melodrama "Five Came Back," a gold-digging stripper in "Dance, Girl, Dance" (1940), a handicapped egotist in "The Big Street" (1942) and a tough-talking secretary in "The Dark Corner" (1946). "I never cared about the movies, because they cast me wrong."<sup>23</sup> The hard worker she was, Ball tried for years but was just never able to find superstardom from films. "I was queen of the B-pluses. I went from one-liners to these sorts of mediocre B-plus pictures. I would do anything though. I was in the only Tracy-Hepburn flop ever made, and I got good reviews. What you were encouraged to do was to become a flapper girl, a glamour girl or some type. You were that type of girl belonging to that type of picture. It was very limiting and I was really stuck."<sup>24</sup> She decided to

---

<sup>23</sup> Flint, "Lucille Ball, Spirited Doyenne of TV Comedies, Dies at 77."

<sup>24</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 5.

look for her niche elsewhere in the late 1930s and early 40s; though by the end of her life, she had appeared in over fifty films. Ball would regularly guest star on Jack Haley and Phil Baker's comedy-variety shows until she found a permanent job. In 1947, she played the precursor to Lucy on the CBS radio comedy "My Favorite Husband." Here began the origins of *I Love Lucy*. Until 1951, Ball played the hare-brained woman married to a Midwestern banker, played by Lee Bowman and then later, Richard Denning.

Ball and Desi Arnaz met at RKO Studios in 1940 when Arnaz was just twenty-three and Ball twenty-nine, already in Hollywood for seven years. At this time, Ball, who was previously in a long-term affair with Pandro Berman, a producer, was now involved with Alexander Hall, a director. Unlike Ball, Arnaz was a newcomer in California, there to appear in a film version of "Too Many Girls," a Broadway show he was a part of. Ball was the star of the film. Both ran into each other at a Malibu cast party and spent the night together. Lucy ended her relationship with Hall the next day, as did Arnaz with his dancer fiancé, Renee de Marco; and by November 1940, they were married in Connecticut. A decade later, after some film success and being released from her MGM Studios contract, Ball made a name for herself in Hollywood via "My Favorite Husband." On the other hand, Arnaz had not found fame like Ball, traveling with his band. He would cheat, gamble and disappear for days when the couple would fight. They had even filed for divorce in 1944 but eventually reconciled. Her success and his lack of became the root of their marital troubles. In "Lucille: The Life of Lucille Ball," author Kathleen Brady mentions that Ball told a friend that she was 'seriously contemplating doing a television show because it would keep Desi at home.

In 1950, Lucille and Desi tried to sell *I Love Lucy* to CBS. According to the *New York Times*, network executives objected, contending the public would not accept the team of an American redhead and a Cuban bandleader with a heavy accent. To prove them wrong, both went

on a national vaudeville tour with a twenty-minute act that included a “Cuban Pete-Sally Sweet” medley. They went even further in the investment by producing a half hour film pilot with five thousand dollars of their own money. Their hard work worked as the broadcast officials loved it. The show premiered on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1951. Lucille Ball was clearly a devoted and hard worker, even stating once that, “I have to work or I'm nothing, I've never been out of work except for two hours once between contracts.” On the set, it was a common fact that Ball knew every term, every lighting fixture and every worker.<sup>25</sup>

According to the *New York Times*, once Ball had convinced CBS that Arnaz should play her husband on *I Love Lucy*, she allowed him to dictate some important qualities of the characters. “Most of all, Desi insisted on Ricky's manhood,” Ball stated in *Love, Lucy*, the gloss-over-everything autobiography she co-wrote with Betty Hannah Hoffman. “He refused to ever be a nincompoop husband.” Ball also recalled Arnaz describing his view of the Lucy character at a meeting with their writers, “She tries so hard, she can't dance and she can't sing, she's earnest and pathetic.”<sup>26</sup> It was truly a team effort, one that added a few more years to their marriage.

If one had to summarize the series, it could be best described as Lucy Ricardo consistently trying and failing (hilariously) to make a career in show business, much to the anger of her husband who wants her to be a regular housewife. This concept of the show is described in detail by Jess Oppenheimer in his book, *Laughs, Luck...and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*. Oppenheimer was the *I Love Lucy*'s producer and longtime head writer. Here is a part of the original series summary that he filed with the Screen Writers' Guild in March 1951: “Ricky, who was raised in show business, sees none of its glamour, only its deficiencies, and

---

<sup>25</sup> Flint, “Lucille Ball, Spirited Doyenne of TV Comedies, Dies at 77.”

<sup>26</sup> Anita Gates, “Television/Radio: The Good, the Bad, the Lucy: A Legacy of Laughs; Endlessly Lovable, But Damaging, Too,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2001.

yearns to be an ordinary citizen, keeping regular hours and living a normal life. As show business is the only way he knows to make a living, and he makes a very good one, the closest he can get to this dream is having a wife who's out of show business and devotes herself to keeping as nearly a normal life as possible for him.”<sup>27</sup>

In an early review, published the day after the premiere, *The Hollywood Reporter* sang praises to the new show, “Every once in a great while, a new television show comes along that fulfills, in its own particular niche, every promise of the often-harassed new medium. Such a show, it is a genuine pleasure to report is, *I Love Lucy*, starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz in a filmed domestic comedy series for Philip Morris, which should bounce to the top of the ratings heap in no time at all. If it doesn’t, the entire structure of the Americans entertainment business should be overhauled from top to bottom. The outstanding pertinent fact about *I Love Lucy* is the emergence, long suspected, of Lucille Ball as America’s number one comedienne in her own right. She combines the facial mobility of Red Skelton and the innate pixie quality of Harpo Marx all rolled into one. She is a consummate artist, born for television. Half a step behind her comes her husband, Desi Arnaz, the perfect foil for her screwball antics and possessing comic abilities of his own more than sufficient to make this a genuine comedy team rather the one-woman tour de force it almost becomes.”<sup>28</sup> The review after just the first episode concluded that Desilu Productions has scored with this one, and scored heavily.

Jess Oppenheimer was asked to write a script for the new “My Favorite Husband” by Harry Ackerman at CBS in 1948. Ball played a gay, sophisticated socialite wife of a bank vice president.

---

<sup>27</sup> Gates, “Television/Radio: The Good, the Bad, the Lucy: A Legacy of Laughs; Endlessly Lovable, But Damaging, Too.”

<sup>28</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 7.

Oppenheimer took the show in a new direction, making Lucy less sophisticated, but more childlike and impulsive, with broad, slapstick comedy. Lucy loved it and the show found its true footing. Ackerman signed Oppenheimer as the radio show's new head writer, producer and director, thus planting the seeds for the brains behind *I Love Lucy*.

Ball made sure to give credit where credit is due. "I am not funny. My writers were funny. I am not funny. What I am is brave."<sup>29</sup> Her show writers for "My Favorite Husband" would write many *Lucy* scripts in the future. Oppenheimer described the unprecedented experience, "We were an eager and innocent crew, embarking on a trip in a medium about which we knew nothing, none of us had an inkling of the high-flying success that lay ahead. We were all just deliriously knocking ourselves out to put the show on the air each week. What's more, we loved the work-none of us could wait to get to the set or the typewriter."<sup>30</sup> He goes on to describe how the most important piece of the magic was Ball herself, calling out her radiant talent, wonderful combination of beauty and clown, her sure touch for the human quality, which found recognition in every segment of the viewing audience. According to Oppenheimer, these were the sparks that gave life to the entire series. He concludes that she was truly one of a kind and that he thanks his lucky stars that their paths crossed when they did.

From B movies to her A list status on the radio due to her successful role in *My Favorite Husband*, Ball's tireless attitude even allowed her to still maintain a movie career throughout her life. However, it was television that really made her a star, as Lucille Ball finally had found a role and medium that changed media history and popular culture forever.

---

<sup>29</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Jess Oppenheimer and Gregg Oppenheimer, *Laughs, Luck- and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 4.

#### **Chapter 4: What Made *Lucy* Different from the Rest: Themes Addressed in *I Love Lucy***

Like *I Love Lucy* and other television shows at the time, its precursor “My Favorite Husband” also differed from its competition. Since the 1920s, radio was broadcast into people’s homes and occupied a central place in domestic life, with programs ranging from news, sports and quiz shows to adventure serials, dramas, and, as they were called, “domestic comedies” set in the home. Ball’s radio show was among the first to move from a vaudevillian model to what came to be known as “situation comedy,” with logic behind the comic business.<sup>31</sup> Oppenheimer claimed to have broken new grounds in radio with the help of female writer Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr. He stated, “We just weren’t writing what was then considered the ‘in’ kind of radio comedy show, where you have a series of comedy characters, each of who comes in, does his own shtick and then exits. Instead, we did whole stories-situation comedy.”<sup>32</sup>

There was an immediacy and sense of presence that the medium of television had, one that far outstripped radio and film. Landay argues that whether live or, like *I Love Lucy*, filmed “live,” the discursive patterns of early television encouraged viewers to feel like they were actually present at the event or performance. In his discussion of the changes television wrought on American political and social life, historian David Halberstam summarizes, “People now expected to see events, not merely read about or hear them. At the same time, the line between what happened in real life and what people saw on television began to merge. Nothing showed the power of this new medium to soften the edge between real life and fantasy better than the coming of Lucille Ball.”<sup>33</sup> Landay continues that in the 1950s, *I Love Lucy* addressed the central ideological concerns of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Oppenheimer and Oppenheimer, *Laughs, Luck- and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*, 127-128.

<sup>33</sup> Landay, “Millions ‘Love Lucy’: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon,” 25-47.

postwar period within the emerging medium. The resonance and relevance of *Lucy* is due to the way the situation comedy and the main female character dramatized and personified cultural conflicts about gender, marriage, and commodification caused by the legitimization crisis that emerged in postwar America. Her key claim is that the Lucy phenomenon is a triumph of commodification. For example, the television series, the merchandise, and the character are all aspects of one of the most successful products that television and postwar American society has ever manufactured. Even today, international reruns, websites, fan conventions, collectibles, television specials, books, videotapes, the merchandising, and the *Lucy* U.S. postage stamp commemorating the 1950s are all evidence of the contemporary Lucy phenomenon.

Themes addressed and tackled in *I Love Lucy* were quite unique, controversial and edgy for its time period. With episodes like “Equal Rights” where Lucy and Ethel demand to be treated like men by their husbands, Lucy constantly disobeying her husband’s wishes for her to stay a normal housewife rather than attempt a career in show business-marital problems, gender roles, misogyny and sexism became regular topics in the comedy series. “By calling attention to the power relations of the sexes in everyday domestic life, *I Love Lucy* participated in a proto-feminist current building in American culture. To be sure, Lucy’s desire to escape the confines of domesticity, to be autonomous and public instead of dependent and private, were ridiculed and usually ineffectual. However, the glimmers of equality in the Ricardo marriage, combined with the audience’s extra-textual knowledge of the real-life Ball and Arnaz marriage/creative partnership, posited the hope of a collaborative marriage alongside of its dramatization of the conflicts of the 1950s ideal of the companionate marriage.”<sup>34</sup> Lucy’s dissatisfaction with being just a housewife, her sisterly reliance on Ethel, her best female friend and constant want of what she doesn’t have clearly resonated and

---

<sup>34</sup> Landay, “Millions ‘Love Lucy’: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon,” 25-47.

related to the vast amount of American viewers.

Landay also believes that as a kind of postwar domestic realism, *I Love Lucy*'s comic representation of everyday life placed a romantic, yet screwball comedy version of the battle of the sexes into a more intimate, private setting than any other medium-written, stage, film, or radio because the Ricardo living room was literally in the living rooms of American viewers. Plots and storylines often revolved around Lucy's insatiable desire for what she doesn't have, whether that is a role in Ricky's night club act, re-decorating the apartment, fame in Hollywood and Europe, a big house in the country or a new freezer. Landay questions what cultural work *I Love Lucy* performed and how was and is it shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which it was created and reprised? She concludes that *I Love Lucy* emerged as a show concerned with the major cultural preoccupations of the post war era, these being marriage, domesticity, and the attainment of a middle-class lifestyle; and it did so because of the particular historical conditions, the newness of television programming and the genre of the situation comedy.

Lucille Ball herself stated "In addition to the production company, we also had a merchandising business. It was possible to furnish a house and dress a whole family with items carrying our *I Love Lucy* label." By October 1952, there were almost three thousand retail outlets for Lucy dresses, blouses, sweaters, aprons, Desi Arnaz smoking jackets, dolls and unisex pajamas identical to the ones that the couple wore on the show. In one month in late-1952, 30,000 "Lucy" dresses, 32,000 heart-adorned aprons, and 35,000 dolls were sold. In 1952, the pajamas sold out in two weeks, and the Christmas rush sold 85,000 dolls. January 1953 was the first month of selling a line of bedroom suites and half a million dollars in sales were reported in just two days. By 1953, merchandise included nursery furniture, Desi sport shirts and denims, Lucy lingerie and costume jewelry, desk and chair sets, *I Love Lucy* albums, sheet music, coloring books, and comic books.

While Landay argues that the on-screen chemistry of Ball and Arnaz, the combination of

the familiar (screwball and situation comedy conventions, show business couples) with the innovative (a Cuban-American marriage), and Ball's superlative abilities at physical comedy all created a context for the success of *I Love Lucy*. However, she reiterates that most likely the cultural movement toward domesticity was the biggest factor in creating the Lucy phenomenon. The situation of *I Love Lucy* articulated the contradictions of marriage, gender, the battle of the sexes, and middle-class life: the things of concern to a majority of television viewers. Ball attributed the series' success to how it made comedy out of everyday life. Due to political, ideological, and institutional developments that converged at the time, young adults were homeward bound, but they were also bound to the home. Landay states that in *I Love Lucy*, home meant the "love" that Ricky had for Lucy no matter what odd, property damaging, career jeopardizing, financially threatening thing she did. *I Love Lucy* assured viewers that with "love," everything would turn out alright. "And that "love" could be yours in the form of his and her pajamas for only \$5.95."<sup>35</sup>

The characters in *Lucy* modeled an everyday life in which television was an integral part. The self-reflexivity of people on television going on television, or watching television, was a characteristic of the situation comedy in the genre-forming years of 1950–1955. "In *I Love Lucy*, this tendency manifested most clearly in the many episodes in which Lucy and Ricky appeared on television, but television also figured prominently as a consumer item. In "The Courtroom," the Ricardos and their neighbors Fred and Ethel Mertz end up in court over damage done to the television the Ricardos gave the Mertzes for their wedding anniversary. In self-reflexive episodes like "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," "Fred and Ricky are TV Fans," "The Million Dollar Idea," "Home Movies," and "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show," televisions and being on television are central to

---

<sup>35</sup> Landay, "Millions 'Love Lucy': Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon," 25-47.

the plot.” Like in the lives of its viewers, the material item was a major part of the characters’ lives, once again relating to their audience.

Landay observes that the majority of Lucy’s storylines concerned acquiring commodities such as a freezer, fur coat, furniture, dresses, washing machines, vacuum cleaner, cars, wigs, pearls, and a twenty-five-pound rare Italian cheese that Lucy passes off as a baby. If a material good wasn’t what Lucy was seeking, it was enough money to buy something. Lucy’s material desires constantly got her in trouble and found her in comedic chaos. According to Landay, this was always sparked by the unequal economic power relation between Ricky and Lucy, Lucy often ended up in a jam because she had already spent her “allowance” and Ricky wouldn’t give her the money she wanted. Fred Mertz once remarked in a 1952 episode, “When it comes to money, there are two kinds of people: the earners and the spenders. Or as they are more popularly known, husbands and wives.” The postwar consumer unit was thought of as the married couple, and in Fred’s joke at least, women were responsible for translating the husband’s income into commodities. Once again, *I Love Lucy* reflected its time period and related to its audience, as advertisers had long targeted women as the primary decision makers in consumption, and television, often thought of as a feminized medium, was no exception.<sup>36</sup>

Madelyn Pugh Davis and Bob Carroll co-wrote the pilot for *I Love Lucy* and stayed with the show for its six seasons. Both recalled that when the reviews appeared after the first episode, they were mixed. The *Hollywood Reporter* gave it a rave, *Daily Variety* said the show needed work and the *New York Times* thought it had "promise." TIME called it "a triumph of bounce over bumbling material." However, the magazine changed its tune soon enough as Lucy Ricardo was featured on its cover in May 1952. Still, when the ratings came out, *I Love Lucy* was in the top ten and number

---

<sup>36</sup> Landay, “Millions ‘Love Lucy’: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon,” 25-47.

one within six months. Both attributed the show's success to the incredible comedy genius of Lucille Ball. Aside from Lucille Ball's talent, controversial but relatable themes and its wildly successful merchandising, *I Love Lucy* also found success for its unique contributions to the entertainment world before it even aired. In the early 1950s, most TV shows were performed for live broadcast in New York City, and stations around the country played a kinescope, a copy of the show filmed from a TV screen, which wasn't of good quality. According to Davis and Carroll, Lucy and Desi were expecting their first child, and they didn't want to move to New York from California. To fix this problem, "Desi got a group of top technical people together who figured out how to shoot the show with three film cameras in front of an audience. CBS said that would cost too much, so Desi and Lucy took a cut in salary and in return were given the rights to the negatives of the films. Thus, the three-camera film system, still used for situation comedies today, was created, and the rerun was born."<sup>37</sup> *I Love Lucy* premiered on CBS at a time when most programs were variety shows and broadcast live over the airwaves. In contrast, *I Love Lucy* was filmed before a live audience and then broadcast on television at a later date. The show differed from most of the time in that sense and also that it revolved around a reoccurring narrative with familiar characters and plots.

Being the first show to be filmed rather than performed live, making it possible to have a high-quality print of each episode for rebroadcast, compared with the poor quality of live-show kinescopes made the show innovative and unique before it had even aired yet. The change eventually led to a shift of television production from New York to Hollywood. The New York Times reports that the show was the first to be filmed before an audience, and crew members used

---

<sup>37</sup> Madelyn Pugh Davis and Bob Carroll. "80 Days that Changed the World: Falling in Love with Lucy," *Time*, March 31, 2003, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1977881\\_1977887\\_1978206,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1977881_1977887_1978206,00.html).

three cameras at once to permit motion-picture-type editing. The series won more than 200 awards, including five Emmys. Jack Gould of *The Times* analyzed, “The extraordinary discipline and intuitive understanding of farce gives *I Love Lucy* its engaging lilt and lift. Only after a firm foundation of credibility has been established is the element of absurdity introduced. It is in the smooth transition from sense to nonsense that *I Love Lucy* imparts both a warmth and a reality to the slapstick romp that comes as the climax.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most important theme and uniqueness of *I Love Lucy* was its pregnancy theme. According to scholar Stephanie Bor, this important media event occurred in the early 1950s and marked the first time that an image of pregnancy and childbirth would be depicted on national television. Although the inclusion of sexual content in the mass media was highly controversial at the time of Ball’s pregnancy, Bor’s analysis concluded that the press was generally favorable in its treatment of the topic. Journalists highlighted the popularity of the event, praised *I Love Lucy* creators for their sensitive treatment of the topic, and drew comparisons between characters’ on-screen and off- screen lives. Bor’s research elucidates the emergence of representations of pregnancy and childbirth on television that are now commonly featured in modern broadcast programming. On the evening of January 19, 1953, a landmark event in broadcast history occurred. For the first time ever, the depiction of a mother giving birth would be televised in homes throughout America. However, this was not the only significant event that Americans were anticipating that day. Monday, January 19, was also predetermined to be the day that Ball would give birth to her real-life baby via cesarean section. During the second season, the coinciding deliveries of both Lucys inspired a great deal of publicity. According to an article in *Life*, the episode, “Lucy Goes to the Hospital,” had 44 million viewers. Not only was this number

---

<sup>38</sup>Flint, “Lucille Ball, Spirited Doyenne of TV Comedies, Dies at 77.”

approximately four million more than the program typically attracted each week; but the importance of this event to the American public is particularly evident when comparing the ratings of the Ricardo birth to the mere 29 million viewers who watched Dwight D. Eisenhower's televised presidential inauguration the next day according to Bor. Clearly the affair interested print media journalists as well because the birth of the babies was reported in several popular magazines and newspapers in 1953, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *TV Guide*, and *Time*. The April 6, 1953, cover of *Life* that featured a family portrait of Ball, Arnaz, and their two children even referred to them as TV's first family.

The decision to risk incorporating the controversial topic of pregnancy was prompted by the news that Ball was going to have a baby in real life. According to Stefan Kanfer, Desi Arnaz had a conversation with executive producer Jess Oppenheimer, in which Arnaz argued "Lucy and Rick are married. She's pregnant. There is no way we can hide that fact from the audience." Still, producers, studio executives, sponsors, and writers, argued the danger of incorporating the taboo topic. Bor historically contextualizes that media portrayals of pregnancy and maternity prior to Ball were scarce. According to her research, the celebrity mom profile featured in contemporary media, which features images of stars that 'emphasize their pregnant bodies' and 'glamorize' motherhood on the covers of magazines, did not emerge until the 1980s.<sup>39</sup> Handling the uncharted situation delicately, CBS prohibited sexually suggestive language of any kind, double beds for couples to sleep in, and even the use of the word 'pregnant.' After much deliberation, *I Love Lucy* creators finally agreed to incorporate the controversial topic into a seven-week pregnancy storyline that would conclude with Lucy Ricardo's climactic delivery of a baby boy.

---

<sup>39</sup> Stephanie E. Bor, "Lucy's Two Babies: Framing the First Televised Depiction of Pregnancy," *Media History* 19.4 (2013): 464-478.

When learning of Ball's pregnancy from Arnaz, Oppenheimer was the one to say that the Ricardos having a baby was just what the series needed to give excitement to the second season. He then said, "What better thing is there for married couples in the audience to identify with than having a baby?" The media praised the television producers for their empathetic, humorous, and relatable treatment of the subject. Bor claims that this was a strategy used to encourage viewers to appreciate the event and that the blatant suggestion that events being depicted on television were analogous to those that were occurring in the private lives of the characters helped to normalize the very public presentation of a taboo topic. It is important to note the importance of airing this theme on television, as the cancelation of the show would have most likely discouraged subsequent media outlets from incorporating representations of pregnancy and childbirth into their own content. Bor argues that at the very least, the widespread coverage of *I Love Lucy*'s pregnancy storyline in the mass media unveiled a conversation about a previously unmentionable topic and drew attention to an extremely important and pertinent aspect of human life. Since Ball's very public pregnancy, television shows have continued to integrate maternity plots into their storylines. Pregnancy is now a common TV gimmick that has been repeatedly used to freshen a show, allow it to develop in a new direction, or to explore political issues. Bor's research uncovers a crucial slice of media history and provides understanding of the complicated emergence of a theme that is now pervasive and conventional in present-day television and film.<sup>40</sup>

Far from ridiculing motherhood, *Lucy* made it appear as one of the most natural and normal things in the world according to Jack Gould's 1953 radio and television column in the *New York Times*. To Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, what seems remarkable, especially in the context of the

---

<sup>40</sup> Bor, "Lucy's Two Babies: Framing the First Televised Depiction of Pregnancy," 464-478.

1950s, is that the wide dissemination of this information attracted practically no public criticism of Ball's continuing to work after the birth of her first child in July 1951 and while pregnant for a second full term. Instead, the pregnancy coverage actually functioned to increase her popularity and that of the show. CBS claimed that its show's stars had received over one million goodwill messages from the public concerning the pregnancy and birth. Shockingly, even where criticism or caution was raised in public discourses about the pregnancy narratives, Ball's status as working mother was never at issue. By the first week of April 1953, baby Desi Arnaz IV had appeared on the front cover of the first-ever edition of TV Guide, celebrating Ball as performer, mother, and media professional. The headline "LUCY'S \$50,000,000 BABY" refers simultaneously to Desi IV, Little Ricky Ricardo, and the estimated total sales of *I Love Lucy* merchandising stimulated by the births. In comparison to other television series at the time, while other television families were used to advertise products, the marketing around the Ball/Ricardo pregnancy focused on images, clothes, and furniture actually seen on the show.<sup>41</sup>

This birth was not only historical, but found much commercial and critical success-setting *I Love Lucy* apart from any other television show on the air. While Bor, Davies and Smith celebrate this turning point storyline, and the positivity that came out of it, Elaine Tyler May has pointed out that this was one of a series of widely publicized celebrity pregnancies and mother/offspring stories which reaffirmed the experience of motherhood as fulfillment.<sup>42</sup>

"I might not be able to understand what you say when you say it, but before you say it, I can understand what you're going to say perfectly" states Lucy to Ricky in the season six episode

---

<sup>41</sup> Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, "Race, Gender, and the American Mother: Political Speech and the Maternity Episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *Murphy Brown*," *American Studies* 39.2 (1998): 33-63.

<sup>42</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 88.

“The Ricardos Visit Cuba.” Lucy is an all-American woman, and Ricky, a Spanish-speaking Cuban, represented an enamored encounter not only of two cultures, but of two languages as well. In regard to Ricky's infamous accent, Oppenheimer claimed that seven or eight times a week, Arnaz would say something during rehearsal that came out funny because of his accent, and the writers would add it in to the script. Although Desi was a good sport, Oppenheimer adds that the jokes about his accent became so frequent that he took most of them out, believing that the audience would eventually get tired of one accent-based joke after another. According to Kirschen, Desi became so influential that he convinced Oppenheimer to let him become executive producer of the series, thus giving the actor final say on what cultural and linguistic elements made it onto the air.

It is important to note that America was not just laughing at an immigrant trying to speak English. The multilingual manipulation on behalf of both of the Ricardos provides an equally humorous arrangement of both language and culture in the United States according to Kirschen. He argues that strong cultural and linguistic stances held by each protagonist make their dialogue and greater discourse not only relevant to the program's viewers, but also allow for humor to be distributed uniformly between both parties. It is, therefore, not only bilingual Ricky who is the object of laughter throughout *I Love Lucy* but also the monolingual Lucy that is unable to understand the linguistic intricacies utilized frequently during the show. As such, bilingual cleverness often plays the monolingual as the inferior. This was another unique factor to the show. The balanced relation between Lucy and Ricky in regard to their language practices, coupled with the fact that Ricky Ricardo speaks up to Lucy about preconceived notions of the Spanish or English language, allows for society to embrace the program and find humor in the linguistic nuances

produced by the protagonists.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, scholars and authors previously discussed give their different reasons why *Lucy* was such a unique success. Landay focuses on the merchandising, writers of the show giving credit to their (female) star and her comedic genius, Ball herself giving credit to them and how they wrote a slapstick comedy with storylines that were relatable to middleclass America, Bor, Davies and Smith all pinpointing the success to the controversial pregnancy theme; and others believing it was reruns/the innovative filming method. That particularly contributed to the success of the program because in 1952, the first television rerun ever was that of *I Love Lucy*, thus paving the way for all other televised programs to be replayed in the confines of one's home. However, in his study, Bryan Kirshcen argues that it is language, and its skillful manipulation by the Ricardos, that made *I Love Lucy* one of the most humorous and top-rated programs in television.<sup>44</sup> No matter the major reason, there was no denying the uniqueness of the *Lucy* phenomenon.

---

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Kirschen, "Multilingual Manipulation and Humor in "I Love Lucy," *Hispania* 96.4 (2013): 735-747.

<sup>44</sup>Kirschen, "Multilingual Manipulation and Humor in "I Love Lucy," 735-747.

## Chapter 5: Two Lucys: Contradictions and Conflicts

Lucy Ricardo, a 1950s housewife, contested gender roles put forth by her husband and society, while simultaneously enabling the patriarchy (by being submissive at times and often needing her husband to “save” her.) Stefan Kanfer describes these two Lucys “the control freak whose comic alter ego thrived on chaos, the worshipful TV housewife whose real marriage ended in public disaster. I argue that Lucille Ball was everything Lucy Ricardo wanted to be. Ball was one in a million, an exception, Lucy Ricardo represented the rule.

While Lucy Ricardo lived in the shadow of her famous husband, always trying to get a role, big or small in *his* act, Lucille Ball was undoubtedly the main star in her marriage. Jess Oppenheimer noted the difficulties in bringing such a production onto the screen. Lucy had received much more attention than her husband on air, their marriage in real life was failing, and CBS did not initially want Desi to play alongside Lucy in the show.<sup>45</sup> Although, Desi Arnaz became a major force to be reckoned with in the production of *I Love Lucy*. Oppenheimer states that Desi's Cuban upbringing played an integral role in the materialization of the role of Ricky Ricardo. Once it became clear that Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz were a package deal, Desi's voice became respected. Without Lucille Ball, there was no Desi Arnaz.

Anita Gates of the *New York Times* finds it amazing that Lucy Ricardo, a woman in her 30's (played by an actress in her 40's) can even function in the world. To add to her argument, she provides many various examples. Lucy overdoses on seasickness pills, packs her passport in the luggage that's being sent ahead from Italy to France, leaves her purse with the New York train tickets inside on the platform in Los Angeles, misplaces train tickets to Florida, misses the departure of her trans-Atlantic luxury liner, becomes trapped inside a steamer trunk and gets her

---

<sup>45</sup> Kirschen, “Multilingual Manipulation and Humor in “I Love Lucy,” 735-747.

head stuck in a porthole. And those just have to do with traveling! When Ricky gives her a driving lesson, she tries to make a U-turn in the Holland Tunnel, and there was also that time that Lucy tries to smuggle a giant Italian cheese into America by disguising it as a baby on the plane. Before Lucy and Ethel get their jobs at the chocolate factory Ethel states to Lucy, "We don't know how to do anything." When the employment agency mentions roles for bookkeepers, dental technicians, insurance adjusters, PBX operators, the women embarrassingly don't know what some of the occupations are. The first time Lucy goes job hunting, the only paid employment she can find is baby-sitting. When she helps an Italian friend by filling in for him making pizzas, she does two hundred dollars worth of damage to the restaurant. Her artistic skills are not great either. She is awful in ballet class and a failure as a sculptor. Impressively, she writes a novel but a publisher only buys it to include portions in another book as an example of bad writing. When she does get a big commercial break (with the help of Ricky of course), she ends up drunk from the medicine she has to try to sell.<sup>46</sup>

While Lucy Ricardo was a ditz, Ball was a genius-executive. Ricardo needed a business manager hired by Ricky to fix the financial mess she brought them into from her overspending on clothes and beauty, Ball was the unofficial head of her family for years, setting up her mother and other relatives in California and supporting them. While Ricardo was a housewife who had to run her home on the household budget that her husband provided, Ball took over Desilu Productions in the early 1960's, pulling it out of the financial slump it had fallen into after enormous initial success, with Arnaz as studio head.

Lucy and Ricky lived happily ever after, Arnaz and Ball divorced in 1960. Interestingly, Ball, a strong, powerful woman, a divorcee at a time where the sanctity of marriage was highly

---

<sup>46</sup> Gates, "Television/Radio: The Good, the Bad, the Lucy: A Legacy of Laughs; Endlessly Lovable, But Damaging, Too."

valued and separations looked down upon greatly, played a character that many like the *New York Times* described as funny, but a manipulative idiot. They are wrong. Lucy was a housewife in the 1950s who married someone that wanted her to stay just that. Sure, she was not a great singer or artist, and every character was quick to point that out when she dreamed of fame in show business. For someone with no talent, Ricardo had many opportunities that she turned down for her marriage's sake. In an early episode, a network talent scout is going to check out Ricky's nightclub act. Lucy sneaks into the show, doing a comedy routine with a cello and imitating a seal playing horns. She's so funny that the scout offers her, not Ricky, a television contract. She turns it down for Ricky. In a California episode, when she tries to pass off a dummy of Ricky as her dancing partner, she's accidentally so hilarious that the movie studio offers her a contract to do comedy. Again, she says no, when Ricky says she can't be a mother, wife and movie star at the same time.<sup>47</sup> She was clearly talented, just not in singing or dancing, but like Ball, in comedy. Unlike Ball however, she did not get to have a chance at it all, motherhood, marriage and movies. However, her very trying to and even succeeding at the opportunity shows her brains, and that she was just a victim of traditional gender roles and the era's sexism.

The two Lucys personalities also differed. Madelyn Pugh Davis, the only female writer on staff for the iconic series, revealed that Ball did not naturally have Ricardo's zany personality. It was Ball's hard work and dedication that helped her make the most of the scripts. She was a perfectionist and if she had to work with a difficult prop, she always wanted the prop there the first day of rehearsal so she could get used to it and learn to use it incorrectly to pull off the funniest gags.<sup>48</sup> Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley remembered that the show made her uneasy

---

<sup>47</sup> Gates, "Television/Radio: The Good, the Bad, the Lucy: A Legacy of Laughs; Endlessly Lovable, But Damaging, Too."

<sup>48</sup> Dayen, "Edwards, Elisabeth. I Love Lucy: A Celebration of All Things Lucy; Inside the World of Television's First Great Sitcom," 76-77.

because Lucy Ricardo never seemed to learn from one episode to the next how not to get into trouble. Still, like many other women and girls, she identified Lucy as her mother and herself. When she got older however, she discovered Lucille Ball, “Now there was someone to pay attention to, Lucy Ricardo’s better half, a woman of talent and ambition who had been around and knew how to make something of her talents.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly, there was a difference between life and art. Still, in regard to the 50s, both Lucys were similarly no “good girls” and should be respected for their feminist trailblazing.

---

<sup>49</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 307.

## Chapter 6: Indirect Contributions, *The Feminine Mystique* and Second-Wave Feminism

Lucy Ricardo played a goofy, loving housewife and mother but was far from a June Cleaver type. She contested gender roles put forth by Ricky and society, depicted a strong sisterhood/friendship with her best friend Ethel, was not always an obeying, dutiful wife and dreamed of a show business career. Although she failed in this attempt constantly, she never let her husband saying no stop her from trying to get into an act. In the episode “Equal Rights,” after Ricky yells, “We’re going to run this house like we do in Cuba, where the man is the master and the woman does what she’s told.” Lucy replies right back, “I don’t know how you treat your women in Cuba, but this is the United States, and I have my rights.”<sup>50</sup> Ricky continues, “I am not arguing about women’s rights. I am the first one to agree that women should have all the rights they want as long as they stay in their place.” Ethel chimes in, “You men tell us that we have equal rights, but you certainly don’t give us a chance to act like it.” The show touched on this serious issue and Ricky’s views reflected the gender norms of that time. And to bring it back to a situational comedic tone, Fred ends the conversation with, “What do you want? You’ve got the vote, you wear pants, you drive buses, and you wrestle. You go every place you please except the steam room in the YMCA.” Episodes such as these, especially ones during the pregnancy and the very existence of Lucille Ball’s super star career as a female on television all contributed to the start of the feminist movement in the 60s.

Lucy Ricardo clearly longed for more in life than just being a wife and mother. It is clear at this point that Lucy always tried to get into Ricky’s act, make it in show business and wanted fame. However, besides that, Lucy just obviously wanted to be out of the house and be more than a homemaker. Episodes like “The Girls Go into Business” and “The Million Dollar Idea” depict the

---

<sup>50</sup> *I Love Lucy: The Complete Series*, directed by William Asher, Marc Daniels, Ralph Levy and James V. Kern, 1951-1957, Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2006, DVD.

sisterhood and comradery between Ethel and Lucy through their shared longing for careers. They fail miserably in each episode, unable to make a profit from their dress shop in the first and once again don't profit from a salad dressing venture in the latter. These two women relied on each other, supported one another and went against their husbands for one another in their scheming (much like the feminists of the 60s who relied on one another to fight the patriarchy together.) *I Love Lucy* showed its viewers that women were strong and could lift one another up, and were all going through the same or at least similar feminist problems. Other episodes that focus on Lucy resenting a housewife role include "The Diner" (when she fails at owning a business/running a restaurant), "Lucy Writes a Play," "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," "Lucy Becomes a Sculptress," "Lucy Writes a Novel," and "Lucy Raises Chickens." Clearly, this was a female character desperate to get out of her house and do something for herself; and this became a central theme of the sitcom. Just depicting such a theme so many times in so many episodes was a huge contribution to the upcoming feminist movement.

Feminists might argue that it is problematic how Lucy always returns home to her husband's loving arms after consistently failing in her attempts to branch out and that traditional gender roles are the solution in episodes like "Job Switching" and "Equal Rights," but Ricardo should at least get credit for always trying to make it outside the home and Ball should get a lot more for actually succeeding in doing so. Clearly, the show was not making a direct political statement about feminism, but that is not to say both Lucys did not influence its female viewers. In bringing these feminist issues to the forefront of primetime television for six years, America saw seeds for the second-wave feminist movement being planted, albeit unintentionally.

Susan Douglas argues that American women are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery that they grew up with was itself mixed messages about what women should

and should not do, what women could and could not be.<sup>51</sup> Media urged women to be cute, thin, and deferential to men. On the other hand, media also suggested that women could be rebellious, tough, enterprising and shrewd. Women in return accepted but also rebelled against what they saw, as media was encouraging females to embrace feminism in some form. Women found themselves pinioned between two voices, one insisting they were equal, and the other insisting they were subordinate. Women seeing Lucy Ricardo leaving the home and trying to establish a life outside of her nuclear family could have been inspired to do that same, even as the storylines often sent a mixed message- having Lucy constantly failing and always returning home at the end.

Issues women could relate to became a major aspect of *I Love Lucy*. In “The Diet”, the third episode of the series, Ricky tells Lucy that she can be in his show if she can lose weight to fit into the already purchased outfit. Lucy has to lose weight, not for herself, not because she wants to or for health issues. She is told to do so by a man to meet society’s expectations and beauty standards. Clearly, men and society had control over the female body. Perhaps watching this on television gave future feminists inspiration to rebel against this sexist norm. In the season one episode “Men Are Messy,” Lucy and Ethel are sick of their husbands being slobs and not appreciating all the cleaning they have to do as housewives. Another storyline that so many housewives could relate to on a personal level. Wives were supposed to appreciate their hard-working husbands who came home from a long day at the job but their own work, housework, was considered inferior and an easy task. In a season 2 episode titled “Vacation from Marriage,” Ricardo depicted a very real issue for married couples. Bored of their marriages, Ethel and Lucy decide to spend a few days away from their husbands. Although this episode ended with the spouses missing one another, it still portrayed the commonality of two housewives’ (who seemingly have it all) unhappiness and

---

<sup>51</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 10.

dissatisfaction with their lives. In the season 2 episode “Lucy Hires a Maid,” we see the hilarity of the Ricardos being afraid of their maid and thus unable to fire the help. However, beyond the situational comedy, in the beginning of the episode, we see Lucy miserable, tired and unable to handle the hardships and struggles of a newborn baby and homemaking with chores and cleaning all on her own. She is up all night with the baby, unable to get him to sleep, doing the laundry by hand, and then so exhausted she falls asleep while hosting company that has come over. The purpose of this montage is to set up the episode’s main storyline, but still reminded the show’s audience of this relatable issue of women raising children and doing all the housework on their own (while their husband works) that so many women lived every day. Lucille Ball played this character dealing with protofeminist issues and demonstrated them to some extent every week for the American audience. With *I Love Lucy* being the biggest show on television, Ball used this platform to bring something real and relatable for women to her screwball comedy.

Cail Collins describes 1963’s *The Feminine Mystique* as a very specific cry of rage about the way intelligent, well-educated women were kept out of the mainstream of American professional life and regarded as a little more than a set of reproductive organs in heels. Betty Friedan was tired of the way that the economy appeared to see all females as simple consumption machines which built national prosperity by buying new appliances for the kitchen. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47% in 1920 to 35% in 1958. Girls were getting married younger; a large percentage would get engaged in their teens. Magazines taught girls to pity those unfeminine girls who longed for a lonely life with just a career rather than a husband. Modern appliances had stripped most of the time-consuming chores of the past, making the role of the wife in the home less crucial. The unspoken problem Friedan described was a sense of dissatisfaction and yearning that married mothers felt for about fifteen years. Their whole life purpose was to cater to their husband and raise their children, with no personal passion

or career to feel accomplished on their own.

White, middleclass, bored housewives longing for more could relate to Lucy Ricardo and were inspired by Ball. Lucille Ball fought the patriarchy by being a woman who chose to have a career, married a Cuban immigrant and eventually divorced him at a time when none of these actions were approved by the majority of society. 1963's publication of *The Feminine Mystique* sparked the second-wave feminism movement. It can be argued that Lucille Ball depicted and portrayed the dissatisfied and domesticated women described by Friedan on her show throughout the 1950s. *I Love Lucy* was the biggest television show in the world throughout the 50s. Lucy Ricardo was a visual representation of these women facing "the problem that has no name," while simultaneously fighting this dissatisfaction, thus indirectly contributing to the start of the feminist movement.

While there were aspects of the show that enabled gender roles, like women should do the cooking and cleaning and should leave the money making to men; Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo did a lot for feminism-even if it was indirectly. The show was much more conventional to gender roles than Ball and Arnaz's reality. In the show Arnaz is the celebrity, meanwhile in real life, producers were eager to star Ball in a television series and had to be convinced of Desi as a costar. Ball was a strong woman, who made a career in Hollywood even though it took repeated failures to find stardom. Ricardo repeatedly uses her trickiness and attempts to escape the confines of the home and the role of a housewife according to Landay.<sup>52</sup> Common themes (surely appreciated by feminists) portrayed on the show was the battle of sexes and rejection of beauty for comic effect. Historian Dan Wakefield asked why is Lucy so loved and offered the theory that it was because she was the first good looking actress to throw her body around with abandon in the cause of comedy;

---

<sup>52</sup> Landay, *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)*, 18.

compare her rubbery torso flings to Mae West's statue like stance as she shot one-liners from the side of her mouth.<sup>53</sup>

Brianna Leone goes as far as to say that the comradery between Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz visually provided a sense of sisterhood that American women would demonstrate they needed in the following decades through social organizations and movements. She also argues that the show is a cultural artifact of the 1950s and offers a visual representation of the segment of American women that were motivated by *The Feminine Mystique* to organize the Women's movement.<sup>54</sup> Leone supports the notion that Lucy's adventures transformed the character into a figure for discontented 1950s American housewives to live through vicariously, even though Ricardo always ended up back where she began-in the home. Like Lucy, female viewers retained a desire to explore the world independent of their families and their individual confinement to their homes also bound them to one another. While teenagers were discovering the Beatles, their mothers made *The Feminine Mystique* the number one best-selling paperback in the country, a tip-off that these women hated their assigned positions. Trashing the happy housewife heroine of the women's magazines, enumerating the emptiness, resentments and self-doubt of many housewives' lives, Friedan reminded women of the unfinished work of the women's movement and urged her sisters to stop being doormats and fight for equality.<sup>55</sup> Daniel Horwitz believes that *The Feminine Mystique* helped transform the course of America's political and social history. Historians view its

---

<sup>53</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 307.

<sup>54</sup> Brianna Leone, *Women Love Lucy and Lucy Loves Them: Demonstrating the Proto-Feminism of Lucy Ricardo* (United States: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 125.

publication as marking the beginning of the modern women's movement.<sup>56</sup> Keeping a safe distance from controversial political topics and continuing with the light-heartedness of situation comedy, *Lucy* was still able to pave the way for female voice in television and fighting against patriarchal views.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Hillary Miller, "America Loves I Love Lucy: Dear Feminists, What's Not to Love?" *TV Criticism*, September 27, 2013, <http://tvcriticism2013.blogspot.com/2013/09/america-loves-i-love-lucy-dear.html>.

### **Conclusion: Lucy and Lucille's Legacy**

Drawing from her own personal experiences and those of other female writers, Madelyn Pugh Davis described discrimination against women during the early years of television. She reveals that women were treated like intruders in a men's club and were commonly ignored. Once, she applied to an all-male comedy writing team and they bluntly explained to her that they weren't going to her because she was a girl and so wouldn't fit in. Even on the *Lucy* set, where the star was a woman, Davis was known as "Girl Writer." Her unofficial duties as a girl writer were to monitor Ball's wardrobe for malfunctions as she performed stunts and also to tests stunts to ensure a woman could perform them without injuring herself. Even when Davis became a producer of the show, the prejudice did not stop, describing how she was treated like she was invisible and purposefully ignored by male coworkers. Still she shares this serious story with some humor, adding, "When I was first starting out in television in 1951, you could have held a meeting of women television comedy writers and producers in a booth at McDonalds." It should be noted that Ball hired her, another one of her many acts in fighting the patriarchy. Lucy, like herself, made Davis a pioneer in the television industry. Davis also noted that more women had jobs in the industry beginning the 1970s.<sup>58</sup> Also like Ball and thanks to her, Davis was a trailblazer for female writers and producers in Hollywood.

As the years progressed, women did not have to play the housewife anymore and got to go out and successfully pursue their dream jobs unlike Ricardo, but just like Ball. In the 1970s, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* titular character was a single working woman who dumped her boyfriend and moved to Minneapolis in the series premiere, setting up herself and her series as an

---

<sup>58</sup> "The Woman Behind I Love Lucy," *Video Age International* 32.1 (2012): 10-11.

example of independent feminism.<sup>59</sup> Moore, who previously played the supportive housewife character on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* from 1961-1966, now played a character that focused on her career, dating a series of men, and taking the Pill. In the 80s, Hollywood had Candice Bergen as the newscaster Murphy Brown. She inflamed a national debate when she chose to have a baby out of wedlock, enraging many for her lifestyle choice. The 90s brought Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* on HBO. Sarah Jessica Parker played a single woman in her 30s and a sex columnist who unapologetically had sex and talked about it. Recently, television offered us Hannah Horvath on *Girls*, an aspiring writer who surrounds herself with a cadre of friends to help her make her way through the trials and romances of life in the big apple, much like Carrie Bradshaw. Lena Dunham created, wrote and starred on the show. While Lucy Ricardo was not a single working woman like these characters, she and Ball pushed many limits for their own era. Ball had to take a stand and fight for producers to okay Arnaz as her television husband because he was Cuban. Her refusal to not back down brought an interracial couple on television in the 1950s, before the Civil Rights Movement even began. Ball working during her pregnancy and portraying the taboo topic on television was never done before. Ball was also the first woman to head a major television company. Under Ball, Desilu Productions gave Hollywood *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Star Trek* and *Mission: Impossible*, with the last two Ball specifically having to push to make happen. It can be argued that all these progressive characters and their female voices would never have made it to air if Ball and all her many contributions to feminism had not come before them.

Today, Ball's influence can be seen in the work of comediennes and actresses like Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Amy Poehler, Tina Fey and Debra Messing. In the past, the physical comedy

---

<sup>59</sup> David Bianculli, *The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 4.

genius impacted Betty White, Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Burnett and many more. Lucille Ball was one of the six winners of the Kennedy Center Awards in 1986. “Others in life have seen to our material needs, built our roads, constructed our cities, given us our daily bread. But these six artists...have performed a different and singular task-to see to the needs of the heart...I think this redheaded bundle may be the finest comedienne ever,” said President Ronald Reagan during the honors.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, 5.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

### *Primary Sources*

#### **Interviews**

Ball, Lucille. "Lucille Ball & Barbara Walters: An Interview of a Lifetime." Interview by Barbara Walters. *20/20*, ABC, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1977. Audio, 21:04.

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x590db4>

Ball, Lucille. "Ask Her Anything About Desi Sr., Divorce, Drugs, Gay Rights—Lucy Ball Hasn't Become Bashful at 68." Interview by Peter Lester. *People*, Magazine, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1980.

<http://people.com/archive/ask-her-anything-about-desi-sr-divorce-drugs-gay-rights-lucy-ball-hasnt-become-bashful-at-68-vol-13-no-6/>

#### **Television Series**

*I Love Lucy: The Complete Series*. Directed by William Asher, Marc Daniels, Ralph Levy and James V. Kern. 1951-1957. Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2006. DVD.

### *Secondary Sources*

#### **Books**

Austerlitz, Saul. *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014.

Bianculli, David. *The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific*. New York: Doubleday, 2016.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.

Chunovic, Louis. *One Foot on the Floor: The Curious Evolution of Sex on Television from I Love Lucy to South Park*. New York: TV Books, 2000.

Douglas, Susan. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995.

Emmons, Caroline. *Cold War and McCarthy Era: People and Perspectives (Perspectives in American Social History)*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

Greene, Doyle. *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy Through South Park*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2008.

Horowitz, Daniel. *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000.

Kanfer, Stefan. *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Landay, Lori. *I Love Lucy (TV Milestones Series)*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.

Leone, Brianna. *Women Love Lucy and Lucy Loves Them: Demonstrating the Proto-Feminism of Lucy Ricardo*. United States: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012.

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

Mills, Brett. *The Sitcom*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009.

Nelson, Deborah. *Gender and Culture in the 1950s (Women's Studies Quarterly)*. New York: The Feminist Press CUNY, 2005.

Oppenheimer, Jess., and Gregg Oppenheimer. *Laughs, Luck- and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

Pollack, Pam, Meg Belviso and Greg Copeland. *Who Was Lucille Ball?* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2017.

Stark, Steven D. *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events That Made Us Who We Are Today*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Thompson, Ethan and Jason Mittell. *How to Watch Television*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

### **Journal Articles**

Bor, Stephanie E. "Lucy's Two Babies: Framing the First Televised Depiction of Pregnancy." *Media History* 19.4 (2013): 464-478.

Clements, C. L. "I Love Lucy: An American Legend." *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 50.1 (2012): 74-75.

Davies, Jude, and Carol R. Smith. "Race, Gender, and the American Mother: Political Speech and the Maternity Episodes of I Love Lucy and Murphy Brown." *American Studies* 39.2 (1998): 33-63.

Dayen, Rosalind. "Edwards, Elisabeth. I Love Lucy: A Celebration of All Things Lucy; Inside the World of Television's First Great Sitcom." *Library Journal* 136.19 (2011): 76-77.

Kirschen, Bryan. "Multilingual Manipulation and Humor in 'I Love Lucy.'" *Hispania* 96.4 (2013): 735-747.

Landay, Lori. "Millions 'Love Lucy': Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon." *NWSA Journal* 11.2 (1999): 25-47.

Mellencamp, Patricia. "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy." *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (1986): 80-98.

Thorburn, David. "The Single-Series Monograph: A New Approach to TV Studies." *Cinema Journal* 50.4 (2011): 194-201.

"The Woman Behind I Love Lucy." *Video Age International* 32.1 (2012): 10-11.

### **Newspaper Articles**

Peter B. Flint, "Lucille Ball, Spirited Doyenne of TV Comedies, Dies at 77," *New York Times*, April 27, 1989.

Anita Gates, "Television/Radio: The Good, the Bad, the Lucy: A Legacy of Laughs; Endlessly Lovable, But Damaging, Too," *New York Times*, October 14, 2001.

### **Websites**

Davis, Madelyn Pugh, and Bob Carroll. "80 Days that Changed the World: Falling in Love with Lucy." *Time*. March 31, 2003.  
[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1977881\\_1977887\\_1978206,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1977881_1977887_1978206,00.html)

Littleton, Cynthia. "Anniversary Waltz for Lucille Ball." *Variety*. July 25, 2011.  
<http://variety.com/2011/tv/news/anniversary-waltz-for-lucille-ball-lucy-1118040340/>

Markovitz, Adam. "Who's the New Lucy?" *Entertainment Weekly*. August 6, 2011.  
<http://ew.com/article/2011/08/06/whos-the-new-lucy/>

Miller, Hillary. "America Loves I Love Lucy: Dear Feminists, What's Not to Love?" *TV Criticism*. September 27, 2013. <http://tvcriticism2013.blogspot.com/2013/09/america-loves-i-love-lucy-dear.html>

O'Keefe, Meghan. "Lucy's Legacy: How Lucille Ball Shaped Modern Pop Culture." *Decider*. August 6, 2014. <https://decider.com/2014/08/06/lucys-legacy/>

Rudolph, Ileana. "Celebrating 60 Years of I Love Lucy." *TV Guide*. September 29, 2011.  
<http://www.tvguide.com/news/celebrating-60-years-1038247/>

"I Love Lucy First Episode: THR's 1951 Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. August 25, 2015.  
<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/i-love-lucy-first-episode-815902>