HER STORIES

DAYTIME SOAP OPERA
& US TELEVISION HISTORY

ELANA LEVINE

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CONSOLE-ING PASSIONS: Television and Cultural Power *Edited by Lynn Spigel*

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1973, fourteen-year-old Jane Marsh recorded her thoughts and feelings in a daily journal, including her reactions to her favorite daytime TV soap operas. She looked forward to seeing the "gorgeous" actor Joseph Gallison on *Return to Peyton Place* (NBC, 1972–74), but she worried that the program would be preempted by a different continuing saga, "Watergate," labeled in her journal with the same quotation marks she used for the other stories she followed, like "As the World Turns." "Watergate" often aired in place of the soaps the week of June 25, as former White House counsel John Dean testified before the US Senate's investigative committee. Jane was resentful—and intrigued: "'Watergate' has been on all week. John Dean is testifying. I think he's cute. So are Senators Howard Baker and Edward Gurney. . . . It was getting kind of interesting lately. It was boring before. Dean says Nixon knew about the cover-up. Dean's wife is very pretty."[1] Alternating moments of tedium and excitement, featuring attractive leading men and their love interests, plus the revelation of closely held secrets, "Watergate" was familiar terrain for the young soap opera fan. As part of the growing youth audience for daytime drama, Jane was invested in the soaps' characters and their portrayers, learning about both through the burgeoning fan press, even as she had been watching with her mother and sister since the mid-1960s. She grasped the political significance of Watergate, but her soap viewing had also encouraged her to practice feminized skills such as assessing character, evaluating personal relationships, and identifying (hetero) sexual desire. In applying these insights at the safe remove of the TV screen, Jane made "Watergate" one of her stories.

In the summer of 2018, fifty-eight-year-old Jane Marsh was still watching soaps. Instead of writing about them in her journal, she tweeted about them; this is how I first encountered Jane. She wrote about NBC's *Days of our Lives* (1965–), and sometimes ABC's *General Hospital* (1963–), but mostly about the early 1970s episodes of *The Doctors* (1963–82), originally aired on NBC

but now rerunning on the twenty-first-century broadcast network Retro TV, its programming carried nationwide on digital subchannels and low-power stations. Much as in her 1973 journal, Jane's tweets combined observations about the soaps with political commentary; like many Americans, she noted the similarities between Watergate and the scandals of Donald Trump's presidency.[2] With maturity and the passage of time, her insights had changed, now more critical than adoring, particularly when *The Doctors* represented a character such as the surly Nick Bellini as heroic, when he had actually raped his wife, or when *DOOL*'s Steve told off his wife Kayla's boss, to which Jane tweeted, "She's capable of speaking for herself. :/"[3] She shared letters from early 1970s soap viewers published in the fan press, magazines she had saved from her childhood, noting with irony, "Many of the complaints are the same as from current soap fans."[4] She still expressed her fondness for particular characters, stories, and performers, now with more cynicism about the motivations of the TV business, as well as more wisdom about personal relationships. She knew where the plot of *The Doctors* was going, having watched it more than forty years earlier, offering "spoiler alerts" about events that would unfold later in the 1970s.[5] She also knew that some of the more problematic gender politics on display would not change as much as one might have expected between the 1970s and the present, that certain aspects of the retro-soap were not so out of place in the 2010s. In Jane's feed, continuities and disruptions across time, in controversies real and fictional, from the drama of the political sphere to that of scripted fiction, converged. Jane's experience of daytime soap opera mirrors the experiences of many watching soaps across their lives.

These layers of time are especially familiar to me, someone who has been thinking about soaps for more than thirty-five years. I was aware of them across my childhood because my Aunt Bonne, who lived across the street, had been watching *DOOL* since before I was born. But in the fall of 1981 things changed. My fellow sixth graders at Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary were talking a lot about Luke and Laura, whose *General Hospital* wedding was imminent. My mom had heard about it, too—the show was everywhere. The day of the wedding, November 16, one of my friends brought to school a radio that received TV channels. During our afternoon recess we gathered together to listen. Around the same time, my father brought home a device that allowed us to record a TV show and view it later; recording *GH*'s daily episodes became the perfect way to use our new VCR. Like Jane in her youth, I became a serious soap watcher. *General Hospital* was my show, but I knew about all of them through my voracious consumption of fan magazines. In

the decades to follow, I kept watching, time-shifting every episode throughout high school, college, working years, graduate school, my job as a professor. I moved, attained degrees, dated, broke up, lost my dad to cancer, got married, had two kids, lived a life, watched *GH*.

I wrote my first paper about soaps in high school, after reading Ruth Rosen's essay "Search for Yesterday."[6] My pen pal from the fan club of *GH* actor Jack Wagner gave me *The Soap Opera Encyclopedia* for my sixteenth birthday.[7] I picked up Robert C. Allen's *Speaking of Soap Operas* from Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications gift shop soon after it opened in 1987; I also watched soap episodes in the museum's collection—my first archival research visit.[8] In college I learned that academics were now studying TV as they did movies; it didn't take me long to want in. Graduate school helped me understand the academic research on soap opera; my first graduate seminar paper was about soaps. My first academic publication was about the production of *GH*—the program's producers invited me to visit after I sent them a letter asking to research their work.[9] Not yet sure what broader questions I had about soap opera, I decided against making it the focus of my dissertation, though I did explore the daytime dramas of the 1970s in one chapter. Years later, eventually, inevitably, it was time to write *Her Stories*. I would spend another twelve years researching and writing, on top of the quarter century I'd already spent with soaps. As I worked, I have found myself dwelling, seemingly simultaneously, in periods of the soap past I have lived before, such as 1981, or 1995. I have also become familiar with moments located in a past before my time, as in 1952, or 1963, or 1969. For soap opera, the past always matters, bearing upon the present and shaping the future.

Soap Opera's Intellectual History

In *Speaking of Soap Operas*, the book I was so excited to discover as a teenager, Allen wrote of the impossibility of a full textual history of a soap. He enumerated the thousands of hours passed of *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952–2009), his soap, many of them evaporated into air thanks to live broadcasts, never preserved.[10] His point was that a traditionally defined aesthetic object was not essential for the study of culture; that cultural forms, soaps included, had multifaceted existences; that they were more than text, they were forces of production and practices of viewing and discussions of their impact.[11] Soap opera was his case for a broader and crucial point, an intervention in fact, one refuting the formalism of traditional aesthetic criticism and

the empiricism of American mass communication research. Allen argued for an analysis of culture that drew upon theories of meaning making, a "reader-oriented poetics."[12] He demonstrated this approach through a history of soap opera focused mainly on its origins in US broadcast network radio, when it was constructed industrially and socially as programming for housewives. His way of grappling with soap opera was a crucial shift for the fields of media and cultural studies but was only a start at what might be said of the history of the US daytime soap, a point with which Allen would surely agree, given his desire not to "close off the soap opera from further analysis . . . but rather to open it up . . . to reveal the full extent of its multiple determinations."[13] Carrying on this endeavor, I have sought to apply Allen's lessons, and his start at a history, to put into historical perspective the ways soap opera has changed, or not, over time, focusing in particular on the (many more) years of its tenure on television rather than Allen's emphasis on the radio age. *Her Stories* is a history of the US daytime television soap opera as a gendered cultural form and a central force in the economic and social power of American broadcast network television from the late 1940s through the 2010s.

Allen's pioneering work emerged in the 1980s alongside other strands of scholarship that considered soap opera, scholarship that initiated the cultural analysis of television as an academic field. In some of the earliest humanistic readings of television as a cultural form, as in Horace Newcomb's *TV: The Most Popular Art* (1974), soap opera is figured as the quintessence of television's potential as storyteller.[14] Soap opera was also a central case in the emerging field of British cultural studies, a frequent example of popular television culture among scholars in the United Kingdom, studying British soaps, and those in the United States, translating these ideas to American culture and its serial dramas.[15] The British cultural studies work on soap opera intersected with efforts of feminist film scholars to examine television, to consider how the domestic medium might speak about gender in ways different from the dominant "male gaze" of Hollywood film and in ways like or unlike other forms associated with women, such as melodrama and the women's film.[16] As Charlotte Brunsdon has explained, all of this work on soap opera was crucial to the positioning of feminism within the academy, and also central to the establishment of popular culture as a valid field of intellectual inquiry.[17] These efforts not only paved my own path but also established new perspectives on the study of television, of popular culture, and of women's culture—soap opera was embedded in the intellectual foundation of these burgeoning fields.

Her Stories is multiply influenced by these scholarly traditions, but it also differs from them, continuing the study of soap opera beyond these earlier inquiries and departing from them by examining soap opera as a historically specific and variable form rather than as static and fixed. As such, I draw on and expand upon developments in both film and television scholarship focused on the concept of genre as an operative system of media classification. My approach shares with scholars such as Rick Altman and Jason Mittell a commitment to a contextual, rather than transhistorical, view. Their work invites a consideration of differences and disruptions in media genres over time rather than insisting upon the coherence of continuities across instances.[18] I approach soap opera akin to the way these scholars approach genre, exploring changes in relation to media industry structures, production processes, critical discourses, and reception practices, varying by place and time.

While I attend to the ways that daytime soap opera has operated as a category of TV programming within industrial and popular discourse, *Her Stories* reveals that soap opera has been much more foundational to the history of American television than is typical of a single genre. Unlike the game show or the cop show, "genre" may not be the best descriptor for soap opera. A comparison with the place of melodrama within the world of feature film is instructive. In film culture and scholarship, melodrama is a category that at times has shared with soap opera an association with the feminine and the histrionic, particularly when used as a synonym for the classical Hollywood "woman's film."[19] Scholars such as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams have argued that melodrama is best understood not as a *genre* but rather as a widespread narrative *mode* informing much of American cultural history.[20] While the continuing, serialized structure of the daytime TV soap opera makes such a vast cultural reach less feasible, I argue that the economic and cultural form of soap opera plays a similarly constitutive role for television itself, undergirding the medium in ways that make it far more foundational than would be the case were soap opera simply another broadcast genre.

To trace the influence of the daytime TV soap opera, *Her Stories* focuses on two primary axes of change over time. One is change in US broadcast network television as an economic and social institution, wherein soap opera can be seen as tracking the practices and fortunes of the system as a whole. The other is change in cultural constructions of gender and intersecting aspects of social identity, including race, class, and sexuality. Given the status of soap opera as a form associated with women, my focus is especially on femininity (albeit in juxtaposition to masculinity), a femininity that has

often been imagined by TV creators as white, middle-class, and heteronormative, but which gets regularly complicated and even fractured in the convolutions of soap storytelling and the investments of soap viewers. Both of these axes of change have received their own historical and theoretical treatment, independently and intertwined, as in certain works of broadcast history and television theory that have pointed to the feminized positioning of television in relation to the domestic sphere and within the culture at large.[21] *Her Stories* furthers such work and speaks to our television heritage more broadly, combining analyses of the social construction of femininity and of American network television in and through the daytime TV soap opera, a form imagined as speaking to and about women, and persisting across US television history.

Instead of taking soap opera's feminized status at face value, my approach seeks to use soap opera to "examine gender concretely and in context, and to consider it a historical phenomenon, produced, reproduced, and transformed in different situations and over time."[22] As Joan Scott writes of feminist history more generally, I am approaching soap opera as "a site of the production of gender knowledge," of how our culture has come to know and understand meanings and experiences of gender.[23] As such, I am following a tradition in feminist media and cultural studies of understanding media forms as participants in broader social constructions of identity categories, not to assert a direct or exclusive causal chain between popular culture and society, or to document the lived histories of women as universal or even knowable, but to offer insights into a question posed by Lynn Spigel of "how mass culture reacts to (as well as contributes to) the social and historical construction of femininity."[24]

Yet the history of soap opera cannot be restricted to the sphere of "women's history" or even a history of gender or gendered cultural forms. For the history of soap opera does not occur in a gendered ghetto. Rather, it is central to the history of American television in its workings as a commercial, cultural, and aesthetic force. Rethinking American television history through the history of soap opera shifts our perspective so that this gendered form is not an afterthought but rather a central player in a history we thought we knew. *Her Stories* is not an appended "her-story" running behind the main "his-story" of American television; it *is* American television history, a lens through which to see the economic, creative, technological, social, and experiential path of television across seventy years that exposes its gendered structure.[25] The history of the US daytime TV soap opera is a history of a media form, but it is also a history of a prominent cultural construction of

femininity and its imbrication within the institutional and artistic evolution of the primary mass medium in American society for nearly three-quarters of a century.

The Prehistory of the US TV Soap

Her Stories explores the many ways in which the daytime TV soap opera has been a crucial participant in the social construction of gendered identity as imagined by the American TV industry and its personnel, as well as in the development and evolution of television as both a business and a means of audiovisual storytelling. But soap opera is not native to television, nor are the serialized stories of the soaps their sole invention. Narratives that continue from installment to installment have been part of Western culture since at least the nineteenth century. As Jennifer Hayward notes, since that time, "Producers have relied on the serial form to consolidate and hold a mass audience," whether in mass-produced fiction, newspaper comic strips, early filmed adventure tales, or scripted narratives of radio and TV.[26]

The soap opera as we know it was a product of the system of network radio broadcasting launched in the 1920s, its name derisively intended to juxtapose the banal goods sold by its sponsor-owners with the melodramatic intensity associated with an elite performing art. As the number of these fifteen-minute daily dramas grew, by the early 1940s, "The soap opera form constituted 90 percent of all sponsored network radio programming broadcast during the daylight hours."[27] Daytime serials were substantial moneymakers for the networks and for the ad agencies that produced them, and they proved valuable sales tools for their sponsors. In 1945, the daytime serials brought in to NBC and CBS $30 million in time charges, about 22 percent of these networks' total revenue and, due to their low production costs, about 15 percent of the gross of all network broadcasting.[28] Ad agencies like Blackett-Sample-Hummert, home base of the Frank and Anne Hummert radio serial empire, established themselves as major industry players with their serials' "hard-sell" approach.[29] Manufacturers of household goods—laundry and dish soaps, breakfast foods—found the serials an ideal advertising vehicle that helped them to achieve an oligopoly in their markets.[30]

In tandem with their commercial utility, the serials were also a significant cultural space for their women audiences, as radio historians have shown. More than a realm for considering the travails of domestic life, the serials connected the private sphere with the public, helping their audiences

to grapple with the world around them and their places as women within it, what Jason Loviglio calls "the public/private dichotomy in American social life."[31] As Michele Hilmes explains, "Daytime serials both addressed and helped to create an explicitly feminine subaltern counterpublic, reinforcing and acknowledging the differences between men's and women's lives within the hierarchy of American culture, and providing ways to envision changes, negotiations, and oppositions."[32] Radio serials were not raising radical challenges to the mainstream; rather, they were offering opportunities for listeners to imagine their lives, and the world around them, in ways that sometimes supported and sometimes opposed dominant expectations of thinking and living.

During World War II, the serials' attention to connections between public and private matters became all the more acute, as the US government asked serial creators to assist the war effort. As radio historians such as Gerd Horten, Kathy M. Newman, and Marilyn Lavin have detailed, daytime serials often took as their central subject matter women's duties in the working world and in the home, from exploring women's paid, wartime labor to valorizing domestic tasks such as cooking.[33] The serials' stance on such matters was the product of complex negotiation among the US government, serial sponsors, networks, agency-producers, writer-creators, and audiences, a mix of stakeholders that would grapple with one another across soap opera history.

Understanding just what audiences got from their serial listening was a preoccupation of the broadcasting industry and of commentators in the press, one bound up with anxieties about gendered hierarchies and social identities. As Allen's work documents, from the outset the daytime audience was constructed as "that which must be explained," as if the (male) executives of the broadcasting industry, the trade press that covered it, and the researchers studying radio could not fathom why someone would listen to serials.[34] In a host of studies initiated by the radio networks, by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and the Bureau of Applied Social Research he directed, and by many other researchers, from psychiatrists to anthropologists, the soap opera audience was singled out as distinct from the radio audience more generally, distinguished largely on the basis of gender and marked as aberrant. In the assumptions of many of the studies of soap listeners, and in the popular commentary that was built around them, the soap listener was viewed as "isolated from meaningful social intercourse, unequipped to deal with the 'real world,' and forever vulnerable to psychic manipulation."[35] Some cultural commentators and researchers tried to justify and explain the

appeal of serials from a more empathetic perspective, defending women's interest in them.[36] During the radio age and since, researchers and commentators have struggled to explain and understand the appeal of these daily dramas, in the process shaping ideas about femininity and domestic life.

The radio soap opera is a well-researched phenomenon, an object that media historians have examined in historically specific detail. But soap opera historiography dissipates with the transition to television, as if the radio age explains all we might want to know about soap opera by exploring its origins. There is a plethora of scholarship on the TV soap, but little of it conceives of it, or the social forces it engages, as contextually specific and variable, as having a history, as changing over time.[37] *Her Stories* begins with the radio-to-TV transition of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Integrating daytime soap opera into this history shifts our understanding of this early period of electronic media convergence. In the transition of soap opera can be found some of the earliest negotiations over the shape the new medium would take, the ways it would both continue and vary from the precedents set by radio. From there, the US daytime TV soap opera would embark upon its own history, one influenced by the radio serial but soon speaking more specifically to the economic and creative contexts of television, as well as to the continuing shifts in the construction of identities such as that of the housewife-viewer, a role that would change significantly over the second half of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first.

From the early 1960s through the middle 1980s, the daytime TV soap was a powerful force in the TV industry and in American culture. The number of soaps on air mushroomed to an all-time high of nineteen in the early 1970s, just as the broadcast networks were growing their profit margins at a rapid rate; by the early 1980s, daytime soaps were a popular sensation. A gradual drop-off in the ratings, profitability, and popularity of soap opera from the mid-1980s on matches the shrinking profile of broadcast network television more generally. In the twenty-first century, the cancellation of a number of soaps, including *Guiding Light*, which had originated in radio, left soap opera proper in a diminished state, even as the form had shaped much of television culture. *Her Stories* traces this "rise and fall" arc, but I seek to complicate that stock narrative by examining points of struggle or regression, as well as innovation and progress, in any given period. As befits its form, the story of the daytime TV soap opera does not have a definitive ending, even as the number of daytime TV soaps on the broadcast networks has shrunk to four as *Her Stories* necessarily concludes. *Her Stories* rethinks soap opera as a historically mutable phenomenon with determinative factors that

vary across time, from the strengths or weaknesses of broadcast network economics to the forces of change that have encouraged tentative efforts to represent subordinated social groups in new ways.

What Stories Does *Her Stories* Tell?

Much like the programs it examines, which span decades, *Her Stories* follows the TV soap across one half century and into the early decades of the next. This time span is unusually broad for the cultural histories of American television upon which my work is modeled. Such work, including my own previous research in US TV history, is often decade-bound, understanding the interplay of the economic forces, reception practices, and representational dynamics of television in historically specific detail, albeit focused on a particular trend or aspect of television rather than accounting for all of its multitudinous programs and production forces.[38] Some histories cross decades but select representative case studies of a given phenomenon to trace temporally.[39]

Her Stories strives to respect the same attention to contextual specificity that is practiced elsewhere in this scholarship, but to do so over a longer swath of time. By zeroing in on soap opera, and by focusing on its storytelling capacity especially around matters of social identity, I streamline my approach. But the long period of time I examine necessitates that I omit aspects of soap opera history, television history, and American cultural history, omissions that I hope will open up future inquiry rather than mark my analysis as incomplete. That said, my story traces three general periods of television history, each of which contains negotiations over soap opera's contribution to constructions of social identity and to changes in television itself.

The first period is that of the immediate post–World War II era, which for soap opera and its constructions of femininity and other aspects of identity begins in the late 1940s and carries through to the early 1960s. Chapters 1 and 2 explore this terrain by detailing the transition from radio to television in the business and production practices of soap creators, and in the convolutions of soap narratives. I include sponsors, networks, writers, production personnel, and on-screen talent within the broad category of soap creators, and I explore their institutional and individual practices, as well as the images, sounds, and stories they generated. Chapter 1 asserts that the efforts of these institutions and individuals were central to shaping the business,

production, and aesthetic practices of television itself. In establishing the economic and creative structures that would make the TV soap possible, these creators molded the contours of the new medium. Their work borrowed heavily from radio but also offered substantial new opportunities. Indeed, this is a period of medium differentiation, of distinguishing television from radio (and, at times, from the stage and feature film) in ways both practical and ideological. The gradual arrival of the daily daytime soap in TV exemplified these processes. Chapter 2 examines the constructions of gender embedded in the era of the new TV soap, in particular the ways soap opera offered a therapeutic salve to the gendered stresses of postwar American life. Soap opera was at the center of a subtle shift across this period in the vision of the woman viewer-consumer held by the broadcasting and consumer goods industries, one that gradually came to see daytime television as a vehicle of psychological help rather than a distraction from the necessary business of homemaking. So too were the soaps' on-screen characters struggling to achieve happiness and well-being within the "containment culture" of the postwar United States.[40] In keeping with the broader preoccupation with family melodrama across film and television of this era, the daytime soaps upheld ideals of white patriarchal heteronormativity.[41] But the soaps' narrative necessity for ongoing conflict exposed the dissatisfactions of these ideals for their characters, representing mental and emotional stability as elusive goals and thereby challenging the soaps' ability to uphold a consistent ideological stance.

Chapters 3 through 5 traverse the second period of soap opera history, corresponding to the classic network era of American television from the middle 1960s through the late 1980s. This period was the height of the soaps' economic and cultural power. Indeed, in chapter 3 I argue that soap opera was the foundation of the network era business model, that it epitomized and literally upheld the structures of production, distribution, and advertiser funding that earned the networks immense profits and power. At the same time, over this period the soaps led television in grappling with social issues, including race relations and reproductive politics. Daytime drama "turned to relevance" before most of TV, and sometimes did so in subtly progressive ways, advocating for the intersectionality of black women's identity or for women's autonomy over their own bodies. Chapter 4 examines the form's stories of social change, analyzing its strategic balancing of the evolving culture and daytime TV's historic adherence to a narrow vision of its audience as confined to a white, middle-class, reproductive femininity. I argue that a new generation of creators shaped soap opera into

a liberal-leaning cultural forum on the issues of the day, especially those related to changing expectations of gender and (hetero)sexuality. In chapter 5, I detail the peak of soap opera's economic and cultural power, within which were contained seeds of its decline. In the tales of supercouple romance perfected by the early 1980s were the soaps' most resonant pleasures and long-standing limitations. The mass popularity of the form took great advantage of the structures of the network system and luxuriated in the appeals of story worlds that admitted just enough cultural change to feel "of the moment," but both network structure and supercouple fairy tale would prove to be fleeting fantasies.

The third period in the history of American TV soap opera is the focus of chapters 6 through 8. Often labeled the postnetwork or convergence era, the span from the late 1980s through the 2010s is one of declining fortunes for the broadcast networks and also for the daytime dramas that had been so central to network profitability. Chapter 6 analyzes these struggles, pointing to failures of the network system that threatened the status of soaps, and to the ways that the network soap business responded, from aesthetic experimentation to an embrace of the internet as a site of promotion and distribution. At the center of the soaps' slow decline was a changing construction of their audience, wherein the feminized viewership that had once made soaps a valuable property now made them economically and culturally suspect. Chapter 7 examines the same period but instead focuses on the stories and characters of the soaps across these decades. I understand this era as one of engagement with the soaps' own past, wherein the programs sought to reclaim their popular status by reimagining narrative fixtures such as the supercouple and the family. Some of this reimagining progressively confronted constructions of race and sexuality as well as gender, admitting to a new degree nonwhite and nonstraight characters. Other of these narrative paths rejected rather than reimagined the soap past, at times pushing daytime drama in directions that disengaged the very audiences the industry was desperate to retain and attract, doing their own kind of harm to the soaps' future.

Chapter 8 brings this period of decline up to the present of this writing. By the late 2000s the soap business was faced with widespread cancellations of long-running programs and severe austerity measures for those that remained. This chapter charts this reimagined industry but also tracks the emergent sphere of "web soaps" as a return of sorts to soap opera's modest beginnings, albeit now directed at a diverse, fragmented set of audiences rather than an assumed-universal mass. The reimagined soap opera, whether a

product of the independent web or of the shrunken broadcast sphere, necessarily grapples with its own past as its story continues. In the end, the long view *Her Stories* offers makes clear the fluidity of soap opera, whose borders have become less and less fixed over time and whose appeal was never as limited to the feminized, white, middle-class homemaker as both the TV industry and American culture had assumed.

These chapters alternate between an orientation around developments in soap opera production, both economic and creative, and more elaborated attention to the stories the soaps told. These two dimensions of the TV soap—the forces shaping the texts and the meanings of what appears on-screen—are intimately intertwined, but I emphasize particular developments in different chapters to explore each in depth. As a result, I dwell in and retread various periods for more than one chapter in order to cover the mutually determining elements of industry, text, audience, and social context within as well as across periods. In each of the three eras I explore, I examine the differing power of these determining forces, helping us to see the ways that such influences as network hegemony or movements for social change have shaped not only soap opera but also American television more broadly, and the varying ways that television may tell us who we are, and what we want.

While *Her Stories* tracks the daytime soap opera and uses it to think through both American TV history and the mutability of categories (of media and of social identities), the richness of my narrative may best be found in the details, in the ways that creators experimented with particular production techniques, or built audience sympathy over months of scenes, as well as in the means that network executives used to exercise new degrees of control over budget and story, or that fans employed to follow their shows amid days of work or school. Much as in soap narratives themselves, what happens *to* the daytime TV soap, its slow-moving plot, is not nearly as surprising or enlightening as *how* it happens. Ratings rise and fall, budgets expand and contract, stories push open boundaries of social change only to reproduce problematic assumptions. Yet the details of how such forces come and go, of how they interact to shape the resulting programs or develop in dialogue with an audience in search of particular pleasures, can be revelatory. They help us to understand the interactions of social and political forces with the cultural sphere of TV storytelling, to see with fresh eyes the ways that the daytime drama industry has led or sustained the network TV business, to grapple anew with how the entertainment we consume works to affirm or deny our identities and values.

How Have I Researched *Her Stories*?

Despite its culturally denigrated status, the US daytime TV soap opera has a remarkably robust archive. Manuscript collections of the correspondences and memoranda of soap creators, sponsors, and networks, as well as scripts and story projections, fan-targeted books and memoirs, episodes and promotions preserved in official and user-generated collections, the soap press and blogs, fan-built websites—there is a rich array of resources for understanding the history of the daytime TV soap. Yet even this volume of material cannot begin to match the mountains of story, production practice, economic exchange, and everyday experience that have accrued around so many daily-produced serials across seventy years of TV history. Thus, the resources I draw upon have shaped my claims in multiple ways. For example, some of my analyses of narratives and representations rely on story summaries or scripts because there are no extant episodes I can examine. All daytime dramas were broadcast live until the early 1960s, some continuing their live feeds into the early 1970s. There are select kinescoped episodes from the era of live broadcasting available in conventional archives and in user-generated websites, and I have seen all that I know of, but these represent a mere fraction of the episodes aired in the live era.

My archive is much broader than soap episodes alone, but the particularities of the video preservation of soap opera, or lack thereof, are instructive for television historiography writ large. Even once soap episodes were recorded to videotape, they were not always preserved by their producer-owners or their networks; indeed, tape erasure schedules were typical of soap production across the 1960s and 1970s. Although conventional archives preserved select episodes from this period, the outdated formats on which they were recorded make them unwatchable in the present. Unlike other kinds of TV content, commercially available episode runs of soaps are very limited; I have viewed all that do exist.[42] The era of home videotaping marks an important shift, as fan-collectors have preserved much of soap history from the 1980s on. Indeed, my analysis is rooted in part in my own personal archive, episodes I have saved to videotape, DVD, or digital format over decades. While some fan collections have been shared online, fan-archivists have seen too many episodes removed for copyright violations to rely on such methods alone, instead exchanging private holdings of full episodes and/or story line or character edits through off-line networks. Still other fan collections remain unshared, and the volume of content is such that no

one could watch every episode of every soap from the home-taping era on, which now spans four decades.

As a result, there are many stories, characters, programs, and individuals that do not appear in *Her Stories*. My personal history as a *General Hospital* viewer has surely shaped my insights—I simply know this soap better than any other, thanks not only to my viewing history but also to my past observational research into its production and to my access to multiple weeks of episodes across the 1960s in the UCLA Film and Television Archive.[43] The differences between soaps are quite significant for those familiar with them, and I am aware of the ways that *GH* is and is not a typical case at different moments in its history. As I have watched episodes (or even read sequences of outlines or scripts) for other soaps in my research, I have found myself intensely invested in their stories, as well.[44] Even as I was watching the 2000s and 2010s *GH* as it aired, often I found myself caring much more about the characters of the 1970s *Ryan's Hope* (ABC, 1975–89) or *The Doctors*, which I was viewing at the same time. I am hardly an objective observer, but *Her Stories* encompasses more than the story of any one soap, or any one viewer, myself included. Indeed, one of its lessons is that the form is internally varied enough that no one soap could represent its history.

As a way of accounting for how my arguments and areas of focus have been shaped by the available archive, I have tried to indicate through citation whether I am referencing an episode I have watched or whether my point is based on a script or story summary. I have read multiple scripts or watched a long sequence of episodes (or scenes of particular story lines) for any examples I discuss in depth. However, except for cases of episodes that are preserved in official archives or are commercially available, I do not identify how I saw particular episodes, as I do not want to endanger the accessibility of the fan-generated archives, online and off, so crucial to my work and to lay preservation. If I cite a particular episode (rather than a script, outline, or other manuscript), I have watched it.

I have been careful to identify scenes and episodes and contextual circumstances by exact date, both as part of indicating how I have reached my conclusions—what happens in what order is important to seeing how representations change over time—and to emphasize that moments of soap opera have occurred not in some ephemeral anytime but under specific historical circumstances. Attributing such moments to particular dates is a means of giving them a history, of recognizing them as particular rather than universal, as mutable rather than essential, but also as connected to specific historical forces that shaped American life in 1954, or 1988. Yet the airdates I offer

are often dependent on sources vulnerable to the inaccuracies of memory and errors of documentation, whether those of official archives and institutions or of everyday viewers. My efforts at dating soap episodes, much like the rest of my conclusions, are products of inevitably flawed research and interpretation, although they are offered in good faith, with as much rigor as one might apply to such fleeting objects.

Her Stories historicizes the daytime TV soap opera, situating a feminized form at the center of American television history. For too long, our mainstream and even our scholarly conceptions of television history have been directed by the high-profile programming of prime time while the medium's longest-running scripted series have offered up daily episodes to a deeply invested audience. Operating under the radar has long worked to the advantage of the soaps and their viewers. Daytime's dramas have grappled with social change and offered thoughtful explorations of romantic and familial relationships to an extent rarely seen in evening schedules, with controversial subject matter airing to little notice, and thereby little upset, outside their regular audiences. There is much to be learned about the aesthetic and economic histories of American television by studying the path of daytime soap opera, and much to be explored in the history of television's participation in the social construction of femininity and other categories of identity in soap opera's fictional tales and in its position amid broader industry discourses about women viewers and consumers. The US daytime TV soap opera demonstrates that television narratives and feminized popular forms may at once pleasurably satisfy desires and needs and frustratingly fall short of progressive ideals. Across the continuing history of American broadcasting, the daytime soap opera has carried such promising, and precarious, possibility.

INTRODUCTION

1 Jane Marsh journal, June 28, 1973, author's personal collection. Marsh shared pages of her journal with me when I noticed her referencing it in her Twitter posts. I don't know Marsh personally, but she has shared details of her personal history and her history as a soap viewer with me as a researcher.
2 Tweet from @jam6242, Jan. 21, 2017.
3 Tweets from @jam6242, Mar. 29 and July 5, 2017.
4 Tweet from @jam6242, June 29, 2017.
5 For example, see tweet from @jam6242, Apr. 20, 2017.
6 Ruth Rosen, "Search for Yesterday," in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 42–67.
7 Christopher Schemering, *The Soap Opera Encyclopedia* (New York: Random House, 1985).
8 Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
9 Elana Levine, "Toward a Paradigm for Media Production Research: Behind the Scenes at *General Hospital*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (Mar. 2001): 66–82.
10 Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 13.
11 Allen, 4.
12 Allen, 61–62.
13 Allen, 4.
14 Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 161–82.
15 Charlotte Brunsdon, "*Crossroads*: Notes on Soap Opera," *Screen* 22, no. 4 (1981): 32–37; Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (London: Methuen, 1982); John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987).
16 The concept of the "male gaze" was developed in an influential 1975 essay by Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 58–69. Some feminist scholarship that considered soap opera in relation to work on melodrama and the women's film included Ellen Seiter, "Eco's TV Guide: The Soaps," *Tabloid* 5

(1981): 35–43; Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007). In 1984, *Screen* published two articles engaged with such questions: Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form, and Television Today," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 4–17; and Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera, and Theory," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 18–28.

17 Charlotte Brunsdon, *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 217.

18 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999); Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

19 Elana Levine, "Melodrama and Soap Opera," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (2018): 117–22.

20 Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 5–42; Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Linda Williams, *On the Wire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

21 For example, see Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Lynne Joyrich, *Reviewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Post-modern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

22 Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

23 Scott, 10.

24 Lynn Spigel, "Detours in the Search for Tomorrow: Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*," *Camera Obscura* 5, nos. 1–2 (1985): 228.

25 Scott notes that "her-story" is a central practice of women's history, but that it should be paired with a more critical engagement with the politics of existing histories in order to more fully rewrite history in ways that engage the "silent and often hidden operations of gender." Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 18–27.

26 Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 1–2.

27 Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 3.

28 "Soap Opera," *Fortune* 33 (Mar. 1946): 120.

29 Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 103–29.

30 In 1940, six manufacturers sponsored more than two-thirds of all the network radio soaps. Merrill Denison, "Soap Opera," *Harper's*, Apr. 1940, 499.

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

32 Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 172.

33 Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 159–64; Kathy M. Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935–1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 119–21; Marilyn Lavin, "Creating Consumers in the 1930s: Irna Phillips and the Radio Soap Opera," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 1 (June 1995): 86.

34 Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 18.

35 Allen, 25.

36 Herta Herzog, "What Do We Really Know about Daytime Serial Listeners?," in *Radio Research 1942–1943*, ed. P. F. Lazarsfeld and F. N. Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1944), 3–33.

37 I examine the reasons for these gaps in "The Rise and Fall of Soap Opera," in *The Blackwell Companion to the History of American Broadcasting*, ed. Aniko Bodroghkozy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 301–20.

38 Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). For other examples, see Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

39 For example, see Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for US Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

40 This is the label Elaine Tyler May uses to describe the culture of the post–World War II period, including its constraining expectations of bifurcated gender roles and the connection between such expectations and the anxieties of the Cold War. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

41 Nina Leibman characterizes this period of film and TV history in these terms. Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

42 I have watched all episodes of any soaps commercially available on VHS or DVD, rerun on now-defunct cable channel Soapnet, or currently rerunning, namely, *The Doctors* on Retro TV. The only daytime soap available in full on commercially distributed DVD is *Dark Shadows*. There are select episode runs of *The Bold and the Beautiful* available commercially and, in the 2000s, BVDM Distribution released select episodes of *Guiding Light* and *As the World Turns* on DVD. Earlier, a handful of special-episode collections of ABC's soaps and of *Guiding Light* were released on VHS.

43 Produced on videotape from its 1963 beginning, many of *GH*'s past episodes have been preserved. The UCLA Film and Television Archive has most episodes from 1963 to around 1970, although it lacks the resources to convert them all into

viewable formats. The existence of 1970s episodes is less clear; if ABC retained them, it has not made them publicly available.

44 Some of the longer or ongoing runs of individual soaps I have watched include contemporaneously viewing every episode of *General Hospital* since 1981, contemporaneous viewing of *Port Charles* for its first couple of years on air and subsequent viewing of several of its "books" from the early 2000s, all of *Dark Shadows*, all of *Ryan's Hope* from its 1975 debut through 1981, and about one year of *Another World* from 1990 and 1991. I continue to watch all episodes of *The Doctors* from late 1967 on, as aired on Retro TV. I discuss my methods of viewing some of this content in "Digital Tools for Television Historiography: Researching and Writing the History of US Daytime Soap Opera," in *The Arclight Guide to Media History and the Digital Humanities*, ed. Charles Acland and Eric Hoyt, 2016, http://projectarclight.org/book/.

CHAPTER 1. SERIALS IN TRANSITION

1 *Portia Faces Life* script, episode 1, Apr. 5, 1954, Kent, LAB. While not widely acknowledged as racially charged language at the time, Portia's reference to "scalping" demonstrates the presumed whiteness of soap characters and their audience.

2 Leonard Hole and Jini Boyd O'Connor, "Television," in *Radio and Television Writing, Revised and Enlarged*, ed. Max Wylie (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1950), 423.

3 William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.

4 Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 122–25.

5 Marsha Francis Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 3–4.

6 Jennifer Hyland Wang details the tensions between sponsors' use of daytime radio serials and the turn to TV in the postwar period. "'The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *The Radio Reader*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 343–66.

7 This broadcast aired on the Chicago CBS affiliate. Jim Cox, *The Daytime Serials of Television, 1946–1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 25.

8 Hal Cooper and Wes Kenney, interviews, Archive of American Television, http://www.emmytvlegends.org/. David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 151, discusses Kenney's history at DuMont.

9 "A Unique Twist to the Tele Soap Opera Given by Caples' Man Lewis," *Televisor*, Nov.–Dec. 1946, 33; "*Faraway Hill*," *Televisor*, Nov.–Dec. 1946, 29.

10 Spigel, *Make Room for TV*; Mary Jane Higby, *Tune in Tomorrow* (New York: Cowles, 1968), 205; Mona Bruns Thomas, *By Emily Possessed* (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 98–99; Cox, *The Daytime Serials of Television*, 27–28.