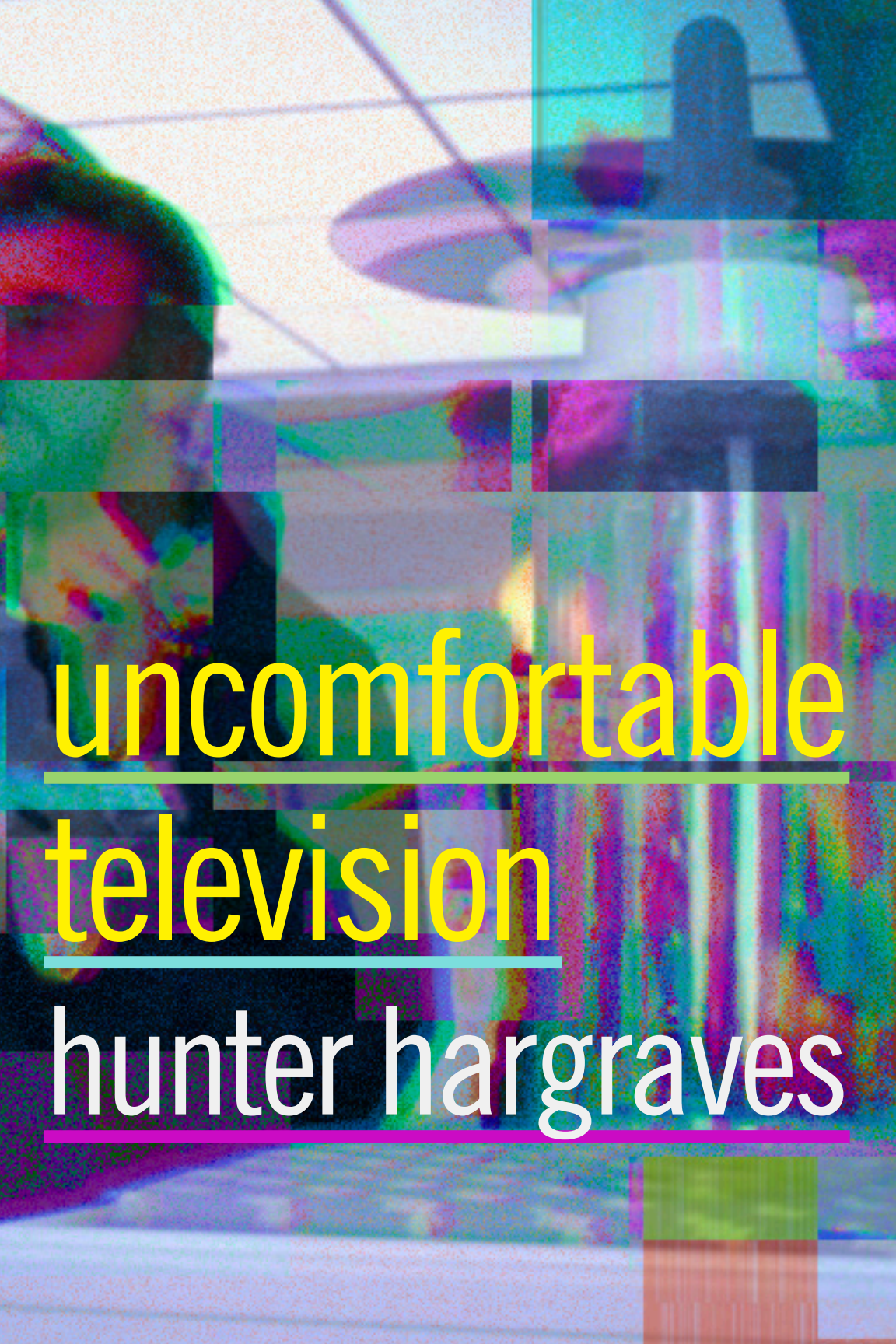
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For the Uglies

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introduction

TELEVISION *SCRIPTS*

This is a book about being made to feel uncomfortable by television. For most of the twentieth century, television—and especially American television, which structured the medium within a commercial context—pursued large audiences through typically family-friendly broadcasts, selling consumer comfort and narrative pleasure alongside broader cultural signifiers of postwar middle-class stability. Yet as television entered into the new millennium, it began to change on aesthetic, formal, generic, industrial, and technological grounds. While these changes to television have been extensively documented, little has been written about this television's affective texture: how these changes elicited different and often discordant responses from its spectators. *Uncomfortable Television* examines what I call postmillennial American television: television from roughly the early and mid-2000s until the mid-to-late 2010s, a period in which scenes and relations of discomfort became widely introduced into the spectatorial lexicon. Postmillennial television acculturated audiences to embrace discomfort in tandem with other changes to the medium, just as those same audiences were being asked to conform to the labors, rhythms, and social structures of late capitalism. It did so by marrying these changes in TV form, genre, industry, and technology to key affects of discomfort. Television thus began to normalize discomfort during this time as a strategy of governmentality, Michel Foucault's term for the way that the state governs and manages populations at a distance through various social institutions. By focusing on the changes that made postmillennial television a comparatively more exciting medium than what came before it, audiences learned how to transform feelings of discomfort into feelings of pleasure, a skill necessary to adjust fully into the systems of economic precarity and cultural instability brought on by the instantiation of neoliberalism into daily life.

Postmillennial television is a flexible category, referring to different viewing practices, technologies, genres, and narrative forms of television, all of which affect its content. Under this book's categorization, not all popular television programs broadcast from the 2000s to the early 2010s qualify as

postmillennial television, insofar as many of that time span's most-watched series (for example, *Friends* and *ER*) had already been on the air for years. While the category is defined relationally to the television that came before it, the changes to TV addressed in this book include the following: the explosion of reality programming and the impact it has had on production processes, labor, and celebrity; the increased serialization across many genres of programming, but particularly within dramatic programming produced by cable networks; the legitimation of television as an art form, which translated to higher production budgets and expanded aesthetic effects; the widespread growth in platforms and technologies of distribution, which include subscription video on-demand (SVOD) services on streaming platforms; the increase in narrative adaptation across other media forms and global programming; and the expansive practice of reflexive commentary and criticism on TV (through think pieces, social media, and fan cultures, among others).

These changes have resulted in a television first considered to be "post-network" and "post–public service"—a television, according to one early scholarly anthology periodizing these changes, "after TV."[1] But these changes also have had concrete effects on the tone and topical matter of programming; far from the sanitized, family-friendly fare of its past, the television of the early twenty-first century bombarded viewers with unlikeable protagonists, widespread profanity, depictions of graphic violence and explicit sex, and the exploitation of cultural minorities. To give a few examples of this bombardment, many of which I explore in greater detail in later chapters: Police procedurals began to depict sexual assaults against women and children as quotidian events in metropolitan cities. Cheaply produced reality programs began to profile ordinary individuals and families as they engaged in decidedly excessive hobbies and behaviors, such as accumulating so much stuff as to make domestic life untenable or becoming addicted to life-threatening substances. Original dramatic programs exemplary of television's new "golden age" began to chronicle the violent lifestyles of individuals in the drug trade and the Mafia as well as those of several serial killers and white supremacists.[2] Comedy, too, began to embrace new norms revolving around cringeworthy interactions between coworkers, friends, and potential romantic partners and around character tropes such as the irritating or mentally unstable millennial.

To introduce the contradictory feelings of pleasure and discomfort that come from postmillennial television's rewriting of televisual conventions, consider two television episodes about masturbation. The episode "Come On, God," from the second season of the acclaimed comedy series *Louie* (FX, 2010–2015), opens on the televisual, specifically, the Fox News late-night program

I.1 Louie's appearance on Fox News late-night program *Red Eye with Greg Gutfeld*. *Louie*, "Come On, God," Season 2, Episode 8.

Red Eye with Greg Gutfeld, in which the episode's topic is masturbation.[3] Attacking the art of self-pleasure is Ellen Farber (Liz Holtan), an attractive Christian who believes that masturbation deprives young people of purity and grace. Defending masturbation is Ellen's foil, Louie (Louis C.K.), introduced by Gutfeld as "a man who is well-known for being a prolific masturbator, who even brags about it." In a roughly six-minute-long segment, Ellen asks Louie if he has ever attempted to stop masturbating (he responds negatively), and Louie asks Ellen if she has ever been married (she responds negatively). Ellen volleys next, asking Louie, "Have you ever been happy? Are you happy now?" As the camera zooms in on C.K., it emphasizes his discomfort, before alternating between shots of Gutfeld and of the full panel, all in an awkward silence.

Later, Louie masturbates, though not to completion, to a fantasy involving a woman with whom he shared an elevator. His fantasy devolves into a farcical attempt to place a literal "bag of dicks" into the object of his desire. He then attends one of Ellen's purity seminars, and afterward the two walk down the street while processing their respective relationships to sex. Louie reveals that during his first experience reaching orgasm with a woman, he farted, and this fateful act formed "the basis of [his] whole life sexually . . . just shame and cum and farts." A rapport established, Ellen invites Louie back to her hotel room for a drink, during which he attempts to kiss her. Assertively rejecting Louie's advances, Ellen voices her own desire for monogamous Christian love, in which both partners experience sex for the first time without shame or fear. Aroused by such a fantasy yet also entirely alienated from it, Louie

rushes to her hotel room's bathroom, furiously masturbating and climaxing with a long, drawn-out fart. The episode concludes with Louie at home, masturbating to digital stock images of *M*A*S*H* actress Loretta Swit until a BBC radio broadcast graphically describing Somalian genocide interrupts him, thwarting his attempts to orgasm.

In the episode, masturbation functions as an ontological characteristic of maleness: in Louie's stand-up routines that punctuate the narrative action, he self-deprecatingly argues that all (straight) men masturbate in order to deal with their presumably much worse perversions. The episode links masturbation visually and narratively to desperation, nihilism, and misogyny symptomatic of a perceived loss of White masculinity in a changing world. This treatment of masturbation resonates with twenty-first-century heteropessimism—evocatively defined by Asa Seresin as a set of performative disidentifications with heterosexuality that ultimately do not abandon heteropatriarchal desires, structures, and affects altogether—as an immutable and anesthetic condition.[4] Louie's attitudes toward masturbation stem, he suspects, from a disastrous high school hand job, and he subsequently reduces this root expression of male sexuality to affective responses of dissociation (shame) and markers of male physical and olfactory virility (cum and farts). "Come On, God" thus frames masturbation in line with Victorian scientific literature connecting the act to degeneracy and delinquency. While Louie justifies the act on *Red Eye* by saying, "It keeps me sane—I'm a good citizen, I'm a good father, I recycle, and I masturbate," the episode's use of awkward silences, compressed space, and narrative interruptions undermine this defense, as even Louie appears confused and chagrined by how exploitative his masturbatory fantasies have become and by how quickly he nonetheless embraces them. The episode represents a marked departure from scholarly attempts to link masturbation to the individual development of the modern subject, such as in Eve Sedgwick's description of the act as a "reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection."[5] The episode instead renders Louie's beliefs on masturbation as well as his constant desire to masturbate as deeply abject, always already inscribed by his failure to respect women fully. While the camera's frame is cropped carefully so as not to show genitalia, the episode presents masturbation in exhibitionistic and excessive terms, as in the exaggerated pouts of the woman in the elevator asking Louie to penetrate her with a "bag of dicks," or in the soft camera movements meant to represent the act itself. Rob King has argued that "in *Louie*, absurdist fantasy is the boomerang" in opposition to the lure of abjection, one

of many dialectics central to the auteur's visual and narrative style.[6] For Louie, masturbation's explicitness (its permanence as a fact of male heterosexuality) as well as its mediation (its dependence on controlling women as objects of desire) advance the heteropessimistic thesis that all male fantasies must compulsively mistreat women.

Of course, this argument was corroborated by C.K.'s own predatory behavior. In November 2017, the *New York Times* published accusations of his sexual misconduct made by five women: C.K. masturbated in front of two women after a late-night show at the US Comedy Arts Festival; he masturbated during a phone call with another woman; and he asked another woman permission to masturbate in front of her.[7] The following day in a statement to the press, C.K. confirmed these accounts, and he quickly became one of the television industry's highest-profile casualties among that year's #MeToo scandals: his film *I Love You, Daddy*, then nearly ready for distribution, was canned, and both FX networks and Netflix cut all ties to him.[8]

Now contrast *Louie*'s commentary on masturbation with one that aired nearly twenty-two years earlier, the 1992 episode "The Contest," from the NBC comedy series *Seinfeld* (1989–1998). "The Contest" presents masturbation through its absence: network prohibitions prevented the word from being uttered in prime time, and thus the episode relies on euphemisms for comedic effect.[9] The plot revolves around a bet to see which of the series' four protagonists can go the longest without masturbating; importantly, the temptations each face in this challenge—a neighbor who walks around her apartment naked, an attractive nurse giving a patient a sponge bath, John F. Kennedy Jr.—are shown in silhouette or out-of-frame entirely. Masturbation is still a constant, a release required to maintain sanity, but neither *Seinfeld*'s characters nor its audience are exposed to the subject and object of masturbatory desire, which would force a confrontation with that desire's potential to offend audiences. In fact, most critics and fans view "The Contest" as completely *inoffensive*, insofar as network censorship facilitated a comedic expression of sexual desire that was light-hearted, with the characters more angry about losing money than about their relationship to self-pleasure.[10] Both *Seinfeld* and *Louie* feature straight, White male comedians (Jerry Seinfeld and C.K., respectively) who play somewhat fictionalized versions of themselves, like many noted TV comedians before them, and who integrate their stand-up routines into the structure of each episode. Both series have also been recognized for their writing within the logics of quality afforded to episodic comedy; "The Contest" earned *Seinfeld* cocreator Larry David the Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series, for example,

while C.K. was nominated for the same award during each year of *Louie*'s five-season run (winning twice). How, then, to explain the stark differences between these representations of masturbation, an act that—despite its habitual omnipresence—remained a rarity within the narratives of prime-time television for most of the medium's history?[11]

The surface-level differences between *Seinfeld* and *Louie*—network versus cable, multicamera versus single camera, episodic resolution versus narrative complexity—have been extensively documented in television criticism and scholarship. If *Seinfeld* represents one era of TV genre, *Louie* represents its next instantiation: serialized narratives that test formerly accepted boundaries of episode and season length. *Louie*'s episodes largely consist of vignettes shot handheld in cinema verité style, with camera angles in shot–reverse shot sequences slightly out of proportion, mapping imperfect lines of sight onto its characters. In their attempt at selecting the "greatest American shows of all time," critics Alan Sepinwall and Matt Zoller Seitz find *Louie*'s "revolutionary" formal innovation to be its legacy, asserting that the series "translated the thought processes of stand-up comedy into cinematic terms."[12] And *Louie* fits easily into FX's stable of adult-oriented and provocative programming; as critic Tim Goodman writes (in unapologetically masculinist prose): "Series on FX have balls, no question about it. They are aggro, not Zen."[13] Yet these aforementioned differences fail to account fully for this shift in tone. In hindsight, C.K. may have been attempting to confess to his own perversions through *Louie*, cloaking his collapse of the space between representation and reality through rough, amateur aesthetic techniques (a shallow depth of field, mostly handheld camera work, and little lighting) and loosely bound narrative form.[14] Functioning as a kind of script for actual episodes of misconduct, *Louie* communicates specific identity truths to its audience: that men are not capable of enacting romantic gestures toward women without also sexually demeaning them. Yet this script was rarely recognized as such by cultural critics and scholars, with *Louie*'s auteur-driven and formally innovative brand encouraging audiences to disinvest in the possibility that C.K. himself could be a sexual predator. The revelations of his misconduct force questions about how audiences should respond to episodes such as "Come On, God": Was C.K. trolling his audience all along, daring them to suspend their disbelief in his own capacity to assault women? How were audiences trained to disavow and, indeed, take pleasure from, the consequences of such a breakdown between representation and reality? Why is what is beloved about C.K.—his significance to the evolution of early twenty-first-century television comedy—also what makes him dangerous, irresponsible, and ultimately uncomfortable?

Sitting beside a TV "Gone Too Far"

As a historiography of television's formal relationship to pleasure, *Uncomfortable Television* describes a script for how audiences reconceptualize the boundaries of pleasure and discomfort, drawing from a number of schools of thought: television history and theory; feminist, anti-racist, and queer theories of affect; and cultural, political, and economic periodizations of late capitalism. This book places these bodies of knowledge *beside* each other, bearing witness to their many collisions while tracing the affective residue that subsequently lingers. The emphasis on the preposition is intentional, as the notion of the *beside* rejects binary critique, offering instead a critical practice that affirms instability, promiscuity, mobility, contingency, and circulation. Eve Sedgwick uses the term to describe a perceptual lens that allows us to think in terms of nondualistic modes of critique; she maintains that "the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos."[15]

I find the term particularly rich for the study of television, a medium that historically defined spectatorship through configurations of domestic space. This book summons certain figures that affectively appear beside spectators and who in turn animate affective reactions within audiences—irritated millennials, addicts, and the urban poor, among others—who help them make sense of the present. As a medium of popular culture, television functions as one of the ideological state apparatuses famously outlined by Louis Althusser that interpellates individuals as constituted subjects. As Richard Dienst has observed of Althusser's canonical essay on ideology, however, ideology does not necessarily hail the subject in place but rather operates within a communicative context.[16] Even though television has historically replicated the status quo, buttressing key institutions such as the family and the nation, the "short circuit between the singular and the general" created by television allows for possibilities of rupture, and thus the medium has also been positioned as committed to incrementalism, often alluding to the disruptive forces of social change while concurrently containing those disruptions.[17] Television's ability to thrill from the safety of the domestic home implies that audiences are interpellated "at a distance" (as the *tele-* in television suggests), drawing attention to the significance of the affective conditions of interpellation. When these figures of discomfort trigger affective dispossessions—minor acknowledgments of discomfort—within the viewer, television provides viewers with pathways of rationalization and disavowal as a strategy of containment. That these

figures represent perverse but necessary forms of neoliberal subjectivity testifies to Jodi Dean's (here riffing off Slavoj Žižek's) framing of communicative capitalism as "characterized by the prevalence of the superego injunction to enjoy."[18] In describing both how new cultural forms and practices articulated through discomfort emerged around the millennium as television's response to late capitalism, and how audiences willingly embraced discomfort as a way to gain pleasure from (and, at times, resist) these cultural logics, this book employs discomfort as a reparative viewing practice.[19] Because television is a medium fundamentally of the present, analyzing the moments of discomfort that regularly punctuate postmillennial television allow us to view better how television has disseminated new regulatory norms regarding American cultural, economic, and political life.

Uncomfortable Television turns to affect as necessary to make sense of this changed relationship to pleasure. As I explore in the next chapter, the renewed interest in affect across the humanities and social sciences resonates with the ascendancy of neoliberal culture. I thus consistently problematize distinctions between the affective and the ideological throughout this book, believing both analytical modes necessary for making sense of television, the dominant entertainment medium of late capitalism. Following the work of scholars like Amy Villarejo and Sara Ahmed, this is a rather ethereally *queer* book: queer not only in that it demonstrates the entanglement of political-economic, aesthetic, technological, and formal concerns, but queer in that it thinks through the rather queer feelings experienced by spectators who are confronted with provocative material on their screens.[20] Indeed, a certain structural fluidity undergirds many of the terms and concepts central to this book. *Discomfort*, for example, manifests as disgust, perversion, addiction, uncanniness, disidentification, realism, and irritation. *Television* includes both broadcast programs as well as those found on streaming platforms and transformative works created by fans disseminated online. As free-floating, *affect* itself can encompass a range of embodied responses. And *representation* can refer both to processes of spectatorial identification (watching people who purport to "represent" you demographically or visually) as well as to the acknowledged staging of real-life situations ubiquitous to television programming. One of my goals in this book is to trace the promiscuous encounters between and beside all these terms, insisting on their promiscuity because of the affective flexibility demanded by neoliberal culture.

The clash between affect (as presubjective or individual) and ideology (as institutional or social) makes the act of identifying and categorizing uncomfortable television difficult. Who determines, for example, what counts

as uncomfortable, and for which audiences? In a seminal text of audience-reception theory, "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall advanced a set of three possible ways that readers make meaning from texts: preferred readings (in which readers receive the dominant ideology of the status quo reflected in the text and by its creators), negotiated readings (in which readers may modify the preferred reading based on their own positions or experiences), and oppositional readings (in which the reader's social position places them in direct conflict with the preferred reading, and thus they reject it).[21] To find a text uncomfortable or disturbing may be a privileged reaction based on its position within this schema, in part because Hall assumes that social identities and experiences are key determinants in how audiences affectively respond to and make meaning from texts. This could partially explain, in the example of *Louie*, why male television critics generally lauded *Louie*'s gender politics as "complex" and "complicated" without attempting to derive many moral lessons from it, whereas female television critics consistently expressed troubling and conflicted feelings about *Louie*'s toxic masculinity well before the revelations about C.K.'s sexual misconduct surfaced.[22] These reactions are often influenced by *Louie*'s use of various mirroring and framing devices: episodes in the program's early seasons were often framed by stand-up, mirroring two smaller stories against one another. Such formal techniques allow for more contested readings to emerge, especially since Louie, in many of his stand-up routines, makes broad generalizations about the behavioral patterns of straight men and women. While the encounters with discomfort described in this book are not thought of as universal, they are informed by the representational practices of television and its attendant discursive apparatuses (such as television criticism or fan cultures). In many instances, like in *Louie*, metacomedic gags are deployed to provoke a confrontation with uncomfortable or offensive material; in this sense, *Louie* is no different from other television programs that self-referentially and mockingly announce their flaws—Louie's flaws, this argument goes, are simply more abject or perverse.

Even television critics have metatextually acknowledged similar provocations. One example is a March 2005 issue of *Time* that posed the question "Has TV Gone Too Far?" while announcing on its cover, "What's really at stake in the red-hot indecency war." The accompanying cover story by James Poniewozik takes up this question through an investigation into the Parents Television Council's (PTC) anti-indecency campaign, which was organized in the mid-2000s around instances of nudity and sexual content, profanity, and violence.[23] Poniewozik provides no close readings of the offensive material in question, framing his approach to indecency solely through the reactions of

activist viewers, itself a selective arrangement organizing spectatorship around discomfort that includes both political conservatives (on the grounds of decency) and liberals (on the grounds of speech). A 2005 episode of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000–2015) about infantilism is the most fleshed out example of indecency within the story, and Poniewozik focuses more on the PTC's highlighting of the episode's popularity (30.72 million household viewers) than on describing the plot, which he does in a single sentence. He notes how *CSI* opens up a set of questions about the conjunction of the popular and the perverse: "It is probably the most gruesome, explicit drama on broadcast TV—and it is the single most popular. Did all those people tune in by accident? When the greatest plurality of viewers chooses to watch a show they know to be graphic, can that show be beyond the pale? Or does [the PTC] simply not like where the pale is nowadays?" While I will return to this particular episode of *CSI* (and others like it) in a later chapter, it is important to note that the scope of his article precludes Poniewozik from considering *CSI*'s form (episodic procedural) or its primary narrative and aesthetic devices (omniscient forensic technologies). The importance he places on ratings as a barometer for the tolerance of content suggests a faith in a free-market approach to viewing pleasure, one reinforced by the industry: if viewers are truly offended by such content, he implies, they would change the channel.

Time magazine's cover image affirms this free-market logic: actress Teri Hatcher, the star of *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–2012), lies down on a bed, holding a remote control in her right hand and placing her left hand over her mouth in feigned shock. Light emanating from the television set illuminates Hatcher's face, positioning her as the spectator of TV "gone too far," with such a linguistic construction implying an acceptable amount of indecency.[24] Her mouth is slightly puckered in a vaguely sexual way, and she wears a night-robe that gestures both to television's private and domestic nature—it is not uncommon to find television in a bedroom—and to Hatcher's character in *Desperate Housewives*, Susan Mayer, who often found herself in steamy romances with the men of Wisteria Lane. Far from innocent, her exaggerated eyebrows make her appear to revel in her complicit position as both the instigator and recipient of indecency (tellingly, some reviews of *Desperate Housewives* found her guilty of overacting); she thus blurs the boundaries between representation and reality not unlike C.K., whose character Louie is similarly grossed out by what television depicts. Readers of *Time* can be inferred to share the same position as the TV set, a TV "gone too far"; but even indecent television, the cover implies, produces a viewer savvy to the medium's theatricality and intertextuality. *Time* thus scripts its readers to find

I.2 Teri Hatcher on the cover of *Time*, March 28, 2005.

an intimate comfort with an "indecency" that is tied to television's artistic value.[25] In other words, the savvy TV audience knows quite well how "far" content has gone and finds that content acceptable and even exciting.

Televisual Neoliberalism at the Millennium

A television "gone too far" represents redefinitions of the medium's technological, aesthetic, generic, industrial, and formal aspects; yet within many studies of contemporary television these redefinitions are rarely linked to the larger cultural and economic changes brought on by neoliberalism and felt within American popular culture during this same time period. (Importantly, the subfield of reality television studies has consistently thought through the

genre's neoliberal shape, as I later describe.)[26] Late capitalism here refers to the shift from a period marked by an emphasis on post-Fordist modes of production and consumption to one marked by the fluidity of capital, the movement of multinational media conglomerates, and the rise of management discourse; or the historical difference between what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello frame as the second and third "spirits" of capitalism.[27] Driven by commercialization, privatization, and marketization, late capitalism—and, crucially, the television industry that late capitalism depends on in order to maintain its ideological hegemony—reshaped the dominant vector of consumption, changing it from one emphasizing the mass as a public to one emphasizing the individual as a unique, mobile, and diversified consumer. On television, this manifested through practices of narrowcasting, or targeting niche audiences through a menu of expanded cable channels and technologies such as DVRs and SVOD platforms that divorce the viewer from the live broadcasting schedule while giving them more options of series to watch. This fractured the once-dominant units of viewers such as the family into discrete and diffused audiences, resulting in broadcasting that now reflects, in the words of William Uricchio, "adaptive agent mediations of individual tastes."[28] It has also allowed for the expansion of the diegetic universe of a series and for the consolidation of authorship, as in when showrunners, directors, writers, and actors provide interviews and commentary across a series' paratexts. But this requires new logics of calculation to determine the new audience's individual tastes, and algorithms thus occupy an important space in organizing spectatorship and even the creative decisions behind production.[29]

Neoliberalism is generally used to describe an economic relationship between free markets, the state, and civil society. Historicizing neoliberalism is a difficult task, and one that is ultimately not my project here. Most accounts of neoliberalism place its ascendancy during the 1970s, starting from the implementation of free-market economic policy in Latin America to its de facto adoption as official state policy in the United States during the Reagan presidency.[30] Regardless, neoliberalism has been associated with a number of political, economic, and cultural discourses, namely an emphasis on individual rights, the privatization and deregulation of state assets (including the welfare state), and new global scales of production supervised by corporate conglomerates. These discourses are what interest me most in my study of a popular culture, which is partially indebted to neoliberal policy. Elizabeth Povinelli asserts that neoliberalism refers "not [to] an event, but [to] a set of uneven social struggles within the liberal diaspora."[31] Neoliberalism, we may say, takes as its project the promiscuity of late capitalism, allowing for a diffuse

set of political and cultural actors to indulge in its applicability. It may make sense, in fact, to characterize the cultural consequences of neoliberal state and economic policy more as a *turn* than as an *-ism*: a neoliberal turning toward and beside individuation, privatization, global markets, and customization that plays out across a range of cultural texts.

Framing these shifts as a neoliberal *turn* allows for a different reading of popular entertainment cultures: while neoliberalism as an economic system has been implemented on both domestic and international scales since at least the 1970s, the average American citizen did not then immediately turn toward—or turn away from—its cultural effects. This book contends that neoliberalism's effects on popular culture and on everyday American life began to be felt throughout the 1990s and normalized as embodied feelings throughout the 2000s. As Wendy Brown has argued, the 1970s and 1980s saw the institutionalizing of neoliberal policy throughout the Americas and Western Europe, but these policies were often brought on by "fiat and force." Yet by the 1990s, neoliberal policy started to be implemented "through specific techniques of governance, through best practices and legal tweaks . . . through 'soft power' drawing on consensus and buy-in, [rather] than through violence, dictatorial command, or even overt political platforms."[32] The West turned to neoliberalism with certain affection throughout the 1990s. Once the Cold War could be declared officially over, multinational corporations—including, importantly, those within the media industries—began to consolidate a "new world order" thanks to advances in telecommunications technologies. The sale of the "Big Three" networks (ABC to Disney, for $18.28 billion in 1996, and CBS to Viacom, for $34.9 billion in 1999) gave Disney and Viacom a wide variety of network and cable platforms with which to target tailored audiences. Disney, in fact, was frequently invoked as a prime symbol of the customized standardization of cultural experiences brought on by neoliberal policies, becoming a metonym for globalization during this time, alongside other brands such as Starbucks and McDonald's.

Neoliberalism can best be summarized as a formula of economization: it gestures toward the transformation of human capital, energy, and rationality into economic capital, energy, and rationality. These transformations have resulted in the proliferation of neoliberal discourses into schemas of representation (such as television programming) and their concomitant decoding apparatuses (such as television criticism and even its scholarship). While neoliberalism has, within the humanities, acquired a distinctively unpleasant stench—in part because of its odorous ability to overdetermine economic life—I situate this scholarship to expose the fascinating and pervasive breadth

of neoliberal critique. Because of television's wide reach and centralized artistic structure—somewhat challenged throughout the 2000s by the evolution of a participatory culture, as this book's third chapter examines—it is impossible to imagine many postmillennial TV programs that have been developed and executed outside of neoliberal schemas. While I am skeptical of considering neoliberalism as a synonym for the *popular* (insofar as it is signified by popular cultural texts or representative of populist expressions of political culture), television has always exploited its position as the dominant mass medium of the late twentieth century as an asset: it may not have been the most culturally valued or legitimated art form, but at least it was popular among the masses. If neoliberalism turned to governing through common economic sense at the turn of the millennium, television became the most accessible medium to enact its project of governmentality and financialization.

With its emphasis on new technologies of distribution and on corporate hegemony of such markets via the mergers of multinational corporations, neoliberalism thus has a specific relevance to and resonance with postmillennial television. In writing about Latin America (the laboratory for experiments in neoliberal economic policy in the 1970s), Jon Beasley-Murray explains this connection through comparative analysis: "Replacing the theatricality of traditional liberalism," he asserts, "populism is cinematic; neoliberalism is televisual."[33] What might this curious set of alignments indicate? On the surface, his claim accurately pairs popular forms of entertainment and leisure with the prevailing economic movements of the time. Yet Beasley-Murray frames these comparisons not within proper objects (*the* theater, *the* cinema, *the* television) but instead within modalities of being (theatrical, cinematic, televisual), gesturing away from the material technologies themselves and toward the spectatorial atmospheres they generate. His insistence on medium specificity is therefore provocative yet also misleading, since late capitalism uses many styles, forms, and modes of address to maximize profit potential, even as these communicative and representational codes contradict or come into tension with one another. As my fourth chapter argues at greater length, the discursive intermediality of quality television—describing it as "cinematic" or "literary"—is a symptom of neoliberal culture's logic of valuation, which is often a proxy for talking about (while also *not* talking about) racial schemas of white supremacy.

Yet despite these critiques, I find there is something seductive in the phrase "televisual neoliberalism," in part because it is suggestive of how the cultural effects of specific economic policies can be perceived by the "complex of formal tendencies that shape television works and their reception." If, for

Beasley-Murray, populism "is incarnated bodily," then televisual neoliberalism explains not only the way the protocols of late capitalism become integrated into television but also, and more importantly, the way that these ideologies require the contextual—that is to say, affective—framework of television's form, aesthetics, technology, and genre. Even if consumed in private or semiprivate spaces, television spectators perform their pleasure and discomfort through their bodies, registering complicity with and resistance to the status quo.[34]

Television Scholarship and the Question of Postmodernism

If neoliberal policies began to take political and economic shape in the 1980s, why did they not begin to appear prominently on American television until the millennium? Some of the aforementioned changes studied in this book have roots in the television of the 1980s and 1990s: the DVR as the genealogical inheritor to the VCR, or the expectation of what Jason Mittell has identified as complex narratives within prime-time drama as the proliferation of the same techniques employed by *Dallas* (and daytime soap operas before that).[35] It was in the 2000s, however, that what this book calls postmillennial television began to be recognized as something different and unique within American popular culture. In a decade retrospective of the aughts, critic Emily Nussbaum has argued that this was the decade in which television "became art." Her glowing tribute to contemporary television echoes a sentiment felt not just by her fellow critics but by many consumers of American popular culture. Television's position in the American cultural imaginary—that is to say, its status within a hierarchy of artistic and entertainment mediums—no longer yielded mere contempt (Nussbaum even cites former FCC chair Newton Minow's notorious "vast wasteland" speech of 1961 to this effect) but instead elicited near-universal acclaim. In her words:

> You could easily memorialize the aughts as the Decade of Reality TV, that wild baby genre conceived in some orgy of soap opera, documentary, game shows, and vaudeville—it was reality, after all, that upended the industry's economic model and rewrote the nature of fame. Or you could mark this as the era of the legal procedural, or the age of Hulu and DVRs and TWOP [the fan website *Television Without Pity*]. But for anyone who loves television, who adores it with the possessive and defensive eyes of a fan, this was most centrally and importantly the first decade when television became recognizable as art, great art: collectible and life-changing and transformative

> and lasting. As the sixties are to music and the seventies to movies, the aughts—which produced the best and worst shows in history—were to TV. It was a period of exhilarating craftsmanship and formal experimentation, accompanied by spurts of anxious grandiosity (for the first half of the decade, fans compared anything good to Dickens, Shakespeare, or Scorsese, because nothing so ambitious had existed in TV history).[36]

In their book *Legitimating Television*, Michael Newman and Elana Levine have critiqued Nussbaum for essentially writing "one long *auteurist* celebration" in which "great art" is equated with a single visionary who serves as the guarantor of high art. Thus, Nussbaum can compare the aughts to comparable decades in music and film, invoking Western canons of "ambitious" individual storytellers ("Dickens, Shakespeare, and Scorsese").[37] My goal in this book is to elaborate on Newman's and Levine's interpretation, contextualizing these discourses of taste and cultural value within the affective circuits of pleasure and discomfort surrounding TV spectatorship. What makes television "feel" like great art (or conversely, like bad art) is not solely a result of the success of a showrunner or *auteur* (or lack thereof); rather, it comes from an affective climate of "craftmanship" and "experimentation." This logic equates artistic value with the ability of *auteurs* to push the envelope with respect to formal and topical conventions. To recognize discomfort is thus to view a work of art.

So, what distinguishes the television of the millennium from that which came before it, the television of the 1980s and 1990s? 1980 represents a turning point in the medium's history, with the following decade's expansion of cable networks accelerating industry practices of courting market demographics through practices of narrowcasting. But the 1980s also saw the development of a new broadcasting network (Fox, in 1986), the widespread use of graphic and visual effects across all genres of television, and renewed interest in serialized storytelling—first through prime-time soaps, as well as the serialized arcs that governed romantic relationships in quality dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*, and sitcoms such as *Cheers*—that constituted a second golden age to some critics.

Analyses of this era of television initially circulated within the emergent institutionalization of television studies during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and these readings have shaped the discipline's understanding of its theoretical commitments to TV form, aesthetics, and representation. Much of this scholarship dissected the aesthetic codes, narrative logics, technological mirrorings, and modes of address of 1980s and early 1990s television, finding the television of that time to reflect a number of observations and

critiques popularized in the ascendancy of postmodern inquiry within the humanities.[38] In *Televisuality*, John Caldwell maps out a stylistic methodology invested in excessive or intentionally citational style; TV's new stylistic exhibitionism, he claims, "is not adequately posed nor fully explained by reference to postmodernism," yet he maintains that both theorists and practitioners (workers in the media industries most concerned with aesthetics) have a problematized faith in televisual images.[39] In *Re-viewing Reception*, Lynne Joyrich also acknowledges the spread of postmodern representational devices in the television of the 1980s and early 1990s, although she cautions that many of these devices have been central to the medium from its inception as a domestic technology targeting housewives. Her critique is thus directed as much toward postmodern theory for omitting gender as a central analytical category as it is toward television studies, and she provides a useful feminist counterpoint to that offered by Richard Dienst, who provides not so much a unified argument about the medium as a number of interrelated theoretical observations about postmodern television (as evidenced by the subtitle to his book *Still Life in Real Time*, "theory after television"). And, while Jane Feuer draws some connections between postmodernism's obsession with destructuralizing simulacra and the presidency of Ronald Reagan, her interests in *Seeing Through the Eighties* lie more in how 1980s television serves as a formal and representational vehicle for Reaganism and its many ideological contradictions. Taken together (as all these monographs were published between 1994 and 1996), these works proffer four assumptions about so-called postmodern television's position as both a symptom of and a potential site of resistance to capitalism, central to both the Reagan presidency and postmodern lines of flight.

First, Caldwell, Joyrich, Dienst, and Feuer all assume that understanding television requires excavating contradictions and approaches from multiple perspectives: Dienst instructs us to "engage in creative speculation, combining and recombining all kinds of images," while Joyrich parenthetically notes that "the very omnipresence and multiplicity of discourses on and about TV contribute to the portrayal of television as *the* diffuse and enveloping medium of this (and our) time."[40] Second, this leads these authors to read television's intertextuality and self-conscious repertoires of performance as central to its formal and representational politics. Caldwell's excitement for the winking and nodding TV set is clear in his alignment of television with spectacle, "conceived of as a *presentational attitude*, a display of knowing *exhibitionism*."[41] His description of the medium's self-image as a consumer technology of entertainment and pleasure (much like the brands associated with advertising

culture) fulfills Dienst's prescription that the televisual image functions as a "transformation in the capacities of capitalism through a new production of time."[42] Both Caldwell and Dienst argue that the value of televisual images lies in their persistence across television's cluttered and often ephemeral flow, a formal and aesthetic grammar that simultaneously democratizes and destabilizes the image.

Third, they all articulate how the medium's position as cultural "trash" or as the lowest common denominator of mass culture partially determines this investment in self-referentiality. For Feuer, one of Reaganism's more curious paradoxes was its yoking together of elitism with populism, creating a decade that advertised itself as a means to "avoid dealing with the economic and social realities of the times."[43] Such tension, moreover, highlights other binary framings of television as both complicit and critical, as both artistic object and commodity. As Joyrich points out, this could have only been accomplished because television produces the assumed feminization (and thus infantilization) of its audience, with its promotion of consumption positioned as both symptom of and resistant act to the threat of a feminized world.[44] Caldwell takes up this argument in a theoretical register, using the postscript of his book to invite readings that meld "low cultural practice" with "high theory," leading to the devaluation of the image.[45]

Fourth, and perhaps most important for my purposes here, these authors take television's capacity to structure affective transmission for granted, attempting to graph (without fully doing so) the temporal and spatial flows that enable constructions of affective spectatorship. In her first paragraph, Feuer figures television as capable of both dissecting and epitomizing "the aura of the eighties," and while she concedes that we should not read 1980s TV as "a reflection of an eighties Zeitgeist in any simple way," her project nevertheless remains committed to demystifying the various structures of feeling embedded within the television and its viewers (in particular, the yuppie audience of the 1980s).[46] Joyrich, in fact, opens her book through a close reading of Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis), the empathic counselor in *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (syndicated, 1987–1994), as the exemplary "image of professionalized feminine receptivity" who is also illustrative of television's deployment of therapeutic discourse.[47] While Dienst anticipates her critiques in announcing his skepticism of "a conclusion in which television and 'the feminine' are alike reduced to a set of necessary affects associated with 'consumption,'" he does not question television's ability to be reduced to a set of affects, necessarily commercial or otherwise.[48] In "looking at television as if it were not already there," Dienst states, we produce "our own fields of visibility . . . the

as-yet-unrealized, blocked, and diverted power of television," a delineative conceptualization both scaffolding and eroding affective potential.[49] Television generates affect, these studies intimate, because of television's power to construct intimacy.

In establishing these commonalities, my aim is to test if and how they apply to television's subsequent evolution: the assemblage of changes to television beginning at the turn of the millennium and extending until the mid-2010s. What comes after postmodern television, and how do these changes in turn transform our understanding of television? The late 1990s signaled a gradual departure from the television earlier on in the decade. Even if many of the cultural themes associated with the 1990s—its rejection of aesthetic glamour, its emphasis on multicultural diversity, and its use of sarcasm as a dominant form of comedy—were present in television throughout the decade's entirety, the decade contains radical differences between its earlier and later periods, particularly with respect to TV aesthetics, form, genre, and technology. These changes both build upon and contradict the shared assessments about the postmodern television of the 1980s. With the widespread adoption of narrowcasting and the rise of cult television throughout the 1990s, television amplified its commitment to multiplicity; recent emphases on algorithms as a metric for assessing audience response summon the logics of capture emblematic of control societies, with every series with a fan base eligible for consideration as a cult text. Television still deploys postmodern representational techniques in the service of self-conscious or acknowledged performance—but without one of its most theatrical capacities, as live television viewing and commercial breaks became relics of the past. Television is no longer thought of as merely trash, with critics noting its "novelistic" qualities as early as 1995, though reality television was exempted from this legitimation, and even still, it was not until the end of the 2000s that arguments were being made about a third golden age. And while Feuer's argument for the interpenetration of 1980s television and Reaganism helps us follow the political structures of feeling of the time, the decade-defining two-term presidencies following Reagan (Bill Clinton in the 1990s, George W. Bush in the 2000s, and Barack Obama in the 2010s) do not cohere under a specific political or economic ideology—unless, of course, one accepts the already disparate and ethereal rationalities of neoliberal culture.

Both postmodernism and neoliberalism share a certain investment in images—neoliberalism thrives on risking credit in the pursuit of new markets, with this credit consisting of an electronic currency that is simulacral—and each requires the diffuse infiltration and naturalization of market logics. Fredric

Jameson, in his seminal work on postmodernism, contends that "'the market is in human nature' is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged; in my opinion, it is the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time," and he emphasizes that the postmodern schizophrenic subject is ultimately unable to "organize its past and future into coherent experience."[50] Yet while postmodernism may have signified the end of grand metanarratives used to explain human behavior (contributing to the fragmentation of the subject), late capitalism is rather invested in the metanarrative of free and unfettered access to global markets, with the individual focusing on maximizing investment potential in order to fulfill the functions of *Homo economicus*. Thus, one can trace the affective registers of this metanarrative as it has played out in the various genres, forms, and discourses surrounding television. As Patricia Ventura argues, "The end of the Cold War saw neoliberalism crystallize as a structure of feeling," so that "by 2003, at the start of the Iraq War, American neoliberal culture had reached a kind of maturation point."[51] With the consolidation of economic and political power, the cultural effects of neoliberalism can be found in the ways that it reorganized American citizenship, with various policies affecting welfare and immigration and restructuring the family as a target, an object, and an instrument of governmental power. And with technological change shifting the primary unit of economic organization from the family to the individual, television could introduce discomfort to its audiences more easily, as adult audiences increasingly viewed themselves as sophisticated consumers.

This Book's Script

Uncomfortable Television registers these spectatorial performances of pleasure and discomfort across key genres of postmillennial television: auteurist comedy, documentary reality, the police procedural, prestige drama, and fan-produced satire. This book organizes its objects primarily by genre for a few reasons. First, genre exists as a cultural category not only specific to a set of texts (genres are inherently organizational and thus contingent) but specific to practices across media industries and audiences as well.[52] Audiences classify and categorize texts as they consume them, and with the development of a participatory culture, fan communities have been able to assert their expertise in these acts of classification. Second, genre persists as a critical category despite the popularity of generic hybridity (e.g., dramedies, docusoaps, and mockumentary sitcoms) within television programming during this time. In part, this is because of increased quantities and accessibility of original

programming enabled by cable networks and SVOD platforms. With so many series to watch, genre increasingly shapes audience attention and, more importantly, often determines or governs *what* gets watched. Third, because this book is making a historical claim, genre allows for more refined explanations of pleasure in popular culture. One question central to TV historiography is why certain genres are popular at certain historical times (science fiction, fantasy, and horror in the 1960s; prime-time soaps in the 1980s), and this book follows in this practice. Last, I have intentionally excluded some genres of television from this book not because they do not necessarily fit into a model of televisual discomfort but because of how those genres script their spectators' discomfort. Many series with uncomfortable elements do not appear in this book, and not just for a lack of space: fantasy and horror series such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–2019) and *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011–present) appear to qualify as deeply uncomfortable, given their displays of sexual and racial violence, but I see their generic classifications as doing other work in governing the mechanisms of disavowal and critique by which uncomfortable affects become rerouted into viewer pleasure.[53] Such exclusions may strike some readers as being unfair or incorrect, but I do not mean to limit definitions or experiences of discomfort through erecting these parameters.

Genre is organizationally privileged because of what it does: in establishing a set of expectations for its viewer, it thus structures a viewer's affective engagement with a text or a set of texts. By expectation I mean not only the operational aesthetics that structure how viewers follow a program's narrative. Instead, I use the term to signify the ways in which popular discourses in both mainstream journalistic and academic criticism—and especially discourses anchored around a set of ideological assumptions about a series or network—script viewers' affective reactions to a series. Audiences have certain expectations about the representational messages these programs contain, so their negotiation of pleasure is always tempered by a disclaimer, occasionally one that expresses ambivalence or resistance to a particular ideological message. Such expectation is, of course, built into the larger viewing economy, an economy that requires those very expectations in order to market and brand programs for different viewing communities constructed through industrial practices of narrowcasting and franchising. This book thus utilizes practices of close reading of a single episode or a collection of episodes from a single series representative of these changed viewer expectations, in order to highlight the formal and industrial mechanisms that produce and script viewer affect.

Robin Bernstein uses the term "script" to describe the relational nature of material things and people (her examples range from museum exhibits

to children's alphabet books). For her, the term equates neither directly to mimetic representation nor to the rigid dictation of performed action but instead carries additionally resistant, performative, and improvisational valence, making each engagement akin to a dance: "Dances with things, too, are performative in that they constitute actions: they *think,* or, more accurately, they *are the act of thinking*."[54] Turning to characterizations of choreography, Bernstein situates affective expectation as interpellative, or what we might call here the viewer's coming into being, or subjectivation. The seductive light of the television, the lure of its abundance, and the accessibility of programming function, this book argues, as a sort of scriptive thing: "The scriptive thing hails a person by inviting her to dance. The person ritualistically engages the matter, and in that process, subjectivation—how one comes to 'matter'—occurs. Interpellation occurs not only through performative utterances but also through thing-based enscription into identifiable, historicized traditions of performance from both the stage and everyday life."[55] For Bernstein, the scriptive thing structures spectatorial behavior alongside cultural assumptions of identity and, notably and importantly, alongside racial violence. Following her lead, postmillennial television-as-scriptive-thing negotiates the construction of identity alongside the many violences central to early twenty-first-century culture, as in my opening example of *Louie*. The slippage between narrative and reality present in the audience's identification of Louie with C.K. are a regularly repeated and ritualized part of this script. Indeed, this can be traced to the technological and industrial imperatives of the medium itself, which are premised upon the false construction of boundaries between visibility and invisibility, public and private, and fiction and reality. As Dienst observes, television "allows us to imagine new values for the visible image and visual realm without resorting to the ultimate privilege, or the ultimate evasion, of the invisible."[56] *Uncomfortable Television*, then, recasts these "new values" into affective economies that pressure both the study of representation (how cultural taboos appear in postmillennial television) and the study of spectatorship (how viewers perform discomfort). Perhaps what makes viewers squeamish is neither the dramatic depiction (representation as re-presentation) of sexual assault, as in the case of *Louie*, nor the televisual homomorphism (representation as in a legislative context) symbolic of a larger "culture" of sexual assault, but instead the affective circulation of both: a creepy dance that spectators haphazardly consent to by turning on their televisions.

If for Bernstein the scriptive thing cannot be divorced from affective histories of racialized and sexual violence, *Uncomfortable Television* is particularly

invested in documenting the ways in which depictions of discomfort allow for audiences to both embrace and disavow popular expressions of white supremacy and misogyny. Here, I acknowledge how my own spectatorial position as a queer White male will inevitably inform the following readings of postmillennial television presented. While my own intuitive perceptions of discomfort are certainly marked by my identifications, I combine them with discursive analyses of reviews, recaps, interviews, and other forms of television criticism and scholarship to pinpoint the uncomfortable structures of feeling present within these series and episodes. Many of the programs examined in this book cohere along a certain formation of audience that attracts a specific kind of viewer: one with a certain amount of class privilege to have access to cable or premium cable television, for example. This should come as no surprise to historians of television, many of whom have noted the ways that "quality" television and its synonyms reflect a desire to encourage audiences to identify as sophisticated and savvy spectators. This key branding strategy has been embraced by television executives going back to the 1970s, when the "rural purge" at CBS saw the premiere of several series branded as feminist and politically progressive that also targeted more urban and younger (yet still White) audience demographics.[57] At the same time, however, television's expansion to include profiles of "ordinary" individuals and families (in reality programming) and new forms of production (through fan cultures) somewhat challenges these demographic assumptions. On a metatextual level, then, this book is a commentary on the pervasiveness of televisual discourse—and of its popular misogyny and Whiteness—as much as it is a historicization of televisual affect.

The first chapter, "The Irritated Spectator: Affective Representation in (Post)millennial Comedy," provides this book's theoretical scaffolding, spelling out the relationship between discomfort and pleasure. Drawing from the theories of affect and embodiment that animate my methodology, I demonstrate how television encourages its audiences to perceive affects of discomfort through ideological frameworks despite changes to television aesthetics, form, and technology that suggest a more immersive experience. This chapter extrapolates from discomfort, ultimately advancing a central claim of this book: that under late capitalism, televisual affectivity depends on the fiction of meaningful representation. In developing this argument, I turn to irritation as a minor affect with which to approach the study of representation. Using the example of *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017) and its polarizing series creator, Lena Dunham, I consider how irritation may be recouped as the form of neoliberal resistance par excellence, thus situating it as a fundamental

way of studying (and coming to terms with) conflicting affects surrounding televisual representation.

The second chapter, "The Addicted Spectator: TV Junkies in Need of an *Intervention*," focuses on reality television, which exploded in popularity at the beginning of the millennium. If the genre of reality television has been linked to consumer technologies of self-improvement, this chapter examines instead the more stigmatized—yet equally necessary—form of citizenship embodied by the addict. It reads theories of narcoanalysis alongside episodes of recovery television, a subgenre of reality TV in which individuals with compulsive behaviors or addictions to unhealthy substances are profiled and reformed through a staged intervention. I argue that recovery television advances a form of addictive spectatorship, a concept that takes seriously the notion that television may act affectively as a drug. Recovery television thus helps viewers negotiate their own relationship to television consumption. Through an episode of the reality series *Intervention* (A&E, 2005–present), I demonstrate that reality television's structuring of affect provides its audiences with a motive to disidentify with its subjects in order to disavow their own addictions—including, importantly, their addiction to TV itself.

It is not just that the ordinary citizen becomes a larger character across TV during this time, but that the ordinary consumer does, too. Accompanying similar breakdowns in the private and the public spheres brought on by reality television and the digital public sphere, the late 1990s and 2000s witnessed the breakdown between producers and consumers through the formation of participatory cultures and transformative works. Significant changes to television technology thus occurred as "television" itself began to encompass paratextual media such as fan reaction videos, web series, video recaps, and remixes. The last of these, remixes, is the subject of the third chapter, "The Aborted Spectator: Affective Economies of Perversion in Televisual Remix." It examines Sienna D'Enema's *Jiz* (2009–2016)—a reimagining of the children's animated series *Jem and the Holograms* (syndicated, 1985–1988)—in which the colorful glam rocker is transformed into a profane, violent, and drug addicted abortionist. Using *Jiz* and other queer video remix TV series, I trace the role of nostalgia in remix culture, in which television series from the past are inserted beyond their cancellation dates into a future punctuated by digital mediation and participatory culture. If remix is, in today's digital cultural studies, used to promote cultural literacy, I argue that this is because of its capacity to pervert and corrupt. Remix may infuse creative potentiality into the wistful objects of one's past, but only through taking as its premise the risking of innocence conjured by those very objects.

If reality television and participatory culture represent two key stories describing the changes to postmillennial television, another story is the question of *story*: of increased serialization and sophistication in scripted narratives, tied to the medium's cultural legitimation. The fourth chapter, "The Spectator Plagued by White Guilt: On the Appropriative Intermediality of Quality TV," considers what has been called a new golden age of serialized drama; these current programs feature antiheroes and are heralded by critics and scholars as "literature" or as "cinema." Examining why a dislikable or morally repugnant protagonist is presumed to be a necessary component for televisual risk-taking, and why both have been branded as "art," I use discourses surrounding *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2007) and popular police procedurals (such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*) to read intermedial appropriation—the disavowal of televisuality in favor of a more legitimated art form—against theories of cultural appropriation tied to White guilt.

Finally, the last chapter, "The Woke Spectator: Misrecognizing Discomfort in the Era of Peak TV," forms the conclusion to this book, asking what comes next, or what happens when we are fully immersed into televisual discomfort. In distinguishing between the periodization of postmillennial television here and the television of the late 2010s and into the 2020s (including how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted television production and reception), I chart the shift from the acculturating function of discomfort present in postmillennial television to a more politicized function of discomfort seen in formations of "woke TV." Woke television is advanced by this era's characterization as "Peak TV," since more options enabled by SVOD platforms and algorithmic narrowcasting have led to more series that deal explicitly with questions of social justice and that feature the creative talents of cultural minorities. Because of this explosive rise in the number of viewing options, I examine a variety of series and their construction of wokeness as a scripted spectatorial affect that signifies a viewer's progressive politics. I then turn to two examples of racial misrecognition—blackface in the critically acclaimed comedy *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006–2013) and whiteface in the critically acclaimed comedy *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–present)—to illustrate the emergence and limitations of woke spectatorship. Audiences, I argue, are now so acclimated into discomfort that it may be acknowledged and used productively as a form of resistance, but this resistance is possible only by rewriting the very terms of the spectator's relationship to pleasure.

Taken together, these chapters make an intervention into analyses that examine television after TV, demanding that television studies synthesize work

in affect and performance into its methodological repertoire. This book is intended to provoke discomfort among its readers, who must account for their own spectatorial pleasure in the popular texts of a pervasively neoliberal American culture. While such discomfort might ultimately be nothing new—American television has never claimed to be an authoritatively antagonistic force against the status quo (until perhaps, as the conclusion argues, the current moment of Peak and woke television)—my intention here is to stress how the perverse and the popular, how ideological and affective critique, and how scriptive things and spectators all circulate when we consume postmillennial TV. It has not been emotionally easy to write a book on discomfort, especially when whatever pleasure that may have originally been derived from textual perversity mutates and exhausts upon repeated viewings and critical reflection. Yet television often provides pleasure through establishing the individual viewer as part of a larger community, even if that community is imagined. To break the fourth wall for a moment (something television is known to do occasionally), I invite you, the reader, to share in this discomfort, so that together we may reroute affect through critical pathways and make sense of the television we love—and the world we inhabit—in more fruitful and politically engaging ways.

notes

Introduction

1. Spigel, "Introduction," 2. Spigel characterizes television "after TV" as a "reinvention" of the medium in the period 1994–2004, noting how the following changes resulted in the merging of television's commercial and public-service imperatives: "The demise of the three-network system in the United States, the increasing commercialization of public service/state-run systems, the rise of multichannel cable and global satellite delivery, multinational conglomerates, internet convergence, changes in regulation policies and ownership rules, the advent of HDTV, technological changes in screen design, the innovation of digital television systems like TiVo, and new forms of media competition all contribute to transformations in the practice we call watching TV" (2). It is this book's contention that these changes do not begin to impact relations of televisual discomfort and pleasure until *after* the period Spigel describes.

2. Throughout this book, I capitalize terms such as *White* and *Whiteness* in order to underscore their influence as a racial category. Because American television has assumed a White audience for most of its history (even while targeting non-White audiences with specific programming), I use these forms of capitalization as a way of making visible television's role in making Whiteness invisible through its normalization. I consciously do not capitalize the term *white supremacy*, however, as it refers not to a socially constructed racial category and more to an ideological system that rewards Whiteness.

3. *Louie*, "Come On, God," Season 2, Episode 8.

4. Seresin, "On Heteropessimism."

5. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 111. See also Lacquer, *Solitary Sex*.

6. R. King, "Powers of Comedy," 306.

7. Ryzik et al.,"Detailing Lewd Acts," A1.

8. Tellingly, C.K. bought back the rights to *I Love You, Daddy* in full from its distribution company, agreeing to pay for all future distribution and marketing costs.

9. *Seinfeld*, "The Contest," Season 4, Episode 11.

10. In a 1993 article in *Rolling Stone*, the four castmates argue over who won the contest. Here, sitcom form tames the act entirely: "Always it comes back to masturbation: There remains a major controversy, thus a need for resolution." See Zehme, "Jerry & George & Kramer & Elaine," 46.

11. Around the same time as "The Contest," a sixth-season episode of *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997), "Homeward Bound," also dealt with the topic of masturbation, though from the perspective of Dan and Roseanne discovering that their teenage

son DJ had begun masturbating. Contained within the episodic confines and kinship structures of the domestic family sitcom, the episode's humor is similarly inoffensive to that in "The Contest."

12. Sepinwall and Zoller Seitz, *TV (The Book)*, 105. Sepinwall and Seitz's short chapter on *Louie* is notable for how it excuses the series' uncomfortable subject matter, stating only that "some of the portrayals of female sexuality have a touch of bitter-white-guy misogyny" (107). They also analogize C.K.'s formal influence on television with that of another notable auteur accused of sexual misconduct, Woody Allen.

13. Goodman, "When TV Brands Go Off Brand."

14. As Rob King astutely notes of C.K., "self-exposure, it seems, was the engine of his comedic art." See R. King, "Powers of Comedy," 292.

15. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8. For Sedgwick, critical work on identity and performance often undertheorizes space while privileging temporality, though for her, no clear hierarchy exists within or between the two terms. We might extrapolate from her reading of the beside a logic of mutual constitution, in which the spatial is already temporal and vice versa.

16. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, 141–142.

17. On this, see Spigel, "From Domestic Space to Outer Space," 205–235.

18. J. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 133.

19. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 12.

20. Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer*, and Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, especially chapter seven.

21. Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

22. See, for example, the commentary revisiting some of *Louie*'s more controversial episodes following the revelation of C.K.'s misconduct: VanDerWerff, "Most Controversial Episode." See also Brennan, "Reconsidering *Louie*." For other responses to *Louie*, see Robinson, "What on Earth Is Louis C.K. Trying to Say about Rape?"; and North, "Louis C.K.'s Self-Deprecating Comedy." See also Karen Petruska's examination of the gender politics of recappers in the larger media industries, "Recappables."

23. Poniewozik, "Decency Police."

24. In writing about a similarly-lit *Time* magazine cover—a 1995 issue that introduced "cyberporn" into the public eye through the image of a young boy illuminated by the glow of a computer screen—Wendy Chun notes that the spectator "literaliz[es] his enlightenment/exposure" at the expense of the young boy's innocence, interpellating the magazine reader into the "position of the intruding pornographic image. Or else he serves as our mirror image, his surprise and invasion mirroring our own." In Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 90–91. The cyberporn cover is from *Time* 146, no. 27 (July 3, 1995).

25. The distinction between indecent content and obscene content as defined by the FCC matters here. Indecent content on television generally contains "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value," while obscene content does not and thus would be subject to censorship. See Federal Communications Commission, "Obscene, Indecent, and Profane Broadcasts."

26. While the literature on the confluence of neoliberal governmentality and reality television is extensive, two key examples are Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living through Reality TV*; and Weber, *Makeover TV*.

27. Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit of Capitalism*.

28. Uricchio, "Television's Next Generation," 180.

29. See Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas's important essay that pressures the cultural assumptions present in the notion of "algorithmic culture." Hallinan and Striphas, "Recommended for You."

30. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey's book is probably the most well-known "history" of neoliberal policy, though by no means is it the only history.

31. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 17. As the subtitle of her monograph suggests, she prefers the term "late liberalism" to highlight the role of tense in defining these social struggles, using the phrase to denote "the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements" (25). My own use of the term *neoliberalism*, while registering these crises, is not dependent upon them, and my geographic focus on the United States limits me from addressing, for example, how these new social movements might complicate the transmission of affect in global popular cultures.

32. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 34.

33. Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*, 115.

34. Deming, "Locating the Televisual," 127; Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*, 115.

35. See Mittell, *Complex TV*.

36. Nussbaum, "When TV Became Art.".

37. Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 47–48.

38. The scholarship discussed here includes: Caldwell, *Televisuality*; Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*; Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*; and Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties*.

39. Caldwell, *Televisuality*, vii.

40. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, 4; Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*, 23.

41. Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 5.

42. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, 60.

43. Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties*, 12

44. Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*, 38–40.

45. Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 337. Both Joyrich and Caldwell, in fact, share a common textual example to make this point: the avant-garde children's program *Pee Wee's Playhouse* (CBS, 1986–1991).

46. Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties*, 1.

47. Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*, 4.

48. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, 179n68.

49. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, 33–35.

50. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 271, 33.

51. Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture*, 5–6.

52. See Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory."

53. Linda Williams's foundational work on "body genres" is instrumental to thinking through this point. See Williams, "Film Bodies." See also Snyder and Mitchell, "Body Genres."

54. Bernstein, "Dances with Things," 70.

55. Bernstein, "Dances with Things," 83.

56. Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, x.

57. On this, see Alvey, "'Too Many Kids and Old Ladies'"; and Lentz, "*Quality* versus *Relevance*."

Chapter One. The Irritated Spectator

1. Variants of this index have also been used to assess realism in contemporary dramatic television. See Haggins, "*Homicide*: Realism," 13–14.

2. Freeman, "Hopeless Cases," 336.

3. J. V. Fuqua has described, for example, how TV emerged as a consumer appliance in the late 1940s and 1950s while simultaneously being integrated into the interior architecture of hospitals, allowing hospitals to brand themselves as rehabilitative spaces for the patient-consumer. See Fuqua, *Prescription TV*.

4. *Portlandia,* "One Moore Episode," Season 2, Episode 2.

5. See, most famously, White, "Crossing Wavelengths," 55.

6. Lowry, "Onion News Network, Portlandia." Reviews both of the series in its infancy and at its completion noted this affective trait. See Humphrey, "Paradox of *Portlandia*,"; Les Chappell, "*Portlandia* Suffers the Disability,"; and Armstrong, "TV Comedy *Portlandia*." Chappell's categorization of irritation as a "disability" particularly stands out here.

7. Russo, "Many Copies," 451.

8. Brinkema, *Forms of the Affects*, xii.

9. Hemmings, "Invoking Affect."

10. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 270; and Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

11. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27–28.

12. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 40n4.

13. Shaviro, *Cinematic Body*, 26.

14. Shaviro, "Cinematic Body REDUX," 52.

15. Shaviro, "Cinematic Body REDUX," 53. Emphasis mine.

16. Brinkema, *Forms of the Affects*, 29.

17. See Marks, *Skin of the Film*; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*; Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*; Thain, *Bodies in Suspense*. One exception to this direction can be found in Laine, *Feeling Cinema*.

18. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis once tried to sketch a psychoanalytic theory of television, but she ended up concluding that longstanding theories of cinematic identification such as the male gaze and its critiques cannot directly be applied to TV, which relies instead upon multiple and fractured glances. See Flitterman-Lewis, "Psychoanalysis, Film, and Television."