

Cynical Geographies: Mapping the Contours of the Kitchen Table

Leah Ramnath

Alliance of Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought, PhD Student

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Blacksburg, VA

Presented at annual meetings of the Western Political Science Association,

San Francisco, California

April 5-8, 2023

Cynical Geographies: Mapping the Contours of the Kitchen Table

Leah Ramnath

Virginia Tech

ABSTRACT

The kitchen table is an object, site, and central technology of the modern civilization process. Two guiding questions in this paper are: what is the role of the kitchen table in the wider project of nation-building and how do representations of the kitchen table change over time toward this end? Throughout, I look at the role of the senses and how they informed a particular historical sensorium imbued with sentiment constructing the affective associations of the kitchen table and its sociocultural effects as it aligns with the overall process of nation-building. I begin by looking at the kitchen table as an object of desire, a cluster of promises, and an orientation device within a broader context of the nation-building project and how it serves as a body disciplining technology. As a point of entry to understand these concepts and questions, I look to representations of the kitchen table portrayed in television sitcoms between the 1970s and 2020s. I situate the sitcom as a mass-produced pedagogical tool that is in service to the project of nation-building, and explore the juxtaposition between the curation of the sitcom kitchen table and anatomy theater to understand how the two function to disseminate the criteria defining what it means to be a citizen in the modern nation-state. Next, premised on these discussions, I analyze my case studies (episodes from *Good Times*, *the Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and *The Upshaws*) to observe how representations of the sitcom kitchen table has changed, if at all. Finally, I review how the sitcom kitchen table informs a particular form of life and its associated sensibilities specific to notions of modern citizenship.

In the summer of 2018, my parents were very concerned about the eternal condition of my soul because of a book I brought home. I was staying at their house while I did my fieldwork and, of course, I had to bring some books to work on my thesis at the time. Among those books was Sara Ahmed's "Living a Feminist Life," which caught the eye of my conservative, evangelical Christian pastor-parents. They were so disturbed by the very presence of the book bearing the word "feminist" that they yelled for me to come downstairs to talk with them. I thought someone died because of the tone and urgency in their voice. Their eyes, full of concern, gestured for me to sit in front of them at our kitchen table—the space where we have all our most serious-as-a-heart-attack conversations. Mom looked at me, opened her eyes wide, and asked "what is this feminism thing you're doing? Are you a lesbian now?" Someone cue the laugh track because my life is literally a sitcom.

At that moment, they compiled all my failures—failing to appear, failing to perform, failure to (re)produce, failure to meet standard heteronormative milestones—into a simple two-part question about my queer deviation. All at once they were concerned about my gender performativity, sexual orientation, and political associations over a single word in a book title. As if to say, perhaps, a "feminist" does not belong and disrupts "living a life." Now, I did *try* to speak, but the Ramnath kitchen table is not an egalitarian space; this kitchen table is the resultant crystallization of a deeply politicized sociohistorical inheritance (Elias, 2000). How did we get here? I am interested in how these associations formed and why my body and speech seemed to align with behavioral expectations at my kitchen table. Regardless of if there is food at the table, my body seems to already know how to maneuver this sociopolitical landscape, however, on a different register of social etiquette. Table manners, here, reveals itself as the sedimentation of shape-shifting virtues of self-control; social relationships demanding to hold my tongue is both

exemplary corporeal and social restraint. In other words: “What bodies ‘tend to do’ are effects of histories rather than being originary” (Ahmed, 2006, 553).

Reflecting on this moment, I began to think about the object of the kitchen table, the medium for this conversation—its historical emergence into modernity, what it has come to represent, and its inherent pedagogical capacity. Two guiding questions in this paper are: what is the role of the kitchen table in the wider project of nation-building and how do representations of the kitchen table change over time toward this end? As a point of entry to understand these concepts and questions, I look to representations of the kitchen table portrayed in television sitcoms between the 1970s and 2020s. I situate the sitcom as a mass-produced pedagogical tool that is in service to the project of nation-building. Furthermore, I explore the complexity of the sitcom kitchen table wherein the fantasy of the good life is simultaneously reproduced and, in its fraying, has the potential to be a destabilizing site of encounter (Berlant, 2011).

Overall, the main goal of this work is to understand how the kitchen table is both an outcome and central technology of the modern civilization process. Throughout, I look at the role of the senses and how they informed a particular historical sensorium imbued with sentiment constructing the affective associations of the kitchen table and its sociocultural effects as it aligns with the overall process of nation-building. I begin by looking at the kitchen table as an object of desire, a cluster of promises, and an orientation device within a broader context of the nation-building project and how it serves as a body disciplining technology (Ahmed, 2006; Berlant, 2011). I then explore the juxtaposition between the curation of the sitcom kitchen table and anatomy theater to understand how the two function to disseminate the criteria defining what it means to be a citizen in the modern nation-state. Next, premised on these discussions, I analyze my case studies to observe how representations of the sitcom kitchen table has changed, if at all. Finally, I review

how the sitcom kitchen table informs a particular form of life and its associated sensibilities specific to notions of modern citizenship.

The Kitchen Table

What images and emotions come to mind when you think of your kitchen table? I think about my family during the holidays, chipped plates, the smell of fried plantains—all extending feelings of joy and contentment. Despite the many debilitating confrontations I have experienced at my kitchen table, I hold onto the fantasy of having a harmonious family. This fantasy, though a cruel optimistic attachment, is what keeps me coming back to this space (Berlant, 2011). These thoughts, emotions, and sensations are not accidental and tell us about the affective formation and role of the kitchen table as a sentimental object of desire. In my case, the kitchen table is an interlocutor, signaling the aesthetic ideal of the happy, supportive family and my belonging to that family. However, when I sit at the table, becoming “daughter” in part by habitually sitting in *my* seat, this fantasy frays in the negation of my personhood. I am emasculated, hyperfeminized, emotionally reoriented through a thankful prayer, and socially relocated in servitude toward tending the comfortability of my family by the restraint of tone and duration of my speech.

Kyla Schuller (2018), citing Lauren Berlant, states, “the general organization of politics in the United States over the last 150 years increasingly depends on sentimental structures of attachment and identification, in which a ‘world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures [is] projected out as an intimate public of private individuals inhabiting their own affective changes’” (20). Located in the private spaces of the modern family in Western society, the kitchen table as an innocuous domestic space is a central force disseminating the aesthetic ideals associated with citizenship as defined by the nation-state. “Courtesy, compliance, fine manners” and “sound education and preference of virtue to honor” are unified and embodied in this space (Elias, 2000,

23). Specifically, German, French, and English etiquette literature developed during the 1500s provided the precepts for the codified social conduct in which members of different class strata could learn to assimilate (Elias, 2000). These texts ranging from “On civility in boys” in the 1530s to a modern iteration of “The Good Wife’s Guide” in the 1950s provided “aesthetic protocols,” in part based on restraint through shame of the human body’s natural functions, to present the general population as a cohesive, disciplined, and controllable amalgamation (Elias, 2000; Fretwell, 2020). Drawing on the existing libidinal economy, gender roles were defined through the expectation and fulfillment of tasks, like the reproductive labor of cooking, cultivating “respectable domesticity” was aimed particularly at women (Fretwell, 2020; Schuller, 2018).

Elias (2000) noted that as inhabitants of a nation-state became more socially interconnected, transitioning from feudal states to modern community arrangements, social relationships between classes required new mediation. The population became geographically and socially democratized and the need for sovereign intervention is seemingly displaced. Instead, there was a diffuse of sovereign power and extension of the state martial gaze where the general population were to now police and discipline themselves and others through interpersonal relationships, disciplining the population into an ideal body politic. As the upper class were characterized as displaying virtuous self-control through the “restraint of their emotions” and body, the lower class were characterized as its opposite: insatiable and uncontrollable (Elias, 2000, 61). In part, these archetypes needed to be reproduced to loan to the definitional behaviors of desirable citizens.

Novels and poetry, too, romanticizing mannerisms at the table displayed by members of the bourgeois class authored a desirable aesthetics to which the new proletariat population could aspire (Elias, 2000; Berlant, 2011). These sensibilities grew in popularity and eventually became

a universalized standard and measure of civility, the capacity of a nation's citizens to cultivate proper sense (Elias, 2000). Citizens needed to learn how to have the right responses to desirable objects; objects became desirable through affective attachments curated through the needs of the nation-state. Following Schuller (2018), again, the kitchen table becomes “a technology of biopower, functioning as the site of deployment of sexuality in particular, as well as women's paid and unpaid labor, the discipline of children, the geographic interface between the individual and the population, and the grounds of proscription from entering the space of nation...” (20).

Food also functioned as a civilizing medium, another biopolitical tool; the manner in which food was consumed as well as what types of food someone was drawn to display a sense of class belonging and reified gender, sexuality, racial, and ethnic identifications. For example, using hands to eat became viewed as a lower-class mannerism as the use of the fork developed during the Medieval Ages (Elias, 2000). Eating with hands, chewing with the mouth open, burping at the table, and other behaviors at the table were considered a barbaric display; these behaviors were linked to measures of intelligence, capacity to be refined, and determine proximity to early, undeveloped, animal-like forms of life (Elias, 2000; Fretwell, 2020). Sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch informed a universalized “threshold of repugnance” organized around table manners where the goal was to silence the sounds exiting the body, contain the smells, and constrain movement (Elias, 2000). The sensory experience curated during this time was premised on restraint and overall detachment from body sensations. There was also a shift in attention where cultivating social relationships rather than the act of eating became one main purpose of gathering over food. Good conversation edified the spirit and food simply replenished the body; matters of survival faded into the background of social life in modern society.

Again, literary mediums like novels, poetry, and treatises defined criteria and formed affective associations around un/acceptable manners making them observable/identifiable. The public-private event/ritual of eating together at the table presented the risk of being publicly shamed or embarrassed for poor discipline of the body. In terms of taste and preference of taste, those who desired sweets were associated as incapable of self-control and therefore needed refinement of the taste palate (Fretwell, 2020). “General attitudes,” Fretwell states, “held that sweetness...was irresistible for white women and people of color, whose irrational cravings required the intervention of culinary science” (2020, 177). “Intervention of culinary science” is a recapitulation of the instructional literary mediums, however narrated through rationalist and enlightened rhetoric. We continue to see a pathology of the body, and specific bodies, form, and the table transitions into a sedimented state institution where body pacification is an expected social norm.

Sitcom As Pedagogy

Around this same period, in the transition toward a democratically organized society during the 16th century, questions about what it meant to be human were assessed through observations of the physical body itself (Epstein, 2020). Epstein (2020) argues anatomy developed both as a supplementation and rejection of truth dictated by the church and state and through the desire to see the truth for oneself (DISSpublish, 2021). Sight and touch were primarily instrumentalized toward this onto-epistemological end. This newly forming science invented its own terms, procedures, and context to understand how the human body functions. The human body on the dissection table becomes a feast for the eyes and is literally opened for interpretation; the sovereign anatomist bears the hands of god and participates in the creation process in the naming of organs (Haraway, 1988; Epstein, 2020).

By the 17th century, the anatomy theater was opened to the public for annual dissections and became an important cultural event that facilitated a “collective act of looking” (Epstein, 2020, 245). However, in this collective looking, the audience can only observe and learn, not create. In this new pedagogical genre, the general population are relegated as a passive audience subject to the performance between the main actors, the anatomist and the dead body. The learning outcome of the anatomy theater, however, exceeded basic identification of body parts. Like the anatomist, the audience had to employ a degree of “practical insensibility” to witness this violent mutilation. Framing this spectacle as a scientific process of discovery formed a linguistic barrier obscuring violent procedures; the language of rationalism rendered this dead body into a cadaver, an instrument of science. Also, limiting the cadaver selection criteria to the poor, foreigners, and criminals affectively linked them together toward a cohesive identity (Epstein, 2020). Spectators of the spectacle were desensitized, and their threshold of repugnance grew to a greater capacity. Furthermore, through a complete sensorial experience, the audience attune their senses to witness the unfolding of a drama where the anatomist could be read as the state and the dead body as the body politic. It is, as Epstein (2020) states, “a graphic reminder to a broad audience of modern subjects-in-the-making of where the lines of the law ran, and what were the consequences of crossing them” (223).

The simultaneous development of non/fiction etiquette literary works and anatomy theater provided criteria for the ideal citizen and the modes to produce this disciplined body. Civilized citizens were expected to restrain their bodies, emotions, and be able to respond to shocking external stimuli with the same restraint. However, women and people of color were calcified as non-citizens in this regard; these pedagogical genres consequently “...produce some bodies as vulnerable and others as projects to be saved or persons to be expelled” (Schuller, 20). Now, in the

age of mechanical reproduction, more pedagogical genres with these same lessons and framework emerge. If we look at our contemporary moment, the television sitcom becomes the mass-produced pedagogical medium that penetrates the private space. The modern domestic home “provided a phantasmagoria of textures, tones, and sensual pleasure that immersed the home-dweller in a total environment, a privatized fantasy world that functioned as a protective shield for the senses and sensibilities of the new ruling class” (Buck-Morss, 1992, 22). Not only were these home-dwellers alienated within their own homes, but this location also had the potential to foster the same affective environment of the anatomy theater. This domestic organization facilitated a docile, passive subject too. Sitcoms in this phantasmagoric public-private space becomes a new pedagogical genre where the cultural event transitions into the episode (Berlant, 2011). The portrayal of the kitchen table in the sitcom represents and is operationalized by the legacy of the anatomy theater and etiquette texts.

The sitcom kitchen table functions as an aesthetic ideal of domestic intimate private spaces and it becomes a microcosm of the nation-state where “a macrocosm and a microcosm endlessly reflected each other” (Epstein, 2020, 228). A social effect of the sitcom is that the nuclear family is aestheticized and ornamentalized. The mass-production of the sitcom then forms an aesthetic economy where the nuclear family is a fetishized commodity. The modern family visually consuming the sitcom learn the social and gender roles of the family members, and by extension engage in cultural discourses around social norms and standards based on portrayals of class, race, gender, and sexuality, as it is dissected scene by scene.

Scenes at the Sitcom Kitchen Table

Sitcoms are “television’s longest lived narrative genre” (Butler, 2019, 2). Its sustained popularity and survival from its transition from radio to television mediums shows the increasing

cultural value and effectiveness of narrative as a rhetorical mechanism (Butler, 2019). Generally, the sitcom follows a linear storyline where “we become amused by the predicaments of the characters and their dialogue” and is characterized through the actors excessively expressive performance (Butler, 2019, 3). Sitcom critics characterize the genre as inauthentic, unrealistic, and inorganic; they are also critical of the use of humor to progress the plot (Butler, 2019). In other words, some critics claim sitcoms are of poor taste. Regardless, studies have found sitcoms influence viewers’ sociopolitical opinions, particularly around “social norms and lifestyle choices” (Holbert et al., 2003, 49; Butler, 2019).

Sitcom portrayals of ordinary life, though excessive, narrate a desirable fantasy. It provides a snapshot of an unreal ideal that penetrates our private space and turns viewers into consumers of the ideal. Scenes around the family kitchen table, is one snapshot, where there is somewhat of a deviation from the excess in staging family relations. Sitcom families often have confrontational conversations at their kitchen table, so the space on the sitcom is recognized as a communication device. However, in this space, the cast bring to life the ideal types of the family members and how they should conduct themselves at the table especially regarding their social relationships. These roles, as I have argued, have a sociohistorical inheritance making their portrayal reproductions based on pre-modern sociocultural norms. In what follows, I turn to three contemporary sitcoms to analyze the role and representations of the kitchen table.

Good Times (1975) “The Dinner Party”

Good Times was “one of television’s first African American, two-parent, family sitcoms” (Carter, 2019). Sitcoms prior portrayed Black families as unconventional in their family composition and family dynamics. Behind the thin veneer of humor, the sitcom provided audiences an inside look into the lives of Black families in the United States. These sitcoms had the potential,

and actual effect, of normalizing Black culture, but also the opposite depending on the viewer's positionality. *Good Times* adhered to conventional and conservative values around gender roles, sexuality, and class—perhaps widening the net of a target audience. However, the sitcom addressed issues around: redlining, state welfare institutions and other institutions, gun violence, drug use, child abuse, domestic abuse, and others.

This episode's main storyline centers the Evan's neighbor Gertie Vincent, a retired singing teacher, and her financial struggle with the social security system. Winnona, another neighbor, describes Gertie's situation as "the Washington D.C. Boogie," because "every time you take two steps ahead, they drag you back" (Peete et al., 1975, 10:01). The Evan's family find out Gertie doesn't have enough money for food and regularly resorts to eating dog food. The plot then centers around inviting Gertie for dinner to support her. However, when Gertie arrives for dinner she brings a meatloaf, which horrifies the Evan's family. By the end of the episode, Gertie declares she will engage with the state institutions and rally with other people facing the same financial situation to make demands for these institutions to change.

The episode opens with James Evans paying the family bills at the kitchen table. The tablecloth is folded over while James balances the checkbook, writes checks, and counts the rare residual cash left over. Him and Florida thank their children for taking on part-time jobs to support the family and acknowledge they are responsible for the surplus. They all continue to talk about the precarious fluctuations in the value of the dollar and James divides out the money, telling his family to spend it on something silly. James, for almost the entire episode, is sitting at the kitchen table; this duration signals that James is the head of the household as well as rational enough to manage the money and thereby his family. When Gertie's situation enters the plot, the family and audience audibly signal their disgust, groaning and scowling upon hearing Gertie eats dog food.

At that moment, Gertie's identity becomes associated with poverty; the dog food affectively links Gertie as having bad, poor taste. However, this poor taste is linked to the institutional failure of Social Security, failing to provide Gertie with an appropriate living allowance.

The Evan's plot to help Gertie without telling her they know she can't afford food because she is a "proud woman," and they don't want to hurt her feelings. The Evan's identify Gertie as both a strong and fragile woman; she could survive poverty, but her feelings are fragile. Before Gertie arrives, Florida instructs the children to "behave as normal as you've ever been" (16:49). The audience erupts with laughter when Gertie reveals her meatloaf; the family is suspicious and convinced the meatloaf is made of dog food. Laughter and the laugh track is an audible cue that directs the viewers to Gertie's ongoing affective assemblage. At the same time, Gertie's character is dissected as an older, single, poor Black woman who occasionally must eat dog food, so the family and the audience expect nothing less of the meatloaf content. The family goes through a list of tropes evoking a hybrid gender-hierarchy to avoid having to eat the meatloaf:

Gertie: "James, as head of the family you get the first piece." (18:48)

J.J.: "Ladies first!"

Michael: "Mamas before kids!"

Florida: "Husbands before wives!" (19:05)

Gertie confronts the family when catches on to what the family knows about the dog food saying: "Florida, that is ground round. What kind of person do you think I am? Yes, sometimes I can only afford to eat pet food. But that doesn't mean she would try to fool my friends with it" (22:28). This line tells the audience the poor will not, and should not, subject others to their poverty; the ideal poor citizen is virtuous and honors their friends by spending the most others, a kind of self-denial. Florida apologizes for the whole family and Gertie moves on, reflecting on the situation:

Gertie: “You know, maybe there’s a lesson in all this for me too. You people have been trying to help me and I haven’t done a thing myself. I’m going to stop feeling sorry for myself because I’ve been caught between a rock and a hard place.” (23:19)

Again, the sitcom portrays Gertie as a strong woman, however her self-assessment tells the audience she—the archetype of the older Black woman—played a role in her personal economic depression. This works to alleviate blame from state institutions and places the responsibility solely onto Gertie.

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1991) “Guess Who’s Coming to Marry?”

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air first aired on September 10, 1990 and is inspired by Will Smith’s life experiences. The bourgeois Banks family also features a two-parent home; however, they feature other mothering and unofficial adoption throughout the series. In this episode, the Smith-Banks family gather for the youngest Smith sister’s, Janice, wedding. This is the first time the family is meeting her soon to be husband and they are shocked to see that he’s white. The family describes him as “tall” instead of “white,” the laugh track is ongoing during this scene, signaling a type of taboo around interracial marriage.

All four sisters are so disturbed they meet at the kitchen table for a midnight snack to pacify themselves—dressed in luxurious nightgowns and wearing a full face of makeup. Their costuming displays the gender and sexuality of womanhood par excellence, visibly feminine and craving the taste of sweets. Helen exclaims, “I don’t care if Frank is Black, white, or candy apple red. I’ve been on Slim-Fast for the last 2 weeks to fit into my dress. Now somebody’s gonna marry somebody up in here! Oh, hell with it. Start slicing up that ham!” (14:19). At this point, the sitcom also plays on the sound of a woman who can only control her appetite temporarily; having Helen yell about her diet builds on the stereotype of women’s insatiable, irrational desire to consume, reducing her to unimpressible flesh. At the same time, to some degree, the sitcom has a humanizing

effect; perhaps that Black women are classically beautiful *and* eat while remaining classically beautiful. They fill the kitchen table with a big bowl of grapes, a full chocolate cake, crackers, cookies, marshmallows, and chicken; they eat everything with their hands and talk with their mouths full of food. The kitchen table in this scene sets this conversation up to read as frivolous and a moment of hysteria by the indulgent display of excess.

Viola, the eldest sister, is the last to join in, pointing to the absurd amount of food on the kitchen table referring to the whole scene as a their “last meal.” She is the most disturbed by Janice’s decision, overtly expressing she will not participate in the wedding if she goes through with marrying a white man. Vivian brings her to the kitchen table and says, “here we are. The Smith sisters! Loud, live, and in color!” (16:25). Helen follows up with “more like quiet, evil, and colored” and then the scene peaks (16:30):

Viola: “Damn it, Janice. You should have told me he was white.”

Helen: “Oh, oh. Clear the table I think she's gonna blow.”

Viola: “Baby, don't you have enough problems being an African American woman? You need a white husband to further complicate things? What about Frank? This isn't gonna make his life any easier. Have you thought about that? You thought about your children or the jobs or friends you may lose because some bigot fails to see the beauty in your marriage? Honey, I did not make the rules, but I do know how to play the game. For survival, Janice, please don't marry this man.”

Janice: “Vy, Frank and I are aware of everything you just said and we can handle it, sis.”

Viola: “You are making a terrible, terrible mistake.” (16:50 – 17:30)

Viola is regarded as a cynical figure throughout the episode, however, her dialogue touches on the *longue durée* of slavery as it relates to the recent legality interracial marriage in the 1960s. However, she is cast as “quiet, evil, and colored” and her concern is played out, affectively linked, as an archaic worldview, as if she just has to get over it. Vivian picks up a knife in the middle of Viola’s lines, walks behind her and then off view. When Viola leaves the kitchen Helen states, “well I guess she'll be on the first broom back to Philly” and, while scowling, takes a large bite of chocolate cake out of her hands (17:37). Viewers, in the collective

act of looking, see Black women humanized through their performance of heteronormativity but also their objectification in that same performance. Again, at this kitchen table we see a dissection of a social issue, interracial marriage, however the severity of the message is marred because it is staged with an excess of food and bad etiquette.

The Upshaws (2021) "The Backslide"

The Upshaws premiered earlier this year and the plot revolves around Bennie and Regina Upshaws relationship. Regina's sister, Lucretia, is critical and suspicious of Bennie because he does not make enough money and he has cheated on Regina; Bennie's infidelity resulted in other children with the other, younger women. The sitcom features the Upshaws as a blended, contemporary family however their constant marital issues signal this arrangement does not work to the viewers. The kitchen table in the Upshaws home is specifically used for conversations, rarely is there any eating. This episode follows how Regina navigates Bennie's lack of support as she takes steps to go to college. Previously, Regina kicked Bennie out of the house and let him back in because of the children. At the kitchen table, Lucretia and Regina have a conversation about this decision:

Lucretia: "Don't cut him slack."

Regina: "You got a lot of theories for a woman with two body pillows." (7:24)

Regina plays on the older, single Black woman trope to ignore the criticality of her sister; single women do not have the experience to give married women relationship or family advice. In this moment, single women are associated as cold and lonely—physically and psychically. Lucretia is also portrayed as having too much time and therefore chooses to waste time by spending time with her sister's family. The blended family and other mothering are depicted as components of a chaotic environment and has the effect of hierarchizing standard nuclear families as preferable.

Cultural discourses around sexuality are spread throughout the sitcom and in this episode Regina's oldest son Bernard, a gay man, deliberates whether he should go to his high school reunion; he is fraught at the idea of telling a previous high school sweetheart he's gay. Gender performativity is critiqued as a fragile concept and sexuality is understood to disrupt others' performance. The sitcom normalizes Bernard's sexuality/sexual orientation in Lucretia's response: "Do we have to go through this with every human you've ever met? Just pin it to your Twitter" (7:38). We hear the laughing track, and it works to signal both a positive and negative perception of the wide acceptance of homosexuality. At the same time, he perceives his sexuality as potentially disruptive to heterosexual women's sense of self, as if this woman would blame herself for his sexual de-orientation. Regina and Lucretia point to the changing standard, and thereby the expectation, of women having more than one sexual partner:

Lucretia: "You think she's the only girl to sleep with a gay dude?"

Regina: "We've all done it at least once." (8:52)

The Upshaw's kitchen table is used as an orientation device; the conversations here orient the family as they interact with broader society. Ahmed states, "the table is the only thing that keeps its place in the flow of perception" and staged in the sitcom orients viewers because of the familiarity of the object (2006, 548). The affective background images of the kitchen table comprise a cluster of promises, a fantasy of the good life. In the Upshaws, the compiling fantasy of the Evan's and Smith-Banks' kitchen table has someone frayed and is replaced with a new fantasy of the good life which includes overt self-acceptance and family support. However, this fantasy is still at the expense of the matriarchal figures; Regina and Lucretia are central in providing the reproductive labor, emotional and physical, of the family.

On the Next Episode of...

Ahmed states, “we need to face an object’s background, redefined as not only the conditions for the emergence of the object but also the act of perceiving the object, which depends on the arrival of the body that perceives” (2006, 549). The kitchen table is not a neutral object; it is a disciplining object curated as a conventional site full of behavioral expectations. The kitchen table is both a metaphor and microcosm of the State. I have anchored this formation of the object and the perceiving body during the Medieval Age when literature around etiquette and the anatomy theater developed social rules to discipline body, thereby defining the ideal state-citizen. Modern sensibility is characterized as displaying a practical insensibility. Sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste are all used to deaden the body. The natural functions of the body become unsightly, and the goal was to minimize evidence of its physical existence. Etiquette and the anatomy theater together, however, produced identities/tropes/stereotypes bolstered by affective assemblages. Those who can fulfill the expectations of the site of the kitchen table, make the behaviors a habit, may have a seat at the table, in-habit.

I argued the television sitcom was a re-presentation effecting the same disciplinary goals of etiquette and anatomy theater, itself an affective assemblage. The sitcom, however, has a subversive function. But that depends on the perception of the viewer. Although the viewer is not participating in the scene, they are immersed in a phantasmagoric experience through the television. The sensations acted out in the sitcom act upon a perception of the viewer whose sensations are the result of a historical process, informed by a historical sensorium. As the sitcom plays out, scenes at the kitchen table have the potential to challenge antiquated conventions but also use the portrayal of the senses to evoke them with the consequence of their continuity.

Bibliography

1. Ahmed, S. (2006). Orientations: toward a queer phenomenology. *Glq -New York-*, 12(4), 543–574.
2. Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
3. Butler, J. G. (2019). *The sitcom*. Routledge.
4. Carson, A. (1994). The gender of sound: description, definition, and mistrust of the female voice in western culture. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 23(3), 24-31.
5. Carter, B. (2019, February 14). Black History: Black Families in Television and Film. Los Angeles Sentinel. <https://lasentinel.net/black-history-black-families-in-television-and-film.html>
6. DISSpublish. (2021, November 22). *BOOK LAUNCH: Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/QGkVE9Z5ryQ>.
7. Epstein, C. (2020). *Birth of the state : the place of the body in crafting modern politics*. Oxford University Press.
8. Fretwell, E. (2020). *Sensory experiments : psychophysics, race, and the aesthetics of feeling*. Duke University Press.
9. Holbert, R. L., Shah, D. V., & Kwak, N. (2003). Political implications of prime-time drama and sitcom use: genres of representation and opinions concerning women's rights. *Journal of Communication*, 53, 45–60.
10. Medina, B. (Writer), Pollack, J. (Writer), Borowitz, A. (Writer) & Gittelsohn, E. (Director). (1991, October 14). Guess Who's Coming to Marry? (Season 2, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In Q. Jones, D. Salzman, A. Borowitz, S. Borowitz, W. Hervey (Executive Producers), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Stuffed Dog Company; Quincy Jones Entertainment.
11. Monte, E. (Writer), Evans, M. (Writer) & Kenwith, H. (Director). (1975, February 11). The Dinner Party (Season 2, Episode 19) [TV series episode]. In N. Lear, A. Manings, A. Kalish, N. Paul (Executive Producers), *Good Times*. Tandem Productions.
12. Levine, A. (Writer), Emerson, J. (Writer) & Epps, S. (Director). (2021, May 12). The Backslide (Season 1, Episode 10) [TV series episode]. In R. Hicks, W. Sykes, P. Hurwitz, M. Epps, N. Kirchner (Executive Producers), *The Upshaws*. Savannah Sweet Productions; Push it Productions; Naptown Productions.

13. Schuller, K. (2018). *The biopolitics of feeling : race, sex, and science in the nineteenth century* (Ser. Anima). Duke University Press.