

# Introduction

On September 15, 1952, *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) aired “Job Switching” for the first time. In this episode, Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) and Ethel Mertz (Vivian Vance) and their respective husbands, Ricky (Desi Arnaz) and Fred (William Frawley), disagree on whether men or women have it harder. In order to test their theories, the wives go to work, while the husbands take over the responsibilities at home. Lucy and Ethel get jobs at a candy factory, where their task is to wrap the bonbons traveling down a conveyor belt (Figure 1). When the belt speeds up, the women cannot keep up with their duties and hide the chocolates in their blouses, hats, and mouths. They are presented as incapable buffoons, the comedy a clear backlash against the capable “Rosie the Riveter” figure central to the war effort a decade earlier.<sup>1</sup> The writing is literally on the wall: the sign behind them says “Danger,” while the door on the right side of the screen reads “Kitchen”: when a woman leaves the home, the results can only be disastrous. This danger is averted, however, with the episode’s conclusion, the gendered distribution of labor happily restored—the women at home and the men back at work.

Though the comedy upholds a return to order by episode’s end, the assembly line sequence contains multiple and, at times, contradictory meanings. Many interpretations of this famous scene have focused on performance. Two women performers simultaneously embedded in and resisting the “machinery” of collaborative labor through failure speaks



FIGURE 1. Lucy (Lucille Ball) and Ethel (Vivian Vance) struggle to keep up with the pace of their work in “Job Switching,” *I Love Lucy*. © 1952 CBS Television.

to Patricia Mellencamp’s point that “if Lucy’s plots for ambition and fame *narratively* failed, with the result that she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity, *performatively* they succeeded.”<sup>2</sup> The joke may be on Lucy and Ethel, but never on Lucille Ball or Vivian Vance, who triumphantly ape failure and, in the process, make fun of (and with) a dumb, automated machine. Sianne Ngai echoes this sentiment by asking rhetorically: “Although Lucy Ricardo’s efforts to break into showbiz by way of multiple odd jobs never succeed, do not these failures testify constantly to the virtuosity of the professional actress Lucille Ball?”<sup>3</sup> Through her impeccable execution of Lucy Ricardo the klutz, Lucille Ball establishes herself as a comic virtuoso. The specter of Charles Chaplin’s Tramp from *Modern Times* (1936) looms, but the work-weary Everyman is replaced by a contemporary Everywoman whose work is never done. In performing this homage to Chaplin, Ball inducts herself into a distinguished comic lineage.

But the Tramp is not the only invisible figure haunting the comedy: there is also the aforementioned Madelyn Pugh, *I Love Lucy*’s woman staff writer, who worked alongside writing partner Bob Carroll and producer Jess Oppenheimer. With Pugh at its interpretative heart, this assembly-line slapstick can also be understood as an industry artifact: that of the woman writer rushing to get the words typed in time. The relentlessly fast-paced production schedule was a hallmark of television

writing in the network era (1952–1980s), writer Dorothy Foote (*My Three Sons*) remarking that, “One learns quickly that time is of the essence.”<sup>4</sup> As Norman Lear (*All in the Family*, *One Day at a Time*) would recall his early career: “We were all last minute writers,” while writer Horton Foote (*The Philco Television Playhouse*, *The United States Steel Hour*) moved on to stage and film writing, because television writing “would be death. You’d be churning things out, week after week after week. You’re just bound to go crazy.”<sup>5</sup> And as *I Love Lucy*’s Madelyn Pugh details in her memoir, she and Carroll hoped the show would be interrupted by news coverage “so [they] could get a week ahead because no one did reruns in those days.”<sup>6</sup> She describes breaking into their office and working through holidays in the desperate effort to keep up.

This stringent set of professional expectations and constraints are only compounded for women balancing work and family. Pugh cracks wise about a different episode in which Lucy “likes having a career, but finds it keeps her from spending time with her son so she quits,” adding, dryly, “I wonder where that idea came from.”<sup>7</sup> Pugh quit the entertainment business for a short time to stay home with her children, but she returned to Ball’s employ, having missed her work too much to stay away. Lucy Ricardo’s desire to work, her containment to the home, and the meta-escape through Ball’s comic stardom coincide with Pugh’s personal narrative and her authorial perspective. The scene internalizes the tensions of Pugh’s own choices: it takes a woman’s desire to work outside the home, puts it through the conservative ideological “machine” of the self-contained sitcom, and pops out an ending in which Lucy and Ethel do what Pugh and Ball did not, namely return to the kitchen.<sup>8</sup>

Pugh is just one of the many women who wrote during the earliest days of commercial television, contributing to the formation of television as both an industry and an art form. Women worked as freelance or staff writers and story editors, and some even created and managed their own shows decades before the advent of the term “showrunner,” defined by Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine as “potentially an *auteur*: an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft, and whose presence in cultural discourses functions to produce authority for” the medium.<sup>9</sup> In these different capacities, women writers, writer-producers, and story department professionals forged key genres for the small screen: comedy-variety, family serial, daytime soap, suspense anthology. Postwar women television writers between the years 1949 to 1963 navigated an industry that sought to capitalize on female viewership while keeping executive power

largely in men's hands. These women, including, but not restricted to, Lucille Kallen, Selma Diamond, Gertrude Berg, Peg Lynch, Joan Harrison, Charlotte Armstrong, and Irna Phillips, were, by and large, white, middle-class, and educated. Through modes of communication and self-fashioning, women television writers often forged public personas that downplayed issues of craft or artistry in favor of traditionally feminine virtues such as collegiality, emotionality, and competence when caring for others. Their statements on marriage and family ranged from the glowing to the sharply critical. Those writers who were married with children explained how their experiences made them ideally equipped to write for the new domestic medium of television; those who were single mourned or mocked their unmarried state, suggesting that their loss could be television's gain. By speaking regularly and publicly about their male collaborators—husbands, cowriters, industry allies—women writers could show how well they played with others, particularly when those others were men.<sup>10</sup>

Women writers' stories often followed the misadventures of full-time homemakers. However, as we see from the candy assembly line sequence in *I Love Lucy*, the housewife character can be both the stay-at-home matriarch and the creative professional in disguise. This interpretative doubleness serves as a testament to the *scripted lives* women television writers led: writing scripts about marriage and motherhood that obliquely addressed their shared professional travails, while crafting public personas that drew on dominant cultural idioms of white, middle-class femininity. Women writers' creative work and their personal personas were intertwined, mutually sustaining narratives, carefully packaged for the benefit of dubious industry executives and a general viewing public.

The best-known women writers in television reconciled cultural contradictions in their public lives: speaking confidently but modestly, being forceful yet gentle, and making holding down the full-time jobs of writer, wife, and mother look easy and intuitive. Many writers lived out loud and in line with the genres they innovated, leaning into their roles as nifty goofballs, tireless wives and mothers, heartsick spinsters, and unflappable ice blondes.<sup>11</sup> As *All My Children* creator Agnes Nixon described her protégée, soap opera pioneer Irna Phillips (chapter 4), Phillips was “her own best creation,” weaving the story of her personal tragedies and triumphs as a kind of real-life soap.<sup>12</sup> Often, women writers' scripts document the strain of performing postwar femininity more directly than their interviews or publicity materials might permit. In his

theorization of production culture, John Thornton Caldwell asserts that “although critics seldom acknowledge film/video workers as theorists or ethnographers, these workers do in fact produce ‘self-ethnographic’ accounts and daily deploy . . . *critical industrial practices*.”<sup>13</sup> By rereading women writers’ scripts as “self-ethnographic,” a common set of professional objectives and narrative themes emerges across writer, series, and genre, the complicated, often ambivalent, gender politics of early television and of postwar culture on full display.

This study stands at the intersection of television studies and media industry studies, leveraging the latter to produce new readings of both famous and lesser-known programs of the period. Commercial television underwent a series of important shifts over the course of its first ten years, most notably the gradual move from New York to Los Angeles and the shift from mostly live broadcasts to pre-filmed content.<sup>14</sup> With these changes came even bigger changes in genre, aesthetic, and the talent pool from which the industry drew. The scripted lives of women writers in postwar television come into focus when viewed through the lens of these industry changes and the understanding that the ground was always shifting beneath writers’ feet. Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic compare the movements of institutions and individuals by calling them, respectively, corporate *strategies* and subjects’ *tactics*. Individual tactics are “the ways in which cultural workers seek to negotiate, and at times perhaps subvert, the constraints imposed by institutional interests.”<sup>15</sup> The media object internalizes this tension between strategy and tactic, pointing to the many voices and interests that shape the politics of television programming. Many postwar television histories frame the period through the lens of the corporate need to sell homogeneity and ivory soap. Accounts that emphasize institutional strategies can miss how women writers tactically made space in their scripts to argue for their own relevance to the television industry, ventriloquizing their arguments through fictionalized characters and premises.

The primary platform from which writers could make their cases was growing fast. Television set ownership increased quickly over the course of the decade, the medium became what Anna McCarthy calls a “citizen machine,” a force with the power to sustain—but also to potentially undermine—dominant ideologies.<sup>16</sup> Under 1 percent of American residences had televisions in 1946 and only 9 percent in 1950. But by 1955, special deals, financing, and access to personal credit made television ownership accessible to a large swath of middle-class America,

and the number climbed to 65 percent of American residences in 1955 and 88 percent in 1960.<sup>17</sup> Lynn Spigel explains that in the years following World War II, “consumer spending rose by 60 percent . . . most significant[ly] . . . in household furnishings and consumer appliances, which increased by 240 percent. In this land of plenty, television would become one of the most sought-after products.”<sup>18</sup> These statistics speak to television’s growing audience and, with it, the growing centrality of the medium in everyday life.

Sponsors pursued women viewer-consumers in particular, not only by sponsoring soap operas and talk shows in the daytime hours, but also through putting money into prime-time programming. Revlon bankrolled the popular game show, *The \$64,000 Question* (CBS, 1955–1958), spending a “whopping 25 percent of its retail sales on advertising and promotion” with the express purpose of cornering the female demographic.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, a Purex-sponsored daytime special on sexual frigidity was so popular that women audiences demanded it be rebroadcast in the evening for men to watch too.<sup>20</sup> Just as the home was treated as the woman’s domain, so too was the television, Spigel describing how “illustrations and advertisements in women’s magazines . . . suggested ways for women to control their husband’s sexual desires through television” and that “television . . . was shown to contain men’s pleasure by circumscribing it within the confines of domestic space and placing it under the auspices of women.”<sup>21</sup> Women viewers were treated as the keepers of the set and were thus valued by sponsors and networks alike. The tastes and preferences of women were paramount, whether that meant agencies sponsoring women’s preferred genres or networks finding a prominent place to air women’s favorite stars.

The increasing visibility of television’s homegrown personalities, largely imported from film and radio, contributed to the popular curiosity around how television shows were made and what was happening behind the scenes.<sup>22</sup> This interest extended beyond the fandoms of individual performers to include attention to writers and producers with profiles and interviews published in publications ranging from industry trade paper *Variety* to Norman Rockwell’s magazine of choice, the *Saturday Evening Post*. As television became more entrenched in the middle-class home, so too did the figure of the writer—and the woman television writer specifically—took root in the American imagination. The woman television writer deliberately labored in public view, so any viewer who watched the end credits of a favorite series, watched interview programs, or read fan magazines would know she was there.

How does the presence of the woman writer on television change how Americans might have understood or processed what they were watching? The meanings of television series and programs are neither singular nor overdetermined. Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, in their essay on television as a cultural forum, write that “ritual and the arts offer a metalanguage,” and that television specifically “present[s] a multiplicity of meanings . . . focus[ing] on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas.”<sup>23</sup> The inherent polysemy of television stems from the multiple authors and constructive forces that, to quote Stuart Hall, “encode” meaning into their scripts; audiences “decode” these meanings using their own contexts, feelings, and sets of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> And one possibility that Lynn Spigel offers to this decoding process is one of “women us[ing] TV to invert sexist hierarchies” and empowering themselves through their viewing and their stewardship of the set.<sup>25</sup> Exploring the place of women writers’ scripted lives in their broader cultural contexts reveals how shows demanded to be read at the time and how they need to be understood now: as precursors of second-wave feminist rhetoric and identity.

So, while the personal was not yet political for women writers in postwar television, the personal *was* professional—both for the writers themselves and for the characters they created. Women writing across genre used their shows and celebrity to showcase the challenges of all forms of women’s work: in the home, behind the typewriter, and within the television industry. They advocated for their own careers—and, by extension, for the value of women’s labor more broadly—through a critique of the postwar cult of domesticity. Elaine Tyler May describes gender roles in Cold War suburbia as widespread “domestic containment,” a nation-wide policy in which the woman’s patriotic duty is to manage the home while raising their children to be model citizens.<sup>26</sup> Allison McCracken, in her work on radio thrillers, explores the mechanisms of these cultural pressures:

Government propaganda, psychiatric discourses, and the media suggested that women who did not want to leave the work world to occupy their proper roles within the family were a threat to society generally. . . . Men and women who did not perform these roles were seen as deviant, immature, homosexual, psychotic.<sup>27</sup>

But although white women were being told to report home for duty, many declined to answer the call. Between the years 1950 and 1963, the percentage of women working outside the home jumped from 18.3 million

to 24.7 million, and by 1962, more than 60 percent of those women were married.<sup>28</sup> So, even as television narratives seemed to suggest that white, middle-class women had uniformly returned to the home, this was not only a myth, but some of the mythmakers were themselves working women.

The public-facing woman television writer highlights the truth of this historical moment: that a number of women remained in the postwar workforce by choice, not out of necessity, and that white, middle-class women were not just consumers of media but makers as well. As *Lucy's* “girl writer” Pugh explains: “I mean, no one actually wanted to hire women in 1944, but what else was there? I believe there was some theory going around that women were just filling in until all the men came home from the war and then things would go back like they used to be. Surprise!”<sup>29</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz explores this fissure between lived experience and media representation in the 1994 anthology *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, a title that directly confronts the extent to which television representation shapes contemporary reckonings with the past. In her introduction, Meyerowitz explains how “the postwar story is a romance steeped in nostalgic longings for an allegedly simpler . . . time . . . [but] many women were not white middle-class, married, and suburban; and many white middle-class, married, and suburban women were neither wholly domestic nor quiescent.”<sup>30</sup> The fictional archetype of the exemplary housewife can thus index the “multidimensional complexity” and ideological oppositions of postwar femininity, particularly when she has been coauthored or cocreated by professional women.<sup>31</sup> For example, *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS, ABC, 1957–1963), the sitcom in which June Cleaver features so prominently, had a number of women writers, including Katherine Albert and Mathilde Ferro, both of whose husbands also wrote on the show.

The stories women television writers told tweaked and even lampooned the cultural ideal of the happy homemaker. Lucy and Ethel may have made a mess of their job at the factory, but meanwhile, at home, Ricky and Fred were botching their baking so royally that the grotesque loaf actually breaks down the oven’s door. (Like the women, away at work, this bread resists its own domestic containment.) And as Gothic and suspense dramas revealed the home as a site of claustrophobia and danger, soaps thematized the tightness of the domestic space—and of daytime television budgets—as indicative of broader family and societal strains. Even when attempting to mask the sexism of American life, these genres inadvertently exposed the misogyny threaded throughout

postwar mass culture. Movies and television internalized these contradictions and manufactured new ones: Were women innocent beach-loving teens or corrupt femmes fatales? Was a mother's love essential to the health of the free world, or was her smothering, emasculating affection a threat to the global order?

Women writers' television scripts confronted the no-win situation many women found themselves in—desperately needed but constantly criticized, busy yet bored—and took further aim at rampant consumerism, women's diminished political autonomy, and stringent beauty ideals. In her history of consumer culture in the twentieth century, Lizabeth Cohen examines how women held active roles in unions and consumer protection movements throughout the 1930s and '40s, but that, in the postwar period, “the gendering of the ‘consumer’ . . . shifted from women to couples”; this new and “persistent male presence on what often is assumed to be purely female terrain” amounted to women's demotion across both the public and private spheres.<sup>32</sup> The rise of consumer spending and the decline in financial independence for middle-class women coincided with an increasing reliance on kitchen technologies. Mass culture encouraged women to take their newly freed-up time to lose weight, fix their hair, and turn themselves into desirable commodities, all in the eternal quest to keep up with the Joneses. As Elizabeth M. Matelski details in her work on the postwar female ideal, the “renewed emphasis on domesticity required a rededication to cosmetic standards,” amounting to a rise in breast-augmentation surgeries and severe “reducing” diet regimens.<sup>33</sup> Women writers for television circled these issues in their scripts without explicitly crossing into the territory of “political” or “radical,” and they crafted similar public personas that balanced the progressive and the traditional, the professional and the domestic.

Thus, even as both husbands and wives felt oppressed by what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the masculine “breadwinner ethic,” female-authored scripts dismantled the dream of the domestic ideal and, in the process, argued for women writers' value to the television industry.<sup>34</sup> Women's scripts explore the struggles of balancing professional and familial responsibilities; of playing dumb and hiding one's savvy; and of accruing power and agency without giving offense. Not only did women writers thus narrativize the struggles of working women in their scripts, but they also offered hopeful, even liberating, visions of egalitarian marriages, scripted stories of supportive, if challenging, relationships between female characters, and staged moments in which women are recognized for their hard work and sacrifice.

While some women undermined the cult of domesticity by writing about rebellious, misfit housewives, others wrote of proficient matriarchs whose skills and insights overlap with those of the competent television professional. Women like Irna Phillips, Gertrude Berg, and Peg Lynch (chapters 3 and 4) posited themselves as managers of domestic matters and virtuosic nurturers, and their fictional characters were much the same. With respect and care, they portrayed the complexities of women's lives and work, both in their scripts and through their public personas as wives, mothers, and writers. By equating the maintenance of marriage and family with the running of a television show, women writers could discuss the creativity, ingenuity, and discipline required of television writers without sounding intimidating or careerist themselves.

The challenge set before the woman writer, then, was analogous to that of the middle-class housewife being expected to cook “creative[ly] . . . in very structured, controlled ways . . . while accounting for family members' tastes [and] . . . balancing very real budget and time limitations.”<sup>35</sup> Being creative but structured, assessing the needs of others, and keeping to a budget and a timeline: all these skills describe the ideal postwar homemaker but equally apply to the aspiring television professional. To that end, women television writers articulated what Jessica Weiss calls the “mid-twentieth-century . . . maternalism,” an ideology based on “women's nurturing, which women employed outside of the home as well as within it.”<sup>36</sup> These stereotypically feminine strengths and qualities did not condemn a woman's professional aspirations—quite the contrary, by their own account. Television required both a mother's love and her organizational prowess.

By making this claim, women writers, together with their fictional on-screen proxies, revised what Lynn Spigel calls the “spatial hierarchies” of the masculinized public sphere and the femininized private home.<sup>37</sup> Television, much like its forerunner, radio, troubled the distinction between the public and the private, bringing scripted entertainments both light and melodramatic, as well as news, lifestyle programming, and quiz shows into the American home. Radio serials in particular focused on the minor goings-on of family life, composed of what Spigel calls “incidents . . . as they might be told when neighbors visit,” allowing housewives to listen while doing their housework.<sup>38</sup> But unlike radio, television added a visual track, the story no longer living in the imagination of the listener but unfolding on-screen. Television writers, directors, and art directors worked together to establish the domestic space for the small screen, but as any *Good Housekeeping* reader knew