

Department of Humanities, Northumbria University

Honours Dissertation

Representing the 1970s on TV: *That '70s Show*

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Introduction

In popular imagination, the legacy of the 1970s is largely dominated by concepts such as the remnants of the 1960s counterculture, feminism, sexual liberation, a revival of conservatism in tandem with an emerging new liberalism, and staunch anti-communism. The central aim of this dissertation is to examine how some critical themes of the 'long 1970s' have been portrayed on the highly popular sitcom *That '70s Show*, with a focus on the counterculture, drugs, casual sex, feminism, and race and ethnicity. For the purpose of this dissertation, the 'long 1970s' refers to the period from the emergence of the counterculture in the early-to-mid-1960s until 1980. *That '70s Show* was an American sitcom set in the fictional town of Point Place, Wisconsin. The show was based around a group of six adolescent friends and set in the period from May 1976 to December 1979. The sitcom, which had an episode count of 200, first aired on Fox in August 1998 and ran for eight seasons until its finale in May 2006. This allows for an analysis of how key themes of the 1970s have been dealt with in a show filmed two decades later – in which the social, cultural and political climate had evolved but, nonetheless, demonstrated similarities to that of the 1970s. This dissertation will explore whether the writers and producers of *That '70s Show* were merely depicting issues that dominated 1970s America, or if they were also conveying contemporary issues that were prevalent during the show's production.

It should be noted that *That '70s Show* was not the first televisual rendering of the 1970s. Aired on CBS from 1971 until 1979, *All In The Family* was set and filmed in the 1970s. Similarly, there were portrayals of the 1970s on television in subsequent decades. *The Wonder Years* ran from 1988 to 1993 on ABC. Thus, *That '70s Show* was not only in dialogue with the zeitgeist of 1970s America, but was also reminiscent and reflective of previous sitcoms set in the 1970s. Whilst this is an interesting point to note, this is not the main focus of this dissertation.

The 1970s is often regarded as a 'joke' decade that did little to achieve change. However, the 1970s is integral to the making of modern America. Race, gender, politics, economy and culture were all transformed during this decade.¹ There is a vast literature on America in the 1960s, but rather less on the 1970s, which is sometimes reduced to an epilogue to the 1960s or a preamble to Ronald Reagan's America of the 1980s. Moreover, the literature that does cover 1970s America often fails to discuss the portrayal of key themes on television. Therefore, this dissertation will attempt to enhance the existing historical debates surrounding the 1970s, whilst creating a new avenue for discussion – namely, the portrayal of key aspects of the 1970s in popular culture through the examination of a hugely successful American sitcom.

A 1998 issue of *The Hollywood Reporter* noted, "As the countdown winds down to the 1998-99 television season, Fox comedy "That '70s Show" debuted as the No. 1 program among adults 18-49 during the week ending Aug. 23. The Carsey-Werner sitcom swept its Sunday 8:30 p.m. time slot in all key demographics and outdelivered its "Simpsons" lead-in – a first for any Fox series".² This shows the immediate popularity of the show amongst an audience of different ages. It is interesting to consider which aspects of the show appealed to which age groups. Perhaps the humour, and discussion of liberal ideas such as casual sex and marijuana, appealed to the baby boom youth, whilst it is plausible that the older generations could relate to the depiction of 1970s life, and the show may have even invoked a sense of nostalgia and led to a reminiscence of their youth. Regardless of the reasons for watching the show, it is undeniable that *That '70s Show* enjoyed great success and appealed to a diverse audience.

¹ Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, 'Introduction', in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 4-5.

² 'Young Adults Revisiting '70s Fox Sitcom Bows Atop 18-49 Demo; NBC Extends Streak to 21', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 26 August 1998, p. 1, available at https://www.nexis.com/results/enhdocview.do?docNo=10&backKey=20_T27093973761&ersKey=23_T27093966928&format=GNBFI&pubTreeMax=false&csi=12015&pubTreeWidth=null, accessed 26 January 2018.

One of the most prominent legacies of the long 1970s were the new, more relaxed social norms that emerged – largely due to the often liberal, progressive and revolutionary attitudes of the baby boomer youth. From this generation, the counterculture emerged, spreading ideas of free love, psychedelics, and rock ‘n’ roll music. Although the movement peaked in the 1960s, and its prominence lessened in the 1970s, its core values had revolutionised thought, particularly amongst the youth, and continued to live on in subsequent decades, even if the movement had died out as a dominant force. Thus, the first chapter focuses on social issues, exploring the portrayal of the counterculture, with drugs and casual sex as the main topics of discussion. The counterculture was a complex movement and ‘hippies’ could not be defined or identified just by appearance or stereotypes. The movement had a vast and diverse following, with different interests and, importantly, different styles.³ *That ‘70s Show* is a useful source within this discourse, as the countercultural values of drugs and casual sex are prominent themes throughout the show. As *That ‘70s Show* was filmed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it portrays the nature of these topics as they dominated 1970s America, but also shows that these issues remained prevalent during the show’s production.

As well as exploring the show’s portrayal of drugs and casual sex, this chapter attempts to analyse the way in which attitudes towards these topics had, or had not, evolved from the 1970s to the late 1990s and early 2000s. The inclusion of drugs and casual sex suggests that such matters were still hot topics that divided Americans when the show was being filmed. Whilst it is important to consider the attitudes towards drugs and sex in the era in which the show was set, it is equally as important to take into account the contemporary context, and the conflicting opinions and national anxieties surrounding these topics that prevailed whilst the show was being filmed.

³ Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 243.

Transitioning from casual sex to sexual discrimination and gender inequalities, the second chapter attempts to analyse the portrayal of feminism within *That '70s Show*. Second wave feminism dominated the 1960s and 1970s, with many women demanding equal pay and job opportunities, whilst several women also promoted the image of the 'independent woman' and sexual freedom. Throughout the 1970s, and in following decades, women were entirely divided over issues surrounding female sexualisation, nudity, and male pleasure.⁴ Whilst more traditional, conservative feminists often felt that the sexualisation of the woman only strengthened the patriarchy, more liberal feminists often felt empowered by portraying oneself as sexual, and felt they had the right to use their sexual prowess as they so pleased.

Divided beliefs amongst women, as well as conflicting types of femininity, are consistently portrayed within *That '70s Show*, and the sitcom's frequent depiction of feminism reflects the widespread influence of the movement – both in the 1970s, and during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Whilst second wave feminism was prominent in the long 1970s, third wave feminism had established itself as a dominant force during the filming of *That '70s Show*. The sitcom's inclusion of feminism as a key theme did not merely reflect issues concerning gender discrimination and inequality that existed in the 1970s, but in the years of production as well. The prominence of feminism as a key theme in *That '70s Show* shows that issues regarding the feminist movement, gender inequalities, and the patriarchy still existed when the show was being filmed in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The third chapter analyses the portrayal of racism, race relations, and attitudes towards ethnic minorities in *That '70s Show*. Throughout the 1960s, the civil rights movement grew into an overwhelmingly powerful and influential movement, and had achieved monumental successes. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Jim Crow segregation had been criminalised and, in theory, racial inequalities had ended. However, racist attitudes and

⁴ See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006).

discrimination still lingered and hindered the progress and quality of life of African Americans.⁵ This racial discrimination is carefully depicted in *That '70s Show*, reflecting the problematic racial attitudes that existed in the 1970s, and remained prevalent during the years in which the show was filmed. As well as focusing on African Americans, this dissertation will examine the show's portrayal of Latin Americans, considering the show's depiction of racial stereotypes and representation of ethnic minorities, and how this reflected the national zeitgeist of the 1970s, as well as that of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Although this dissertation examines a sitcom set in the 1970s, it is crucial to recognise that *That '70s Show* largely depicts social, cultural and political issues that existed during the show's production. Whilst the show does seek to portray life in 1970s America, it is clear that the writers and producers also sought to reflect contemporary topics that dominated America whilst the show was being filmed. Rather than taking the show's 1970s setting at face value, it is interesting to delve deeper and contextualise the show's key themes in terms of contemporary national anxieties and debates. Although the show was being filmed two decades after the period in which it was set, it is likely that the production team were using the image of the 1970s in order to convey topics, issues, attitudes, and debates that dominated America during filming. This dissertation will seek to explore the ways in which *That '70s Show* portrayed key themes of the 1970s but, just as importantly, how writers and producers used the show as a platform upon which they could convey contemporary issues that dominated America in late 1990s and early 2000s.

⁵ F. Michael Higginbotham, *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p.30.

Chapter 1 - Counterculture, Drugs, and Casual Sex: 1970s

Social Issues

This chapter will examine the portrayal of the American counterculture in *That '70s Show*, with a main focus on drugs and casual sex. Although the counterculture emerged in the 1960s, a number of its core values and stereotypes surrounding the movement lived on in subsequent decades – particularly casual sex and the use of marijuana. These are themes that are featured throughout *That '70s Show*, and the aim of this chapter is to identify the depiction of such issues and, importantly, to assess whether this depiction is accurate to what 'really' happened in the 1970s. Moreover, it is interesting to question why ideas about the counterculture were still being used in a show filmed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The mere fact that the 1970s counterculture was being depicted on a television decades later is striking in itself, and leads us to question why this topic appealed to audiences at the turn of the century.

A dominant theme in *That '70s Show* is the use of marijuana, with countless references to it throughout the entire duration of the show. A common set up sees the group of teenagers sitting in a circle which, although it is never explicitly stated, implies that they are sharing weed – which emphasises the 'community' focus that existed within the counterculture. In the late 1960s, hippies set up their own communities in areas such as the renowned counterculture epicentre Haight-Ashbury, and often established rural communes in which they aimed to live amongst one another in peace and harmony, in the hope that they would inspire the wider American society.⁶

Use of marijuana was a defining factor amongst the 1960s counterculture and holds a prominent presence within *That '70s Show's* depiction of the 1970s. Although drugs existed and were used prior to the 1960s, it was the emergence of the counterculture movement that

⁶ John Robert Howard, 'The Flowering of the Hippie Movement', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 382 (1969), p. 43.

popularised marijuana use on such a large scale and birthed a drug culture that had existed ever since. In the 1960s, many American citizens shared the government's opinion that the use of illegal drugs was dangerous and harmful. The parents of the baby boom generation feared the mental and physical effects that drugs could have on their children – as well as worrying about the widespread belief that experimenting with marijuana could act as a gateway to harder drugs.⁷

Within the show, the use of marijuana is an issue that produces entirely divided opinions amongst characters. Red and Kitty Forman – the main parental figures – are staunchly opposed to marijuana and see it as an evil substance that can ruin lives. When countercultural teen Steven Hyde is wrongly jailed for marijuana possession, Red demonstrates a no-tolerance approach to drugs and tells Hyde that he is kicking him out.⁸ Moreover, when the teenage boys get caught smoking marijuana, Kitty lectures them, stating, “Do you know what drugs do to you? They shrink your brain until, one day, you wake up and you think you're superman and you can fly and then you wind up jumping off the roof”.⁹

In the 1970s, the majority of specialist medical literature on the correlation between drugs and mental health emphasised the negative effects of marijuana use – often failing to note the positive effects of the substance. Many users would discuss the positives of the drug, but this was often omitted in favour of stressing the instances in which users had faced psychiatric disorders after using marijuana. Often, studies were unreliable and results were taken from small groups. Moreover, studies frequently stressed that many psychiatric patients had a history of drug use – but, this does not necessarily demonstrate a clear link between drug use and mental health problems. These studies were of little use, or no use at all, in regards to drug use amongst the majority of the population and, instead, created inaccurate misconceptions surrounding marijuana use.¹⁰ This is

⁷ David Farber, 'The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation', in Peter Braunstein and Michal William Doyle (eds.), *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s & '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 34.

⁸ 'Reefer Madness', *That '70s Show*, Series 3, Episode 1, 3 October, 2008, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

⁹ 'Til the Next Goodbye', *That '70s Show*, Series 7, Episode 25, 18 May, 2005, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

¹⁰ Walter R. Gove et al., 'Drug Use and Mental Health among a Representative National Sample of Young Adults', *Social Forces*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1979), pp. 573-574.

useful in understanding the attitudes of those who opposed marijuana use in the 1970s, and clarifies the negative image of weed that was particularly common amongst parents.

In 1998, a publication in *The Washington Post* revealed the problems surrounding *That '70s Show's* portrayal of drug use. The article states, "In one scene, the kids in the basement rec room get goofy on pot while their parents party upstairs. That's drawn some early criticism to "That '70s Show"".¹¹ Clearly, in the late 1990s, the debate surrounding marijuana was still a sensitive, divisive issue, and some viewers and critics found the depiction of the topic problematic. In 1999, a *Gallup* opinion poll revealed that the vast majority of Americans continued to oppose the general legalisation of marijuana, with a mere 29% of participants supporting it, whilst 69% remained opposed. Interestingly, in a series of opinion polls carried out from 1979, support for the legalisation of marijuana had fluctuated between 23% and 28%.¹² Evidently, the national anxieties concerning marijuana that existed in the late 1970s were just as prevalent in the late 1990s. Whilst *That '70s Show* appeared to depict American life in the 1970s, it seems that the writers and producers were also portraying contemporary issues that existed throughout America during the show's filming. Perhaps conveying contemporary issues in a sitcom, particularly one set in a previous era, allowed the production team to convey sensitive, divisive issues in a light-hearted manner.

Despite parental disapproval, all of the main teenage characters enjoy taking drugs and consistently talk about and/or smoke marijuana throughout the show. This generational contrast was common amongst the baby boomers and their wartime, traditional parents who would have grown up in an America that did not openly experiment with marijuana, and in which drugs were a

¹¹ 'Series Debuts: Two Fox Sitcoms: 'That 70s Show', 'Holding the Baby', *The Washington Post*, 23 August 1998, p. 3, available at <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1620256311/fulltextPDF/DF370AC007B84E11PQ/6?accountid=12860>, accessed 20 March 2018.

¹² David W. Moore, 'Americans Oppose General Legalisation Of Marijuana', *Gallup News Service*, 9 April, 1999, available at http://news.gallup.com/poll/3937/Americans-Oppose-General-Legalization-Marijuana.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Americans%2520Oppo se%2520General%2520Legalization%2520Of%2520Marijuana, accessed 27 March 2018.

taboo – except tobacco and alcohol, for many Americans. The portrayal of the baby boom generation using and enjoying marijuana in *That '70s Show* is somewhat accurate to American society in the 1970s. Fewer than 7 percent of Americans born before 1940 had used marijuana by the age of 35. However, by 1992, 12 percent of high school seniors had experimented with the drug.¹³ Moreover, in a national study conducted on men and women reaching maturity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a significant number had used marijuana before turning 16 years old.¹⁴ Thus, after the birth of the baby boom generation, marijuana use became increasingly popularised amongst younger people, which contextualises the show's depiction of the youth as 'stoners'.

The issue of marijuana legalisation has remained an extremely controversial and prominent topic in America throughout the years. Around the time that *That '70s Show* was being filmed, there was a 'Millennium Marijuana March' in New York City in which an estimated 1,000 protesters gathered to protest for the legalisation of marijuana. Protesters smoked the drug as an act of rebellion against the authorities, and many of the 312 protesters that were arrested were young people.¹⁵ Just as was the case in the 1970s, marijuana use in the early 2000s was popular amongst the American youth. This rebellious form of protest against the government, legal institutions and police departments shows glimmers of similarities to the 1960s and 1970s counterculture movement. This is interesting, as it shows that the debate surrounding marijuana use was still a hot topic in America during the filming of *That '70s Show*, and it suggests the portrayal of marijuana use amongst the liberal youth is somewhat accurate. This is extremely important, as it demonstrates how contemporary issues and anxieties can be satirised by placing them in a sitcom set in a previous

¹³ Mireille Jacobson, 'Baby Booms and Drug Busts: Trends in Youth Drug Use in the United States, 1975-2000', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 119, No. 4 (2004), p. 1484.

¹⁴ Frank L. Mott and R. Jean Haurin, 'Linkages Between Sexual Activity and Alcohol and Drug Use Among American Adolescents', *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1988), p. 128.

¹⁵ 'Suburban Youth in Marijuana Protest Meet City's Tough Justice', *The New York Times*, 9 May 2000, p. 1, available at https://www.nexis.com/results/enhdocview.do?docLinkInd=true&ersKey=23_T27093798959&format=GNBFI&startDocNo=0&resultsUrlKey=0_T27093798961&backKey=20_T27093798962&csi=6742&docNo=6, accessed 26 January 2018.

era. Although the show is set in the 1970s, it is clear that the stigma and negative attitudes towards drugs from this era were still rife during filming of *That '70s Show*.

A character that typifies a stereotypical stoner is Leo – the shabbily dressed, long-haired, laidback hippie played by Tommy Chong of Cheech and Chong. The Canadian comedian, Chong, is an avid marijuana enthusiast and promotes the legalisation of weed. Thus, casting Chong to play a character that is constantly high throughout the series, is somewhat authentic. Chong experienced the 1960s and 1970s counterculture movement first hand, which enhances the credibility of his character. Leo's dress sense demonstrates a classic countercultural influence – such as tie-dye t-shirts, hippie jewellery, and denim jackets embroidered with hearts, flowers and marijuana leaves.¹⁶

In the episode 'Long Away', it transpires that Leo is a World War Two veteran – much to the patriotic, anti-hippie Red's surprise. Discussing this with Leo, Red says, "Leo, I don't see how you could go from decorated war hero to dippy degenerate". In response, Leo explains, "Well, it all started the day I got back to the States..." – which is followed by a flashback scene of Leo and a fellow soldier, set in Fort Dixie, New Jersey, 1945. The soldier asks Leo, "What are you going to do now that the war's over, Leonard?", to which Leo replies, "First, I'm going back home to work at my dad's pharmacy...then, it's off to medical school". A car with blacked-out windows pulls over next to Leo and, as the windows are rolled down, jazz music is playing, the men in the car are all African American and the vehicle has been hotboxed with marijuana. The African American men offer Leo a lift and he, reluctantly, joins them in the car.¹⁷ Within this scene, there is a clear element of patriotism and reference to international conflict – namely World War Two. Red's "dippy degenerate" comment is interesting, as it is telling of contemporary attitudes towards the counterculture, as he clearly sees veterans as deserving more respect than hippies. Moreover, the issue of race is prominent here, with clear stereotypes surrounding African Americans. The scene associates African Americans with illegal drug use and holds them accountable for a respectable

¹⁶ 'Til the Next Goodbye'.

¹⁷ 'Long Away', *That '70s Show*, Series 8, Episode 6, 7 December, 2005, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

veteran becoming a stoner hippie – almost suggesting that they have tainted the white American man. Moreover, the men are portrayed as jazz musicians, which is a music genre birthed by African Americans. Although this scene is included for comic effect, it is clear that the writers and producers are tackling deeper issues concerning race, which existed in the long 1970s and during the show’s production.

Hyde, the edgy teen, oozes countercultural qualities – his dress sense, taste in music, love for marijuana, laidback attitude, and distrust of the American government name but a few. Ironically, this distrust of government was shared by many on the hard conservative right – both in the ‘60s/’70s and the 1990s. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal concerning Richard Nixon’s administration, and the turmoil of the Vietnam War, Americans on both ends of the political spectrum felt an increasing sense of disillusionment towards the government. Throughout the 1970s, leftist hippies and right-wing conservatives alike demonstrated antigovernmental stances.¹⁸ Importantly, the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal dominated the national political climate in 1998 – the same year that *That ‘70s Show* was first aired. Clinton had committed adultery and perjury, which only strengthened the disillusionment with politicians that had existed across the political spectrum since the 1970s. This context explains the inclusion of the topic in *That ‘70s Show*, and demonstrates the fact that the writers and producers were satirising contemporary America, as well as conveying the political situation of the 1970s.

Hyde meets a punk girl who rides a motorbike, and he states, “Mother of God, I think I love you” – to which the girl responds, “Love is an outdated concept used by industrialists to keep women subservient”.¹⁹ Hyde then daydreams of the girl with the traditional anarchist symbol above her head whilst ‘Anarchy in the U.K.’ by *Sex Pistols* plays in the background.²⁰ This is a representation

¹⁸ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 140-141.

¹⁹ ‘Punk Chick’, *That ‘70s Show*, Series 1, Episode 22, 21 June, 1999, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

of the counterculture's cynicism regarding societal concepts and questioning of established order. Moreover, the reference to anarchism is interesting, as the counterculture movement was often associated with the anarchist movement, due to their left-wing stance and somewhat overlapping beliefs. American Literature scholar Dr Joanna Freer noted, "in all essential regards anarchist thought mirrors the ideology of the hippies and counterculture movement more broadly".²¹

The biker girl states, "The Establishment doesn't want us having sex, because they know it makes us feel good, right? So, if we can feel good on our own, what do we need the Establishment for? So, every time we have sex, it's a huge protest".²² A lack of trust in the government, freedom with one's body and openness to casual sex, and the idea of protests are all common values associated with the counterculture of the long 1970s. This could also be interpreted more cynically than merely a demonstration of sexual freedom, as many women would have felt coerced into sex due to a fear that it was considered 'square' or pro-establishment not to do so. Moreover, this 'liberation' rhetoric was, and still is today, a common technique used by many males in order to justify their predatory attitudes towards women.

In the episode 'Going to California', Hyde says to Red, "Where are you, man – and who wants to know? The U.S. government, that's who! Like, I read by 1984 the government want tracking devices on all of us. And after that, they're gonna jam electrodes in our brains so they can read our memories! Damn U.S. government".²³ The inclusion of the year 1984 could be interpreted as a reference to George Orwell's book *1984*, which has a plotline surrounding government surveillance and manipulation of the masses under Big Brother. This is interesting, as it demonstrates links between the British and American Left – highlighting an international cynicism regarding governmental bodies and authorities that prevailed from the 1970s through the turn of the century. Moreover, the title of this episode is a reference to the Led Zeppelin song released in 1971 –

²¹ Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 95.

²² 'Punk Chick'.

²³ 'Going to California', *That '70s Show*, Series 5, Episode 1, 17 September, 2002, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

demonstrating accurate portrayal of 1970s themes, as Led Zeppelin were extremely popular amongst the American counterculture in the 1970s.

Casual sex amongst the youth is a concept that dominated the counterculture of the 1960s, and this sexual freedom survived in following years – with casual sex becoming less of a taboo and more accepted, if not always approved of, in American society. In a national study carried out on young adults in 1988, results showed that 75% of males and 50% of females had lost their virginity by the time they were 19 years old.²⁴ Casual sex is a main theme of *That '70s Show* and there are highly frequent references to sex throughout the seasons. In fact, by the fifth season, all of the six main teenage characters had lost their virginities through premarital sexual encounters. In the episode 'Parents Find Out', Eric Forman and Donna Pinciotti are caught having sex in Eric's car.²⁵ This highlights the sexual freedom that was often prominent amongst liberal teens in 1970s America. During the sexual liberation of the 1960s and following decades, the most avid participants were in their late teens and early twenties.²⁶ Thus, the fact that Donna and Eric are engaging in casual sex reflects the sexual liberation amongst the youth that existed during the period in which the show was set.

This also reflects the trend of casual sex amongst the American youth in the late 1990s, when the show was being filmed. In 2005, 31% of teens aged 13 to 17 felt that the appropriate age to engage in sexual activity was 17 years old or younger.²⁷ Clearly, the writers and producers of *That '70s Show* were not only depicting sexual behaviour of the 1970s, but were also dealing with the contemporary situation regarding casual sex amongst the American youth. Although the show is a

²⁴ Mott and Haurin, 'Linkages Between Sexual Activity and Alcohol and Drug Use Among American Adolescents', p. 128.

²⁵ 'Parents Find Out', *That '70s Show*, Series 2, Episode 19, 7 March, 2000, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

²⁶ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 146.

²⁷ Darren K. Carlson, 'Teen Survey: What's the Responsible Age for Smoking, Drinking, Sex?', *Gallup News Service*, 2 August, 2005, available at <http://news.gallup.com/poll/17611/Teen-Survey-Whats-Responsible-Age-Smoking-Drinking-Sex.aspx>, accessed 5 April 2018.

comedy, it clearly portrays key issues that dominated America in the 1970s and the late 1990s/early 2000s.

In accordance with this portrayal of a sexually liberated youth, throughout the show, attractive teen Michael Kelso consistently seduces girls, engages in sexual encounters, and cheats on his on/off girlfriend Jackie Burkhardt – and even impregnates a librarian as the result of a one-night stand in the toilet at a Molly Hatchet concert.²⁸ The inclusion of casual sex at a concert alludes to the sexual freedom of the counterculture, as Molly Hatchet is a Southern hard rock band that liberal countercultural teens were likely to have listened to during the 1970s. Casual sex and sexual liberation, particularly amongst the youth, was a key issue that dominated American life in the 1970s and the late 1990s/early 2000s. The inclusion of these topics in *That '70s Show* is understandable, as sexual freedom held a prominent place in the national zeitgeist.

In March 2004, the *That '70s Show* episode entitled 'Happy Jack' was preceded by a parental warning due to a scene in which Donna catches Eric masturbating. Although Eric is off-camera during this scene, and no graphic images are involved, Fox felt a warning was necessary. After this scene, there were fears surrounding the fate of the show's syndication.²⁹ Clearly, in the early 2000s, sex and nudity were still sensitive, taboo subjects, and the idea of sexual pleasure being discussed on television was not as common or accepted as it is today.

In the episode 'Afterglow', Kitty explains that she waited until she and Red were married before they had sex – whilst her promiscuous adolescent daughter, Laurie, cannot even remember the name of the man she lost her virginity to.³⁰ This demonstrates the generational contrast between the baby boom generation and their, often more traditional, parents in regards to attitudes towards sex and sexual behaviour. Although sexual practices had become slightly more progressive

²⁸ 'The Acid Queen', *That '70s Show*, Series 6, Episode 7, 19 November, 2003, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

²⁹ 'You Can't Do That On Television!: Or Can You? In The Current Political Climate, Writers Agree They Have No Idea What The Rules Are', *The New York Times*, 18 July 2004, p. AR1, available at <https://search.proquest.com/docview/92703041/fulltextPDF/15981FB073644BFPO/1?accountid=12860>, accessed 24 March 2018.

³⁰ 'Afterglow', *That '70s Show*, Series 2, Episode 17, 1 February, 2000, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

by the mid-to-late 1950s, Kitty was a young adult before the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and, thus, premarital sex would have still been a major taboo amongst Americans whilst she was growing up. However, the zeitgeist surrounding sex had undergone a significant transition since Kitty was young and, by the time Laurie was a teenager in the 1970s, many more teens were engaging in premarital sex, and it was becoming increasingly common to act promiscuously outside of a committed relationship or marriage. A series of 1970s research studies showed that the number of young Americans that were having sex outside of marriage was increasing more rapidly than ever before, and results suggested that there were approximately 11 million sexually active American teens in 1976.³¹ As the years progressed, the taboo nature of sex was increasingly dismantled, and the age of first sexual experiences decreased rapidly. In 1997, 78.9% of eighteen to twenty-one year olds were sexually active and, by 2000, 12.1% of males, and 3% of females, revealed that they had engaged in sexual intercourse by the time they were twelve years old.³² This suggests that the frequent depiction of casual sex in *That '70s Show*, particularly amongst the American youth, boasts a certain degree of accuracy.

Importantly, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is likely to have influenced the consistent depiction of casual sex within the sitcom. Although HIV/AIDS was almost unheard of in the 1970s, the disease had become an epidemic that dominated the international discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, an estimated 33.5 million people worldwide were victims of HIV and AIDS. Anxieties and panic regarding the disease were common, and campaigns were launched across America, warning people of the dangers surrounding unprotected sex, premarital sexual relations, and multiple sexual partners.³³ The fight against AIDS dominated America, and the globe, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which contextualises the careful depiction of sex on *That '70s Show*. It is

³¹ William A. Fisher et al., 'Psychological and Situation-Specific Correlates of Contraceptive Behaviour among University Women', *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1979), p. 39.

³² Laurie L. Meschke et al., 'Adolescent Sexuality and Parent-Adolescent Processes: Promoting Healthy Teen Choices', *Family Relations*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2000), p. 143.

³³ Elizabeth Pisani, 'AIDS into the 21st Century: Some Critical Considerations', *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2000), p. 63.

interesting to contemplate the agenda of the writers and producers, and question whether the show was solely intended for comedic effect, or whether there was also a deeper purpose of portraying the problematic nature of contemporary issues.

When assessing the portrayal of drugs and sex in *That '70s Show*, it is important to consider the nature of the show in terms of genre and editorials. On one hand, there is the possibility that these themes are included and exaggerated simply for comic effect, and the primary goal of the show is to make audiences laugh. On the other hand, perhaps the writers and producers were keen to depict the potential problems associated with issues such as greater sexual freedom and drugs. It is likely that, aside from creating laughs, the show aimed to tackle key issues that dominated American life – both in the 1970s and during the years of production, which is evidenced throughout this chapter.

Chapter 2 - From Friedan to Freedom: Feminism as Depicted on TV

This chapter will aim to analyse the portrayal of feminism within *That '70s Show*. Second wave feminists did enjoy notable successes in the 1970s: the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act tackled discrimination against women within educational institutions; the Equal Pay Act of 1963 was further developed; the Equal Credit Opportunity Act challenged discrimination against women within lending bodies; and the Equal Rights Act was approved by Congress. Aside from these significant legislative successes, many states implemented more progressive laws concerning rape and divorce, the gender pay gap became narrowed, and feminist lawyers increasingly convinced federal courts to dismantle laws that privileged husbands over wives and restricted female driving licenses.³⁴ Despite these victories, there was still a long way to go before gender equality was achieved, and women still faced discrimination in numerous aspects of life – economically, socially, politically, and psychologically. Feminists continued to work tirelessly in the pursuit of women's rights, and this strong feminist presence in the 1970s explains the need to depict this on *That '70s Show*.

Unfortunately, gender equality has still not been achieved and, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, women were still battling discrimination and sexism every day. Third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s, and was largely dominated by young, white women in America. However, that is not to say that older women were excluded from this 'new' feminism – they were still largely involved, but the movement was often dominated by younger activists. Third wave feminism gained a great deal of positive and negative media attention, and the fact that feminists held a strong presence in the national spotlight demonstrates just how prominent women's issues were in the late 1990s and

³⁴ J. Zeitz, 'Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s – Second-Wave Feminism as a Case Study', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2008), p. 677.

early 2000s.³⁵ This contextualises the consistent inclusion of feminist issues within *That '70s Show*, as gender inequality was an issue both in the 1970s and during filming of the show.

Within the different waves of feminism throughout history, there has been a certain extent of conflict between women in terms of their views, ideologies, and methods concerning women's rights. Clearly, many women did not identify as feminists – and those who were feminists often held contrasting beliefs. In the 1970s, many second wave feminists were extremely divided over the issue of the female image and female sexual freedom. Within *That '70s Show*, Jackie Burkhart and Donna Pinciotti demonstrate the conflicting views amongst women concerning femininity. Jackie represents the notion that women should be sexualised, and fixated on beauty and marriage, whilst Donna represents career-driven, independent women who are reluctant to rely on men for financial or emotional support. Although these polarised values of femininity did exist to an extent, it should be acknowledged that this contrast between Jackie and Donna is largely in place for comic effect, and is somewhat inaccurate in its depiction of female values. In reality, most women would sit somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

In the episode 'Eric's Stash', glamorous teen Jackie announces that she is entering a beauty pageant to show the world how pretty she is, to which Donna replies, "And what better way to do it than go on stage and parade around like a piece of meat!"³⁶ This is an important, and somewhat accurate, reference to feminist issues of the 1970s. Clearly, this demonstrates the portrayal of Jackie and Donna as holding polarised attitudes towards femininity. However, it also refers to the debate surrounding beauty pageants which dominated second wave feminist thought. In 1968, the Women's Liberation Movement protested at the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City. Feminists declared, "Women in our society are forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved

³⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Feminist 2000: One Step Beyond?', *Feminist Review*, No. 64 (2000), p. 113.

³⁶ 'Eric's Stash', *That '70s Show*, Series 2, Episode 12, 11 January, 2000, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

by ludicrous beauty standards that we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously and accept".³⁷

Clearly, there was a severe divide amongst women in regards to femininity and expressing oneself in a sexual manner. On one hand, many feminists believed in the notion that women should be free to make their own choices, and that it was their choice if they wished to portray themselves as sexual beings. On the other hand, many feminists believed that the image of the sexy female simply strengthened the patriarchy and contradicted the idea of the strong, independent female, as female sexualisation pleased men.

This debate was also largely relevant when *That '70s Show* was being filmed. The third wave feminism of the 1990s saw women attempting to tackle these divisions concerning the sexual female image, and many feminists argued that the individual female should decide how she wished to portray herself.³⁸ Whilst many women were embracing the notion of the sexualised self and the empowerment of nudity and beauty, there were women who entirely opposed this idea, believing that this only strengthened the already powerful patriarchy. In 2006, journalist Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* was published. Levy's book demonstrates the divided opinions amongst women regarding sex, nudity and sexualisation that existed in the early 2000s. Levy exposes issues such as female nudity, sexual behaviour, and 'spring break' culture as damaging and regressive, rather than liberating and progressive for the feminist movement. Criticising female sex symbols such as Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Carmen Electra and Pamela Anderson, Levy portrays the female embrace of raunch culture as highly problematic.³⁹ Levy condemns the American fixation on pornography, unrealistic beauty standards, strip clubs and nudity – suggesting that the feminist movement has a long way to go before achieving gender equality and dismantling the patriarchy. Whilst *Female Chauvinist Pigs* is only one book in a vast

³⁷ Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), pp. 24-25.

³⁸ R. Claire Snyder-Hall, 'Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of "Choice"', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2010), p. 255.

³⁹ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), pp. 1-30.

literature on feminism, it clearly demonstrates the ways in which attitudes towards female sexualisation and raunch culture continued to polarise women in the early 2000s, and shows that this was still a dominant topic during the filming of *That '70s Show*.

In the episode 'Battle of the Sexists', the issue of patriarchal values and female inferiority is a dominant theme. After Donna beats Eric Forman at basketball, there is outrage amongst the teenagers – the boys cannot believe that Eric has been beaten at sports by a girl, and Jackie cannot believe that Donna did not let Eric win.⁴⁰ This inclusion of gender stereotypes, and the title of the episode itself, clearly reflects the gender discrimination within sports that was apparent in both the 1970s and early 2000s. In 1973, Bobby Riggs challenged Billie Jean King – twenty-six years his junior – to a tennis match. This match gained mass media attention and became widely known as the "Battle of the Sexes", which explains the decision to title the episode "Battle of the Sexists". Riggs was defeated, which was a monumental victory for King and women all over the world. This was more than just winning a tennis match – it was a demonstration of female strength and resilience, and it had entirely the image of the male as superior and the female as inferior.

Moreover, in 2000, John McEnroe seemed to challenge Serena and Venus Williams to a tennis match. This mirrored the 1973 Riggs/King match, and demonstrated that many men were still keen to prove their superiority. McEnroe stated, "Any good college male player could beat the Williams sisters, and so could any man on the Senior Tour".⁴¹ Clearly, gender stereotypes and sexism were a problem in America in both the 1970s and the early 2000s. Although *That '70s Show* aims to make audiences laugh, it also portrays issues that dominated America – both when the show is set, and when it was filmed.

⁴⁰ 'Battle of the Sexists', *That '70s Show*, Series 1, Episode 4, 20 September, 1998, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

⁴¹ 'McEnroe Challenges Williams Sisters', *Lawrence Journal-World*, 31 August, 2000, p. 10, available at <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2199&dat=20000831&id=4gkyAAAAIAJ&sjid=1OUFAAAAIAJ&pg=2681,6092771&hl=en>, accessed 8 March 2018.

In the same episode, Jackie explains to Donna, “Eric will never be your boyfriend if you keep beating him at stuff”.⁴² The female is expected to appear weak and inferior in order to boost the male ego. Midge Pinciotti explains to her daughter, Donna, “Women have to pretend to be weak and fragile so that men can feel superior” and, in order to demonstrate this, Midge asks her husband, “Honey, could you open this jar for me?... Oh, I’m so lucky to have my big, strong grizzly bear around”.⁴³ Although this is included for comic effect, it tackles deeper issues concerning sexism that were prominent in the 1970s, and the late 1990s and early 2000s, and still largely exist today. Likening the male to a ‘grizzly bear’ reflects traditional notions of masculinity and the strong, brave man who must protect his weak, delicate wife. Throughout history, feminists have fought against the societal construct that men are stronger than women, and have challenged the female tendency to feed the male ego and strengthen the patriarchy. Although *That ‘70s Show* is largely a humorous sitcom, it clearly aims to depict real issues that dominated the nation – both in the 1970s and during filming.

In response to the notion that women should portray themselves as fragile in order to boost a man’s ego, Donna says, “Things don’t even work like that anymore. That’s what the Equal Rights Amendment is for”.⁴⁴ The issue of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) dominated second wave feminism in the 1970s, and this is an accurate portrayal of key issues that existed at the time in which the show was set. Although the ERA was first debated in the 1920s, it remained an extremely controversial topic into the 1970s and 1980s, and it entirely divided women. The debate surrounding the ERA was focused around what equality actually meant. Women who supported the ERA believed in absolute gender equality, and that there should be no difference in the ways that men and women are viewed and treated in society. Conversely, women who opposed the ERA were of the

⁴² ‘Battle of the Sexists’.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

opinion that, as women were generally housewives and primary caregivers, they should be protected by laws and treated slightly differently due to their role in society.⁴⁵ Clearly, the ERA was a dominant issue amongst feminists in the 1970s, and the reference to this within the show demonstrates a certain degree of accuracy in terms of the portrayal of political and social concerns in 1970s America.

In the episode 'The Pill', Donna explains to Jackie that she started taking birth control pills so that she can determine her own future. Donna explains, "I am not going to get stuck in this dinky little town... When this ERA passes, I'm going to be able to do whatever I want".⁴⁶ Donna is an extremely independent, career-driven feminist who wishes to determine her own success. Clearly, the ERA did not end sexism, and perhaps the writers and producers of *That '70s Show* wanted to capture the naivety and over-optimistic expectations of women in the 1970s regarding the ability of the ERA to resolve gender inequalities.

Most activists concerned with the ERA – both in support of and opposed to it – were white, middle class, educated women.⁴⁷ Donna, a pro-ERA feminist, fits this description – which further demonstrates the accurate portrayal of 1970s feminism within *That '70s Show*. It is interesting to note that, at a feminist rally in the show, aside from Eric, all of the attendees at the rally are white, middle-class women.⁴⁸ Whilst it is true that many second wave feminists were white, middle-class women, it is important to recognise African American involvement in the feminist movement. Author and feminist bell hooks - or Gloria Jean Watkins – constructed an enlightening discussion regarding black female oppression in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Hooks argues that, while black women in the 1800s were the greatest victims of sexist oppression in American history, their voice was silenced by the racism of white women. Suggesting that this

⁴⁵ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), p. 29.

⁴⁶ 'The Pill', *That '70s Show*, Series 1, Episode 17, 21 February, 1999, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

⁴⁷ Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, p. 34.

⁴⁸ 'Let's Spend the Night Together', *That '70s Show*, Series 7, Episode 2, 15 September, 2004, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

nineteenth century racism continued to plague contemporary America, hooks argues that, while white female leadership had dominated feminist movements throughout history, this was not a result of black female disinterest in the movement. Conversely, hooks noted, “the politics of colonisation and racial imperialism have made it historically impossible for black women in the United States to lead a women’s movement”.⁴⁹ Thus, whilst it is true that second wave feminism was dominated by white, middle-class females, it is important to consider why this was the case, and understand that ethnic minorities were not necessarily indifferent to the feminist cause but, rather, largely omitted from its activism. On one hand, the writers and producers of *That ‘70s Show* may have been attempting to reflect the underlying issues of the mainstream feminist movement, and its discrimination against black women. On the other hand, it is possible that they were simply under the impression that the feminist movement was largely dominated by white women, and cast the show in accordance to this.

In the episode ‘Eric’s Stash’, Michael Kelso unashamedly states, “College is for ugly girls that can’t get modelling contracts” and, standing up for her feminist beliefs, Donna responds, “No, college is for women who don’t want to marry the first idiot they meet and squeeze out his bastard moron children”.⁵⁰ Although this fiery, witty remark is intended to make audiences laugh, there is also a great deal of truth and deeper issues beneath this humour. In the 1970s, pregnant women were not welcome on campus – as students or teachers – and were often forced to leave college if they fell pregnant. Thus, it is true that women in the 1970s would have chosen either college or childbirth – not both. Before 1970, women were largely oblivious to the discrimination they faced in regards to universities and colleges. However, the second wave feminist movement made education a core priority within their activism, and they fought tirelessly against sexual discrimination within educational institutions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 161.

⁵⁰ ‘Eric’s Stash’.

⁵¹ Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 207.

The influence of second wave feminists such as Betty Friedan can be identified in Donna's response. Friedan was one of the most prominent figures within the second wave feminist movement, and she continues to inspire women around the world today. Keen to dismantle sexism and stereotypes concerning women, Friedan believed in greater opportunities for females, and she sought to abolish traditional views of the women as the housewife – instead, encouraging women to determine their own future and pursue their passions in life. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) revolutionised feminist thought and raised awareness of the isolation and dehumanisation created by female domestic labour and the housewife stereotype.⁵² As so many women could relate to this, Friedan's book was a bestseller and sparked a consciousness amongst American women regarding the oppressive nature of female domesticity. Historian Imelda Whelehan explained, "Over thirty years later the problem still has no name; or rather, the problem itself has diversified into numerous equally intractable problems".⁵³ Thus, sexism, gender stereotypes and oppressive domestic labour was still a major problem for females in 1990s America. Clearly, *That '70s Show* was using the image of the 1970s as a means to portray contemporary issues regarding the woman as the primary caregiver and housewife.

Donna's comment can be seen as somewhat naïve and optimistic, as women still faced gender discrimination and restricted opportunities within the workplace when *That '70s Show* was being filmed – and they still do today. Although the 1970s saw an increasing number of women gaining employment in traditionally male professions, it is clear that employers were highly strategic and manipulative when hiring women. Often, women would be recruited into roles that would not threaten the position of the male, and these roles would provide little, or no, opportunity for advancement or promotion.⁵⁴ Thus, employers could pose as supporting gender equality in the

⁵² Ibid, p. 9.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Patricia A. Roos and Barbara F. Reskin, 'Occupational Desegregation in the 1970s: Integration and Economic Equity?', *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1992), p. 76.

workplace but, in reality, sexism was still rife. Clearly, Donna's belief that a college education would give women equal access to jobs presents clear flaws.

When *That '70s Show* was filmed, the writers and producers would have been well aware of the existing sexism regarding the workplace, and it is interesting to consider their reasons for including this discussion of college and employment opportunities. On one hand, it can be seen as an ironic take on Donna's optimism about the power of education in overcoming the gender gap in employment and pay. On the other hand, it may just be that Donna's comment fitted in with her character's feminist beliefs, and enables a quick and simple rebuttal to Kelso. Regardless of the motives behind this comment, it is clear that gender discrimination within the workplace was a key issue in America – both in the 1970s and in the late 1990s/early 2000s.

In the episode 'Let's Spend the Night Together', Hyde calls Donna "Jugs-A-Poppin'", and Donna explains that she hates that nickname as it objectifies women, which leads her to mention that a 'Take Back the Night' feminist rally is being held at the local park. Donna emphasises the importance of the rally and the fact that women should be able to walk through the park at night without being harassed by men.⁵⁵ This is an accurate portrayal of feminist activism in the 1970s, as 'Take Back the Night' marches were an annual event amongst feminists throughout the 1970s. Moreover, in 1990, a revived 'Take Back the Night' march was held to protest against domestic violence towards women.⁵⁶ Clearly, *That '70s Show* was tackling realistic feminist issues and forms of activism that existed throughout the 1970s and during the years leading up to the show's production.

At the rally, Eric and Donna sneak off to have sex behind a park bench. Eric states, "There's, like, half a dozen women on the other side of that bench who would kill to be where I am".⁵⁷ Clearly, this reflects the stereotype of feminists as lesbians. Historian Joshua Zeitz noted, "Many embraced

⁵⁵ 'Let's Spend the Night Together'.

⁵⁶ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, 'Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism', Vol. 19, No. 1 (1993), p. 40.

⁵⁷ 'Let's Spend the Night Together'.

'lesbianism', preferring to forge romantic, social and sexual unions with women rather than men.. Some lesbian feminists were genuinely gay or bisexual, while others embraced homosexuality more out of conviction than instinct".⁵⁸ *That '70s Show* played on stereotypes that existed in the 1970s and, to an extent, demonstrated some historical accuracy.

It is interesting to note the omission of any discussion surrounding abortion within *That '70s Show*. Abortion was a key theme that dominated feminist activism in the 1970s – and is still a core focus for feminists today. In 1973, feminists celebrated a monumental victory when the United States Supreme Court decision on *Roe v Wade* legalised the right to safe abortions. Throughout the years, feminists had fought tirelessly for this decision, and it seems unusual to entirely omit this from *That '70s Show* – a sitcom which, as we have seen, consistently conveyed key themes that dominated the mood of the nation in the 1970s and late 1990s/early 2000s. Perhaps abortion was too sensitive and divisive an issue for a prime time comedy and, thus, the writers and producers made a conscious decision to avoid covering the topic. Thus, although *That '70s Show* largely portrayed key issues of the period in which it was set, and in which it was filmed, it is clear that there is a selective element to the content of the show – resulting in controversial issues being ignored to fit the sitcom's comedic nature. Whilst the show did largely depict key issues of the time, it is crucial to understand that it did not cover all aspects of the 1970s.

In summary, women's issues and the feminist movement are complex matters that dominated American life in the 1970s, and continued to do so at the turn of the century. Feminism is a prominent theme throughout *That '70s Show*, and it is likely that the writers and producers of the show were not only conveying the nature of women's issues in the 1970s, but were also emulating the contemporary context of these topics. Whilst the 1970s saw second wave feminism as a prevalent force, third wave feminism was in action during the show's filming, which is likely to have influenced the depiction of women's issues on *That '70s Show*. It is interesting to consider whether

⁵⁸ Zeitz, 'Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s', p. 679.

That '70s Show was merely portraying the past, or whether it was also imitating the contemporary zeitgeist regarding women.

Chapter 3 – Race Relations: (Lack of) Representation of Ethnic Minorities

This chapter will analyse the depiction of race and patriotism in *That '70s Show*. Race relations, attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and the remnants of Jim Crow America were prominent issues throughout the 1970s, and remain prevalent today. Throughout the era of the Cold War tensions and anti-communist paranoia, many Americans demonstrated an increased sense of patriotism and a belief in conservative, traditional values. 1970s America was dominated by the discourse of ethnicity and the idea of an ethnic revival, and this was largely a response to progressive civil rights policies, such as public desegregation after *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and affirmative action. Often, although whites publicly claimed to support policies that would end racist practices, in private, they actually resented these policies. This ethnic revival, which occurred under the presidency of Richard Nixon, entirely transformed Republican Party politics in the 1970s and beyond. Although Nixon's administration supposedly embraced the heightened sense of ethnicity within America, they moulded it to fit their conservative agenda – inciting the insecurities of ethnics and lower-and-middle class whites in terms of race, morals, and patriotism. Nixon's government constructed a national zeitgeist of white ethnicity which focused on a return to traditional, conservative values, and promoted hard work, strict gender roles, and the family.⁵⁹

With the emergence of the New Right, 1970s America saw a shift towards conservatism and, often, a sense of xenophobia. As this was a key issue in the 1970s, it is clear that the writers and producers of *That '70s Show* would have been keen to include this theme throughout the show. More importantly, however, is the fact that these racial issues were still significant in the late 1990s

⁵⁹ Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny, 'The White Ethnic Strategy', in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 174-175.

and early 2000s. The themes of race, ethnicity and white patriotism shows that the writers and producers of the sitcom were using the image of the 1970s to convey contemporary issues.

Perhaps the most significant character in terms of race is Fez – whose last name is unknown. Throughout the show, there are countless references to his birth country – a mystery that is left unsolved. Perhaps the writers and producers of the show chose to omit any mention of a specific birth country in order to avoid being blamed for racist stereotypes regarding a particular nation. Although Fez’s birth country is never explicitly stated, he is played by Venezuelan actor Wilmer Valderrama. Thus, it is useful to consider the ways in which the wider context of South American stereotypes align with the portrayal of Fez on *That ‘70s Show*.

In the episode ‘Eric’s Stash’, Fez says, “Not everything in the Consitution makes sense”.⁶⁰ Outraged by this comment, Red Forman quickly retorts, “What did you say?!”, and Bob Pinciotti exclaims, “Foreigners!”.⁶¹ Clearly, Red and Bob are outraged by the notion of disagreeing with the Constitution – demonstrating the strong sense of patriotism that many white Americans shared during the 1970s. Bob’s comment is a simple yet effective way of conveying racist attitudes towards those born outside of America, which was a dominant theme of the 1970s. It is interesting to note that Red and Bob – two white, middle-class, older characters – are so proud of the Consitution. Red served as a Navy sailor during World War Two, and Bob was in the National Guard. They grew up in the more traditional, conservative generation, before the emergence of the 1960s counterculture and increased liberalism, and they were both adults during the outbreak of the Vietnam War and Cold War. It is likely that the writers and producers were implying that Red and Bob’s experience with war and international conflict heightened their sense of patriotism. This patriotism did not only dominate the 1970s, but continued to prevail decades later, and remains a core value of American life today. Clearly, this scene is not only depicting a sense of patriotism that existed in the 1970s, but

⁶⁰ ‘Eric’s Stash’.

⁶¹ Ibid.

highlights the contemporary patriotism of the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly amongst those who lived through the Cold War era's paranoia regarding communists.

When Fez carries Red's bags to his car for him, Red states, "Thanks for the help. You seem to have a natural talent for handling luggage".⁶² Red's comment refers to the stereotype of ethnic minorities as bellboys. Similarly, when Jackie Burkhart and Fez have plans to watch *The Wizard of Oz*, Jackie says, "I did my hair like Dorothy, but since there are no foreigners in Oz, I created a new character for you... 'The Butler!'".⁶³ Butlers and bellboys were traditionally low-paid, menial jobs – enforcing the racial stereotype of Latinos in poorly paid occupations which served the white man. In 1995, a study analysed the high poverty rates amongst Latin Americans in the United States. The study concluded that Latinos in America were unable to earn enough money to raise the family out of the poverty threshold. This was in no way due to poor work effort but, rather, the fact that they faced discrimination in educational institutions and the workplace.⁶⁴ The inclusion of these racist comments is a clear reference to racial stereotypes concerning job roles that existed in 1970s America and, importantly, were largely still rife when *That '70s Show* was being filmed.

An extremely interesting aspect of the portrayal of race in *That '70s Show* is the inclusion – or lack thereof – of African Americans. African Americans are entirely omitted from the show until the seventh season – and, even then, only two black characters are featured. This mirrors the lack of African American representation on television in the 1970s and the late 1990s/early 2000s. In this sense, it is just as important to observe what the show does not include, as it is to consider what the show does include. Clearly, this lack of African American representation was not accidental. The writers and producers of the show evidently made a conscious decision to omit African Americans from the show to convey the racist attitudes and segregation that still existed in 1970s America – despite racist practices having, theoretically, ended. After the *Brown v Board* Supreme Court

⁶² 'Going to California'.

⁶³ 'Stone Cold Crazy', *That '70s Show*, Series 8, Episode 5, 30 November, 2005, Fox (viewed on Netflix, 2018).

⁶⁴ Daniel T. Lichter and Nancy S. Landale, 'Parental Work, Family Structure, and Poverty among Latino Children', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1995), p. 353.

decision of 1954, Jim Crow segregation was declared unconstitutional and, in theory, racism was finally beginning to be dismantled. However, the reality of the racial situation in America was not as simple as this, and racial discrimination was still a monumental problem decades later – both in the 1970s and in the late 1990s/early 2000s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, attempts to desegregate public schools faced legislative obstacles, and sparked protests and violence amongst white Americans.⁶⁵ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, America was entirely divided over issues such as affirmative action, Confederate symbols on flags, and President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race.⁶⁶ Clearly, racial inequalities and beliefs regarding white superiority continued to plague America, which contextualises the need to carefully depict race relations in the show.

White-washing of prime-time television sitcoms was not an issue left behind in the 1970s. This absence of ethnic minorities as primary characters continued for decades. For example, the worldwide hit sitcom *Friends* had an almost all white cast throughout, with a few African Americans and other ethnic minorities only playing minor roles. The most prominent black character in *Friends* was Charlie Wheeler, played by Aisha Tyler, and she did not appear in the sitcom until the latter part of the ninth season in 2003. It is interesting to note that both *That '70s Show* and *Friends* introduced African Americans as primary characters in the early 2000s. Perhaps this was because social norms were evolving, and American society was becoming more accepting of ethnic minorities. A 2005 *Gallup* opinion poll found that 68% of white Americans felt that whites and blacks had good relations with one another.⁶⁷ Of course, this should not be taken at face value. An opinion poll is limited in providing a truly accurate representation of race relations. Whilst 68% of whites felt that race relations were good, this did not necessarily mean that this was true. In fact, 43% of blacks felt that

⁶⁵ John B. McConahay et al., 'Has Racism Declined in America? It Depends on Who Is Asking and What Is Asked', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1981), p. 564.

⁶⁶ P. J. Henry and David O. Sears, 'The Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2002), p. 253.

⁶⁷ Lydia Saad, 'Americans Mostly Upbeat About Current Race Relations', *Gallup News Service*, 14 July, 2005, available at http://news.gallup.com/poll/17314/Americans-Mostly-Upbeat-About-Current-Race-Relations.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=&g_campaign=item &g_content=Americans%2520Mostly%2520Upbeat%2520About%2520Current%2520Race%2520Relations, accessed 5 April 2018.

many, or all, white Americans disliked blacks.⁶⁸ Despite these limitations, race relations had improved somewhat since the 1970s, and it is likely that the writers and producers of the shows were moving with the times and adapting their production in coherence with the national mood.

In the episode 'Let's Spend the Night Together', white countercultural teen, Steven Hyde, meets his birth father for the first time. To everybody's surprise, Hyde's father, William Barnett, is African American. When Kitty Forman first answers the door to Barnett, she mistakes him for a door-to-door salesman, stating, "You know, I'm sorry, I told your friend last week we don't want a subscription to *Ebony* magazine".⁶⁹ Firstly, even though Kitty is expecting a visit from Hyde's father, she does not even consider that he could be Barnett. Secondly, Kitty assumes that, simply because Barnett is black, he is selling *Ebony* magazine. First published in 1945, and still in circulation today, *Ebony* is a monthly magazine targeted at African American readers. Kitty's assumption is a simple, yet effective, reference to racial divisions that existed, and still exist, in America. Thirdly, the fact that Kitty assumes Barnett and a fellow African American are friends simply because they are both black suggests that, although segregation had been outlawed, blacks and whites were still largely separated in society. Although *That '70s Show* aimed to make audiences laugh, it is clear that, beneath this humour, writers and producers used their platform to emphasise the stark reality of issues such as race.

Barnett says, "I know all about Wisconsin. The only place around here where you'll see white and black together is on a cow!".⁷⁰ Clearly, despite the legal dismantling of racist practices, racism and segregation were still a problem in 1970s America. Although *That '70s Show* was set in a fictional town in Wisconsin, Barnett's comment demonstrates a certain extent of accuracy regarding race relations in Wisconsin. In the late 1980s, Milwaukee was one of the most hyper-segregated

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ 'Let's Spend the Night Together'.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

urban cities in the North – more so than New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.⁷¹ Thus, *That '70s Show* was conveying racial issues of the late-twentieth century with some accuracy.

Barnett is a businessman who owns a chain of record stores. Considering the stereotypes surrounding ethnic minorities and low-paid, menial work, the decision to portray Barnett as a wealthy businessman is interesting. Perhaps this suggests a certain element of complacency that racial problems have been solved by the 1970s. The idea that Barnett has established a successful business, and is economically thriving, challenges the problems that African Americans faced, and still do face, regarding job discrimination and poor economic status. Clearly, it would be inaccurate to suggest that there were no wealthy African Americans with successful careers in 1970s America. However, it is striking that, when an African American is finally featured in *That '70s Show*, he is portrayed in this light. It is unlikely that the writers and producers were unaware of the fact that Barnett's economic success contradicted the reality of the poor economic status of many African Americans in the 1970s. Perhaps the production team were keen to depict the fact that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, America was largely satisfied that racial discrimination had ended. Moreover, research carried out on the economic status of black Americans between 1984 and 2000 revealed that, by 2000, more than fifty per cent of African Americans felt that blacks were doing fairly well, or very well, economically.⁷² Perhaps the conveyance of Barnett as a wealthy businessman is intended to reflect this increasing optimism of many African Americans regarding their economic situation at the turn of the century.

To add to this discussion, it is useful to consider the portrayal of Barnett's daughter, Angie. Angie is a young African American woman who graduated from college with a mathematics degree. Despite this prestigious qualification, Angie works as a manager for her father's record company. Although it is possible that Angie genuinely wanted to work for the family business, perhaps the

⁷¹ Michael Bonds et al., 'African Americans' Continuing Struggle for Quality Education in Milwaukee, Wisconsin' *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2009), p. 57.

⁷² Melissa Harris-Lacewell and Bethany Albertson, 'Good Times?: Understanding African American Misperceptions of Racial Economic Fortunes', *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (2005), p. 657.

writers and producers were hinting at deeper issues concerning female employment – particularly amongst ethnic minorities. It is widely understood that women in the 1970s, and throughout the following decades, faced limited employment opportunities and gender discrimination in the workplace. It is likely that the writers and producers portrayed Angie as working for her father in order to emphasise the problematic nature of gender inequality in employment, and the idea that a degree did not necessarily give females access to vast employment opportunities. It is quite possible that Angie thought it would be more beneficial to enter the family business, in which she could become a manager, than to enter a job outside the family, in which she would likely be poorly paid and face little, or no, promotion opportunities.

Although white women did face job discrimination, African American women suffered on a significantly greater scale, as they were not just met with sexism, but racism as well. Despite President John Kennedy's affirmative action policy of 1961, minorities in 1970s America still faced racial discrimination in regards to jobs. In 1989, research indicated that the impact of affirmative action upon female employment had been negligible.⁷³ In 1995, historians Ernest Spaights and Ann Whitaker noted, "Black women have progressed very little from an occupational perspective... The labor market is not a place in which Black women can hope to prevail and easily succeed".⁷⁴ The fact that this was still a problem in 1995 – a mere three years prior to the debut of *That '70s Show* – shows that racism and sexism in the employment sector was still a contemporary problem during filming. It is plausible that the writers and producers of *That '70s Show* were addressing racial issues that dominated America, both in the 1970s and during production.

Thus, it is clear that race relations and attitudes towards ethnic minorities was a carefully depicted theme within *That '70s Show*. When considering the portrayal of this issue within the show, it is important to consider what is not included – such as the conscious underrepresentation of

⁷³ Jonathan S. Leonard, 'Women and Affirmative Action', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1989), p. 61.

⁷⁴ Ernest Spaights and Ann Whitaker, 'Black Women in the Workforce: A New Look at an Old Problem', *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1995), p. 284.

African Americans and other ethnic minorities. It is debatable whether the writers and producers cast the show as predominantly white purely as a reflection of 1970s attitudes, or whether this mirrored a more contemporary racial zeitgeist. Regardless of the agenda of the production team, white America's relationship with ethnic minorities, and the portrayal of race relations on *That '70s Show*, is an interesting topic to consider.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to create a new avenue of discussion within the existing historiography of 1970s America, focusing on the portrayal of the 'long 1970s' on the widely successful American sitcom *That '70s Show*. Immediately successful amongst American audiences in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and later enjoyed by viewers across the globe, the show depicted American life in the 1970s and conveyed a number of divisive issues, including those that this dissertation focused on – drugs, casual sex, feminism, and race relations. Whilst the show often dealt with serious, sensitive issues, it did so in a humorous manner, and it is clear that it was a show intended to make audiences laugh. Despite this comic element, *That '70s Show* was more than just a light-hearted sitcom which portrayed American life in the 1970s. It acted as a platform upon which the show's writers and producers could convey contemporary issues that dominated America in the 1990s and 2000s, whilst maintaining the claim that the show merely dealt with issues of the past.

A 2001 publication of *The Washington Post* praised *That '70s Show's* inclusion of 1970's "retro-mercials" – noting the novelty of showing old-style commercials on a current TV show. The article mentions brands such as Volkswagen, Coke, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Dr Pepper.⁷⁵ Clearly, the show's writers and producers were keen to ensure a certain element of authenticity within the 1970s-themed viewing experience. Perhaps this was to maintain the façade that *That '70s Show* solely conveyed 1970s America, and to deflect from any indication that contemporary issues were largely being depicted within the show.

Although the show dealt with national debates and anxieties that existed in the 1970s, many of these issues continued to prevail during the show's production. On one hand, America had undergone a liberal, progressive shift in the period between the 1970s and the late 1990s and early

⁷⁵ "That '70s Show': Just Like Old Times', *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2001, p. C1, available at <https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/1965396978/fulltextPDF/28CC03E735D846CDPQ/6?accountid=12860>, accessed 20 March 2018.

2000s. On the other hand, conservatism, traditional values, and a desire to return to the 'old' American way was just as prominent at the turn of the century as it was in the 1970s. The culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s divided the progressive and the traditional, and can often be identified as a generational conflict between liberal teens and their conservative parents – and these culture wars were just as prevalent in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The war on drugs, conflicting attitudes towards casual sex, and race relations were prominent themes within these culture wars, and are continuously depicted within *That '70s Show*.

Whilst this dissertation has only focused on drugs, casual sex, feminism, and race relations, it is important to note that these were not the only themes that dominated American life between the 1970s and the early 2000s. An abundance of different issues created debates, anxieties, and division amongst Americans in the 1970s, and continued to impact the national zeitgeist in following decades. A multitude of key issues are identifiable within *That '70s Show*, such as gender roles, masculinity, patriotism, war, music, and fashion – to name but a few. This dissertation has only focused on a select few themes in order to create a specific, detailed, thorough discussion, but it is important to recognise the vast array of issues that polarised Americans in the past, and continue to do so today.

The aim of this dissertation was to create a new avenue of discussion within the, currently somewhat sparse, literature on 1970s America. This discussion has identified the ways in which the nation had evolved from the 1970s to the early 2000s, but also highlighted the similarities between these eras, and proved that, perhaps, contemporary America is not entirely unrecognisable from how it was in the 1970s. Whilst it is easy to assume that issues such as sex, drugs, gender discrimination, and racism only created divisions in the 1970s, the reality is that these are but a few of the issues which continued to polarise Americans in subsequent decades – and still divide the nation today.

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