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“That’s How We Do It in the Nine-Nine, Sir”:
Humor, Intersectionality, and Abolitionist Critique
in the TV Series *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*

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In memory of Andre Braugher

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1. Introduction

Police shows are a staple of American entertainment media: from shows like the 1950s' *Dragnet* to the 1980s' *Miami Vice* and the 2000s' *The Wire*. Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette, and Ben Bethell describe the function of police procedurals in their 2015 book *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television* as

[telling] us about our attitudes to crime, and hence what we think about the 'social contract' that exists between state and citizen. They both transmit and reflect the politics of the moment. And as those politics change, so cop shows demonstrate that 'genre' is very rarely generic. Above all, perhaps, they keep us entertained.

(Sabin et al. 1)

One relatively recent police show that has seen great success, received high praise, and garnered critical acclaim (e.g., GLAAD Media Awards, Golden Globes, among many others) is the US-American Sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Fox and NBC, 2013-2021). The series centers on a group of detectives from the New York Police Department (NYPD) and, from the very beginning, addresses inequalities in the treatment of different groups of people at the hands of the police. It has been especially praised for its representation of diverse characters and its handling of social issues such as racism, sexism, corruption, and LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Agender/Asexual) rights. This sets *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* apart from other series centered around the police. Moreover, as a comedy series, the show delves deeper into the intricacies of various vectors of marginalization, such as race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status, among other things, while remaining light-hearted and comedic: another aspect that makes the series unique. The combination of these two factors opens a very interesting field for analysis: the interaction of comedy and social critique in the context of a police series.

Despite its long run and wide audience appeal, the series has not attracted much attention in peer-reviewed academic research. While there has been some research into *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s representation, specifically of Latina women (Poey 2024; Putri and Primasita 2024), and some research into the show's humor, the latter primarily focuses on either linguistic analyses (Mahadewi et al. 2023; Peköz and Saraç Durgun 2021; Novera et al. 2021) or translation-based analyses (Ali et al. 2025; Da Silva Góis Costa and Cristina Correia Carvalho da Silva 2023). While all the above focus on the program of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* – as does this thesis – there has also been some research into institutional, production-, and industry-related aspects of the series (Brembilla and Tralli 2015). Although peer-reviewed scholarship on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* remains relatively scarce, student research at the undergraduate and

graduate levels has included, among others, myriad more papers on the show's slang, wordplay, and translation strategies, as well as inquiries into the show's gay representation (Van den Berg 2016), and into fan studies (Esteve Pedró 2019), covering yet another aspect of television studies: the audiences. Although these theses are not peer-reviewed, the continued appearance of such work in recent years suggests a notable degree of academic interest in the show. Despite its mention in the title, Susan A. Bandes's article *From Dragnet to Brooklyn 99* (2023) does not concern itself with individual series and offers no exploration into *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s program, but equally importantly, discusses how cop shows erase and justify police brutality. Research into police procedurals overall has been more widespread. Notable contributions include Jonathan Nichols-Pethick's *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Television Police Drama* (2012), which explores the genre's cultural, social, and industrial significance, and the already cited volume *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television* (Sabin et al. 2015), which additionally asks how the representation of perpetrators, victims, and police intersect with questions of class, gender, sexuality, and race. These works underscore the police procedural's longstanding role in shaping cultural understandings of law, order, and social identity – concerns that are likewise central to this thesis.

While there is research on humor and representation in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* individually, the intersection of the two, as well as institutional critique, has yet to be explored. This thesis seeks to build on and extend this interest by examining how the series negotiates its identity as a police sitcom through humor, intersectional representation, and genre conventions. Framed through an abolitionist lens, this thesis approaches the show as a cultural text that both reflects and shapes understandings of policing and social justice. It explores how the show's comedic format enables moments of social critique, particularly around race, gender, and sexuality, while also asking whether it ultimately reinforces or challenges the ideological foundations of policing. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, McCall, Collins) is applied as an analytical tool to examine how multiple axes of identity and oppression are represented, while abolitionist thought (Davis, Gilmore, Kaba) provides the overarching political framework to investigate the tension between progressive representation and institutional complicity in a genre historically invested in legitimizing the police. Thus, the main questions this thesis seeks to answer are:

- (1) How does *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* represent intersecting forms of marginalization through its main characters?
- (2) What role does humor play in shaping the show's political messaging about policing and social justice?

(3) To what extent does *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* engage in or fall short of an abolitionist critique of policing?

The focus of this paper is the interplay of comedy with portrayals of discrimination along intersectional vectors of marginalization, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as the ideological work these portrayals do within the framework of a police series. In addition to an intersectional lens, this thesis also applies an abolitionist perspective in order to critically assess the representation of policing in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. While the series presents an unusually diverse cast and addresses various forms of social injustice, it simultaneously upholds the idea of a fundamentally reformable or even benevolent police force. The tension between these two tendencies – representation of marginalized identities and the structural critique that may or may not accompany them – is a central point of inquiry. Furthermore, the show's comedic genre plays a crucial role in shaping both its social commentary and its portrayal of policing, as humor can offer space for critique, emotional relief, or even resistance, but can also deflect, obscure, or soften institutional realities.

The methodology of this thesis uses a mixed-methods approach, consisting of a qualitative content analysis informed by intersectionality theory and abolitionist thought. First, I will do a close reading by watching the entire series, taking notes on the representation of selected characters, and focusing on episodes discussing specific social issues and cultural themes (for racism e.g., “Moo Moo” [S4E16], “Admiral Peralta” [S7E10], “The Good Ones” [S8E1], and selected flashbacks; for sexism e.g., “He Said, She Said” [S6E8], “Mr. Santiago” [S4E7], and “Gray Star Mutual” [S5E18]; for homophobia “Old School” [S1E8], “Game Night” [S5E10], and selected flashbacks). I will pay close attention to how race, social background, gender, and sexuality are represented, as well as how the series depicts societal structures and power relationships – especially in relation to police culture and institutional racism. Next, I will apply intersectionality theory to my notes and examine how different social identities intersect and compound each other to show, for instance, how the series portrays the experience of a female Latina police officer versus that of a white male one or how it addresses the experiences of LGBTQIA+ characters who are also people of color, and how these differently positioned identities relate to and interact with each other. Throughout the analysis, abolitionist theories serve as the primary critical lens through which the series's representation of policing is assessed, especially regarding the ideological function of the “good cop” narrative in the context of systemic harm. Rather than treating abolitionist thought as a separate theme, this thesis adopts it as a guiding framework for inquiring how the series engages with or resists dominant cultural narratives around policing. Lastly, to analyze *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s

relational position in the police series genre, I will focus on the role of humor, as this is what sets it apart from other police shows. The series's comedy creates space for social critique that other (police) series lack. Comedy and humor in general can serve as tools for empowerment and make it easier to address difficult issues, but they can also complicate or undermine critical engagement. Throughout the analysis chapters, selected screenshots from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* are included to support the discussion of key scenes and to aid reader comprehension. These stills illustrate specific moments referenced in the analysis and provide visual reference points that facilitate comparison and reader orientation, particularly where the argument relies on visual details.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework necessary for the analysis. Over four subchapters, I respectively engage with Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz's work on television studies, Alberto N. García and Ted Nannicelli work on seriality, and situate *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* within broader cultural and media contexts, discuss Kimberlé Crenshaw's, Leslie McCall's, and Patricia Hill Collins's writings on intersectionality and the politics of representation, Charles E. Case and Cameron D. Lippard's, John Morreall's and Mary Crawford's perspectives on humor and the functions of comedy, as well as key concepts from abolitionist thought and cultural critique, drawing in particular from the work of Mariame Kaba, Angela Y. Davis, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Moreover, I outline the role of the police in U.S. culture, introduce the concept of "copaganda," position the show within the landscape of contemporary television, and examine shifts in discourse around police reform and representation in the wake of the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter movement. Chapter 3 comprises the close readings of three selected episodes – "Moo Moo" [S4E16], "He Said, She Said" [S6E8], and "The Good Ones" [S8E1] – alongside brief analyses of recurring themes and relevant material from other episodes.

In this thesis, "Black" is capitalized to recognize it as a proper noun denoting a shared cultural and racial identity within the African diaspora, following Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that "Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun" (43).

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework for analyzing *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is established. This thesis draws on various scholarly fields that together reveal the show's complexities and tensions in regard to representation and social critique. Firstly, I root my work within the discipline of television studies, as described by Gray and Lotz, to situate *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* within the evolving landscape of contemporary television and to provide context for approaching the series effectively in the analysis that follows. Their insights into the history of television studies and its areas of interest are especially helpful for this. Additionally, I draw on García and Nannicelli's research on seriality, discussing both police procedurals and sitcoms, to more precisely explain the series's unique position as a police sitcom. This inquiry helps to show how the series both conforms to and subverts traditional police procedural conventions. Building on this media framework, in the second subchapter, I introduce intersectionality theory, as guided by the pioneering scholarship of Crenshaw, McCall, and Collins, to examine how multiple identities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, intersect within the show's characters and narratives. The characters can only be understood through an intersectional lens, as some forms of identity or oppression cannot be grasped otherwise, since they are shaped by experiences of marginalization. In the analysis, I explore how these different representations may serve to critique or complicate dominant ideologies or potentially reinforce them.

The third subchapter explores theories of humor to investigate the functions of comedy within the series. Drawing on three theories, I examine how humor can potentially create space for critique and empowerment, while perhaps simultaneously deflecting attention from serious social issues and painting the police in a more benevolent light. This dual function of comedy is key to understanding the series's political messaging. Lastly, in the fourth subchapter, I engage with abolitionist thought, focusing on the work of Kaba, Davis, and Gilmore, to critically assess how the show depicts policing. This helps to reveal the tensions between critical representations questioning, and idealistic representations reinforcing the legitimacy of policing institutions. Moreover, I introduce the concept of "copaganda," and provide cultural and political context by exploring the off-screen role of policing in U.S. society and media. This background is crucial for understanding the broader significance of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s engagement with issues of race, justice, and law enforcement. Together, these theoretical approaches offer a comprehensive framework that guides the close analysis and critical discussions in the chapters to come.

2.1 Television Studies, Seriality, and the Police Procedural

In their 2012 book *Television Studies*, Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz assess television studies “not foremost as a field for the study of a singular medium” but rather see it “as an approach to studying media” (Gray and Lotz 3). They identify three types of approaches that have had the greatest impact on the field, broadly categorized as social science, humanities, and cultural studies (Gray and Lotz 8). The research tradition of social science approaches focused primarily on “attempting to answer questions about the effects of media or their influence on audiences and societies” (cf. *ibid.*), often in the form of empirical psychological, sociological, or communications research. Gray and Lotz argue that the influence of the social science approach to studying media lies primarily in how television studies responds *against* it, as “[t]elevision studies does not take up the quantitative, positivist, and experimental research central in this early social science work, nor does it presume the negative effects of television that led to the government funding that has supported this tradition.” (Gray and Lotz 10). In humanities traditions, television was often defamed as the “boob tube,” “idiot box,” and “‘a vast wasteland’ filled with mindless fare” (Gray and Lotz 11) and dismissed as not worthy of study until the 1960s and 1970s, when critical approaches “went beyond cataloguing or evaluating cultural products’ ‘beauty’ or inner truths, and instead focused on how they constructed and/or maintained ideology and ideas of ‘common sense,’ beauty, or truth in the first place” (Gray and Lotz 11f). While the humanities approach to television studies does not account for audiences, contexts, or the conditions of production, it has developed analytical tools for examining how meaning is produced within television texts, whether they be explicit, suggested, or implied (Gray and Lotz 13). The third and most relevant approach for this research is the cultural studies approach to television studies. Scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham argued that “culture and the creation of meaning were not restricted to the upper classes alone” (Gray and Lotz 14). They were interested in examining media as “an apparatus of state control and of maintaining bourgeois, patriarchal culture” (cf. *ibid.*) and in exploring how power and ideology operate on a textual level. In the context of police dramas, Nichols-Pethick argues that they are not merely ritualized stories of good and evil but cultural responses to “pressing social concerns: concerns about how we imagine and maintain a sense of community in a vast and often alienating society, and about our rights and responsibilities as citizens” (3f). Timothy Lenz similarly stresses that crime fiction resonates with audiences because the depicted events and human behavior “ring true” (8) in ways they feel accurately reflect the real world, making it “virtually realistic” (cf. *ibid.*), even if fictional. These insights underscore why the police procedural has persisted as a

dominant television genre and why its ideological work, whether it be legitimizing or questioning policing, demands critical attention.

Central to television as a medium is its capacity for extended duration: seriality. Alberto N. García and Ted Nannicelli describe this feature as “temporal prolongation” (27), a concept that captures television’s ability to develop characters, relationships, and narrative patterns across long periods of time. Rather than functioning as entirely self-contained narratives, television series create meaning through repetition and memory across episodes and seasons (García and Nannicelli 37). In the context of the police procedural, a genre defined by its recurring characters and settings while typically resolving its narrative arc within a single episode, this temporal prolongation operates according to what Stanley Cavell calls a “serial-episode principle” (García and Nannicelli 34). Individual episodes restore order by solving a crime, yet the characters and their interpersonal dynamics persist across installments. For a sitcom–procedural hybrid like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, this structure creates tension between episodic resolution and ongoing character development: while each episode resolves a case, the temporal prolongation of the series allows character relationships, personal identities, and recurring conflicts or jokes to evolve over time through a “familiarity with prior instances” (García and Nannicelli 36). Temporal prolongation also fosters emotional investment in recurring characters, creating emotional or even para-social bonds between viewers and fictional figures (cf. *ibid.*). In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the audience’s long-term engagement with the squad potentially complicates potential critique of policing by encouraging viewers to sympathize with these individual “good” officers. The series also utilizes temporal prolongation for comedic effect through recurring narrative devices such as running gags and annual special episodes, most notably the Halloween Heists and encounters with Doug Judy (García and Nannicelli 41). These elements rely on repetition and audience familiarity, giving long-time viewers a “particular cognitive pleasure” (García and Nannicelli 42) of recognizing patterns and anticipating the payoff of recurring jokes. Such moments occasionally disrupt the procedural formula, creating a playful tension between the genre’s rigidity and the flexibility afforded by the sitcom format.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, there are three key areas of television studies: the program, the audiences, and the institutions – all of which are interrelated, both historically and spatially. For instance, the cancellation of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, due to institutional reasons, and its subsequent reinstatement on another network, thanks to audience intervention, is an example of overlap between these areas. Because of these interrelations, Gray and Lotz argue that a proper study of television must also inquire into the contexts that surround these three

areas, which give them meaning (114). In the case of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, one must especially consider the context of the Black Lives Matter protests (#BLM) in 2020, which heavily influenced the show's eighth and final season. This thesis primarily examines the program of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and employs critical textual analysis, a method that grew out of and alongside semiotics and seeks to explore how ideology works within media texts and how hierarchies between concepts are constructed and maintained (Gray and Lotz 36f). Gray and Lotz stress that “nothing that happens on television ‘actually’ happens – everything is a (re)presentation of reality, or a construction of an alternate reality.” (Gray and Lotz 27). This is especially important to bear in mind in the context of a police procedural, as the police portrayed on screen differ greatly from the actual police.

2.2 Intersectionality and the Politics of Representation

While the term “intersectionality” has been widely used as a buzzword in public discourse, a widespread, nuanced understanding of its meaning seems all too scarce. The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, although the idea of race and gender (and other vectors of discrimination such as class, sexuality, ability, and age, among others) as “intersections to describe the operation and experiences of multiple modalities of oppression had been circulating in U.S. women of color feminisms for at least a decade prior to Crenshaw’s articulation” (Bohrer 83). Crenshaw differentiates between three types of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality addresses how the structures of race and gender (as well as other factors) combine “to produce a qualitatively different modality of oppression than those who face oppression on the basis of only one factor” (Bohrer 86). Political intersectionality criticizes the ways in which feminist and anti-racist movements have historically failed to represent those who inhabit multiple marginalized positions – especially women of color – thereby reinforcing the very exclusions they seek to resist. In short, it critiques the feminist movement for not being anti-racist (enough) and the anti-racism movement for not being feminist (enough). Representational intersectionality focuses on “tropes, stereotypes, and images of women of color that contribute to their exclusion, marginalization, and disempowerment” (cf. *ibid.*).

Leslie McCall, another intersectionality scholar, distinguishes between intercategory, intracategory, and anti-category approaches to intersectionality. To McCall, intersectionality is related to identity, which differs from the definition offered by Crenshaw (Bohrer 87). While her framework is more identity-oriented, it offers useful tools for analyzing both structural and symbolic representation. The intercategory approach “focuses on inequalities between

‘already constituted social groups’” (e.g., white men vs. Black women), comparing “differences in access to resources, opportunities, social legibility, and power” (Bohrer 86), whereas the intracategorical approach explores the heterogeneity within such groups (e.g., differences among Latinx women based on class or sexuality), “calling attention to in-group differentiations” (cf. *ibid.*). The anti-categorical approach deconstructs social categories altogether, highlighting their historical contingency, the “limitations of ‘fixed categories’ in explaining complex social realities” (cf. *ibid.*) as well as their internal contradictions and inconsistencies. An example of this would be the umbrella term “queerness,” subsuming a spectrum of non-heterosexuality and gender nonconformity; the term’s history, as well as identities and practices associated with it, are in part inextricably gendered and racialized (Bohrer 86f).

Patricia Hill Collins adds yet another understanding of intersectionality, namely the critical insight that social categories do not operate as “unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Bohrer 87). According to Collins, gender is always raced, race is always gendered, and both are shaped by class, sexuality, and more (cf. *ibid.*). This dynamic view refuses to treat social categories as separate tracks and instead insists on understanding them as interwoven systems that co-produce inequality.

In the context of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, these theoretical strands converge into a central analytic tool. The characters’ identities interact in complex ways that cannot be adequately captured through singular categories. For instance, structural intersectionality helps to explain why Captain Holt, a Black gay man, is passed over for promotions while white, heterosexual men like Jason Stentley are made captain despite being self-proclaimedly “unqualified” (“Coral Palms Pt. 2” 05:53), or how Terry Jeffords, a Black police sergeant and later lieutenant, experiences racial profiling despite his high-ranking position within the NYPD, demonstrating how institutional power does not erase systemic vulnerability. Representational intersectionality, in turn, sheds light on the tropes and stereotypes the show both invokes and subverts: Captain Holt’s hyper-formal speech and stoicism directly counter the flamboyant gay stereotype, while his narrative often revolves around proving himself in a homophobic and racist institution. An intracategorical perspective is useful for examining differences between characters within a social group. For instance, Amy Santiago and Rosa Diaz, both Latina women, one hetero-, the other bisexual, are portrayed with distinct family backgrounds, relationship dynamics, and attitudes toward vulnerability, complicating any simplistic reading of “Latina representation”. Collins’s concept of intersectionality as a dynamic, mutually constructing system of power relations further underscores that identity is never static within

the show. For instance, Holt's authority as captain is shaped not just by his professionalism but by how he must constantly negotiate being both Black and gay in a white, heteronormative institution. Amy's hyper-competence can be seen as a strategy for managing both racialized and gendered expectations, while Jake's white masculinity affords him the freedom to be immature, reckless, and redeemed in ways that would not be extended to his non-white colleagues. Through this lens, the characters' identities are not simply layered but co-constitutive, each element shaping and being shaped by the others. Rather than treating intersectionality as a static concept, this thesis uses it as a flexible analytical tool to interrogate how *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* negotiates and complicates dominant ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and power. The series uses the conventions of the police procedural and the sitcom to foreground characters who embody multiple, intersecting identities – sometimes to challenge structural inequalities, sometimes to reinforce them, and often to reveal the ambivalence of “representation” itself.

2.3 Humor and the Functions of Comedy

Much of the literature on humor lists three main theories of its origin: superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. The first, superiority theory, is by far the oldest, going back to ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and “explains laughter as the result of feelings of superiority over others or over [one's] own former position” (Gilbert 8). This can include sarcasm, ridicule, teasing, schadenfreude, insults, and stereotypes, among other things (Franks 8). In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, this form of humor occurs mostly in connection with specific antagonist characters, for instance, Seth Haggarty in the episode “He Said, She Said” who will be discussed in chapter 3.2, Frank O'Sullivan, the head of the patrolmen's union who will be discussed in chapter 3.3, and high ranking members of police such as Deputy Chief and later Commissioner Madeline Wuntch, Detective and later Captain Keith Pembroke alias “The Vulture,” and Captain Jason “CJ” Stentley. These will be discussed further in chapter 3.4. Interestingly, the antagonist characters in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, who are being made fun of and for whom superiority theory applies, are all in positions of power, whether they be the squad's immediate superiors or holding another influential office. This might be a reason why this form of humor is well-suited for said characters, because “joking about those in power [...] vents feelings, questions the justice of the hierarchy, and temporarily appropriates the power of ridicule” (Crawford 1420). Moreover, according to Case and Lippard, humor can be used as a “subversive and an empowering tool” to “deconstruct patriarchal ideologies and sexist stereotypes” (240). Nevertheless, it is a hard line to toe since such jokes may question, but

“usually [do] not change the power hierarchy” (Crawford 1420) and often “do little to subvert or challenge gender norms and may actually reinforce gender differences and stereotypes” (Case and Lippard 241) as they might be read as “male-bashing” by the mainstream public (cf. *ibid.*).

The second, incongruity theory, as most famously brought forward by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, describes the discordance between expectations and outcomes of situations, which causes laughter (Morreall 15f; 17f). Morreall explains: “We get something that we were not expecting. Whatever it is, it completes the story or fits into the situation in some way it just does not fit in ‘the expected or normal’ way” (17). Laughter is then caused by the sudden awareness of said incongruity (Morreall 17f). This, along with the third, relief theory, is the most common form of humor present in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. In relief theory, John C. Meyer explains, “humor may result from releases of energy that subconsciously overcome sociocultural inhibitions” (312). One practical application of this theory is comedians deliberately building up tension, which they defuse with the punchlines of their jokes. Another application pertains to situations anticipated to be tense, regardless of whether the tension is caused by the topic, the setting, or both, in which communicators begin the conversation with a joke to defuse said anticipated tension (cf. *ibid.*). John Meyer explains that tension often “results from dissonance people experience after making a decision or sensing the approach of incompatible and undesirable thoughts or actions” (cf. *ibid.*). Thus, the release of tension marks humor as a strategy for reducing cognitive dissonance (Franks). One of the functions of laughter is to act as a means for the audience to show approval and validation of the joke teller’s authority (Case and Lippard 242f). This also serves as a form of corrective, as it defines which ideas and sentiments are deemed acceptable and which are not (cf. *ibid.*). What we deem funny or acceptable to joke about highly depends on context and the setting in which the humorous remark is made, but also when in time it occurs.

In their chapter *Cognitive Dissonance and the Logic of Racism*, Berit Brogaard and Dimitria Electra Gatzia “argue that cognitive dissonance can help explain the logic of two forms of racism, which [they] call ‘habitual racism’ and ‘explicit racism’” (219). In cognitive dissonance theory, “the discrepancies between actions and attitudes toward them trigger psychological discomfort, which is resolved by either regulating or eliminating the dissonance” (Brogaard and Gatzia 222). John Meyer’s point that humor can make situations “seem more elastic, or more manageable, by showing that difficulties are not so overwhelming as to be out of control after all” (312) is useful here: laughter can allow audiences to process scenes of injustice without disengaging. While individuals may seek to resolve this discomfort in

different ways, television comedy intervenes by temporarily easing that tension for audiences. By framing instances of racism within humor, a show like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* does not erase the discomfort but renders it manageable, making it possible for viewers to continue engaging with difficult material rather than withdrawing. In this sense, comedy offers not only entertainment but also a narrative strategy for sustaining attention on systemic problems, even when they are unsettling or painful to confront.

While Nichols-Pethick highlights how police dramas respond to viewers' concerns, Delia Poey argues that "Police sitcoms can play the same role as dramas, although in different ways" (111). She proposes that where "dramas address anxieties and tension in the broader social context" (cf. *ibid*), laughter can provide an effective way to do the same. The police sitcom can thus be understood as operating with a form of what is sometimes described as "jester's privilege": much like the court jester who was historically permitted to criticize rulers through humor, comedic formats allow social criticism to be articulated in ways that might be less acceptable in more serious genres (Ife is writing about Pop Culture). Albeit somewhat limited by its respective expectations and rules, the police sitcom's appeal, rather than being "virtually realistic" (Lenz 8), lies in its ability to elicit laughter, which allows for divergent representations "dependent on humor and not the audience's expectations of realism" (Poey 111). By mobilizing humor as a vehicle for critique, sitcoms can question authority and expose contradictions within institutions while maintaining an entertaining tone. In this sense, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* leverages its sitcom form to generate humor that unsettles familiar tropes, offering space for more inclusive and at times utopian representations of policing and identity.

2.4 Abolitionist Thought, Copaganda, and the Cultural Role of the Police

To most people, the concept of the police is ubiquitous. So ubiquitous, in fact, that natural processes are explained through comparison to the police. For instance, in the widely popular 1980s French animated educational television series *Il était une fois... La vie* (English: *Once Upon a Time... Life*), often shown in schools to teach children about biology, white blood cells are stylized as police "patrolling" the bloodstream and fighting pathogens to keep the body healthy. From an early age, we are taught that the police exist to maintain order and keep us safe, which is also how the police perceive themselves, as reflected in their mottos. Probably the most well-known, thanks to the 1950s TV series *Dragnet*, is the Los Angeles Police Department's motto, "To Protect and to Serve." The NYPD changed its three-word motto printed on the side of patrol cars from "Courtesy, Professionalism, Respect" – the initial letters highlighted to invoke CPR, the abbreviation for lifesaving cardiopulmonary resuscitation – to

the slogan “Fighting Crime, Protecting the Public” in 2024 (Offenhartz). Their official motto, “Fidelis ad mortem,” Latin for “faithful unto death,” remains unchanged. But who do the police serve and protect? Does “fighting crime” truly protect the public? Faithful to whom and unto whose death?

In *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*, Kaba et al. make a very important distinction between crime and violence: “Not all violence is a crime, and not all crimes involve violence” (44). Whether something is deemed illegal or not largely depends on political decisions, many of which are made to maintain existing power relations. As such, shoplifting is illegal, but wage theft is not; selling loose cigarettes is a crime, which police alleged Eric Garner committed before killing him in a prohibited chokehold, but structural, economic, and environmental violence “intensifying anxieties that lead to premature deaths due to[, among other things,] alcoholism and drug addictions (including cigarettes)” (Gilmore 367) is not (Kaba et al. 45). This disproportionate criminalization and rise in policing can be traced to poor European workers gaining power during industrialization (cf. *ibid.*). In response, to undermine these gains, the ruling class sought to criminalize the movements and doings of the working and non-working poor. As Alex S. Vitale explains in his book *The End of Policing*, the “earliest origins of policing, [...] were tied to three basic social arrangements of inequality in the eighteenth century: slavery, colonialism, and the control of a new industrial working class” (34). It should then come as no surprise that, beyond criminal laws being tailored towards populations deemed threats, said laws are also discriminatorily enforced (Kaba et al. 47) and “are used as a pretext to stop, harass, ticket, and arrest the people the cops are already charged with criminalizing” (Kaba et al. 48). Although the practice of discriminatory policing is widely known and scrutinized, few challenge the criminalization of violence; however, the “same discriminatory structures underpin the social response to even the most serious forms of violence” (cf. *ibid.*), for instance, a drone strike ordered by a president is not criminalized, whereas a survivor of violence might be criminally charged for acting in self-defense.

If the goal is to protect the public, presumably from violence, relying on the police and crime data they collect, which often inform policy decisions, is wholly insufficient, not only because crime is politically constructed, as established, but also because crime rates only reflect reported crimes, and most violent acts never are (Kaba et al. 49). Moreover, police both knowingly and unknowingly affect statistics by who and what they focus their attention on, or, more deviously, by manipulating the statistics for political purposes (Kaba et al. 50f). Even if not doctored, the categorization of crime data can also distort one’s understanding of danger, as it lacks crucial context inextricably tied to the crimes in question, such as geographical and

social factors, as well as access to resources (Kaba et al. 53). Thus, crime stats do not reflect the harms people actually experience, but rather the police's perception of proper order (Kaba et al. 51) and are often used "as public relations tools to secure more resources, power, funds, and legitimacy for police" (Kaba et al. 512).

Amidst the 2020 #BLM protests, "[m]uch of the public debate has focused on new and enhanced training, diversifying the police, and embracing community policing as strategies for reform, along with enhanced accountability measures" (Vitale 4), however, "[b]y conceptualizing the problem of policing as one of inadequate training and professionalization, reformers fail to directly address how the very nature of policing and the legal system served to maintain and exacerbate racial inequality" (Vitale 14). Thus, to achieve this goal of protecting the public, which police have repeatedly proven to be incapable of – and worse yet, have impeded through enacting violence and starving communities of resources – abolitionists call to prevent harm long before it is done (Kaba et al. 53; 55). Specifically, this entails tackling the underlying conditions that eventually lead to crime, most of which lie outside the realm of policing and emphasize "education, housing, health care, and employment; in other words, create a fair and prosperous society and eliminate the root causes of crime" (Kaba et al. 58). Contrary to reformers, abolitionists, grounded in scientific research, advocate to defund the police, as "[a] kinder, gentler, and more diverse war on the poor is still a war on the poor" (Vitale 27).

Equally, mass incarceration devours social wealth, generating profits, and thus "tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison" (Davis 16f). As Davis argues, carceral institutions persist not because they effectively address harm, but because they have come to be understood as "an inevitable fact of life, like birth and death" (15), rendering abolition unthinkable for many. This naturalization extends beyond prisons to the policing apparatus that sustains them and is achieved, in part, through visual media such as film and television programming (Davis 17f). Most often, these cultural texts engage in the "practice of 'copaganda' wherein stories promote supportive images of police and undermine efforts at systemic reform" (Bernabo 488). Alec Karakatsanis, author of *Copaganda: How Police and the Media Manipulate Our News*, describes copaganda as "a specific type of propaganda in which the punishment bureaucracy and the powerful interests behind it influence how we think about crime and safety" (Introduction). Although his book focuses on copaganda in the news, he points out that fictional copaganda is pervasive in our culture and extends beyond Hollywood: it can be found on TikTok and YouTube, behind many community groups, in online posts, and even in charitable campaigns (cf. *ibid.*). As Laurena Bernabo outlines, cop

shows often have a tendency towards “police fetishism,” and thus offer constructions of officers as heroes at best, and a “necessary evil” at worst (Bernabo 488). This valorizing of police may stem from a symbiotic relationship between production companies and law enforcement agencies, as the former might hire officers as consultants to lend authenticity to the program and publicly affirm the latter’s “self-definition as public servants whose goal [is] to protect citizens from crime and disorder” (Sabin et al. 23), while the latter might facilitate filming, issue permits, and act as security on set (Bernabo 489).

Before 2020, police procedurals functioned as morality plays of sorts that normalized brutality by depicting rule-breaking as “essential to effective policing” (Bernabo 490). In the wake of heightened public scrutiny following the murder of George Floyd, shows were forced to engage with racist policing as a cultural forum. According to Bernabo, this public pressure is unlikely to put an end to police procedurals as a genre, but “seems poised to at least push for the inclusion of more diverse perspectives, the rejection of stories that normalize police brutality, and the addition of stories that explore police reform (489). This holds true in the case of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*: while diverse, intersectional perspectives are present throughout the entire series and police brutality is discussed and opposed in multiple episodes, as will be explored in chapter 3, in the final season, which aired after the 2020 #BLM protests, police misconduct becomes a more central focus and the season centers on the squad proposing and realizing a reform program aimed “to reduce instances in which armed cops are needlessly interacting with civilians” (“The Set Up” 03:02).

3. Analysis

My super-weird family, with two Black dads and two Latina daughters and two white sons and Gina and ... I don't know what you are, some strange giant baby?

(“Thanksgiving” 21:12)

Brooklyn Nine-Nine centers on a group of people working at the 99th precinct of the NYPD. The series’s ensemble cast forms the narrative and emotional core of the show and is often referred to as “the squad” or “the Nine-Nine.” The protagonist, Detective Jake Peralta, is introduced as the precinct’s best detective, who “likes putting away bad guys and [...] loves solving puzzles” (“Pilot” 07:56). He is a fan of classic police stories and idolizes the “rogue solo cop” archetype, as seen in *Die Hard*, his favorite movie. Jake is portrayed as childish, disorganized, and messy, with his sergeant saying, “The only puzzle he hasn’t solved is how to grow up” (“Pilot” 08:01). However, he gradually becomes a more conscientious character over the course of the series through his interactions with the squad, marriage and fatherhood, and his evolving relationship with the institution of the police and the prison system. In the series’s last episode, his captain echoes the “growing up” remark from the pilot, saying, “I think you’ve finally figured it out” (“The Last Day, Pt. 2” 21:27).

His colleague and later love interest, Detective Amy Santiago, counterbalances Jake’s slacker nonchalance in many ways by being ambitious, organized, and rule-abiding. She is one of two Latina women on the squad, grew up with seven brothers, and is very competitive. She channels this competitiveness into meticulous planning and a desire for work-related recognition, leading to her becoming the youngest sergeant in NYPD history and, by the end of the series, chief of the newly instated Office of Police Reform. Her perfectionism and eagerness to impress superiors are often played for laughs but also illustrate gendered and racialized divides in workplace hierarchies. In the fourth episode of the first season, she compares herself to the squad’s new commanding officer, Captain Holt, saying: “He and I are exactly the same. Except that I’m younger, Cuban, female, single, and straight.” (“M.E. Time” 11:44). Together with Holt, she is one of the main reasons the show’s portrayal of the police is unusually academic, as both characters display a breadth of knowledge and interests rarely associated with sitcom cops or the real police.

Captain, and by the end of the series, Deputy Commissioner Raymond Holt, a Black gay man, joins the precinct as its new captain in the series’s pilot. Jake calls him a “washed-up pencil pusher who’s only concerned with [*robot voice*] following every rule in the patrol guide. Meep morp zeep” (“Pilot” 04:18), but Holt’s calm, formal demeanor and aversion to emotional

display, while often played for laughs, also mask a complex history of marginalization and discrimination within the police force. Holt's identity is foregrounded in several storylines that explore systemic racism and homophobia, making him a central figure in the series's engagement with institutional critique. He is married to a college professor named Kevin Cozner and has a Corgi named Cheddar.

The second-in-command, Sergeant, later Lieutenant, and by the end of the show Captain Terry Jeffords, is also a Black man and is portrayed as both physically imposing and emotionally attuned, a juxtaposition that challenges stereotypical constructions of Black masculinity. Poey argues that this type of playing against clichés is a big source of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s comedy (112). Terry is a devoted husband to his wife, Sharon, and father to his three daughters: the twins Cagney and Lacey – a reference to the 1980s police show *Cagney & Lacey*, which featured two female detectives and was exceptional for its time – and Ava. Poey also points out that Terry being played by the eponymous Terry Crews “draws constant attention to the contrast between the actor and the character” (112), as Crews is a former NFL football player and one of the actors playing the “Old Spice Man” in Old Spice commercials, who, despite being a humorous exaggeration of traditional masculinity (Kreicbergs and Ščeuļovs 30), ultimately reinforces its underlying sexism and homophobia (A. Meyer 34).

Similarly, in a way, Jake's best friend and colleague, Charles Boyle, also expands the series's portrayal of non-traditional masculinities. He is kind-hearted, loyal, a little naive, and quickly becomes overly invested in people and situations, which Jake calls “going full Boyle” (“Full Boyle” 03:35). Between the third and fourth season, he and his girlfriend Genevieve adopt a four-year-old Latvian boy named Nikolaj, to whom he is deeply attentive and nurturing, foregrounding forms of emotional labor and care rarely centered in sitcom portrayals of masculinity. Charles loves musical theatre and has eclectic culinary passions, which, along with unintentional sexual innuendo and misunderstanding social cues, make him a recurring source of humor in the series. Especially given Boyle's exaggerated attempts at allyship in the last season, his personality lends itself well to discussions of privilege, performativity, and representation.

Rosa Diaz, the squad's other Latina detective, is described as “tough, smart, hard to read, and really scary” (“Pilot” 06:51). She is very private and guarded and, similar to Holt, communicates with little emotional expression and a dry, deadpan delivery, which become recurring comedic devices, often playing against audience expectations. Midway through the fifth season, she comes out as bisexual, a development central to an intersectional analysis, as her narrative highlights how queer and Latina identities intersect with and are constrained by

the institutional culture of policing, eventually leading to Rosa's decision to leave the NYPD in the final season.

Detectives Norm Scully and Michael Hitchcock are introduced as "pretty much worthless, but they make good coffee" ("Pilot" 06:43). In contrast to the rest of the squad, they are both older, bigger, straight, white men with graying or balding hair and are generally characterized as sluggish, gluttonous, preferably sedentary or napping, and problematic in their conduct. They primarily serve as comic relief and, in being different from the rest of the squad, enable the show to make jokes about the ineptness of cops without portraying an entire precinct of incapable police, which the creators did not want to be the show's main source of humor.

The only non-cop member of the squad is Gina Linetti, the precinct's civilian administrator and Captain Holt's assistant. She is extremely confident, enjoys dancing, and is characterized by a sardonic, often abrasive sense of humor that rejects norms of professional decorum and feminine likability. She frequently comments on and undermines her police colleagues' behavior and plays pranks on them. Gina is a main character until the fourth episode of season six, after which she leaves the precinct to pursue a career as an internet celebrity, returning only as a guest character in three subsequent episodes.

3.1 *Moo Moo* (S4E16)

<i>Holt:</i>	<i>There's politics to being a cop.</i>
<i>Terry</i>	<i>But I wasn't harassed for being a cop. I was harassed as a Black man.</i>

("Moo Moo" 13:05)

Since *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is a sitcom, the presence of humor is ubiquitous, and the show is usually very light-hearted. The episode "Moo Moo" is a great example of how more difficult topics, in this case, racial profiling, are addressed in the series, how they are interwoven with humor, and why. Before diving into the analysis, it is crucial to mention that "[i]mplicit, or unconscious, biases have often been evoked to explain the heightened police brutality against blacks and other marginalized groups in the United States" (Brogaard and Gatzia 219). The phrase "unconscious bias" acts as a smokescreen for racism that "a majority white sector feels comfortable with using and discussing to describe itself" (Tate and Page 142). And while unconscious biases certainly contribute to police brutality, the phrase takes away agency from perpetrators of racial violence and suggests a resistance to change, implicitly justifying the racist acts (Brogaard and Gatzia 219; Tate and Page 143). Brogaard and Gatzia thus demand we be "careful not to blame modern-day lynchings of black people and other forms of blatant

mistreatment of African Americans on implicit racial biases that allegedly can't be helped" (219). Moreover, Vitale notes that no matter how well-trained police are, if they follow proper procedure, the majority of people arrested will continue to be people of color, "because *that is how the system is designed to operate* – not because of the biases or misunderstandings of officers" (Vitale 15, emphasis in original).

The premise of the episode "Moo Moo" is Sergeant Jeffords wanting to take on more responsibility in addition to his work at the precinct. He consults Captain Holt about any job openings, who suggests a position as a City Council liaison, "a rewarding but challenging opportunity" ("Moo Moo" 02:05). To give Terry more time to work on his application, Jake and Amy offer to pick up his twin daughters, Cagney and Lacey, from daycare. As Jake and Amy drive the girls home, Cagney's blankie, which she calls "Moo Moo," falls out of the car while the twins play with the windows. Later, a distressed Terry, rummaging through his car, calls Jake to ask where the blankie could be. When he learns that they let the girls play with the windows and the blankie probably fell out, now lying somewhere on the roadside and not in his car, he gets upset with them. Although he raises his voice and tells them off, when Jake apologizes and then says: "Oh, and one more thing. I love you" ("Moo Moo" 05:16), he responds in a softer, genuine tone with: "I love you too, Jake" ("Moo Moo" 05:22). Terry then searches the vicinity of his home for his daughter's toy, which is when the defining moment of the episode happens: Immediately after finding his daughter's toy, Terry is confronted by a white police officer in a racially motivated stop.

<i>Terry:</i>	<i>Moo Moo? Moo Moo!</i>
<i>Officer Maldack:</i>	<i>What's going on, buddy?</i>
<i>Terry:</i>	<i>Oh, hey, Officer.</i>
<i>Officer Maldack:</i>	<i>Whoa, whoa, don't move. [puts his hand on his gun]</i>
<i>Terry:</i>	<i>Oh, I was just...</i>
<i>Officer Maldack:</i>	<i>Step back. Keep your hands where I can see 'em. Drop that [Moo Moo].</i>

("Moo Moo" 05:25)

Terry's demeanor, in contrast to the previous scene where he was cross on the phone, is friendly and non-threatening, his voice cheery, and he is visibly surprised by the officer's uncalled-for sternness. The fact that the officer calls Terry "buddy" can be seen as condescending, and the fact that he reaches for his gun a mere six seconds into the interaction after a friendly "Oh, hey" is both very telling of the assumptions he has about Terry based on his appearance, and highlights the discordance between who the aggressor is and who is perceived as such: Terry with a children's toy in hand, the officer with a gun. Vitale writes that while most officers will never fire their weapon, many insist on the need for police carrying them, as it supposedly

bolsters police authority and acts as a deterrent, however, “[t]he fact that police feel the need to constantly bolster their authority with the threat of lethal violence indicates a fundamental crisis in police legitimacy” (26f). This is further highlighted when the officer tells Terry to “drop that,” something one would usually say to someone holding a weapon, and Terry drops Moo Moo, a children’s toy which he had so desperately looked for moments earlier, on the floor.

The next day at the precinct, Terry tells his colleagues about the incident, and, despite the heavy subject matter, many humorous elements are still present, dispersed throughout the scene. Terry explains he got “stopped for walking” (“Moo Moo” 06:03), and everyone but Scully immediately understands that Terry was racially profiled and is shocked. Terry saying he was “stopped for walking” alludes to a very real pattern of racially targeted policing. A 2017 ProPublica investigation into pedestrian violations in Jacksonville, Florida, titled *Walking While Black*, referencing the phrase “Driving While Black,” which “commonly refers to the use of pretextual traffic stops of Black motorists by law enforcement officers” (Jefferson-Jones 2282), found that Black residents were disproportionately ticketed for minor infractions like “walking in the roadway,” illustrating how ostensibly neutral laws are enforced in racially discriminatory ways (Sanders et al.). Scully’s lack of understanding and subsequent inquiry into the matter offers an opportunity to, on the one hand, precisely spell out what happened: racial profiling. On the other hand, it allows to include a funny-intended line, as Hitchcock says to Scully: “He got stopped for being Black. Get woke, Scully!” (“Moo Moo” 06:14). This is an instance of incongruity humor, as one would not expect Hitchcock, who himself is not very “woke,” to be the one to educate Scully on this, and the phrasing “get woke” is usually not attributed to older, white, straight men like Hitchcock.

As Terry tells the squad what happened, the audience sees the continuation of the scene between Terry and the officer. The officer, still with his hand on his gun, asks Terry what he is doing in this neighborhood, to which he replies in a calm voice that he lives there. Again, there is a discordance between who the aggressor is and who is treated as such when the officer, in a much louder voice, tells Terry that he needs to lower his. This can be seen as a role reversal of victim and perpetrator. Despite Terry’s full compliance, the situation escalates, and the officer tells him to turn around, put his hands on his head, and not make any sudden movements. When Terry reiterates that he did nothing wrong, the officer kicks him from behind and threatens him, saying: “Keep talking. See what happens next, huh? Big guy” (“Moo Moo” 06:31). Vitale writes that mostly Black and Latino people are targeted in such police interactions – in New York City 80-90% of targets are people of color – and “frequently report being treated in a hostile and degrading manner despite having done nothing wrong” (2).

Interestingly, the first thing Jake asks Terry is if he told the officer that he is a cop. Terry explains that without his badge on him and the situation escalating so quickly, it was difficult, but that he ultimately convinced the officer to look him up in the system and was let go. Though it might seem innocuous upon first viewing, Jake's question raises another, far more important question: Why should it matter that Terry is a cop? This detail speaks to the presumed solidarity and mutual recognition within law enforcement as a shared identity that supposedly overrides or is equal to other social markers such as race. Yet Terry's experience suggests the opposite: that Blackness overrides his position as a police sergeant until explicitly stated, and even then, only barely mitigates the violence of the encounter. The question "Did you tell him you're a cop?" thus implies that being affiliated with law enforcement should offer a kind of immunity and that the real issue is not police brutality per se, but brutality against the wrong target. This reflects a key contradiction in liberal policing discourse: "Liberals think of the police as the legitimate mechanism for using force in the interests of the whole society," wanting them "to be better trained, more accountable, and less brutal and racist [...] but [leaving] intact the basic institutional functions of the police, which have never really been about public safety or crime control" (Vitale 32f). At its core, Jake's question shifts the focus of the issue somewhere it does not belong. It makes the individual responsible for shielding themselves from mistreatment, even though the incident exposes the broader reality that policing disproportionately targets Black people regardless of context – even those within the institution, like Terry.

Jake then says that nothing like that ever happened to him despite him having done "some pretty suspicious things in the street" ("Moo Moo" 06:45), followed by a flashback of him climbing into a window in broad daylight, wearing a dark hoodie and a hockey mask. An officer witnessing this asks Jake what he is doing. Jake lifts his hockey mask and says: "I'm just playing a prank on my buddy" ("Moo Moo" 06:51). Once the officer sees Jake's face, he is no longer concerned by Jake's behavior – presumably because Jake is white – and more than content with his unlikely explanation, even saying: "Sounds fun, carry on!" ("Moo Moo" 06:53) before walking away and the two giving each other a thumbs up. This is a prime example of the discretion police enjoy in who they pay attention to and how, as Kaba et al. explain: "Cops target Black people hanging out on the corner on the assumption that they are up to no good [...]; white people doing the same are almost invisible to police unless they do something to call attention to themselves" (50). Jake's statement and the subsequent flashback serve to highlight the pervasive institutional racism of the police to the viewer and act as a kind of mirror to Terry's interaction with the officer. Jake's behavior, unlike Terry's, would have warranted a reaction like that of the officer who stopped Terry, and vice versa: the only tangible difference

between the two men being their skin color. The flashback simultaneously tees up another funny-intended moment, as Charles very matter-of-factly states: “It was a very good prank. I totally thought I was gonna die” (“Moo Moo” 06:55), segueing out of the flashback scene. The interweaving of humorous quips into the seriousness of the situation continues, as Rosa makes a dry comment about slashing the tires of the officer’s car.

Jake suggests filing an official complaint with Captain Holt, but Terry insists he wants to have a conversation with the officer to ensure he does not repeat the same racist behavior. He asks Amy and Jake to watch his daughters again while he meets with the officer named Maldack. They agree, Jake confidently saying: “There’s nothing those little munchkins can throw at us that we can’t handle” (“Moo Moo” 07:32), but being immediately proven wrong in the next scene when Cagney and Lacey ask them: “Why was Daddy in trouble with the policeman? [...] Is it because he’s Black?” (“Moo Moo” 07:35), which makes both Jake and Amy uncomfortable. Putting characters in the position of having to explain racism to children, especially ones who are or will be directly affected by it themselves, puts viewers in the same position as the characters and implicitly asks them: How would you react? How would you explain this to a child? If viewers were not already asking themselves these questions, they get another incentive to do so when Jake and Amy call their friends asking for advice on what to do in this situation. Their answers are again humorous: Charles, obsessed with the idea of Jake and Amy having a child of their own, uses so many words with sexual innuendo that Jake hangs up before Charles gives an actual answer, Rosa, again very dryly, suggests making the children go to bed regardless of whether they are tired or not, repeating herself with an aggressive undertone, and Gina suggests to “just explain the deep-rooted institutionalized racism that remains pervasive in this country to this day” (“Moo Moo” 08:14), and when Jake replies that they are children, she suggests to put it in a song and starts singing. As a last resort, they call Scully, who says he cannot chat because he and Hitchcock “are eating cake for dinner and watching a movie” (“Moo Moo” 08:46). With crumbs on their shirts and frosting around their mouths, Hitchcock and Scully are often portrayed as food-obsessed and lazy, which functions as a parody of the archetypal old-school cop. More on this will follow in chapter 3.4. Though Scully and Hitchcock did not make any suggestions, the phone call with them gives Jake the idea to distract and divert from the topic by having the children spend their evening the same way as the two men:

<i>Amy:</i>	<i>Who wants cake?</i>
<i>Cagney & Lacey:</i>	<i>Me!</i>
<i>Jake:</i>	<i>And who wants to watch “101 Dalmatians” and not ask any hard-</i>

to-answer questions about your father and race?

Cagney & Lacey: Me! Me! Me!

(“Moo Moo” 08:58)

The next scene shows the meeting between Terry and Officer Maldack. Initially, the officer thanks Terry for arranging the meeting and says he is “so sorry for what happened” (“Moo Moo” 09:16), which positively surprises Terry. However, it becomes clear that the officer only regrets his actions because Terry is with the police. When confronted that the stop should not have happened or escalated like this, regardless of whether or not Terry was a cop, Maldack tries to justify his behavior, saying that Terry doesn’t look like he belongs in that neighborhood, and that 90% of the time he is called there “it’s about a guy that looks like [him]” (“Moo Moo” 09:48). Terry rebuts by reminding Maldack that he lives in that neighborhood and rhetorically asking if he was responding to a call on the night of the incident, which he negates. When Terry says: “I just want you to admit you only stopped me because I’m Black and to apologize and say you won’t do it again!” (“Moo Moo” 10:01), the officer rolls his eyes and even goes as far as to blame Terry for the incident, saying if he had had his badge on him, none of it would have happened. This overtly states what Jake’s question covertly implied earlier and highlights another central aspect of such violence: victim-blaming. Whether it be a woman who gets sexually assaulted and later blamed for the assault because of what she was wearing, or, in this case, a Black man who gets blamed for a racially motivated stop, victim-blaming plays a central role in upholding current power structures and relativizing the aggressor’s actions, implying they were in any way warranted.

The officer then says: “I’m not apologizing for doing my job” (“Moo Moo” 10:12), to which Terry replies: “That’s not the job, man” (“Moo Moo” 10:14). The officer justifying his racism as being part of his job speaks to Brogaard and Gatzia’s argument that cognitive dissonance can help explain the logic of racism. I would argue that Officer Maldack is an explicit racist, as he has overt racial intentions. So, while there is no dissonance between his racist attitudes and racist practices, there is “a discrepancy between [his] racist practices and the socially acceptable egalitarian attitudes” (Brogaard and Gatzia 220). This dissonance causes stress, which the officer seeks to reduce by “attributing a ‘logical’ motive to [himself]. For example, [he] may tell [himself] that [he is] performing honorable actions by punishing ‘dangerous black criminals’” (cf. *ibid.*). He is aware that it is not socially acceptable for him to voice his overt racist attitudes so plainly, thus he hides them under the guise of being part of his professional duty. Having the officer equate his racism to the job also highlights that racism in the police is not a series of isolated incidents, but systemic. While Terry’s response that Maldack’s racism is “not the job” rings true on a moral level, when placed in a historical and

structural context, the officer's claim becomes disturbingly plausible, as "the police exist primarily as a system for managing and even producing inequality by suppressing social movements and tightly managing the behaviors of poor and nonwhite people" (Vitale 34). While Terry rejects Maldack's behavior as a perversion of the profession, the abolitionist critique reveals that such behavior is not a deviation from policing but rather a function built into its very foundations. Thus, cynically – or perhaps realistically – one might argue it *is* the job.

After his failed attempt at getting an apology and an admission of wrongdoing from Maldack, Terry files an official complaint with Holt, who, to Terry's surprise, says he will not submit it, as he thinks it is a mistake, and leaves Terry standing in disbelief in his office. When Terry tells his colleagues about Holt's reaction, they ask if the grammar of the complaint was correct and if he dangled a participle because "Holt hates a dangler" ("Moo Moo" 11:12), humorous quips about Holt's overly correct and uptight manner. Jake then suggests that Terry go to Holt's house, and Charles volunteers Amy and Jake as babysitters again, adding: "unless they're too busy making babies of their own. Shaka-daka-dow" ("Moo Moo" 11:32), again making a sexual joke to the dismay of Amy and Jake.

When an upset Terry arrives at Holt's house to discuss the reasons for his disapproval of the complaint, Terry accidentally interrupts a dinner party Holt is hosting. Terry's demeanor when confronting Holt is serious, his voice slightly raised, and he uses "damn" twice in one sentence ("Moo Moo" 12:09), all of which changes the second he sees Holt's guests, whom he greets with a soft "Hi," a smile, and a wave, fluttering his fingers ("Moo Moo" 12:19). This could also be seen as an instance of incongruity humor, as one expects Holt to respond to Terry and not to introduce him to his dinner party guests, and for Terry to keep his serious demeanor. The two of them then talk privately, Terry apologizing for interrupting the party, and Holt responding: "No problem at all. This is important. Also, Kevin's friend Margo is here, and she's a real class-A drip" ("Moo Moo" 12:22). This is the first of many instances of comic relief in the scene that rely on jokes about Margo. The humor is created through Holt's sassy delivery and the incongruity with his otherwise neutral, stoic demeanor. Terry voices a lack of understanding for Holt's decision, saying he thought Holt, of all people, would support him. Holt prefaces his reasoning by strongly condemning the officer's actions, saying: "First of all, let me say, what that officer did to you was wrong, deeply wrong, and I'm furious about it." ("Moo Moo" 12:33). When pressed about why then he would not support Terry's complaint, his reasons pertain to the potential consequences for Terry's career, as police officers who "blow the whistle on other cops almost always face a backlash," followed by a comparison to

Margo: “just like people who socialize with Margo invariably hear about her trip to Scottsdale” (“Moo Moo” 12:41), which serves as comic relief, and, in addition to poking fun at Margo who according to Holt is “horrible” (“Moo Moo” 12:52), now also makes fun of Scottsdale, a suburb of Phoenix, implied to be an undesirable holiday destination.

Holt maintains he does not want to see Terry’s career derailed because he was “besmirched for reporting on another officer” (“Moo Moo” 12:55), to which Terry replies that Maldack should be the one to be besmirched. Holt then repeats the word “besmirching” three more times in his response to Terry, leading to a moment of semantic satiation, as the word “besmirch” temporarily loses its meaning. This creates a sense of absurdity that viewers may find humorous. Holt then makes the argument emphasized in the epigraph to this chapter: “There’s politics to being a cop.” (“Moo Moo” 13:05), to which Terry replies that he was not harassed for being a cop, but as a Black man. Reminding ourselves of Jake’s question about whether Terry had told the officer he is a cop, this exchange finally counters the earlier insinuation that somehow it matters that Terry is with the police and shifts the focus back to where it belongs, centering the reality that Terry’s identity as a Black man was the determining factor in the interaction. Holt justifies his stance, explaining that Terry should, as Holt himself did, strive “to rise through the ranks so that [he] can make large-scale changes” (“Moo Moo” 13:12). As a Black man himself, Holt says he had to pick his battles and while he concedes that “it hasn’t always been easy” (“Moo Moo” 13:18), his argument also implies that he is only captain because he did not report racist incidents when they happened to him in the past. Holt specifically says that he is the captain of “a precinct whose officers would never do to you what Officer Maldack did” (“Moo Moo” 13:21). This speaks to the notion that racist police are just “a few bad apples” in a barrel full of “good cops.” However, as Vitale posits, “we are asked to believe that these incidents are the misdeeds of ‘a few bad apples.’ But why does the institution of policing so consistently shield these misdeeds?” (29). If the problem were truly limited to a few individuals, the reasonable thing – within the liberal view of policing as both improvable and vital for public safety and crime control (Vitale 33) – would be to work to rid the police of said “bad apples,” unless one wanted to send “an unambiguous message that officers are above the law and free to act on their biases without consequence” (Vitale 29). While grounded in concern for Terry’s career, Holt’s reluctance to escalate the complaint inadvertently upholds a system that protects misconduct by discouraging accountability and could therefore be read as a form of institutional complicity, even as Holt vocally condemns Maldack’s behavior. Another instance of this reluctance to hold officers accountable can be seen in the first episode of the eighth season, “The Good Ones,” which will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.3. Holt and

Terry's discussion in "Moo Moo" weighs the pursuit of justice for the harm already caused to Terry against potential further negative consequences for him, highlighting another central flaw in the system: the police serving as its own supervisory body. This issue is also explored in more detail in chapter 3.3. Moreover, Holt's claim that the officers of the Nine-Nine would not treat Terry the way Officer Maldack did serves to set them apart from other police officers and precincts, which becomes questionable in the third episode of season eight, "Blue Flu," as all of the precinct's officers, with the exception of the squad, stage a walkout and call in sick in solidarity with cops from another precinct, who claim they are being discriminated because they are cops. More on this will follow in chapter 3.4.

When Terry wants to reply, Holt shushes him, adding: "I hear Margo's squeaky shoes in the hallway. One guess as to where in Arizona she brought them. [whispers] Scottsdale." ("Moo Moo" 13:29), another jab at Margo and Scottsdale for comic relief. Margo enters, and the series of jokes comes to a peak in this interaction:

Margo: I'm about to start my Scottsdale slideshow. It has all the highlights.

Holt: There are no highlights in Scottsdale, Margo.

Margo: That's what you think, Raymond.

("Moo Moo" 13:36)

The comic tension built throughout the scene with the running gag about Margo and Scottsdale crystallizes in this moment, and the joke lands on multiple levels, paying off Holt's earlier sarcasm, Margo's obliviousness, and their civil yet antipathic dynamic. Holt delivers his line with his trademark unemotional deadpan, and the interaction provides a final, absurd contrast to the emotional intensity of the conversation Holt and Terry just had. Positioned immediately after a heavy moral dilemma, this exchange, in accordance with relief theory, serves to release tension by momentarily returning the audience to the show's familiar tone. In doing so, it maintains the show's comedic rhythm without undercutting the seriousness of the topic, illustrating again how humor is used not to derail, but to punctuate emotionally charged moments.

Meanwhile, Amy and Jake try to distract Cagney and Lacey with cake and movies again, but this time, the twins are more persistent with their questions: "Is being Black bad? We're Black" ("Moo Moo" 14:05). Amy tries to explain what "prejudice" means by telling the girls about the word's etymology. This can be seen as an example of the police in the series being portrayed as too academic. When she asks if the girls can follow her reasoning, Jake joins the twins, and all three simultaneously say "no," which makes for another humorous moment. She then attempts to explain racism by comparing it to sexism, asking: "You know how it's tougher in this world to be a woman?" ("Moo Moo" 14:42), which surprises the twins and prompts them

to say that, in that case, they do not want to be women, making for another humorous moment. Jake immediately interjects, saying, “You don’t have to be if that’s who you are” (“Moo Moo” 14:50), one of three instances of the show acknowledging trans identities. This short exchange with Cagney and Lacey illustrates the constructedness of discrimination and shows just how deep-rooted sexism is, so that Amy takes it for granted that the girls know about it. The *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines “naturalization” as “[t]he process by which culturally specific worldviews which are constructed sociohistorically come to be phenomenally experienced by those within a culture as natural, normal, self-evident common sense, and are thus taken for granted as universal and immutable, as in the naturalization of difference” (Chandler and Munday). Showing children who are still learning about the world and, until taught, have no concept of racism or sexism, being unfamiliar with both, highlights that discrimination is not natural but rather naturalized. Explaining these forms of discrimination to children, especially to those who will be affected by them across multiple intersections, can be difficult; however, this is also where the potential for great impact lies: finding the right words to explain something complex in simple terms. This dilemma mirrors the show’s broader strategy for communicating complex social realities through emotionally resonant, accessible storytelling. Jake and Amy eventually explain the situation to Cagney and Lacey like this:

Jake: A cop did a bad thing and tried to get your daddy in trouble, but your daddy didn’t do anything wrong.
Cagney: Because Daddy’s Black?
Jake: Yeah.
Cagney: That’s scary.
Jake: It is scary. But that cop was wrong, and what he did was bad.
Amy: And the most important thing is your daddy’s okay, and he’s not in trouble, and he loves you both more than anything in the world.
 (“Moo Moo” 14:55)

Proud of themselves for having explained the situation well and age-appropriately, they say that they are here for the twins if they have any other questions, which tees up to a humorous moment when Lacey asks what an orgasm is, injecting humor into the heavy theme of the scene.

Meanwhile, Holt and Terry continue their discussion. Holt reiterates that Terry should “keep pushing forward in [his] career, so that [he] can change the system” (“Moo Moo” 15:41). While he does not specify what he means by “change the system,” Vitale points out that large parts of the public debate around police reform have centered around measures like better training, a more diverse police force, community policing, and more accountability, most of which fail to address the core issues inherent to policing (4). Terry counters, asking how long it will take to make change that way, emphasizing that cops like Maldack are “on the street

now” (“Moo Moo” 15:50). He then shares his reason for becoming a cop: “Because when I was a kid, I always wanted to be a superhero” (“Moo Moo” 15:55), followed by a flashback to him as a child – “Little Terry” – being bullied by other children and pushed to the ground, until someone shows up behind him and the other children run away. As “Little Terry” lies on the ground, the camera pans up from there to a low angle shot in strong backlight, with a lens flare partially obscuring the figure standing behind “Little Terry.” Once the lens flare fades, the silhouette is revealed to be a Black police officer, whose presence caused the bullies to run.



Figure 1. The cop who helped “Little Terry” (“Moo Moo” 16:11)

This compositional choice to film from below literalizes the figurative “looking-up-to-someone” and, framed against the sky, with the sun creating a halo-like glow around the officer, lends him a near-angelic or, per Terry’s previous statement, superheroic quality. The mise-en-scène and contextual framing serve to deify this unnamed officer as a protective authority figure and visually translate the idea of the police as saviors. Moreover, since the officer is Black, he represents an aspirational figure of empowerment to “Little Terry” and affirms a possibility of safety and strength within a system that often excludes Black people. However, the fact that the other children, who are also Black, are running away does not speak to the cop being a superhero, but rather the opposite, as Vitale points out: “black Americans start from a diminished position that makes them more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system and to be treated more harshly by it” (33). The juxtaposition of cops like Maldack with this unnamed “superhero-cop,” who supposedly actually “protects and serves,” could imply that officers of color are more respectful, fair, and dignified in their treatment of communities, however, evidence shows that the problems of racial profiling and bias persist, as “individual

black and Latino officers appear to perform very much like their white counterparts” (Vitale 11).

Terry then has an emotional, almost minute-long monologue concluding that he will file the report regardless of Holt’s approval. This is followed by a few seconds of silence, after which Holt says: “Kind of seemed like you were gonna get up and leave after saying all that” (“Moo Moo” 17:14), to which Terry replies: “I was, but I think I hear Margo” (“Moo Moo” 17:18) for a callback to the recurring jokes about Margo which again diffuses the seriousness. Similarly, the next day at the precinct, there is a callback to the orgasm joke when Amy apologizes to Terry for telling his daughters that “orgasms” was another word for “oranges.” Sandwiched in between humorous comments about the strength of Terry’s handshake, Holt takes Terry aside to tell him that after their talk he reconsidered and filed the complaint, saying that “as a Black gay man, [he] never had a superior who was on [his] side” (“Moo Moo” 18:25) which is why he focused on his career to make a difference, thereby explicitly referencing the intersection of his racial and sexual identities and how they shaped his experience within the police force. Now that he was in a position where he could, he “would be betraying the very thing that [he] worked so hard for” (“Moo Moo” 18:45) if he did not support Terry. The episode concludes with the two men sharing a drink in Holt’s office and Holt bearing the news that Terry did not get the job as city council liaison, the complaint likely being the reason for the rejection. Nevertheless, he maintains that it is not a sad drink, and they toast “to doing the right thing” (“Moo Moo” 20:18). Terry briefly ponders if they should not have filed the complaint, if not getting the liaison position was worth it, showing more understanding for Holt’s point of view now that his predicted repercussions to Terry’s career came true. Holt leaves this up to Terry, but says that because there were consequences for Maldack, it is a win. The final exchange of the episode, just four words between the two men, is spoken very calmly, resignedly, and succinctly, making it feel even heavier: “It’s tough. – It is.” (“Moo Moo” 20:41). But, being a sitcom, after a brief pause Holt asks who is with Terry’s kids right now and the camera cuts to Rosa and Gina tied to chairs, screaming as the twins dance around them. This is known as a “blow,” the last joke of a scene (“Part 1: Getting the Squad Together” 33:08), again serves as comic relief and a means to soften the gravity of the subject matter of their conversation, and ensures that the episode ends on a humorous note.

Beyond the comedic resolution, however, the episode leaves viewers with a complex portrait of how racism and institutional failure manifest in daily life. This unique combination of humor and social commentary is intended to keep viewers engaged and entertained while raising awareness and acknowledging the lived realities of millions of Black Americans. “Moo

3.2 *He Said, She Said* (S6E8)

interview with CBC, saying that “comedy is the right place to discuss these complex issues” (Nigro et al.) because it “allows the audience to let the pressure out and forget that they might be in the middle of something really hard” (cf. *ibid.*). That pressure release Beatriz refers to arrives swiftly and – fittingly for a story about structural misogyny – through a literal broken penis. The injury becomes a running gag and a source of comic relief throughout the episode, along with other penis-related jokes. For instance, Jake makes a pun during the morning briefing saying, “on the wang” instead of “on the wing” (“He Said, She Said” 00:37), and later we learn that the perpetrator calls his penis “the Cookie Monster” (“He Said, She Said” 04:59) and his testicles “Bert and Ernie” (“He Said, She Said” 05:06). The fact that Mr. Haggarty’s penis is broken and the continuous object of derision can be interpreted as emasculating. Jokes critical of men are often used “as a way to build awareness and to challenge male domination and patriarchal social organization” (Case & Lippard 241), to respond to the oppression and exploitation women face under this social order, and to express “the desire to change the status of women” (cf. *ibid.*). Although not mentioned in the episode, I feel it is an interesting and important medical side note that penises can only be broken in an erect state (Diaz et al.). Therefore, this injury could only have happened if Mr. Haggarty had had an erection at the time of the assault, which he never had to explain in his account of the story.



Figure 2. Mr. Haggarty’s Interview (“He Said, She Said” 01:47)

Most studies on penile fractures use compressive dressings (Kominsky et al. 78), which are applied directly to the injury and, by nature, do not allow for any objects such as cooling packs to be inserted beneath the dressings. In his initial interview, as can be seen in Figure 2, rather

than bandaged, Mr. Haggarty appears diaper-clad, wearing an oversized “bandage” over his trousers, complete with an ice pack sticking out. On one hand, this serves to exaggerate the injury for comedic effect, making the “broken penis” running gag visually explicit. On the other hand, it also infantilizes Haggarty, as the “diaper” is reminiscent of a baby’s. The purpose of such infantilization can be two-fold: it paints him as inept and laughable, further highlighting the comedic aspect, but it can also stylize him as a helpless, innocent victim rather than perpetrator – an image Haggarty clearly leans into. Figure 2 captures Haggarty’s crotch as the focal point of the scene, not only underscored by his struggle to sit down, but also by the compositional choice of it being positioned on the vanishing point of the room’s tiles and both Amy’s and Jake’s gaze, as well as the color scheme of the shot, with the room and all other clothing having darker and more muted tones and the “diaper” being bright white.

Haggarty calls Ms. Brennan “crazy” for accusing him of sexually assaulting her and follows that statement up with: “I know we’re not supposed to say that about women, and I usually wouldn’t go there because I’m a huge advocate. I mean, I’m the kind of guy who thinks Kathryn Bigelow should direct the next Star Wars. I’ve said that out loud to other men” (“He Said, She Said” 02:22). His comment exemplifies a well-worn rhetorical move: discrediting a woman’s accusation by questioning her sanity. His acknowledgement that one should not do that and his promise that he would not otherwise do so serve to make his discreditation of Ms. Brennan more credible, insinuating that she is “so crazy, he had to bring it up.” His mention of Kathryn Bigelow, one of the most successful female directors who has won myriad accolades, as his pick for director of the next Star Wars film is intended as proof of his supposed advocacy for women and an attempt to shield himself behind the flimsy armor of performative allyship. His mention that he has said this to other men further highlights this performativity and, along with his previous statements, behavior, and appearance, caricatures Haggarty. Potential laughter resulting from this scene could be categorized as superiority humor, as it is directed *at* him. This is consistent with my postulation that this form of humor occurs in relation to antagonist characters. He is also in a position of power at his company, which is why jokes at his expense can “[vent] feelings,” for instance, of anger, frustration, or moral indignation about his abuse of power, and “[question] the justice of the hierarchy” (Crawford 1420). This ridiculing of Haggarty throughout the episode can also be understood as “feminist humor,” which “affirms women’s experience, rather than denigrating it” and “[picks] apart the oppressive nature of society [...] ridiculing oppressive structures rather than women’s actions and attitudes” (Case and Lippard 245). Terms like “crazy” function as gendered silencing tactics, aimed at severing women from ideals of rational femininity and rendering them

unreliable narrators of their own experiences. Mr. Haggarty's flippant dismissal of Ms. Brennan as "crazy" exemplifies a broader discursive pattern – gaslighting – described by Paige L. Sweet as "rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships" (851). It relies on associating femininity with irrationality to delegitimize women's testimony, making Haggarty's remark not simply crude but part of a long-standing rhetorical strategy that neutralizes women's voices.

In her interview, Ms. Brennan recounts the events, saying Haggarty "had clearly been drinking, and before I knew it, he pushed me into a desk, and he tried to take my clothes off" ("He Said, She Said" 04:53). Still, having been offered 2.5 million dollars by her firm to sign a non-disclosure agreement, she initially does not want to press charges. Amy is visibly shocked by her decision, asking if she's "gonna let Seth [Haggarty] get off scot-free" ("He Said, She Said" 06:31) to which Ms. Brennan replies: "This is a 'he said, she said,' situation. I know how that goes down. No one's gonna convict him on my word alone. The system's as broken as Seth's dong" ("He Said, She Said" 06:39). The joke within the statement does not deflect from the reality it names but makes the critique more palatable – an example of how *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* uses humor not to avoid political engagement, but to facilitate it. Amy continues the humorous reference by proclaiming that she is the system and "nothing like Seth's dong" ("He Said, She Said" 06:48), assuring Ms. Brennan that she and Jake will keep working the case until they manage to find proof of the assault and Seth goes to jail. As is often the case in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the resolution is idealistic; Ms. Brennan decides to press charges. This idealism reflects the show's broader ethos: one where justice, while difficult, is possible through solidarity, personal courage, and the support of others, all of which the police provide. In reality, "[m]ost crimes that are investigated are not solved" as "[e]ven detectives (who make up only about 15 percent of police forces) spend most of their time taking reports of crimes that they [...] in many cases will never even investigate. There is no possible way for police to investigate every reported crime" (Vitale 31).

While going through Keri's – Ms. Brennan's – statement, Jake remarks that if he were a woman, he would not work in finance, to which Amy sarcastically replies: "Oh, because it's so easy for women everywhere else" ("He Said, She Said" 07:18). Jake is initially alarmed by Amy's response for fear of having said something wrong. Amy assures him that there is nothing wrong with his statement, but says she thinks that men do not understand how different everything is for women. Her statement is followed by a montage of Jake and Amy going about their day doing the same things, yet Amy is met with sexism in all scenarios. In the first setting, they are waiting for the light to turn green at a crosswalk. Jake looks over to another pedestrian

who is gaming on a mobile device, smiles, and says, “Oh, sick!” (“He Said, She Said” 07:30), “sick” in this case being a synonym for “cool.” The camera pans over to Amy, behind whom a man stands very closely and stares down at her chest. With a look of disgust, Amy nudges him and also says, “Oh, sick!” (“He Said, She Said” 07:31), “sick” this time carrying a negative connotation. The second setting is Jake and Amy standing in line at a coffee stand. When the vendor hands Jake his coffee, he says, “Have a great day” (“He Said, She Said” 07:33), but when he hands Amy hers, he first tells her that she has a beautiful mouth before wishing her a great day. This montage is cleverly done, as it uses parallel structure and repetition to highlight the stark contrast between Jake’s and Amy’s experiences in identical scenarios. By placing them side-by-side in situations that initially appear mundane, like waiting at a crosswalk or ordering coffee, and giving the same phrase, “Oh, sick!”, opposite meanings, or inserting a sexist comment into an otherwise neutral interaction, the settings reveal how Amy is exposed to objectification and discomfort when Jake is not. In doing so, the montage further underscores the inequality in how they are respectively treated, as the only tangible differences between the two in these settings are gender and race, though the focus is implied to be on their gender difference. This montage also highlights that harassment can happen anywhere and that people who might appear kind and respectful to one person can be rude and discriminatory towards another. The third setting drives that point home when Amy, in full police uniform, is approached by a man asking if she can point him to a police officer. When Jake arrives, dressed leisurely with only his badge to signify he is with the police, the man immediately disregards Amy and asks Jake for help. Amy then yells “I’m in uniform” (“He Said, She Said” 07:44) in disbelief, which serves both as comic relief and as a segue out of the montage when Jake comments he thought Amy was just proclaiming her general love of uniforms.

Rosa enters the room and finds out that Amy talked Keri out of taking the 2.5 million dollars, and the two have a disagreement:

Rosa: Wait, her firm offered her a big deal, and you told her not to take it?

Amy: Yeah. Because that would mean letting a sexual assaulter go free.

Rosa: Do you have any physical evidence to prove that he did it?

Amy: No.

Rosa: So, it sounds like he might go free anyway. I mean, at least if she takes the deal, she won’t walk away with nothing.

(“He Said, She Said” 08:29)

Amy is surprised at Rosa’s reaction, citing that Rosa is “such a feminist” (“He Said, She Said” 08:41). Rosa agrees but adds that she is also a realist and explains the Catch-22 of #MeToo-related cases: that even in the best-case scenario with sufficient evidence, the victim will still be subjected to a highly publicized trial that is likely to damage her reputation: “Even if she

wins, she still loses. It's two steps forward, one step back" ("He Said, She Said" 08:56). The fact that Rosa and Amy hold opposing views speaks to them being multidimensional characters in terms of representation. While their identities do intersect along lines of race and gender, they are also two completely distinct personalities, and both positions – Amy's idealistic pursuit of justice and Rosa's more pragmatic emphasis on the victim's material security – are presented as valid. Viewers are guided through the emotional, ethical, and strategic complexities of such cases, and the dialogue allows the audience to grapple with the tension between systemic failure and personal integrity without becoming didactic. During their talk, Jake sits stiffly between Amy and Rosa, looking neither of them in the eye, staring straight ahead, contemplating his role in the conversation: "I feel like maybe I shouldn't be here." ("He Said, She Said" 08:43); "Or should I be here because men should be part of the conversation?" ("He Said, She Said" 08:47); "I've landed on active listening. I will no longer be chiming in." ("He Said, She Said" 08:57). His presence in this scene offers a form of meta-commentary; Jake is a stand-in for "every man" and his inner monologue, spoken out loud, captures the uncertainty many men feel when engaging with feminist discussions. His comments serve as a humorous interruption to the disagreement between Amy and Rosa, lightening the narrative load without undercutting its seriousness. Jake's role here is emblematic of the show's broader strategy of using characters as stand-ins for, in this case, the well-meaning but often oblivious man who still has something to learn, similar to Scully's role in "Moo Moo" (S4E16) as discussed in the previous analysis.

Amy and Jake arrive at the office building to investigate the assault, the goal being to "get someone on the record about Seth's patterned behaviors" ("He Said, She Said" 11:37), but with no success. All employees they speak to state, verbatim, that it is "an extremely professional workplace" and that "Seth's a really good guy" ("He Said, She Said" 11:48; 12:05; 12:16; 12:31). Their statements are undercut by their memorized nature, other side comments, and the setting of the scene: it is one of the interviewee's, Beefer's, birthday, he is visibly drunk, supposedly threw up in the koi pond, and the explanation for his nickname suggests that it is not in fact "an extremely professional workplace." The deputy general counsel of the firm calls Keri's allegations of sexual assault ridiculous and, when pushed about the money the firm offered her, frames it as "a benevolent gesture to allow Ms. Brennan to get the professional help she so clearly needs" ("He Said, She Said" 12:55). Moreover, he says the deal is off and that the firm will fire Keri, citing that the company has "a zero-tolerance policy for violence" and that "unlike Ms. Brennan, Mr. Haggerty has actual evidence of an assault" ("He Said, She Said" 13:07). This is a clear instance of victim blaming and role reversal of victim and perpetrator. Moreover, the insinuation that Keri "clearly needs professional help" is another attempt to

discredit her. Still in his diaper and uncomfortably standing, Seth specifies what his attorney meant when he mentioned evidence of an assault, saying: “He’s talking about my broken penis” (“He Said, She Said” 13:13), which is another joke meant to ridicule him.

In the next scene, we see Amy with messy hair, wearing sweatpants and a faded NYPD t-shirt, sitting on the couch in the precinct’s break room, surrounded by boxes of case files. Amy’s appearance in this scene suggests that she did not sleep but instead continued working on the case, an assumption that later proves correct, when Jake says Amy has been “working [herself] to the bone on this case for three days straight” (“He Said, She Said” 13:32). This, as categorized by Naili Ananda Putri and Fitria Akhmerti Primasita, can be seen as “counter-stereotypical to the existing Latina representation” (20) since she is neither overly sexualized nor seductive. Poey underscores this, saying that “[w]hile Latina stereotypes highlight sexual appeal, Amy Santiago stands out for her intelligence and professional ambition” (116). The juxtaposition of Amy’s disheveled appearance with her competence and eagerness to achieve can also be seen in the eighth season when she looks “a discombobulated mess” (Poey 117) for her presentation of the police reform proposal, but Terry speaks to her professionalism, saying: “Okay, style over substance is clearly out, but if anyone can substance the crap out of this, it’s Amy Santiago” (“Balancing” 17:30).

However, Amy’s sleepless ambition in “He Said, She Said” is not only a counter-stereotypical representation of Latinx individuals, but also another example of the disconnect between the fictional *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* police and the real-world police. The show paints an image of a benevolent police force that protects citizens and pursues justice, regardless of working hours. In reality, “it is largely a liberal fantasy that the police exist to protect us from the bad guys” (Vitale 32) and although, as previously established, the aim of television is not to portray reality exactly as it is, this is another instance of valorizing law enforcement, going back to the roots of the police procedural genre, which was “the product of partnerships with [...] law enforcement agencies for the purpose of creating pro-police propaganda” (Bandes 335). In contrast to this depiction of police timekeeping, the first episode of season 8, which tries to paint a more realistic picture of the police, mentions that some officers make arrests shortly before their shift ends so they can write an hour of overtime. More on the eighth season, and in particular its first episode, will follow in the subsequent chapters.

Jake enters, saying, “Hey, you never came home last night. You doing okay?” (“He Said, She Said” 13:20), to which Scully replies that he is a mess because he misses Hitchcock. This joke falls into the category of incongruity theory, as the expectation is that Amy will answer, but Scully replies instead. The discordance of expectations and outcomes causes

laughter (Morreall 15f; 17f), or at least a humorous situation. When Jake clears up the misunderstanding, Scully reacts upset, sarcastically saying “Oh, and who’s talking to Scully? No one. Come on, sandwich” (“He Said, She Said” 13:27), before grabbing the sandwich next to him and leaving the room. This funny intended sequence preludes arguably the most emotional scene of the episode, as Amy explains why “this isn’t just a case for [her]” (“He Said, She Said” 14:04); as a police rookie, she worked in another precinct where her then-captain mentored her, put her on the detective-track, and gave her all the best cases, but ultimately abused his position of power when she became a detective, inviting her to dinner and trying to kiss her because “he felt like he deserved something in return for [her] career” (“He Said, She Said” 14:26). Amy says she ran out of the restaurant and immediately requested to be transferred to the Nine-Nine. This, even if just for a moment, reframes Amy’s presence in the precinct: she is no longer there by chance or circumstance, but for safety reasons. Had this abuse of power not occurred, all previous episodes would have unfolded differently. Moreover, thinking back to flashback scenes from past episodes, like Amy’s first day at the Nine-Nine, where Charles’s first words to Amy are, albeit jokingly, “I’m hearing wedding bells” (“HalloVeen” 20:32) after Jake and Amy introduce themselves to one another, now evokes an uncomfortable aftertaste.

Amy explains she never told anyone about this instance of quid pro quo sexual harassment because she felt like “maybe [she] didn’t actually deserve [her] promotion” (“He Said, She Said” 14:44), and worried that speaking up could have negative repercussions on her career path going forward. Both Jake and Amy visibly have tears in their eyes in this scene, as the following exchange takes place:

Jake: Every time I think I understand how bad it is, it’s just way worse than I imagined.

Amy: This kind of stuff has happened to literally every woman I know. I just wanted to help make it better for this one woman.

(“He Said, She Said” 14:58)

In an interview with *Variety*, Stephanie Beatriz reflects on the more emotionally intense scenes of the episode, noting that “there was a good chunk for Melissa Fumero [who plays Amy] that was painful because all of us have had an experience like that, that’s the core of #MeToo – literally every woman you know has had something s-y [sic] happen to her” (Turchiano). The exchange thus becomes a moment of fourth-wall-adjacent resonance, in which real-world experiences of the cast and creators bleed into the fictional narrative. From there, the episode transitions back into procedural territory; Jake says they are not giving up, and Amy has the idea to reach out to the previously interviewed coworkers again, this time privately, in case they

did not feel comfortable coming forward in the office setting. They meet up with Beefer at the firm's loading docks, who shows them a text chain between some of the men from the office, in which Seth describes the events exactly as Keri did. This interaction follows:

Beefer: I was really torn about whether or not I should send this to you guys, but then I thought about it for a long time and realized it was the right thing to do.
Amy: Oh, who would have guessed Beefer's a secret feminist?
Beefer: No, gross. I meant it was the right thing to do for me. If they fire Seth, I take his job.

("He Said, She Said" 17:03, emphasis in original)

Beefer's immediate rejection of the idea that he might be a feminist, even in secret, underscores how feminism is still framed as something emasculating or undesirable within patriarchal culture. His decision to come forward is not driven by solidarity or a sense of justice, but by self-interest and opportunism, revealing how capitalist structures incentivize individual gain over collective accountability.

When Amy and Jake go to tell Keri the news that the District Attorney will press charges against her assaulter, Keri is happy and thanks them, but says that she had to quit because the atmosphere of the office has changed and everybody looks at her like she is "either a victim or a traitor" ("He Said, She Said" 18:37). She explains that she has since been excluded from non-work networking opportunities without which she will probably not be considered for new accounts or promotions. When Amy wants to apologize because she persuaded Keri not to take the settlement and instead pursue the case, Keri says: "Hey, Seth attacked me and I'm really proud of myself that I didn't let him get away with that. So, even though it sucks, if I had to do it all again, I would. [to Jake] Especially the broken penis" ("He Said, She Said" 19:18). The mention of the broken penis again serves as comic relief, underscored by Keri saying it directly to Jake. Upon their return to the precinct, Rosa congratulates Amy and Jake on the successful indictment of "that finance creep" ("He Said, She Said" 20:30), but Amy maintains there is nothing to congratulate her about. Jake explains that "Amy's just upset because the historically entrenched patriarchy has created a culture of victim-shaming that suppresses any power shift in our masculo-phallic system" ("He Said, She Said" 20:35). He explains that he could not sleep the night before and watched a documentary about feminism on Netflix, to which Amy responds with "I love you" ("He Said, She Said" 20:46). This moment highlights Jake's sincere desire to support Amy and engage with feminist issues; however, him saying this to Amy and Rosa is reminiscent of mansplaining, and the terminology he uses is so exaggerated that it seems performative and arguably turns comedic.

Throughout the episode, there are multiple occasions where Jake is excited about lifestyle aspects of the finance bankers, despite them being portrayed as problematic, and laughs at jokes or considers making jokes that could be seen as sexist. For instance, Jake says the office is “amazing” and “like a dream factory” (“He Said, She Said” 11:25) because it has Butlers, tiny quiches, and a “VR experience [...] where you can fly like a bird” (“He Said, She Said” 11:18) despite the office being the scene of a sexual assault, he escorts one of the interviewees back to his desk so he can meet “a bunch of Mets” (“He Said, She Said” 11:59) who are there for Beefer’s birthday despite the interviewee lying about Seth’s character to them, and when Amy says the three years’ worth of Seth’s emails she read were “mostly inquiries about where he could buy a Batmobile” (“He Said, She Said” 13:50), Jake scoffs and says it is stupid, but immediately asks if he found one and if a dealership exists. He also initially laughs about a GIF of Kelsey Grammer falling off a stage, which Seth sent in the group chat following his recount of the sexual assault he committed, and “LOLZ, Epic Fail” (“He Said, She Said” 16:56) before putting on a serious face again, and when Amy talks about the fruit vendor at their corner being a gentleman, although “the opportunity to be gross is right there” (“He Said, She Said” 08:05) with him always holding two cantaloupes, he says “Is it? I’ve never even noticed that before. I never wanted to make a comment or anything like that and thought better” (“He Said, She Said” 08:08). Jake’s behavior in these moments reveals a dissonance between his progressive self-image and his, albeit only initial, uncritical enjoyment of spaces and behaviors that are embedded in patriarchal and misogynist structures. The show allows him to indulge in problematic humor and admiration for toxic environments while ultimately portraying him as sympathetic and “teachable,” thereby reinforcing a trope of the flawed but redeemable male ally. Similarly, when he says to Amy: “I’m gonna go get you a change of clothes and a coffee [...] Oh, I’m also gonna grab a comb, but you don’t have to use it unless *you* decide” (“He Said, She Said” 15:18; 15:33, emphasis in original), Amy is visibly grateful and feels supported, but his emphasis on “*you* decide” can be read as performative or pseudo-feminist. I would again argue that Jake acts as a stand-in in this episode for the “average guy” who, through his socialization, might idolize problematic men and laugh at sexist jokes, but can learn and choose to do better, shown through Jake’s distancing from sexism, often articulated through ironic detachment or post-hoc seriousness, and informing himself through the documentary he mentioned.

Rosa and Amy revisit their previous disagreement, this time showing more understanding for the opposite view, respectively. Amy concedes that Keri lost the money and her job, as Rosa predicted, and Rosa points out that the assaulter was brought to justice and one

of Keri's coworkers was inspired to come forward, as Amy predicted. The episode acknowledges that there is more work to be done and that "this is a hard fight but it's an important one" ("He Said, She Said" 20:55). Rosa reframes one of her previous arguments, saying: "Two steps forward, one step back is still one step forward" ("He Said, She Said" 21:12). When she asks Amy if she wants to take the Keri's coworker's statement together, Amy's awkward, overly-excited reaction prompts Rosa to cringe and Amy to exclaim: "We can be different and still have the same cause" ("He Said, She Said" 21:22), an attempt at a "blow" and a statement which encapsulates the essence of their representations as distinct, multidimensional characters.

3.3 *The Good Ones* (S8E1)

I'm one of the good ones. And I know how that sounds, but I'm not one of the bad ones who say they're one of the good ones. I'm actually one of the good ones who say they're one of the good ones.

("The Good Ones" 05:16; 18:01)

Following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police in May 2020 and the subsequent protests against police brutality and racial disparities across the U.S. (and worldwide), the producers of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* "scrapped four scripted upcoming episodes to focus on racist policing" (Bernabo 488). While institutional racism has been discussed in earlier seasons, in season eight, "the series' creators and writers questioned how the series played a role in promoting benign or even positive images of policing" (Poey 115). With the cold open set in June 2020 and the remainder of the episode in Spring 2021, "The Good Ones" does not pick up right where the season seven finale left off, with the birth of Amy and Jake's child, Mac, but instead suggests that some time has passed and much has happened, of which the audience is informed in part through exposition.

While the cold open is usually disconnected from the main plot, offering a light, self-contained gag without narrative consequences, and has thus not previously been the subject of my analysis, in this case, it is a turning point in the show's trajectory. In it, Rosa approaches Jake and Charles, all three of whom are wearing masks due to the pandemic, and says she needs to talk to them about something. Jake, in his familiar goofy manner, interrupts her with a rhetorically intended question: "What is the number one problem with the coronavirus?" ("The Good Ones" 00:10), to which Rosa replies earnestly: "Mass death, economic collapse, the way the disease has exposed the systemic injustice at the core of American life" ("The Good Ones" 00:13), already setting the more serious tone for the season to come. Jake concedes, but adds

that besides Rosa's answer, it is not being able to high-five your friends because of social distancing rules. He and Charles proceed to show Rosa their "COVID-five" ("The Good Ones" 00:27), a series of high-fives executed with brooms that have rubber gloves attached to their handles, leaving Rosa utterly unimpressed. When Rosa tells them her news that she turned in her resignation and is quitting the force, Jake swings his arm out in shock, hitting Terry with his broom. This sets off a Rube Goldberg Machine-esque¹ chain reaction culminating in a burning printer and a blackout of the precinct, which Rosa deems "by far the best [high] five" ("The Good Ones" 01:01).

The episode proper picks up almost a year after this incident at Shaw's bar, where the squad often goes to celebrate. On this occasion, they are celebrating Amy's return from maternity leave, which was delayed due to the pandemic, as the audience learns from one of Captain Holt's matter-of-fact speeches. His speech fits his character's trademark concision and deadpan delivery, and simultaneously serves as exposition. Equally conveniently, Amy then asks the squad to tell her everything that happened while she was gone, and Terry complies. We learn that "Hitchcock retired the very first second he could" ("The Good Ones" 01:45), but that he is often in touch with the squad through FaceTime because he misses Scully, which prompts Holt to say: "He's more present than when he worked here. It's been a terrible year" ("The Good Ones" 01:52), poking fun at Hitchcock. Charles then chimes in, agreeing with Holt's statement, but only to use it as a segue to change the topic and to virtue signal his knowledge about racism in the U.S. This prompts Terry to roll his eyes at Charles, and Amy to ask why "Charles [sounds] like a podcast" ("The Good Ones" 02:02). In response, Charles proudly reveals a wireless earbud in one ear, saying he is, in this moment, listening to one called "Two Wrongs Makes a White: Lessons in Antiracism" ("The Good Ones" 02:04). Amy looks confused and a very annoyed Terry cues a flashback scene of Charles on Juneteenth, wearing a Kente-cloth stole and mask, a traditional Ghanaian cloth that has become a generalized symbol of "Africanness" in the U.S. (St. Félix), and doing the Black power salute as he walks past Terry, who angrily yells "What the hell?" ("The Good Ones" 02:12). Terry calls this "[going] full Schumer" ("The Good Ones" 02:14), in reference to a misguided publicity stunt by Democratic lawmakers, including Senator Chuck Schumer, announcing the introduction of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. Lawmakers gathered in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center's Emancipation Hall, named to honor the enslaved laborers who helped construct the Capitol

¹ Rube Goldberg Machines are intentionally overcomplicated chain-reaction contraptions, named after Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist Rube Goldberg, in which one often humorous action triggers a long sequence of others to achieve a simple task.

building (H.R.3315), wearing Kente stoles and kneeling for a minute of silence lasting eight minutes and forty-six seconds (St. Félix) – the originally reported amount of time for which George Floyd’s murderer kneeled on his neck, which was later corrected to having been nine minutes and thirty seconds (Willis et al.). This paints Charles as an exaggerated caricature of performative white allyship: his eagerness to show antiracist awareness comes across as clumsy, misplaced, and self-serving. The flashback is intended to be funny and, according to incongruity theory, surprises viewers. The joke lands not at the expense of antiracist efforts themselves but targets Charles’s overzealous need to prove his “wokeness,” which borders on parody. His character embodies the pitfalls of white allyship that prioritize the ally’s performance over the actual cause, reducing serious discourse to virtue signaling. At the same time, the scene offers levity, balancing the seriousness of systemic racism with humor, while implicitly cautioning against superficial or performative acts of solidarity.

When Amy asks about Rosa’s whereabouts, the audience is provided with more exposition and the central conflict of the episode:

Jake: I’m telling you, she’s not coming. Ever since she quit the force, she thinks we’re just ‘part of the problem.’

Holt: Oh, she never said that. She quit after George Floyd was killed because she thought that she could do more good by becoming a PI [private investigator] that helps victims of police brutality. That has nothing to do with us.

(“The Good Ones” 02:21)

Jake appears to take Rosa’s resignation from the Nine-Nine as personal criticism or an allegation of moral wrongdoing. Venting his latent frustrations, he hyperbolically bets the squad a thousand dollars each that Rosa will not show up, a bet he quickly calls off when, contrary to his expectations, Rosa arrives the second he stops speaking. After Jake awkwardly greets Rosa, she tells him about her newest client as a private investigator, “a woman [who] was assaulted by two police officers in the Seven-Four” (“The Good Ones” 03:17). Jake first shows compassion, saying, “Oh, well that’s horrible” (“The Good Ones” 03:20), and then realizes he knows the captain of the precinct in question, his former sergeant before transferring to the Nine-Nine, and offers to talk to her, saying she can help, which Rosa doubts. Jake then says, with an almost lecturing undertone, “You know, the system can still work sometimes when good people are involved” (“The Good Ones” 03:29), reinforcing the common and previously discussed “a few bad apples” trope. Rosa, with a light smirk, is quick to reply: “Is that why you want to help, so you can make some point about policing?” (“The Good Ones” 03:31), which Jake negates. He convinces Rosa to work with him, saying he genuinely wants to help and misses seeing her. From here, the episode splits into separate storylines. The main one follows Jake and Rosa on their case, while the other two, briefly intersecting, take place at the precinct;

one centers on Amy's first day back and her relationship with Holt, the other on Boyle's performative allyship and Terry's frustration with it. In the following, to avoid unnecessary confusion, I will first analyze the main storyline, which establishes the new tone and pacing, introduces the main antagonist, and sets up the season's central objective. Subsequently, I will analyze the other two storylines.

When they meet the next day to speak with Rosa's client, Ms. Fulton, Rosa asks Jake to "[not] be too cop-ish, just be normal" ("The Good Ones" 04:58), as getting her client to agree to meet with a cop was difficult. Jake agrees, but upon walking in, greets Ms. Fulton with a high-pitched Mrs. Doubtfire-like "hello" and his arms swinging wide open, which visibly unsettles her. Apologizing and explaining that he got in his head over Rosa's notes, he introduces himself and says the line written in the epigraph of this chapter, which appears twice in the episode: "I'm one of the good ones. And I know how that sounds, but I'm not one of the bad ones who says they're one of the good ones. I'm actually one of the good ones who says they're one of the good ones" ("The Good Ones" 05:16). At the risk of drifting into a perpetuum mobile of overexplaining his intentions with "and I know how that sounds" ("The Good Ones" 05:23), Ms. Fulton interrupts him and Jake's claim of being "one of the good ones" is not further discussed. At Rosa's request, Ms. Fulton then recounts what happened to her: On her way home from the pharmacy, two uniformed officers stopped her and asked about the contents of her bag. She told them it contained nothing except some personal items, which the policemen kept pushing her to show them. Then, this brief moment of incongruity humor occurs:

Ms. Fulton: But in my mind, I'm like, why do I need to show them my new loofah?

Rosa: You don't. It's your loofah.

Ms. Fulton: Thank you, Ms. Diaz. It is my loofah.

("The Good Ones" 05:39; emphasis in original)

One would not expect Ms. Fulton to vehemently affirm her ownership of a loofah in the middle of a retelling of her assault, just as one would generally not expect a loofah to be talked about this seriously. This sudden focus on a trivial object momentarily disrupts the emotional tone and creates a moment of incongruity that, as Morrell explains, can provoke laughter because of its unexpectedness in the situation (17f). Ms. Fulton continues her recount of the events, saying that when she attempted to walk past the officers after telling them that she wanted to go home, they grabbed her, threw her on the ground, and yelled at her to stop resisting. She explains that she was not resisting but was just scared. The officers then threw Ms. Fulton against the police car and arrested her, claiming that she assaulted them, despite her being the one with a black eye and bruises all over her body, proving the opposite. Rosa then asks Ms. Fulton what time it was when the officers stopped her, which she says was around 5:45 or 6:00

PM, placing it right at the end of a shift. Rosa explains that some police officers make arrests towards the end of their shift so they can work late and get overtime. As briefly broached in chapter 3.2, this stands in stark contrast to the depictions of the Nine-Nine's squad, their work ethic, and self-perception as cops. In this regard, it is also interesting to note that, as of this episode, the cops of the Nine-Nine still hold an exceptional position among other police, since the officers Ms. Fulton speaks of are from a different precinct, the Seven-Four. Over the course of the season, this exceptional position will be gradually dismantled in part. More on this will follow in chapter 3.4. Ms. Fulton is appalled by this explanation of her arrest, saying, "That is so wrong" ("The Good Ones" 06:14). Jake agrees and promises that he and Rosa will get her justice, to which Ms. Fulton skeptically replies, "Yeah, we'll see" ("The Good Ones" 06:19).

As Jake suggested the night before, they then speak to Captain Lamazar of the Seven-Four, who, upon reviewing the case, says "it is definitely problematic" ("The Good Ones" 06:53), adding that several complaints have been filed against the officers in question in the past. Their version of events in the police report is also derisively brief: "Suspect had suspicious item. Scary" ("The Good Ones" 07:02). Knowing that the item in question was Ms. Fulton's new loafah only exacerbates frustration about this injustice. Lamazar agrees that her officers' claim is baseless but notes that one of them broke his finger, which Rosa suspects happened when he tackled Ms. Fulton to the ground. In an attempt to signal his indignation at the officers' misconduct, Jake offers another, albeit figurative, explanation: "Yeah, or from pointing it so hard at everyone but himself" ("The Good Ones" 07:09), playing on the literal injury and echoing the idiom of "pointing the finger" to assign blame. Followed by a sigh and a four-second-long silence, Jake's utterance also signals his own conflicted need to distance himself from the wrongdoings of the police, especially in light of Rosa's principled choice to quit the force. Rosa, picking up on this, asks: "Who are you performing this for, Jake?" ("The Good Ones" 07:16), which catches him off guard, and he less confidently replies, "Both of you guys" ("The Good Ones" 07:18), with a slightly rising intonation towards the end, making it almost sound like a question. Before either of them can elaborate further, Lamazar interrupts them, saying that she would like to help, but that there is no proof of the actual events, which Rosa correctly assumes is due to the body cam footage having been "mysteriously corrupted" ("The Good Ones" 07:23). Throughout their interaction, the captain is very blasé and nonchalant about her officers' misconduct, which is harrowing in itself, as she acknowledges their wrongdoings but ostensibly at the same time sees them as a natural or self-evident part of the job. So too she admits that "they probably tampered with it [the footage]" ("The Good Ones" 07:26), but tells Jake and Rosa in confidence that, besides the two officers, a rookie, Janice Lee, was present at

the scene. Provided Lee confirms Ms. Fulton's story, Lamazar says she can help them. Jake is very pleased with this outcome, confidently saying: "Great! See, Rosa, this couldn't be any easier" ("The Good Ones" 07:36), only to be predictably proven wrong in the next scene. When they arrive at the rookie's address, they are greeted by Frank O'Sullivan, the head of the patrolmen's union and the main antagonist of the season. He introduces himself and tells them that they cannot talk to anyone involved in the case. With a look of resignation on her face, Rosa tilts her head in Jake's direction, who, in a call back to his previous statement, says, "I guess it could be a little easier" ("The Good Ones" 07:48).

When asked to explain his presence at Officer Lee's house, O'Sullivan states that he is "here to stop [their] heartless crusade against our heroes in blue" ("The Good Ones" 07:55). His choice of words is hyperbolic, calling the officers in question "heroes in blue" and Jake and Rosa's pursuit of justice for Ms. Fulton "a heartless crusade," thereby simultaneously othering them from being supposed heroes, despite Jake also being a cop and Rosa having been one for years. His hyperbolic manner serves to caricature people who are proponents of the police despite their racially motivated violence. This caricature is further reinforced as the scene progresses. O'Sullivan says all he wants is to keep New York City safe and to "then go home to [his] ma at night" ("The Good Ones" 08:02). When Rosa dryly asks, "You live with your mom?" ("The Good Ones" 08:04), O'Sullivan feels attacked and tries to defend himself saying, "My ma lives with me [*pause*] in her house" ("The Good Ones" 08:05), which highlights the mocking undertone in Rosa's question and, thus, any intended laughter resulting from this interaction can be seen as superiority humor since one would be laughing at O'Sullivan for still living with his mother. This same scheme of making fun of O'Sullivan repeats:

O'Sullivan: Do you have something against my ma? Because I'll be honest with you, there's only three things that I love in this whole world: my ma, the NYPD, and Billy Joel. And right now, you're assaulting two of those three things.

Jake: Wow. So, Billy Joel made your top three?

O'Sullivan: And now you've assaulted all three.

("The Good Ones" 08:08)

O'Sullivan shares a fact about himself that can be deemed embarrassing, Jake asks him a question with a mocking undertone while Rosa looks at him with disgust, and O'Sullivan doubles down on his statement, underscoring that any laughter resulting from this scene can be categorized as superiority humor. When a frustrated Jake asks if he and Rosa could talk to Lee, O'Sullivan deflects, saying the officers they are "going after" are "nice boys" ("The Good Ones" 08:26), and blames Ms. Fulton, whom he calls "the perp" ("The Good Ones" 08:28),

claiming all she needed to do was show the officers what was in her bag but that she instead escalated the situation. He then goes on a tangent:

A finger was broken. Do you understand that if anyone else was being treated the way our brave officers are being treated, there'd be marching in the street – which I would oppose, by the way – because marching leads to rioting, and rioting leads to looting.
(“The Good Ones” 08:34)

His word choice and manner are again hyperbolic, calling the officers “brave” and reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator by claiming that people would be marching in the streets were they treated like the police – a satirical inversion equating their treatment with that of the very people protesting police violence. Moreover, the fact that he talks about looting is a reference to reactionary defenders of the police during the 2020 #BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd. As Mary Woods points out, “[p]articularly in the George Floyd protests, highlighting looting and violence served as a way to portray police forces in a more positive light and as a necessary aspect of the community, distracting from the systemic issues within them” (31). Brandon Storlie attributes this to the “protest paradigm,” which works to delegitimize the aims of a protest by focusing on violence and spectacle instead of protesters’ grievances, regardless of whether or not protesters actually engage in violent or disruptive behaviors (3).

Jake and Rosa leave, as O’Sullivan shows no signs of stopping his rant. Rosa then tells Jake that she noticed O’Sullivan said all Ms. Fulton needed to do was show the officers what was in her bag, a detail about the case he could not have known from the five-word-long police report, and which Lamazar also did not know. Rosa surmises that O’Sullivan “watched the body cam recording before it was corrupted” and that “he might have the original footage” (“The Good Ones” 10:03) and suggests they break into the police union to get the video as proof. Jake is very hesitant for fear of being recognized, which Rosa remedies by saying “Just put on a big dumb watch, some Oakleys, and a camo baseball cap. You’ll fit right in” (“The Good Ones” 10:14), ridiculing members of the police union. Initially, Jake responds with excitement, immediately creating a character to Rosa’s description who he names “Mitchell Keith Eriksson,” but ultimately refuses to go along with the plan as he does not “have a warrant, and [Rosa] could be arrested for breaking and entering” (“The Good Ones” 10:26). Instead, he suggests they go door-to-door looking for a witness to corroborate Ms. Fulton’s story. When Rosa trenchantly presses him about this plan, hinting that New Yorkers are out of sorts with the police, Jake optimistically proclaims he believes “that people still understand that we’re here to help” (“The Good Ones” 10:37), only to again be predictably proven wrong immediately after. What follows is a cut to people’s reactions after Jake and Rosa ask for their help. The first

is a Black man in a pizzeria uniform simply saying “Nope” (“The Good Ones” 10:40), which also serves as a direct reply to Jake’s previous statement, thereby negating the idea that the police are here to help. The second is a white woman who sarcastically remarks “Yeah, I saw something. It looked kind of like this” (“The Good Ones” 10:42) before giving them the middle finger, and the third is a young Black boy saying, “I don’t talk to pigs” (“The Good Ones” 10:45), which Jake acknowledges with a forced cheery “Copy that” (“The Good Ones” 10:47) before frustratedly walking away. Rosa remains standing, expressionless, staring into space, her hands folded in front of her, arguably with an air of “I-told-you-so.” This recurring structure, in which Jake’s confident statements are immediately undercut by the story, on the one hand, provides brief comic relief through incongruity and, on the other, simultaneously highlights the gap between his faith in policing and its material reality.

After more implied rejections from members of the public, Rosa annoyedly asks how many more doors they are going to knock on before Jake realizes it is a pointless endeavor. Jake answers that he does not think it is pointless and wants to prove this to Rosa, which starts an argument when Rosa calls into question his previous statement that he is “not some point maker” (“The Good Ones” 03:34). Jake then confesses that he only said that so Rosa would let him work with her and he could make his point. In admitting that he lied to Rosa, Jake exposes the same impulse that defines his policing: a need to prove himself right and to perform moral clarity rather than embody it. Arguably, in this scene, he becomes the very kind of “cop-ish” figure Rosa asked him not to be. Rosa says this is the reason they do not hang out anymore, as Jake is “always so defensive” (“The Good Ones” 11:42), after which this exchange takes place:

Jake: Well, it’s kind of hard not to be when you think I’m a bad person now.

Rosa: I never said that.

Jake: You didn’t have to. Rosa, we came up together. We went to the academy together. We’ve had the exact same career. All we ever wanted was to be detectives. And yes, we’ve always known there were problems, but we would solve them together from the inside. So, when you quit, yeah, it made me feel like you thought I was wrong for staying.

(“The Good Ones” 11:43)

Jake projects his insecurities, doubts, and guilt onto Rosa, revealing that his frustrations stem less from her decision to leave the force than from his own unresolved discomfort with remaining in it. In his signature idealistic manner, he downplays the systemic violence of policing, claiming the two of them would solve the police’s problems from the inside, when the necessary structural change is impossible to achieve this way. In drawing a parallel between his and Rosa’s careers by predominantly using “we,” he also disregards intersectional factors that impact their respective options and decisions, as Rosa points out to him, holding back tears:

Jake, my choice has nothing to do with you. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I gave up my career, my friends, my whole life, but I did it because I couldn't ignore what I was a part of anymore, couldn't ignore what the police are doing in my community to people who look like me.

(“The Good Ones” 12:03)

When Jake interjects, “I know, but not all of them, not me.” (“The Good Ones” 12:19), Rosa, this time a little louder, reiterates her core message that “This isn’t about you. And this case, where a Black woman was assaulted by the police, has nothing to do with you either” (“The Good Ones” 12:22). She then confronts Jake with a choice, saying if he is more interested in proving a point than helping, she does not want to work with him or be his friend, before walking away, leaving Jake standing in the street speechless.

Rosa meets Scully at a hotdog stand and asks for his help navigating the building of the Patrolmen’s Union, which she assumes he and Hitchcock, who is again present via FaceTime, clad in an aloha shirt and sunhat, know well, as they often complain about work regulations. After the previous, more serious and emotional sequence, this scene featuring Scully and Hitchcock serves as comic relief. They are happy to help, and Scully seemingly encourages Rosa, saying that “Those bastards are everything that’s wrong with policing” (“The Good Ones” 13:03), only for Hitchcock, now shirtless, to chime in, “Their dress policy’s insane. You have to wear a shirt at all times” (“The Good Ones” 13:05). This can be categorized as an instance of incongruity humor, since one assumes Scully’s statement to be in support of Rosa’s planned break-in, but Hitchcock’s comment and sudden nudity change its context, making the statement more trivial. Scully tells Rosa how to get to O’Sullivan’s office undetected, and, as he gives his instructions, we see Rosa execute the break-in. When he gives her an overly detailed description of the last bathroom before O’Sullivan’s office and Rosa in turn snarls at him to stop talking about bathrooms, Scully nonchalantly replies, “Fine. Pee your pants. What do I care?” (“The Good Ones” 13:30). This joke relies on Scully’s deadpan delivery and exaggerated indifference, creating humor through its mismatch with Rosa’s urgency. As Scully finishes his instructions, we see Rosa enter O’Sullivan’s office. She logs into the computer and comments that the desktop background, a sexualized cartoon version of the statue of liberty wearing a stars and stripes bikini holding a machine gun in front of the U.S. flag, is “on brand” (“The Good Ones” 13:35). This underscores the show’s portrayal of O’Sullivan as someone whose sense of patriotism is tied to nationalism, gun culture, and sexism, all of which are mocked rather than glorified, and caricatures his reactionary worldview. Before Rosa can download the file, O’Sullivan unexpectedly walks into the room, on the phone with his mother, telling her about the Billy Joel tickets he bought for them – a callback to the previous joke about

his affinity for Billy Joel, which becomes a recurring joke throughout the season – forcing Rosa to hide under his desk. The situation appears hopeless, but Rosa’s saving grace arrives in the form of Jake pretending to be “Mitchell Keith Eriksson,” wearing, as Rosa described, “a big dumb watch, some Oakleys, and a camo baseball cap” (“The Good Ones” 10:14) and yelling from the hallway to speak to his union president. Jake distracts O’Sullivan with a story about being “assaulted based solely on profession” (“The Good Ones” 14:48), ironically mirroring O’Sullivan’s earlier rhetoric about police victimhood. In his story, Jake also mentions somebody insulting Billy Joel – another callback to the recurring joke – which infuriates O’Sullivan and buys Rosa enough time to download the file and leave undetected.

Rosa waits for Jake outside the building for 45 minutes. When asked what took him so long, Jake cites that “O’Sullivan wouldn’t let [him] leave until he had explained to [him] why reverse racism was worse than, as he called it, classic racism” (“The Good Ones” 16:18), which again satirizes O’Sullivan and cements his reactionary worldview. When Rosa then asks how Jake knew she would be there, he explains that Scully told him everything, fearing Rosa would not “take his toilet advice” (“The Good Ones” 16:26), a callback to the earlier joke. Rosa thanks Jake for saving her, and Jake reaffirms that he has her back, not to make a point, but because he wants to help. They show the footage to Lamazar, who, upon watching it, is visibly shocked and says she must delete it, and does so immediately. Jake, thinking she is kidding, initially laughs but, realizing that she is serious, gasps, “Oh, no. You’re a villain!” (“The Good Ones” 16:46), commenting on the captain’s actions as if he were watching the scene from a third-person perspective. When confronted about her earlier promise to help them if they brought her proof, Lamazar cryptically replies: “Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d *get proof*, get proof. I thought you just, you know, get proof. There’s proof and there’s proof. You got the wrong kind of proof. I don’t know how much clearer I can be” (“The Good Ones” 16:53; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, she insists she *is* helping, as she will have her officers revise their statements and have the charges against Ms. Fulton dropped, now that she has seen the real footage. When asked about the consequences for the perpetrating officers, there is a mismatch in what Lamazar and Jake understand “consequences” to mean: to Lamazar, even a suspension is unthinkable, while Jake believes they should be fired. Subsequently, Lamazar explains the rationale behind her decision. The sequence uses crossfades between sentences to give viewers the sense that the conversation is longer than what is shown in the episode:

Well, if I fired them, it would trigger the union’s appeal process. PBA’s [Police Benevolent Association] grievance proceedings allow for both unions and individual officers to challenge personnel actions by superiors. The complaint gets sent up the chain of command till they get someone who sides with the officers. And the courts are

a nightmare. Prosecutors work closely with cops. They're not gonna jeopardize their relationship by pursuing cases against them. All the officer has to say is he feared for his life, and it gets thrown out.

(“The Good Ones” 17:16)

Here, Lamazar speaks to key structural issues in policing: first, that the police effectively act as their own supervisory body, making internal investigations into misconduct inherently biased, and second, that “[t]he close working relationship between police and prosecutors, normally an asset in homicide investigations, becomes a fundamental conflict of interest in all but the most straightforward cases” (Vitale 18). Jake tells Lamazar that he and Rosa are aware of all this but urges her not to give up. The sequence then continues, ending in the second iteration of the line written in the epigraph of this chapter:

Lamazar: Okay, so say I don't give up and I get the commissioner to agree to fire the officers. Do you know what happens next?

Jake: They'd file a countersuit.

Lamazar: Yes. And the officers get paid to stay at home. Not to mention qualified immunity. And now the officers are back on the street and I am blackballed. And then one of the only female captains in the NYPD is forced to quit. And you don't want me gone. I'm one of the good ones. And I know how that sounds, but I'm not one of the bad ones who say they're one of the good ones. I'm one of the good ones who say they're one of the good ones.

(“The Good Ones” 17:40)

Qualified immunity, as explained by Joanna C. Schwartz, “shields executive branch officials from damages liability, even when they have violated the Constitution, if they have not violated ‘clearly established law’” (Schwartz 1801). This doctrine can be traced back to the rise of Jim Crow laws after the Civil War, which legalized racial segregation (“Qualified Immunity”). Its mention in this scene highlights that, even if legally pursued, the officers would most likely not face any consequences. Lamazar then invokes her position as “one of the only female captains in the NYPD” to justify her reluctance to hold the officers accountable, using a pseudo-feminist argument as a shield to avoid taking responsibility for her inaction. This could also be interpreted as her mitigating cognitive dissonance. Regardless of its intent, this argument sidesteps the issue, as her being a woman in a male-dominated rank does not negate her role in upholding harmful institutional practices. As Lamazar claims to be “one of the good ones,” verbatim to Jake earlier in the episode, Rosa slowly turns to Jake, staring at him accusingly. Ashamed, he acknowledges this and suggests they leave.

When they break the news to Ms. Fulton, she is in disbelief that “those cops are just gonna keep walking the streets doing this crap with no consequence” (“The Good Ones” 20:14), but quickly resigns herself to the small consolation of getting the charges against her dropped.

She says “thanks,” adding, with emphasis, after a short pause, “to Rosa because you’re not a cop” (“The Good Ones” 20:24), and assures Rosa that she will give her a 5-star review on Yelp. After Ms. Fulton leaves the room, Jake apologizes to Rosa, admitting he was wrong to project his insecurities onto her and acknowledging that it is not Rosa’s responsibility to make him feel okay about his decision to stay with the NYPD. He also expresses doubt about his role as a cop saying, “I like to think I’ve done a lot of good as a detective and that I can continue to do that, but maybe I am part of the problem” (“The Good Ones” 20:46). This sense of ambivalence about his position has not been present in the series thus far, with one exception; in the episode “Kicks,” after Jake returns from being wrongfully imprisoned, he lets a guilty criminal go free, fearing he might be innocent, and concedes that it is “a lot harder for [him] to put another human being in prison after experiencing it [himself]” (“Kicks” 17:58) and seeing more nuance after his time in prison where everything was clear-cut before. Besides this, Jake has always been sure of his role as a cop and happy to be one, making this fracture in his previously stable self-image a pivotal moment for the series going forward. Moreover, Jake’s contemplation of whether he is “part of the problem” can be read as foreshadowing the episode “The Set Up,” in which he does become part of the problem – albeit unintentionally.

While Rosa and Jake work on their case, Amy is stressed on her first day back at the precinct because Holt engaged in small talk with her. She tells Terry, who knowingly finishes the second sentence with her, that “Captain Holt always says that true friends sit in silence. Small talk is for strangers and con men” (“The Good Ones” 04:08). She reckons that she is now a stranger to Holt and shares that her biggest fear about having a child was “losing [her] spark with [her] boss” (“The Good Ones” 04:18), an instance of incongruity humor, as one would not expect this to be someone’s biggest fear about having a child. Terry tries to calm Amy down by pointing out that she is likening her connection with Holt to a romantic relationship, which she unexpectedly agrees with – incongruity humor again – and decides to approach the issue as such. To do so, she asks Terry if he “still [has] that relationship book from when [he] and Sharon were having issues” (“The Good Ones” 04:30). This is a callback to the episode “The Therapist,” in which Terry ordered a book titled “How to Please Your Wife: 100 Tips to Take Your Sex Life from Blah to Ahhhh” that is erroneously delivered to Amy. Embarrassed by this, Terry asks Scully to pretend that it is his book, and Scully agrees, as he does not care what other people think of him. Many of the funny-intended moments in this subplot in “The Good Ones” stem from this callback, with Terry correcting anyone who claims that he owns the book. So too when answering Amy’s question, Terry emphasizes that “That book was about sex. And it’s actually *Scully’s*. But I bet *Scully* also ordered some relationship books when *Scully* got

himself that sex book for *Scully*” (“The Good Ones” 04:34; emphasis in original). This recurring joke functions according to relief theory by releasing tension associated with the taboo subjects of sex and marital issues (Morreall 21f).

Amy later comes to Terry’s desk to ask for the book, and Terry again emphasizes that it is Scully’s, this time irritatedly, thrusting the book into Amy’s hands. When Amy asks about his mood, Terry reveals that he went to his barbershop, only to find that Charles was also there, bringing the second subplot, Boyle’s performative allyship and Terry’s frustration with it, into Amy and Terry’s storyline. Charles proudly states that he “got a low-drop fade with a crisp lining” (“The Good Ones” 06:31), barbershop terminology often associated with Black cultural spaces and out of character for Charles, and that he is “all about supporting Black businesses” (“The Good Ones” 06:34), something he never previously expressed being passionate about, prompting an annoyed reaction from Terry. Pressed on his reaction, Terry explains that the barbershop is “where [he goes] to clear [his] mind” (“The Good Ones” 06:41), which is hard to do with Charles there. As Terry speaks, Charles repeatedly interrupts him with humming which he calls his “listening noise” (“The Good Ones” 06:47), prompting Terry to jump up from his desk and exclaim that “Listening doesn’t require noise” (“The Good Ones” 06:49). Both Charles’s presence in the barbershop as well as his “listening noise” serve to highlight the performativity of his allyship. While the broader #BLM movement calls to support Black-owned businesses and to listen to Black voices genuinely, Charles makes Terry feel uncomfortable in his safe space, and his self-declared “listening noise” ironically signals that he still centers himself rather than actually hearing Terry.

In an attempt to connect with Captain Holt, Amy tells him how good it is to see him, reaches for his hand, and holds intense eye contact. Holt, confused and slightly concerned by her behavior, asks “What’s with the bizarre eye contact and the weird way you’re talking, Santiago? Did you join a cult?” (“The Good Ones” 08:57) and when Amy negates this adds “Are you sure? Most cult members don’t realize they’re part of a cult” (“The Good Ones” 09:02). This joke works by resolving the initial incongruity in Amy’s behavior with Holt’s unexpectedly extreme yet logically consistent explanation that she must have joined a cult. Amy explains that she was trying to connect with him using a method from the book, holding it up and revealing the title “Rekindle Your Love Fire,” which Holt immediately recognizes as one of Terry’s sex books. Terry, walking past, corrects him, yelling, “You mean one of *Scully*’s sex books” (“The Good Ones” 09:12; emphasis in original). Amy continues telling Holt about her feeling that something is wrong between them, asking him, “What happened to Raymy?” (“The Good Ones” 09:19), a portmanteau of Ray and Amy that Amy claims people use to refer to the

two of them, and she confronts Holt about the small talk he made with her the day before. Holt, surprised that she noticed the small talk, agrees to do the exercises in the book. When he asks what the next one is, Amy says, flipping through the pages, “It is [*pause*] way too sexual” (“The Good Ones” 09:44) – an instance of incongruity humor, as she finishes the sentence in an unexpected way – and they agree “to skip around a bit to make this appropriate for work” (“The Good Ones” 09:48).

They meet in the break room to do the exercises, the first of which says to “participate in a new hobby your partner has expressed interest in” (“The Good Ones” 13:49). When Amy asks Holt about his, he matter-of-factly says “I started performing daily checks of my blood-oxygen level during COVID because I feared for my life” (“The Good Ones” 13:54) to which Amy replies with an interested “Ooh!” (“The Good Ones” 13:59), going up in intonation and raising her eyebrows slightly. They measure their blood oxygen levels with pulse oximeters, and both devices show 98%, prompting Holt to exclaim, “We did it. We’re back to being Raymond-Amy” (“The Good Ones” 14:02). Amy corrects him on the portmanteau “Raymy” and demands they do another exercise, saying one cannot measure their connection by blood levels. For the second, they alternately repeat the word “regulations,” as the exercise calls for “a meaningful word to both of [them]” (“The Good Ones” 14:15), but they soon stop as Holt grows more irritable. When for the third exercise, “[telling] each other a secret no one else knows” (“The Good Ones” 14:20), Amy reveals to him that she once had a graphic sex dream about Sanjay Gupta, Holt calls the exercises absurd, stands up and says “We’re not lovers. We’re not even friends. We’re coworkers. I’m tired of Terry’s stupid book” (“The Good Ones” 14:33) only for Terry to barge into the break room and correct him on the ownership of the book. The humor in this scene stems from absurdity and multiple unexpected beats: Holt naming blood-oxygen checks as a hobby and calmly sharing that he feared for his life, Amy overreacting, and the choice of “regulations” as a meaningful word. Furthermore, the way Holt emphasizes his and Amy’s relationship using the rhetorical device of tricolon in *membris crescentibus*, combining the three-part structure of a tricolon with climactic escalation, is also unexpected: while the rhetoric and Holt’s delivery suggest an escalation of closeness, the order “not lovers, not friends, but coworkers” is inverse to the conventional emotional intensity of relationships. Lastly, the recurring joke of Terry telling everyone that the book is Scully’s reaches peak absurdity, as his bursting into the room suggests he is constantly on alert for any misattribution of ownership.

Later, Amy enters Holt’s office to apologize for her strange behavior explaining that “Being back at work has been weird. Rosa’s gone, and the world has changed. And you were

the one person I thought I could count on to be the same. Always Holt” (“The Good Ones” 18:14). Holt motions for her to take a seat and clarifies that he did not make small talk with Amy because she had become a stranger to him, but rather because he is a con man, wanting her to believe that everything was normal with him. He confesses with a breaking voice that he and Kevin have separated because: “It’s been a tough year to be a Black man, and a police captain, and a human. I’ve been pushed to the brink emotionally and physically. I went into survival mode, and it seems I have neglected my personal life” (“The Good Ones” 19:02). This reframes Holt’s distance not as a change in their relationship but as a consequence of his own emotional exhaustion, revealing a rare moment of vulnerability in contrast to his usually composed, stoic persona. Holt commends Amy for noticing something was off with him on her first day back when nobody else in the precinct has realized for months and says he does not feel alone anymore, “And that’s thanks to you, Raymy” (“The Good Ones” 19:57). After a 6-second-long pause of the two of them smiling at each other, this brief exchange takes place:

Amy: Just so you know, I am not Raymy. We are Raymy.

Holt: Just be glad I said it.

Amy: Totally. Yes, I am. Thank you, sir.

(“The Good Ones” 20:06, emphasis in original)

This serves as the “blow” of the scene, providing a moment of levity following the emotional conversation they had, and ensures the subplot is resolved on a humorous note.

Charles and Terry’s storyline continues with Terry walking up to Charles’s desk, asking him if the “random Venmo payment” (“The Good Ones” 10:49) he received from him was an accident. Charles negates this saying, “it was the only way I could express how sorry I am for what you’ve had to go through,” and he should consider it “a mini reparation” (“The Good Ones” 10:54). Terry then reveals that Charles sent him \$10,000, an amount he would not consider “mini,” shocking Charles. He postulates that Charles meant to send him \$100 but added two zeros, thinking he also needed to add the cents. Charles checks his bank account looking worried, and with a forced smile says “That’s a pretty good guess as to what could have happened – but didn’t. Because I meant every last zero” (“The Good Ones” 11:11). Terry cheerily responds “I’m sure you did. Thanks, Charles” (“The Good Ones” 11:19), delivering the line in a way that makes clear he does not believe him but chooses not to confront him further and leaves. Once Terry is gone, Scully commends Charles for being so nice to Terry, only for Charles to snap at him that it was obviously a mistake, making Scully flinch. Scully’s earnest misreading of the situation functions as an additional comic beat, reinforcing his role as an oblivious but well-meaning foil and heightening the awkwardness of Charles’s failed attempt at performative allyship.

Later, Charles approaches Terry while he is waiting for the elevator. He asks him not to interrupt him until he is done speaking, a request which makes him visibly insecure and prompts him to add “not that I’m trying to silence you. I am listening” (“The Good Ones” 15:34), exposing Charles’s anxiety about being perceived as a “bad ally,” that leads him to overperform even in the simplest interaction. Terry snaps at him to “just say it” (“The Good Ones” 15:37) and Charles confesses that the \$10,000 were indeed supposed to be \$100 and that he was too embarrassed to ask for it back. Terry then admits that he obviously knew Charles had made a mistake and was messing with him, going on to say:

Look, Boyle, it’s great that you’re trying to do better, but the way you’re doing it is kind of messed up. If you want to do something about these issues, you have to do it because you think it’s the right thing, not because you want me to know about it. That just makes stuff weird between us.

(“The Good Ones” 15:49)

Charles, visibly relieved, immediately agrees with Terry and promises not to be as performative. He fumbles around on his phone until it makes a whooshing sound and says he “just donated to a great charity” (“The Good Ones” 16:05), but will not tell Terry to which one or how much he donated. Terry enters the elevator and commends Charles on this. As the elevator doors close, Charles blurts out, “For Black trans women. It was \$1,000” (“The Good Ones” 16:11), undercutting his resolve and providing one last joke that encapsulates his inability to resist spotlighting his allyship and his need for performative acknowledgment.

In contrast to the two previously analyzed episodes, “The Good Ones” does not end on a “blow.” Instead, the episode leaves viewers with the unease Jake and Rosa feel after their heart-to-heart and their conversation with Ms. Fulton, and with 9 seconds of silence. This quiet, earnest ending marks a shift in the show’s tone and speaks to its more sober, disillusioned portrayal of the police and a harsher critique of them.

3.4 Beyond the Selected Episodes

The scope of this thesis, unfortunately, does not allow for a detailed analysis of all episodes tackling the relevant themes: not surprising considering *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*’s 153-episode-total. As becomes evident in the analyses of the three selected episodes, the lion’s share of screen time is given to the squad, who are depicted as good guys – or at least well-meaning guys. Meanwhile, the top brass of the NYPD, along with multiple lower-ranking cops, are portrayed almost exclusively negatively. In this chapter, I will discuss further relevant material from other episodes that could not be examined in detail within the main case studies but is nevertheless worth considering in the context of this research. The following sections address recurring characters and character types as well as institutional dynamics that structure the

series's representation of policing beyond individual episode narratives. In the first subsection, I will discuss the previously mentioned Detectives Hitchcock and Scully, as well as the series' portrayal of stereotypical police. The second focuses on the "villains" of the show, of whom only one, Frank O'Sullivan, is mentioned in the main analyses. These are of particular interest, as they are often the targets of superiority humor and all hold positions of power. Lastly, the third subsection discusses the "other" cops, both outside of and within the Nine-Nine, and the series's reckoning with the exceptional position the squad holds until the final season.

3.4.1 Hitchcock and Scully

As previously mentioned, Hitchcock and Scully are often portrayed as gluttonous, oblivious, and lazy. These traits are often overexaggerated, for instance, in the episode "Bad Beat," where the two men challenge Rosa to a competition of who can stay seated the longest, or in "Lights Out," where their primary focus during a city-wide blackout is eating all the food in the refrigerator before it spoils. Unlike the rest of the squad, they prefer doing paperwork to being in the field, and cases are usually assigned accordingly. When they do venture beyond their desks, they are usually portrayed as inept and a liability to have around; in "House Mouses," for instance, they are kidnapped in a failed attempt to infiltrate a drug ring and need to be rescued. In an episode of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine: The Podcast*, guests discuss why the show's humor does not stem from the ineptness of police officers. Writer Gabe Liedman says it is "really scary if a cop messes up, it's not funny" ("Part 1: Getting the Squad Together" 04:45), which is why the choice was made to not portray a precinct of cops "messing up or hurting someone" ("Part 1: Getting the Squad Together" 04:51). Showrunner and co-creator Dan Goor then explains that "Hitchcock and Scully were set up as foils so that [they] could make those kinds of jokes [about the ineptness of police officers]" ("Part 1: Getting the Squad Together" 04:33). The humorous moments surrounding Scully and Hitchcock can broadly be put into two categories: one, more commonly, where they serve as instant comic relief, almost slapstick-like, and another, when they are surprisingly competent or unexpectedly knowledgeable, thereby playing against type and defying the already-existing expectations of the two. For instance, the previously mentioned line in "He Said, She Said": "Come on, sandwich" (13:29), where Scully anthropomorphizes a sandwich, is an example of the former, and the line in "Moo Moo": "He was stopped for being Black, get woke, Scully" (06:14) an example of the latter. More examples of Scully and Hitchcock playing against type include "Admiral Peralta," in which they intentionally do not record the details of a witness because she is undocumented,

and “Hitchcock & Scully,” in which they help a criminal informant build a new life after she is denied witness protection.

The recurring portrayal of Hitchcock and Scully as predominantly food-obsessed, sedentary, and intellectually disengaged functions as a parody of the archetypal old-school cop. This characterization draws on a broader popular culture tradition of caricaturing police officers as indulgent and professionally ineffective. A comparable example is Chief Wiggum from *The Simpsons*, whose gluttony and incompetence similarly parody police authority. In *The Simpsons Movie*, Wiggum is depicted eating donuts off his gun, as can be seen in Figure 3, accidentally firing it a moment later, barely missing his head, and then eating off it again.



Figure 3. Chief Wiggum eating donuts off his gun (*The Simpsons Movie* 23:43)

This is mirrored in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* when Hitchcock proudly reveals a tattoo of himself supposedly “blowing smoke off the barrel” (“The Last Ride” 08:14) of a gun, although the tattoo clearly shows him pointing the gun in his mouth, as if to commit suicide, see Figure 4.



Figure 4. Hitchcock's tattoo of himself ("The Last Ride" 08:13)

Both images rely on the same visual gag of a police officer placing a gun in his mouth. In Figure 3, Chief Wiggum holds four donuts in one hand and his gun in the other, with another four stacked on the barrel, suggesting he could have kept his service weapon holstered and carried all eight donuts using just his hands, but actively chose not to. Instead, he puts the donut-covered gun in his mouth, exaggerating the stereotype of the gluttonous and incompetent cop. In Figure 4, Hitchcock reproduces an almost identical pose in his tattoo, which he insists depicts him confidently blowing smoke off the barrel of his gun, typically a symbol of authority. However, the image unmistakably shows the gun pointed inside his mouth, turning what he perceives as a display of bravado into an image that instead resembles a police officer about to shoot himself, undercutting the authority the pose is meant to convey. The joke is further amplified by the fact that Hitchcock has permanently tattooed the image onto his arm, transforming a momentary gag into a lasting emblem of his incompetence. However, as is the case with all members of the squad, Scully and Hitchcock are portrayed as more likable than other old-school cops shown in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Examples of these include a flashback scene to Holt's first day on the force in "Old School," where he walks into a room of 25 white police officers staring at him and, after introducing himself, is asked by one of them: "Are you here to turn yourself in?" (06:26), and a flashback in "Full Boyle" where Holt asks for discretionary funds to start the AAGLNYCPA (African American Gay and Lesbian New York City Police Association), an organization supporting Black gay and lesbian police officers, and a room of 19 white police officers responds with roaring laughter. Moreover, there is mention

of old-school cops who were “too hung over to chase a perp” (“Old School” 12:40), used their own severed fingers to “flip off every Puerto Rican in the place” (“Old School” 06:59), and “[choked] a hippy to death with his own ponytail” (“Old School” 02:38). Although Scully and Hitchcock are framed more favorably, as two older, white, heterosexual men, they nevertheless embody patriarchal privilege, and their obliviousness to social issues is emblematic of the institutional inertia entrenched in the police. In this sense, they serve as comic stand-ins for a fading model of white, male authority that is increasingly out of sync with contemporary values. The humor often lies in the stark contrast between their irrelevance and the seriousness of the situations around them – a dynamic that allows the show to mock police inefficacy without directly vilifying the institution.

3.4.2 The Villains

Though one might assume that in a police procedural the villains would be the perpetrators of crime, in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, this is not the case. Rather than functioning as moral antagonists, the perpetrators the squad encounters are often eccentric or sympathetic figures and, in some cases, even become the squad’s allies. The most prominent examples of this are the recurring appearances of Doug Judy, also known as the Pontiac Bandit, whose playful rivalry with Jake develops into a friendship, with Doug even asking Jake to be the best man at his wedding and Jake helping Doug evade prison in their final encounter, and Caleb John Gosche, a cannibal and Jake’s cellmate during his time in prison in season 5, who takes a stab in the stomach in Jake’s stead when another inmate tries to kill him. Another example of perpetrators becoming allies is a short scene in “Operation Broken Feather,” where the squad has four minutes to solve a crime before Detective Pembroke of the Major Crimes Unit, also known as “The Vulture,” who “swoops in and solves cases that are almost solved and takes the credit for himself” (“The Vulture” 06:27), takes over their case. Jake encourages the perpetrator, who initially insists he is innocent, to confess to the murder and repeatedly emphasizes that there is not much time. Ultimately, the perpetrator signs the confession just in time before the Vulture arrives, high-fives Jake, and says: “Suck it, Vulture. I killed that guy and his neighbor, but you were too late” (“Operation Broken Feather 04:23), seemingly being more invested in the NYPD’s internal quarrels than his own freedom. This scene primarily serves comedic purposes, but also highlights who the true villains of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* are: cops in positions of power. With the exceptions of Captain Olivia Crawford, one of Holt’s rivals for the job of Police Commissioner in season 5 who is discriminated against by the hiring committee on account of being a woman, Captain Julie Kim, the first female Asian-American captain in the NYPD and

interim captain of the Nine-Nine in season 7, and Captain Holt himself, “virtually all of the individual senior officers are shown to be incompetent, soulless careerists, malicious, or even outright criminals” (Edwards). Commissioner John Kelly, for instance, advocates for a “vigilant policing initiative” (“Honeymoon” 06:07) reminiscent of stop-and-frisk, which was declared unconstitutional in 2013 (Kaba et al. 114), authorizes a stingray to conduct illegal surveillance, and punishes the entire precinct when Holt voices his concern directly to the mayor, resulting in “[t]he Nine-Nine [being] at war with the NYPD” (“Honeymoon” 21:18), which serves to further set the Nine-Nine apart from other precincts and cements their exceptional position as being morally superior to other police.

As previously mentioned, comedy surrounding antagonist characters often functions in accordance with superiority theory, which can include sarcasm, ridicule, teasing, schadenfreude, insults, and stereotypes, among other things (Franks 8). In the case of the Vulture, this dynamic operates primarily through ridicule and stereotyping. He functions as a caricature of toxic masculinity, marked by arrogance and sexism, whose exaggerated performance of dominance and entitlement renders him professionally and morally inferior to the detectives of the Nine-Nine. Other examples include Deputy Chief and later Commissioner Madeline Wuntch, whose long-standing rivalry with Holt is characterized by exchanges of elaborate insults that invite laughter and encourage schadenfreude in moments of Wuntch’s professional setbacks, and even in her eventual death. Captain Jason “CJ” Stentley, the Nine-Nine’s interim Captain while Holt and Jake are in witness protection in season 4, is a source of superiority humor grounded in incompetence, as laughter arises from the gap between his institutional rank and his capabilities, making him an object of gentle teasing. Finally, humor surrounding the head of the patrolmen’s union, Frank O’Sullivan, mentioned in chapter 3.3, is marked by ridicule and stereotyping, as he functions as a caricature of reactionary defenders of the police. His rhetoric mirrors real-world discourse that frames accountability as hostility toward law enforcement. The humor derives from this recognizability, as the arguments already present in public debate are exaggerated.

3.4.3 The “Other” Cops

As proven by Officer Maldack, who racially profiled Terry in “Moo Moo,” and the two officers who assaulted Ms. Fulton in “The Good Ones,” the negative portrayal of law enforcement in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is not limited to the NYPD’s top brass. Instead, it permeates the entire punishment bureaucracy, a term used by Alec Karakatsanis “instead of ‘criminal justice system’ [...] because it is a more accurate and less deceptive way to describe the constellation”

(Introduction). For instance, Stevie Schillens, Jake's "very first partner and one of the all-time greats" ("The 9-8" 02:42), plants drugs to arrest a suspected dealer. Sheriff Reynolds, who arrests Holt and Jake while they are in witness protection, takes pleasure in watching the two of them fight but intervenes when they kiss, revealing his overt homophobia ("Coral Palms, Pt. 2"). Lieutenant Melanie Hawkins oversees a gang of bank robbers and, conveniently, also runs the task force tasked with capturing them ("The Slaughterhouse"). When Jake and Rosa plan to expose her, she frames them for the bank robberies she committed, and the two of them are convicted and sent to prison. While wrongfully imprisoned, Warden Granville and guard Alan Wilson are "exceptionally abusive" (Edwards) towards Jake and the other inmates, both physically and in their exercise of power ("The Big House, Pt. 1"; "The Big House, Pt. 2").

Although the previously mentioned individuals are all from outside of the Nine-Nine, there are also examples from within the precinct: under the guise of a prank gone-wrong, Officer Howard Booth plants a glitter bomb on Jake's desk to destroy evidence on behalf of the Assistant District Attorney, who anticipates losing a case at trial and wants someone else to blame ("Dillman"), and Officer Debbie Fogle steals machine guns and twenty bricks of cocaine from the evidence room, holds Rosa and Jake hostage, and colludes with a notorious mobster ("Debbie"). Much effort is made throughout the series to set the Nine-Nine apart from other police officers and precincts; however, towards the end of the show, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* gently explores the likelihood that in the "rotten orchard" of the police institution, not all of the Nine-Nine's apples can be good (Bernabo 492). Initially, it is beat cops who no longer hold the same exceptional position as the squad, among them officers Booth and Fogle. In "Blue Flu," this expands to include all uniformed officers, as they stage a walkout and call in sick using fake medical test results attesting to a diagnosis of mononucleosis. They do this at the behest of Frank O'Sullivan, in solidarity with cops from another precinct, who claim they were being discriminated against for being cops after one of them found a dead mouse in his burrito. Despite the squad providing ample proof that the so called "Blue Flu" is a publicity stunt, that the officer in question bought the mouse in a pet shop and put it in the burrito himself, and that the Nine-Nine's beat cops forged their medical test results, O'Sullivan does not back down from his demands that Holt "issue a statement of public support for the officer, to give them all extra hazard pay and to wear this Never Forget Burrito ribbon" ("Blue Flu" 00:52). It is only when Holt confronts O'Sullivan and threatens to fire officers because the precinct could function effectively with fewer police, that O'Sullivan calls off the "Blue Flu" and the uniformed officers return to work.

Holt: *With fewer officers at our disposal and none of them trying to hit*

CompStat numbers, we made fewer bad arrests. Number of complaints against officers, down 32%, number of cases thrown out at arraignment for insufficient evidence, down 34%. And here's the most important thing we didn't do. We didn't make the community less safe. Rates of major and violent crime, what actually matters, stayed the same.

O'Sullivan: What are you saying?

Holt: I'm saying the Nine-Nine just became a case study for how a police force can work better with fewer police.

(“Blue Flu” 19:34)

This moment also constitutes the inception of the reform program, on which the season centers.

The final reckoning with the squad's exceptional position comes in the episode “The Set Up,” in which Jake insists on working a case because it reminds him of the movie *Speed*, despite it not being under his jurisdiction – something he has done often throughout the series. He breaks into a locked bus lot to investigate and arrests a passerby who runs away when Jake identifies himself as police. Back at the precinct, Holt informs Jake that the man he arrested is innocent because the FBI has already caught the perpetrator. While Jake immediately made sure the man was let out, “[h]e was in processing for ten hours, which made him late for work, which meant he got fired” (“The Set Up” 06:29), and leads him to sue Jake and the department for wrongful arrest and Jake being threatened with suspension. O'Sullivan tells Jake he “can make all of this disappear. That's what the police union does” (“The Set Up” 07:41) if he cooperates with him. This makes Jake suspect that O'Sullivan hired the man so he could blackmail Jake and undermine the Nine-Nine's police reform proposal, which later turns out to be false. Despite Holt forbidding it, Jake follows the man home to prove his theory, thereby unwittingly engaging in police intimidation, which is ultimately added to his charges. This is an example of Jake following a hunch and enacting the “trope of the maverick cop who bucks the system, sacrificing procedure in the name of the greater good” (Bernabo 489), which previously always ended with his hunch being right and him solving the case. In this instance, Jake's exceptional track record is broken, and the episode centers the repercussions his actions have on the victim. O'Sullivan enters, accompanied by a city attorney, and triumphantly announces that “the department is going to settle without admitting any wrongdoing, and because the facts of the case will remain unresolved, there will be no suspension” (“The Set Up” 18:55), essentially arguing that “all is fair, and ultimately good and forgivable, in pursuit of the bad guy; moreover, accountability only holds back the pursuit of justice and the ability to keep good people safe” (Bandes 337). This mentality infuriates Holt, and he holds an impassioned speech ending with: “You wonder how Peralta can do his job when he's held accountable for his actions? I wonder how any of us can do our job if he's not” (“The Set Up” 20:08), which inspires Jake to admit his mistake and apologize in the presence of the city

attorney, ensuring his suspension. In classic *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* fashion, Jake reframes the outcome as a win despite his five-month suspension because he learned a valuable lesson, and O'Sullivan did not get his way. In a departure from the show's usual tone, Holt tells Jake that next time it would be better if a man did not have to lose his job for him to learn a lesson. By centering wrongdoing in its main protagonist, the show acknowledges fallibility within the precinct itself. The episode thus represents the culmination of the series's gradual destabilization of the Nine-Nine's exceptional status, yet even at this peak of internal critique, Jake's misconduct is carefully framed as well-intentioned rather than indicative of moral corruption. This framing echoes an earlier moment in "The Good Ones," in which Jake tentatively reflects that he might be "part of the problem," a moment of self-awareness that the series ultimately stops short of fully developing into sustained structural critique.

4. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* represents intersecting forms of marginalization through its main characters, what role humor plays in shaping the show's political messaging, and to what extent the series engages in, or falls short of, an abolitionist critique of policing. Through the analysis of the three selected episodes, the series emerges as a text that is politically self-aware and often explicitly critical yet structurally constrained by the genre and institutional framework within which it operates.

In its representational politics, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* foregrounds characters whose identities intersect across race, gender, and sexuality, and repeatedly stages moments in which these intersections become narratively and politically salient. Throughout the show, most, if not all, of the characters play against type, meaning they are generally presented in anti-stereotypical ways. For instance, Captain Holt, a gay Black man, is mostly reserved, at times “robot-like,” and overall dignified rather than the stereotypical outgoing, flamboyant, and often loud and lewd gay man. While his physique is the epitome of hegemonic masculine body ideals, Terry's visible muscles and physical strength are predominantly used in humorous contexts, and he is primarily portrayed as a loving husband and father, at times anxious, and on occasion reading self-help books to improve his sex life – quite the opposite of the hypersexual Black man stereotype. Furthermore, Amy and Rosa, though very differently, are both defined by professionalism and rationale and are neither exoticized nor portrayed as excessively sexual or temperamental, as is often the case with Latina characters. In the analyzed episodes specifically, “Moo Moo” makes overt the racialized violence of policing by showing that Terry Jeffords' professional identity offers no meaningful protection against anti-Black racism and illustrating the qualitatively different modality of oppression Captain Holt faces as a gay Black man. “He Said, She Said” centers a survivor of sexual violence and uses Amy Santiago's positionality to expose how credibility, institutional response, and narrative authority are shaped by gender and race. “The Good Ones,” in turn, extends this focus from individual experiences of marginalization to their structural implications, staging Rosa's leaving the police and Jake's slower but growing uncertainty as responses to systemic injustice that cannot be resolved through individual goodwill alone, influenced by their respective identities as a bisexual Latina woman and a straight white man. Together, these episodes demonstrate that marginalization in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is not merely acknowledged but actively woven into character arcs and conflicts. At the same time, these experiences are largely negotiated within an institution that itself enacts much of the violence experienced by marginalized people, suggesting that, within

the police, recognition and redress remain imaginable without fundamentally dismantling the structures that produce harm.

Humor is central to how this negotiation functions, as it sets *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* apart from the majority of television programming centered on the police. The most common form of humor in the series is incongruity humor, stemming from a discord of expectations and outcomes of situations, which causes laughter. Unsurprisingly, with audiences primed by decades of police dramas, a police comedy has plenty of unexpected situations to offer. While most police procedurals aim to give viewers a sense of realism, as historically ingrained in the genre through the close working relationship between Hollywood production companies and law enforcement agencies, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, as a sitcom, enjoys a modern-day version of jester's privilege, using humor for entertainment and social commentary. Throughout the series, comedy operates as a strategy for engagement with difficult subjects. In line with relief theory, humor often functions to release tension created by the discussion of sensitive topics, such as, in the case of the three episodes analyzed in this thesis, racial profiling, homophobia, sexism, misogyny, as well as sexual and institutional violence. These themes are often juxtaposed with humor to lay out the viewpoint of feminist, anti-racist, or otherwise progressive arguments in a more accessible way to a broader audience. Another form of humor present in the show is superiority humor, which explains laughter as resulting from feelings of superiority over others, and mostly occurs in connection with antagonist characters in positions of power. Using this form of humor to punch up is a means to subversively question existing hierarchies and ideally deconstruct patriarchal ideologies, although it rarely results in a change of the hierarchies it targets. In "Moo Moo," humor provides levity between recounts and portrayals of racial violence and sharpens the critique of racism by highlighting its absurdity and cruelty rather than deflecting from it. In "He Said, She Said," comedic beats and running gags serve to build awareness and discredit male supremacy in patriarchy, coexisting with moments of anger and fear, preventing the episode from collapsing into didacticism. In "The Good Ones," humor increasingly fails to resolve tension, giving way to quiet unease and disillusionment. This tonal shift marks a turning point in the series's relationship to policing, signaling a growing awareness of the limits of comedy as a catalyst for institutional critique in a police sitcom.

The use of humor also exposes the series's central contradiction: while *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* repeatedly depicts corruption, incompetence, malice, and soulless careerism in the NYPD's top brass and multiple lower-ranking cops, the core ensemble is consistently framed as morally exceptional. Although the institution is portrayed as deeply troubled, the narrative overwhelmingly centers the "good cops" of the squad whose intentions are sincere, and who

investigate and solve every case. For instance, in “Moo Moo,” Terry is assured that he works in a precinct whose officers would never racially profile him, and the officer from a different precinct who did is implied to be reprimanded for it. Thus, even when the series gestures toward a critique of policing, it ultimately remains committed to reformist imaginaries that preserve policing as a necessary institution. In “He Said, She Said,” a victim of sexual assault reports her case to the police and is believed, and not only does her detective consider the best outcomes for her, but also stays past working hours to solve it. Only in the final season is the exceptional position of the Nine-Nine’s cops gradually, partially dismantled, with Jake – albeit “unintentionally” – making a wrongful arrest and engaging in police intimidation, and the show advocating for fewer police through its reform program, though, critically, it is a *reform* program. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*’s inclusivity and comedic framing play a decisive role, since policing has, from its inception, been a violent system. By translating this system into a sitcom, especially one with multidimensional, relatable characters, and progressive representation, the series renders policing emotionally legible and, crucially, human. The squad invites identification and affection, softening the institutional violence in which it is structurally embedded. While this does not erase the series’s critiques, it does mitigate them. In this sense, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is neither straightforwardly radical nor easily dismissed as uncritical copaganda. It is a text deeply invested in progressive values and equally invested in preserving the narrative pleasures of the police procedural. Its humor and inclusivity allow it to articulate critiques that many police shows avoid, while also humanizing an institution whose violence is systemic rather than aberrational. The result is a series that expands the representational possibilities of the genre while remaining tethered to its ideological limits, revealing both the potential and shortcomings of television comedy.

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Acknowledgement of the use of tools based on Large Language Models

During the writing and final editing stages of this thesis, I used AI-based tools to assist with phrasing suggestions, improving clarity and coherence, organizing and cross-referencing source material, and identifying relevant academic publications. All ideas, arguments, and the final wording are my own. The table below provides an overview of the tools consulted and their respective uses.

Tool	Use	Sections	Time Period
Grammarly	Grammar, spelling, punctuation	Entire thesis	2025-2026
NotebookLM (Google)	Organizing and cross-referencing sources; synthesizing material	Theory chapter; analysis chapters	2025
ChatGPT (OpenAI) GPT-4o, GPT-4.1, GPT-5, GPT-5.1, GPT-5.2	Phrasing suggestions; simplifying wording; checking coherence	Throughout the thesis	2024-2025
ResearchRabbit	Discovering relevant literature; exploring citation networks	General research stage; theory chapter	2024

Abstract

This thesis analyzes the representation of policing in the US-American sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. It examines how progressive critique and institutional legitimacy are negotiated through diverse characters and humor. Drawing on television studies, intersectionality theory, humor theory, and abolitionist thought, it situates *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* within the conventions of the police procedural and the affordances of serialized television comedy, examining how the show uses humor to address systemic social issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. The analysis is based on close readings of three selected episodes, supplemented by short discussions of further relevant episodes and scenes. It argues that in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, humor simultaneously functions as a tool for progressive critique of policing and as a means of obscuring the violent nature of the police. This ambivalence highlights the tension between the series's progressive representation of diverse characters and its role in producing "copaganda" that potentially validates law enforcement institutions. The thesis specifically contrasts the show's idealized "good cop" narratives with real-world critiques of police brutality and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Ultimately, it questions whether the show's comedic format entertains to soften institutional realities or to meaningfully challenge the ideological foundations of policing.

Keywords: Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Television Studies, Humor, Intersectionality, Police, Abolition

Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Darstellung der Polizei in der US-amerikanischen Sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Im Fokus steht die Frage, wie die Serie progressive Kritik an Polizeistrukturen mit der gleichzeitigen Legitimation der Institution Polizei verknüpft. Theoretisch stützt sich die Arbeit auf Ansätze der Television Studies, der Intersektionalitätsforschung, Humortheorien sowie auf abolitionistische Zugänge und verortet *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* an der Schnittstelle zwischen Police Procedural und serieller Fernsehkomödie. Anhand einer Analyse von Close Readings dreier ausgewählter Episoden sowie ergänzender Analysen ausgewählter Szenen wird untersucht, wie Humor eingesetzt wird, um gesellschaftliche Konfliktfelder wie Rassismus, Sexismus und Homophobie zu thematisieren. Dabei wird deutlich, dass Humor in der Serie einerseits progressive Kritik ermöglicht, andererseits jedoch auch dazu beitragen kann, strukturelle Probleme der Polizei zu entschärfen oder zu überdecken. Damit bewegt sich *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* in einem Spannungsfeld zwischen diverser, progressiver Repräsentation und Formen von „Copaganda“, die polizeiliche Institutionen legitimieren können. Besonders deutlich wird dies in der Gegenüberstellung der idealisierten „Good Cop“-Figuren der Serie mit der realen Kritik an Polizeigewalt, wie sie etwa durch die #BlackLivesMatter-Bewegung artikuliert wurde. Letztlich zeigt die Arbeit, dass das Comedy-Format der Serie sowohl zur Verharmlosung institutioneller Gewalt beitragen kann als auch Räume eröffnet, die ideologischen Grundlagen von Polizeiarbeit kritisch zu reflektieren.

Schlagwörter: Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Television Studies, Humor, Intersektionalität, Polizei, Abolitionismus