RENEGOTIATING BRITISH IDENTITY THROUGH COMEDY TELEVISION

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
August 2009

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ABSTRACT

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In conversations concerning American television abroad, conflict arises regarding the impact of American culture on countries without a strong means of autonomous media production. These discussions are usually confined to developing nations; however, Americanization still remains relevant to those nations who have a developed media industry. This thesis further examines the dynamic relationship between two media powerhouses, the United States and Great Britain. The purpose of this project is to explore how British television works with American television and popular culture in ways that do not interrupt the cultural education television provides.

Beginning with a short history of the importation of programs between both countries, the thesis elaborates on the significance of television and comedy to culture. This history of media importation helps to set up how particular programs play with Americanness in ways that help to reassert a sense of Britishness. Using Andy Medhurst’s *A National Joke*, this project examines how television comedy is able to communicate, reassert, and redefine British identities. The shows chosen, *Peep Show* (2003- ) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001) are two comedies that play such a role in renegotiating and redefining Britishness, by deconstructing the notion of identity as well as emphasizing Britishness through the representation of Americanness. Between *Peep Show*’s utilization of an American character as a means to differentiate British from American and *Goodness Gracious Me*’s use of familiar American formats to emphasize the impact of American television on British culture, both pinpoint the
issues relevant to discussing contemporary British identity and through the lens of comedy
provide a space for these issues to be deconstructed and challenged.
For the jokers, jesters, and fools
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been looking forward to writing these acknowledgements and now that I am here, I have no clue where to start or what to say. I only know it is possible that if gone wild my acknowledgements could give my thesis a run for its money. Firstly, I have to thank my committee. Dr. Simon Morgan-Russell took the time out of his incredibly busy schedule to work with me on this project. I could not have asked for a better person to be on my side. Always supportive, ready with suggestions, and a positive attitude, he attempted to make this process as painless as possible. Nobody is more thankful for this than I. Dr. Becca Cragin who helped introduce me to the possibilities of television studies and provided me with sources that soon became my guides for how television studies should be done. I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr. Don McQuarie, who has answered every question, walked me through every process, and has consistently put me at ease. I would also like to thank the professors who helped develop me as a researcher and writer over the past two years. I never expected to be surrounded by such a supportive faculty, but I have had the luck of having some of the greatest professors I have come across in my six years in higher education.

There has been no greater distraction than the friends I have made in Bowling Green. They deserve much more thanks than what can be adequately described here, but they know who they are and what they did. Finally, I have to thank John and Malia Lewis, my parents, who raised me with a sense of humor, inspired me to pursue my education, and never gave me flack for studying television. They were also the ones who allowed me to watch as much British television as I wanted as a kid. This thesis is would not have happened if it had not been for the hours of my childhood spent watching *Dream Team*, *Fort Boyard*, *Harry Enfield and Friends* and a smattering of comedies we would catch and no nothing more about except they made us laugh. I love you both.
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Introduction

One of the most daunting questions posed to graduate students (or any student for that matter) is the one inquiring about their focus. When asked about this project, I have told friends and family that I study the use of Americanness in British comedy as a means to reassert a sense of British identity. This is the easiest and most concise way I have found to answer the question. It is also a sentence constructed in such a way as to impress those unfamiliar with television studies. For some reason, when people hear “study television,” their body language and faces indicates that this field is a waste of time and just an excuse to watch television rather than do “real” work. Most do not understand that studying television changes the way in which I watch television. This dismissal changes, however, when I explain that I work with British television. There is a release in their body language, a type of acceptance, as if British television has been accepted as canonical, far superior to American television, deserving of study, more meaningful, and better quality. All of a sudden, I am given suggestions as to which program I should work with, which is their favorite and why I should watch it, and how much better they think British television is in comparison to American programs. Somehow, within this conversation, television studies becomes less useless and more insightful. It is the perceived differences and the way we talk about television, especially that of British and American television, that led me to this study of British television and specifically at the reflection of the dynamic of the British and American relationship within television.

The purpose of this project is to explore how British television works with American television and popular culture in ways that do not interrupt the cultural education television provides. In conversations concerning American television abroad, there arises a conflict between cultures and questions as to whether or not the importation of American values and
ideologies within countries without their own strong means of media production affect that
domestic culture. While this debate continues to become more relevant as more nations develop
their own programming, I thought it pertinent to look at the dynamic relationship between two
media powerhouses like the United States and Great Britain. Each has a unique history with
broadcasting and each have become great media exporters. Great Britain has proven to have
great media influence within the United States, having had several programs imported or adapted
for American television. The impact of British shows within American television schedules is
more subtle than that of American television in the Britain. American shows often are shown in
Great Britain, un-adapted for British audiences, whereas British shows are usually “translated,”
using American writers and actors to adapt shows for the audiences. Besides, channels within the
states aimed at niche audiences interested in British television and culture, like BBC America,
audiences are not exposed to “British-ness,” unlike British audiences who have become very
familiar with representations of “American-ness.” For those with access to BBC America, this is
the channel meant to present the best of British television (BBC America website), which in turn
gives viewers essentially a “what they need to know” about British television. For those in Great
Britain, however, American television plays a larger role in television. American shows are
commonly placed within main channels schedules.

The question, then, is how does American television interact with British television and
how does British television handle the incorporation of American programming? What happens
when these two culturally collide? Is there even a collision? I posit that there is only a minor
scuffle. While American television has been watched with a cautious eye, it has not completely
overwhelmed British television screens. The following will help show how British television
remains “British” amidst the increase of American programs in television schedules. The shows
chosen, *Peep Show* (2003- ) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001) are two comedies that play such a role in maintaining this sense of Britishness, by deconstructing the notion of identity as well as emphasizing Britishness through the representation of Americanness. Playing with Americanness and American culture in general helps to reassert a sense of British national identity and helps to define or at least clarify what that means. References to American culture are often greatly used in British television. There are references to American film, television programs, politics, and famous figures. These references not only reflect the impact of American culture on British television, but the amount of play and mockery with these references also requires a certain amount of assertion of British identity. By poking fun at American culture, British culture is prioritized. It is not that comedy programs are purposefully constructed as nationalist propaganda; rather, comedy provides a space to deconstruct and resist a strict definition what it means to be “British,” but that comedy also builds and reinforces unity through humor. By inviting audiences in on the joke, writers and performers use familiar cultural elements as benchmarks of understanding, that most if not all viewers can recognize, relate and “get” the joke. Television comedy is both exclusive and inclusive and when dealing with identity, and hence this ability becomes even more significant.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses primarily on the interaction between British and American television. It is a short segment of a very long history of the trade between nations, but still expresses the significance each has on the other’s television. With the British Broadcasting Corporation being a governmental agency, British programming at first aimed to provide television shows that helped foster better British citizens. With the advent of more channels in Great Britain, such as ITV and Channel 4, British television has changed and has become more diverse in representation of British-ness, but has also become more reliant on American shows
that provide a cheap way to fill television schedules. This introduction of the relationship between two cultures’ media representation elaborates on the ease with which American television is exported to Great Britain, but the lack of British television aired in the United States. Using Paul Rixon’s *American Television on British Screens* and Jeffrey S. Miller’s *And Now for Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture*, this chapter further expands on the cultural exchange that occurs through television. Rixon’s argument that this exchange is a dialogue between two cultures and Miller’s assertion that British television has had a greater impact on American television than most recognize, will help illustrate what I will consider as an intermediate way of looking at globalization and media. Rather than focus on whether or not American television is a form of cultural imperialism, I will examine what options are provided by both American and British Television and how British television shows frame British-ness. Andrew Crisell’s book *The History of Broadcasting in Great Britain*, helps to supplement both Rixon’s and Miller’s work by offering the historical context of British media. His recount of the history helps to map the influence American television has had on British television. Using Crisell has helped to both make sense of the British television industry (which is remarkably different to the American industry), but also as a means of placing both *Peep Show* and *Goodness Gracious Me* in context. Examining the development of the industry helps to understand the significance of both programs, especially in light of the increasing presence of American television in British schedules.

The incorporation of American programs, which in turn reflect American cultural values, acts as a type of interruption to that particular dynamic of television. This history of media importation helps to set up how particular programs play with Americanness in ways that help to reassert a sense of Britishness. As I am more concerned with comedy’s political potential, I offer
why I think it is important to look at these issues of identity through the lens of comedy. As stated before, television itself acts as a space for cultural issues to be played out on the screens for viewers, relating experiences specific to that culture. Comedy allows this to go further, because it relies so heavily on audiences understanding allusions and the nuances of jokes usually related to culture. In terms of television studies, comedy has been underrepresented in terms of television studies, especially in its importance of reflecting particular ideologies. Of course, it is not because comedy is considered unimportant, but it is difficult to talk about comedy because it is so subjective. What is funny to one may not be to another and so it becomes difficult to discuss why certain elements of these shows are funny. Though I focus on comedy, I do not deconstruct each joke discussed. I am more interested in comedic play and also dread writing about these shows that make them unappealing and worse unfunny to the reader. Taking a page from Andy Medhurst, I am attempting to not be an assassin of enjoyment (5) and instead of strictly analyzing jokes analyze the sense of play programs utilize to make points concerning Americans, American culture, and the relationship between the United States and Great Britain. With this in mind, I further examine the politics and relationships in both Peep Show and Goodness Gracious Me and how they are used in order to reassert a specific conception of identity.

Chapter two examines British identity as displayed in the program Peep Show, which deals with personal identity, but also places in the context of the national. The chapter begins with recounting the history Channel 4 in the 1980s as a means of breaking up the duopoly of broadcasting dominated by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Independent Television Authority. While Channel 4’s purpose was to air programming that focused on issues and narratives that would not be found on the other channels, it ultimately resorted to airing
American programs due to costs and ease to fill up schedules. The channel eventually became known for being dominated by American programming and led to the channel expanding into original programming. This push for more domestic programs reflects a certain need for more shows that represent British life and values over those reflected by American programs. One of Channel 4’s programs is *Peep Show* which began airing in 2003 and has continued to gain more viewers as the series continues its run. *Peep Show* deals with identity at the personal and individual level, but also through the anxiety of the two characters reveals the social norms that are expected of them.

The two characters Mark Corrigan and Jeremy “Jez” Usbourne reflect a certain level of anxiety associated with the expectations of British masculinity and identity. This level of anxiety is represented as the failure of both to perform certain cultural expectations as men, employees, and socialized people. Their inability to perform these expectations illustrates the anxiety inherent with the expectations of living in a society with strictly defined social roles. With the show’s popularity increasing due to the amount of attention paid to the increase of DVD sales, the show acts as a space where anxieties linked to identity are reflected for the audience. There is something valuable in the show, despite the fact that it is a comedy with seemingly little redeeming value or importance besides providing entertainment. Though I discuss the show in general, most of the focus is on the second series, where an American character is introduced to the series. Nancy, a love interest to Jez comes into the show as a representative of American culture. Her insertion into the narrative interrupts Jez’s relationship with other developed characters, most notably that of his roommate. The stereotyped American character of Nancy is used as both a disruption in the relationship between Jez and Mark, as well as acts as a representation of Americanness. This chapter pays particular attention to the representation of
Nancy as “the American.” It will be examined how “the American” is represented in *Peep Show* and how American-ness is reflected in comparison to British-ness. This chapter also examines her relationship with Jez and how it is used within the series to illustrate a greater concern with the primarily ambivalent relationship between the United States and Great Britain, primarily of the ambivalent relationship. This is especially significant concerning how this relationship has developed in the past decade, with the relationship of George W. Bush and Tony Blair’s partnership in relation to the War in Iraq. The criticism surrounding Tony Blair’s apparent blind following of Bush’s plans for Iraq offered more reasons for this relationship to be more contentious.

With the discussion of this relationship and the representation of “Americaness” on British television, specifically in *Peep Show*, the third chapter will examine how comedy can be used to resist a strict sense of national identity, but also builds and reinforces unity through humor. Identity is deconstructed through comedy, but because comedy relies so much on audiences understanding the joke it is vital for there to be a collective understanding of what is being deconstructed and commented on in order for the joke to be effective. This sort of play and deconstruction is depicted perfectly by the sketches included in *Goodness Gracious Me*, a show that brought the conflict of British Asian culture with White British culture. Aired on BBC2, the program offered a new site for illustrating issues of ethnicity and national identity and the duality of those within Britain who did not and could not conform to the white, Anglo-Saxon norm of British identity. The analysis of *Goodness Gracious Me* focuses on the ways in which the show deconstructs the strict definitions of what it means to be British, which does not often include those of various ethnicities. By playing with representation of minorities, the show is able to criticize derogatory representations while also creating some wiggle room for interpretations of
Britishness. The chapter begins with discussing the issue of representation and the frustration of ethnic minorities toward the lack of minority representation within the British television industry. *Goodness Gracious Me* is a great example of a show with a minority cast and crew that was able to communicate this frustration over representation, while also appealing to a mainstream audience. Though the conflict being confronted is racism within Great Britain, there are several examples of American popular culture. Sketches like “The Six Million Rupee Man” and “Channa’s Angels” use the framework of the popular American program to make a point concerning representation of Indian culture, which demonstrates the importance of American popular culture within Great Britain, but also adds to the struggle of British Asian cultural representation within Great Britain. The use of Americanness helps to do several things within the short amount of time. The reference to American shows indicates the importance of American culture to British culture. The way in which representations of British Asianness is parodied deconstructs past representations within media constructed by white British writers or performers. The comedic aspect of these representations challenges strict definitions of national identity and allows for a more inclusive definition.

My research consisted of lots of solitary viewing and pausing in order to take copious notes. While television seems like it would be all fun and games, it is by no means an easy task to keep track of cutting shots, dialogue, and action. This, however, is the price paid for textual analysis when dealing with a moving text. This analysis will be supplemented through DVD commentary where possible, as *Peep Show* only has commentary for selected episodes and *Goodness Gracious Me* provided no commentary. While it is incredible to have performers and writers (often the same people) discuss the elements of production the problem that comes with commentary is that they do not necessarily answer all if any of a researcher’s questions. It is not
as if they are expecting that someday an American Culture Studies graduate student will write a thesis concerning their work. The commentary for *Peep Show* is able to provide a bit of context, especially concerning the casting for Nancy and of her placement within the series. In order to not put words in the mouths of those involved in the production of these shows, I have also included interviews from various newspapers where they discuss either their show or personal background that relates to their work. This is most evident with those in *Goodness Gracious Me*, where actors Sanjeev Baskhar and Meera Syal provide a lot of insight to what it means to be British Asian in Great Britain.

In terms of placing these programs within a context, as well as providing a theoretical framework, I use secondary sources from an array of fields. Hartley and Fiske’s *Reading Television*, is a staple to television studies. This project relies heavily on John Hartley’s and John Fiske’s *Reading Television* for this reason. Though a short work, *Reading Television* offers a rich outline for the study of television and how it relates to culture. By thinking of television as replacing the bard and performing the same functions, the ways in which television and identity work together, where television emerges as not simply a tool for entertaining audiences, but a cultural educational tool, which both reasserts and helps to develop societal norms. The insertion of another culture’s television, which also functions as a domestic bard, alters the ways in which the cultural messages provided by domestic programs are viewed. While some may see this as an interruption, others consider the ways in which these imports are chosen and scheduled in order to minimize disruption. Still, the ways in which American culture is referenced, recognized and played with in programs offers a way in which to clarify what exactly the significance of American television is on British screens. Along with the work of Hartley and Fiske, I rely on Bret Mills’s *Television Sitcom* as a backbone of my discussion concerning *Peep*
Show and how it functions as a comedic text. Mills outlines various ways in which sitcoms can be studied and elaborates about the conventions of both American and British comedy, including aspects of performance, representation, and consumption. His explanation of texts’ structure, function, and usefulness enhance the value of studying a program like Peep Show and has become fundamental to understanding sitcoms and their importance. Because the thesis is focused on the attempts to illustrate and reassert “British-ness” in television, these texts also help illustrate the importance of television in creating a unifying space for British audiences. Also vital, is the work of Andy Medhurst, whose A National Joke plays a major role in this thesis. He concisely and brilliantly outlines the ways in which comedy deals with issues of identity and representation in comedy television. His work deals with identity on both the personal and national level, developing a better understanding toward what can be considered a national sense of humor. His discussion helps to lead to my further analysis of how American texts are used within Great Britain and how British television attempts to reassert a sense of Britishness despite this interruption.

As an American working with British television and culture there is usually an assumption that I think British television is “better” than American programs. I have become the “British television person” within my circle of colleagues, as if I refuse to watch anything else. While I usually do lean more in the “Brits do it better” camp, I more than readily admit to what I consider bad British television and likewise praise many American programs. Though I am not interested in proving which nation produces better programming; rather, I am more intrigued by the ways two leaders in media production and media importation interact with each other. Because of the mass importation and popularity of American television in Great Britain, the importance of maintaining a sense of national identity amidst American values and standards
becomes an important aspect of British television programming. The conclusion of this thesis will offer ways in which representation of national identity can be read in these texts and in comedy in general. Combining my readings of these primary texts with the offerings of secondary sources, this summary of findings will illustrate how comedies can be read for political meaning. Rather than thinking of comedy as a form of pure entertainment or escapism from the real world, the purpose of this thesis will show the importance and relevance of comedy and performance to understanding the functions of television in passing down cultural values, meanings, and identities.
Chapter 1
Importing Identities: National Identity and Television Comedy

There is no doubt that there is a difference between American and British television. One can look at the structure of sitcoms and notice the ways in which commercial breaks placed differently and their duration. Even the nature of comedy in general can be seen as a difference, with American comedy considered more joke-and-gag oriented, and British comedy being more situational. Even the ways in which the industry itself is a fundamental difference to the ways in which television is aired, watched, and discussed. These differences are ones produced by culture. What is produced domestically is both defined by culture as well as part of its production. When television schedules are interrupted by the inclusion of foreign programs, these differences are highlighted, but when foreign programming begins to overwhelm the schedules, cultural imperialism becomes a concern. The United States, the greatest exporter of media, has been closely examined as a result of the increased interest in globalization and media. Concern has risen over the impact of American imports, especially with television. The focus on television is due to the fact that television programs enter into homes rather than film, which is displayed in areas, set aside for people to congregate and view. This concern has been mostly associated with those of developing countries and the reflected importance of commercialism in American media and pleasure associated with American products that impact the lifestyles of those living outside of the United States. This fear of American cultural imperialism has mostly been confined to discussing the relationship between the United States and developing countries. But this fear is not confined solely between the American entertainment complex and struggling domestic media industries. Since the rise of television, American media and exportation has been at the center of debate within nations whose own industries have been strong. The relationship
between British and American television presents a unique vantage point at examining how those nations who are conscious of America’s media power negotiate between the ease in which it is to import American programs and maintaining their own industry to reflect their own cultural values.

The concept of national identity is complex and highly debated. As has been discussed in the works of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, within one conception of national identity like “British” or “American” a multitude of other identities based on ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual preference emerge presenting a difficulty in establishing a comprehensive definition of any national identity. In determining a national identity it is then important to find “the suture point”, a term used by Hall in “Who Needs Identity?” to explain the convergence of multiple identities into one (Hall 5). Television acts as such a point. Though in today’s world of options for cable, satellite, and internet viewership, television acts as a point where multiple identities can come together. Television has increasingly become an important day of everyday living within nations, acting as a place that brings people together literally and ideologically. Television programs emphasize issues and messages that are important to particular nations and help to define cultural features like family structures, bodily comportment, and gender roles, amongst others. That said, in watching television, it is clear that texts made within a cultural context are better understood by those audiences living within that context.

Though Stuart Hall has rightly claimed in “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” that audiences decode the signs and symbols used by the television industry to express various values (6), those in the field of television studies have continued to point to the ways that signs are used by television to express certain aspects of culture. In this instrumental essay Hall explains the relationship between producers and audiences when it comes to the
meanings and relevance of texts. In producing cultural texts, those within the industry are using signs and symbols in order to convey a particular message and it is up to those within the audience to recognize these signs and “decode” the text in order to form meaning (1). Hall includes that texts are polysemic and that though there may be an intended meaning, audience members can choose to read either with or against these texts (9). While the audience may not decode in similar ways there are signs used in texts to convey a sense of the nation’s culture. Hall stipulates that

The domains of ‘preferred mappings’ have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs the everyday knowledge of social structures of ‘how things work for all practical purposes in this culture’, the rank order of power and interest, and a structure of legitimations and sanctions. (14)

Television texts are packed with these preferred meanings that help to reinforce certain cultural norms and reaffirm certain ways of life that will be familiar to audiences. The familiar use of the family dynamic in sitcom, for example, is based on the cultural conceptions and definitions of families and the determination of what is “normal” and what is “dysfunctional.” Despite the fact that these definitions may be dependent on each individual’s personal background, because audience members are bombarded by the same signs and symbols in a variety of media examples, they are aware of how the culture should view the family structure. Without access to or knowledge of these cultural codes embedded into texts, audiences will be more likely to misread the text and possibly be unable to fully understand the program’s significance or point.

The concept of encoding/decoding becomes vital to understanding the international flow of television and serves as an explanation of the differences between programs imported by another. Though multiple and at times conflicting identities may coexist within a nation, the
values and ideologies are readily recognizable by those within the domestic culture. Not only is the understanding of the cultural text made easier but so is the digestion of ideology filtered through television. While television acts as a convergence point for multiple identities within a nation, it also acts as a form of identity definition, as it is also exclusive. Albert Moran has expressed the importance of domestic programming in relation to globalization and the flow of cultural products, contending that

…the television system will inevitably have cultural effects by subjecting everyone with a given territory to the same type of service, thereby producing notions of equality and commonality, by instituting the expectation of rhythms of service, subjecting everyone to the same flow of control. (8)

Domestic programs are produced to fit into the culture, as well as help create and reinforce cultural values and expectations. Because television programs are specified for domestic audiences their formats and tone exclude those not made domestically. While, for example, British and American television programs are both made in Western and developed nations, because of their cultural differences there remains clear differences in their television. The differing histories of both British and American television help to explain this disparity, while also able to clarify how both have been able to interact and form somewhat of a symbiotic relationship. Both nations’ television industries have affected the other and have been used in ways that have somehow aided the other. Both have either used each other’s programs to fill air time in newly formed schedules or by purchasing shows and formats to help boost a sense of credibility. With this relationship, comes the issue of how the codes used within programs are approached, changed, or recontextualized in order to make sense of their meanings.
The United States Adapts

In importing British television, American broadcasters are more inclined to purchase formats rather than broadcast the originals. This is exemplified by the NBC hit *The Office* (2005-), an adaptation of a British show of the same name that originally aired on BBC2 in Britain. The original had become both an example of great British television and a worldwide phenomenon. When commissioned by NBC, critics and fans of the original were concerned as to whether or not Americans could do the *The Office* justice and could appreciate the low-key comedy for which the original and English comedy is most known. *The Office*, however, became a major success for NBC. Yet, the integration of the format included catering to American audiences. The American adaptation of the show is not so wholly different as both are shot in a documentary style, feature employees of local paper companies in industrial towns (Wernham Hogg in Slough and Dunder Mifflin in Scranton, PA), inadequate middle aged bosses, and often similar plots or plot devices. The negotiation of representation is present in the mixture of elements from the original series and the inclusion of more American cultural points that Americans can better understand.

Despite the growing popularity of the show on NBC, initial reactions to the idea of adapting *The Office* were either those of unease or negativity. According to a report in the Mirror that the “test audience has given the American version of hit series *The Office* the worst rating for a sitcom in a television station's history” ("The Office Re-Make Flops in US" 11) and the show was in constant threat of cancellation until given the chance to come into its own rather than continue to lean on the original program’s storylines. The eventual success of *The Office* on NBC is even more remarkable considering it followed the utter failure of one of England’s other imports, *Coupling* (2003), another sitcom akin to *Friends* (1994-2004) that was to act as
replacement for the latter long running American program. Unlike the care taken by producers and writers of *The Office*, to recontextualize the show for American audiences, little to none of that same concern seemed to be put into *Coupling*, besides the heavy editing of sexual innuendo and conversations, as well as British slang. Granted, the issue of friendship and working environments are inherently different and perhaps the working environment and those within needed a bit more tweaking, but the lack of any sense of adaptation is partially responsible for the failure of the series, which was cancelled after only three weeks. In watching both series, critics readily and rightly pointed out the not just the similarities but almost a mimicry of the original series. In a review for the *New York Times*, contributor Alessandra Stanley compared the American adaptation to that of the transportation and rebuilding of the London Bridge in 1971 (Stanley 1). The minor translation of British slang into American and the editing of jokes to be less sexually explicit were not enough to fully contextualize the show into the American schedule. The show remained British, but was in the midst of an American backdrop. In pondering the possible success of *The Office*, critics focused and compared the adaptation of the series to the current failure of *Coupling*, ignoring or perhaps unaware that many shows had transitioned into American programming from English television seamlessly and successfully.

After the importation of *Coupling* and *The Office*, the media was quick to call the increase of British formats another British invasion. The usage of British formats on American screens, however, is nothing new to American broadcasting. Ironically, many of what have been considered the cornerstones of American television, and sitcoms especially, have been originally English. As Jeffrey Miller has documented in his book *And Now for Something Completely Different*, British popular culture has always had an impact on American culture and has always played a role in American television. In discussing the impact of British entertainment on
American popular culture and television in particular, Miller comments on the popularity of British theater, and more specifically, the comedy of Beyond the Fringe (1960). The production, which opened in New York in 1962, provided the opening for comedy programs in the United States (Miller 114). Miller cites comedian Peter Cook as having “suggested that the cultural differences presented in [Beyond the Fringe] provided a sort of “snob merit” for well educated and well-off American audiences (114-5). The point made concerning access to both education of cultural practices, as well as access to comedy continues with BBC America’s approach to programming. Because BBC America is the channel for those interested in British television, the expectations for the programming would be those that were stereotypically “British,” marked in ways that are vastly different than what can be found on American television. Those looking for humor will be looking for the low-key means of humor, rather than what marks American comedy.

In recounting the cultural exchange between American and British television, Miller not only addresses the importation of British shows onto network television, but also the usage of British sitcoms as models for classic “American” sitcoms like Sanford and Son (1972-77) and All in the Family (1971-79). While Miller’s analysis of the importation and usage of British programs aired in the United States provides a useful approach to considering the impact and contextualization of Britishness on American television, his strict focus on the decades of the 1960s and 1970s ignores the advent of cable and the explosion of new channels for niche audiences. What little he does with cable is to explain the use of British programs to promote the image of newly formed networks. A&E, for example, used British shows as a means to define themselves as a “quality network” as British programs had the cultural collateral to lure viewers (Miller 171). No longer were British shows confined to the major three networks and PBS;
rather, more channels offered more opportunities to air British programs, which not only satisfied certain sections of audiences, but also filled air time. British programs have since been seen on Oxygen, MTV, Comedy Central, each specializing in an appeal to their chief demographics. When, for example, Oxygen began to air *Nighty Night* (2004-5) in 2004, a show that focused on the murderous, deceitful and morally reprehensible Jill Tyrell, it made sense that a channel aimed toward women would air a program that centered on a female character, especially a channel that continually attempts to present itself as a channel for independent women. The same can be said for *The Young Ones* (1982-84), which aired on MTV, and a variety of British comedies that have aired on Comedy Central, like *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-96, 2001-05). Besides the smattering of programs that could or can be seen on various cable channels, there is also BBC America, which promotes as presenting the best of what is “Across the Pond.” Yet, this is somewhat a misnomer. Because BBC America is owned by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), what is aired for American viewership consists primarily of BBC programs and for the most part neglects popular programs aired on other networks. Though the shows listed above, be them aired via BBC America or on other channels are mostly affiliated with the BBC. Though perhaps the greatest source of British entertainment, the BBC also aims to provide a service to citizens, having had a history of being a cultural educator, a space to teach citizens how to be citizens. In airing shows produced or with this type of service expectation, BBC America is not only entertaining audiences with the “otherness” of British television, but acting as a type of educational tool to teach American audiences the ways of British. Even if these depictions are not wholly accurate, the expectation is that these programs are representative of British culture.
It is because sitcoms depend on cultural literacy for their jokes to work, that they, according to Miller, require to be reconfigured once imported if they are to appeal to mass audiences. This is the reason why *The Office*, though working relationships within an office setting can be readily recognizable to those in the United States, still required a bit of reworking. Negotiation of representation then becomes instrumental to the ways in which imports function into the schedules of American programs. Despite the borrowing of content (both shows, for example, featured ethnic/race sensitivity training) the producers and writers changed characters and plotlines that were clearly decisions made to appeal to a mass American audience. Ricky Gervais, co-creator of *The Office*, even commented that the original had found a small American audience “Because as much as it seems that it seems parochial and quintessentially English, the themes are universal, and Americans invented that in sitcoms” (Muther N7) and that the adaptation would be successful because it would reach a wider American audience who were unfamiliar with the original. One of the more significant changes is of the recharacterization of the boss figure. In the original, David Brent is egotistical, mean spirited and evokes minimal sympathy, despite his pathos. Michael Scott, his American counterpart, is incompetent, lonely, yet there many points throughout the series where the audience is led to sympathize with Scott. Scott’s fruitless attempts to find true love and Steve Carrell’s performance of heartbreaks, epitomizes one of the fundamental differences between British and American comedy, what Bret Mills claims is that “the American sitcom often invites us to laugh with its characters Britcom instead offers pleasure in laughing at them” (42) The British version of *The Office* does not necessarily bring the pleasure that NBC’s Thursday night prime time schedule, is affiliated with having been the home of *Friends, Seinfeld* (1989-98), and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006). In attempting to define the comedic style of the Britcom, Bret Mills has suggested that “the
preponderance of black humor and the repeated intermingling of serious and comic subjects without clear distinctions between the two can be seen as representative of a particular British way of responding to events” (9-10). Black comedy, however, while somewhat seen in film, is not a common occurrence on American television. By including a show like *The Office* into the schedule, would more than likely result in mass confusion, since ambiguity between comedy and drama is not a code that American audiences decode often. In order to fit into the schedule, it was necessary to recode the show in order to market it for mass audiences familiar with the rhythm of American comedy, which also includes making the jokes clearer and overall lighter. While to appeal to mass audiences, American television must adapt British programs for mass consumption, the same is not necessarily true for British television.

**British Television, Negotiation, and Assimilation**

Unlike American broadcasters, British broadcasters have used and aired American television programs in full, bypassing the energy and financial strain in creating a new show within a borrowed format to air an already purchased product. Though America media dominates the global market, the relationship between the United States and Britain provides an alternate perspective to the issue of cultural imperialism. On one hand, the fact that it is easier and more cost effective to purchase shows and air them in their original format, demonstrates the type of fear associated with cultural imperialism when there is a lack in economic options. On the other, Britain is the second largest exporter of media in the world, so the British television industry is not one that can be consumed by American television and culture.

The relationship between American and British television in Britain becomes more complex than that of their relationship within the United States. Britain has always been aware of the possibility of American television’s impact. Since radio, the British Broadcasting
Corporation has maintained its position as an agency that provides a cultural service. Scheduling was based on what the board members thought the needs of the nation were and how the medium could be used in ways that both appealed to audience, but also educated them to be members of the nation (Crisell 14). Unlike the United States, which had always approached mass media as a commercial venture rather than an educational tool, the BBC avoided consistent scheduling, opting instead to fluctuate programming. Where a consistent schedule would be an advantage to the commercial system because of its ability to build an audience, which in turn would give advertisers a greater opportunity to sell their products, for Britain, the fluctuated schedule had its own advantages. According to Crisell

The high-minded intention was continually to renew the listener’s alertness to the medium, not only to make her listen instead of merely hear but to surprise her into an interest in a subject she had previously not known about or disliked and at all times to give her ‘something a little better than she thought she wanted’. (23)

When the BBC launched its own television station in 1936, the agency remained funded by licence fees and through the government, rather than be funded through commercial advertising like the American system. Though the BBC did air a few programs like *I Love Lucy* (1951-60), the imposition of American television was still distrusted. Not only would people be listening, but paired with audio would be the visual signs and symbols of an American way of life that could possibly threaten the values of British culture. The issue became whether or not the BBC could maintain their stance as a cultural educator while the British public were swayed by American culture. The public had become tired of being patronized by television schedules that were aimed at culturally educating them. The BBC was accused of being a monopoly and though it had good intentions in providing a service, the public wanted more agency and to have a more
active role in their television watching (Crisell 27). Ideas to commercialize the industry emerged. Though despite the desire for more options that could appeal to a variety of people, rather than to a blind mass audience, commercialization was still a concept that had to be negotiated with both the elite and the public. The BBC, in order to maintain their hold on the television industry, used the post-War anti-American sentiment and linked commercialization to Americanization (79). Broadcasting in Britain, was therefore operated based on the desire to maintain their own sense of identity through television, by positioning themselves against the United States. The BBC’s attempt at convincing the public and the government that commercialization would do nothing but help erode British culture failed and ITV was launched in 1955 (84).

Because the BBC is a governmental agency, it has always been responsible for the education of British citizens, which also meant providing and reinforcing a sense of identity through music and programs. The same sense of responsibility for the British public has been expected of by later channels that emerged in the desire for more options and commercialization. This beginning of broadcasting as a maintainer of cultural identity marks a fundamental difference between British and American television, and also provides partial answers to why American television has been cautiously approached by the British broadcasters. In doing so, British broadcasters have spent energy in choosing programs that can not only entertain their audiences, but can also fit seamlessly within a schedule of domestic programs. This has been maintained after decades of being concerned with Americanization. Since the beginning of the television in Great Britain, those within the television industry and government have been concerned with overly broadcasting American programs for fear of American culture’s repercussions on British culture. If radio, and later television, were to be used for educational purposes, than the use of American programs which were more commercial oriented, would act
as an interruption to the BBC’s agenda. The BBC broadcast only a few American imports, like *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s, but in doing so made sure that the remainder of their schedules were mostly domestic and maintaining a sense of Britishness (Crisell 96).

Though television channels have expanded, with the BBC growing into four channels, ITV emerging in 1955, Channel 4 in 1982, and the rise in satellite, the desire to maintain a majority of domestic products has continued. Like the explosion of cable in the United States, with the advent of new channels came more air time that needed to be filled and the easiest way to do so was to purchase and air American programs. When Channel 4 launched, a majority of its programming was American and their usage acted as a means for the network to attract viewers and establish themselves, while developing its own programs in order to build its own domestic schedule. While in the United States, the use of British programs was an option used to prove the quality of new channels, the use of American programs on new British channels was more of an economic necessity than a way to lure viewers. Despite the cultural impact of the United States on the world it is the concern over being culturally colonized that has led to the emphasis of domestic production not only in Britain, but in the rest of the world. This why, according to Albert Moran,

> international trade in television programs while impressive in terms of its value, is, nevertheless, dwarfed by the overall volume of television programs that only receive domestic circulation. The fact is that most of the world’s television programs are produced and broadcast in national television systems and do not receive international distribution. (5)

The perceived threat of the United States’s media possibly interrupting the flow of international airwaves has caused broadcasters worldwide to become extra wary of American programs. In
terms of Great Britain’s relationship with American media, this is even truer. Having an already well-established industry, themselves, Britain has had to negotiate their own schedules in order to remain a cultural tool, both relying on and distancing themselves from American television. While British television broadcasting attempted to become a dominant form of media within its own national boundaries, broadcasters also had to depend on American imports in order to fill time slots while developing their own shows which would highlight their own sense of identity. In using the American programs, broadcasters had to be more alert to the needs and desires of the their audiences, choosing programs that would both fill slots while also providing the public service which television was thought and purported to provide.

Despite the concern of having too many American programs, the channels have attempted to prioritize domestic productions. Though the ratio of American television shows to British is small, there remains a large presence of American programs on British televisions. Paul Rixon has claimed that careful consideration on behalf of the broadcasters has made the American presence on British screens less worrisome (Rixon 6). The time given to American television is not enough to have created a great impact and that care is placed into choosing these shows so that they fit into the rest of the schedule dominated by domestic programming. Giving programmers the opportunity to explain their choices of American programs for the British public, Rixon documents the ways in which American programs are introduced to a British audience and how they are fit into schedules so that they are not disruptive to the flow of domestic television. With the British public being more inclined to watch domestic programs rather than American and less of a need by broadcasters to import to fill schedules, American cultural imperialism is no longer an actual threat to the British way of life. Though American programs may appear on British television screens, they are chosen and aired in ways so as they
assimilate into scheduling, that “they do not impose on a British culture but become part of it, and that they should therefore be judge on their merits” (Rixon 97). While Rixon suggests that American culture has been less of an imposition than was once conceived, this does not stop the fear of cultural imperialism. As Americans question the use of the British formats and imports in their own television schedules and consider the 2% of these imports (Steemers 104) as threatening the range of American creativity and identity in the United States, the same wariness of American imports operates within the discourse of British television.

The interaction, adaptation, and borrowing between American and British television is a competitive relationship of cultural identities. There is an awareness of differences and a desire to maintain a sense of cultural stability through television. While each has proven itself as a force of media and power throughout the globe, their relationship through television reflects a greater focus on television as a source of cultural identity. With the United States adapting and manipulating British imports in order to appeal to a mass audience who will potentially buy more products, and the British still making caveats for their shows to both entertain the public as well as act as a cultural education tool, both approaches to television reveal the values important to each culture. Television has been approached as an important aspect of culture, transmitting programs that reflect and reinforce our ways of life through signs and symbols. The addition of global markets, the increase of technology and the ease in which television can travel both through airwaves and internet connections, this battle over television and representation becomes even more complex.

Television and Identity

This trade of cultural products and their meanings has complicated the exclusivity of television. Televisions, as part of domestic space, enable viewers to sit and watch programs that
are a reflection of their own ways of lives. For American audiences, this was about the American way of life and how it could be achieved through consumption, whereas for British audiences television was a learning process in order to become ideal British citizens. Both of these views are somewhat cynical, but at the same time the use of domestic programs to reflect identity also helped to create a sense of citizenship. Television has acted a source of exclusivity, with programs defining what it is with what it is not. The concern over whether or not an American version of *The Office* could be successful was a debate that was centered on the differences between American and British television and, more specifically, the differences in comedic style. The British fear and distaste of American programs on their channels was one of cultural differences and the fear of Americanization of British culture, the loss of a sense of identity. With the discussion of assimilation of imports into domestic schedules, aided by the works of Miller and Rixon, comes the more complex view of how television works in a more globalized world. Assimilation has aided the effect of DIY citizenship as expressed by John Hartley in *The Uses of Television*. Television, according to Hartley, has gone beyond mere reassertion of identity and has allowed citizens to be more active in their own identity formation (178). Because more channels are available for niche audiences, there are an endless amount of cultural meanings available for viewers to interpret and make meaning that are instrumental for their own identity. In some ways it makes it more difficult for producers of these texts to reinforce a more concrete sense of a national identity. No longer are viewers bound to NBC, ABC, and CBS in the United States, nor to the BBC in Great Britain; rather, there are multiple places for viewers to choose from and cultivate their own sense of national identity.

It may seem as if programmers and producers play a more active role in maintaining a national identity by choosing, adapting or airing programs, which somewhat falsifies the agency
of the audience as proposed by Hartley. When British programmers make choices to include only 14% of imports onto screens and less so in the United States, it is difficult to believe that DIY citizenship means a more global minded audience (Moran 7-8). With programmers actively choosing programs that they believe will appeal to audiences, they are still reinforcing their own cultural ideologies and values. The use of the internet to find programs via websites like Youtube or torrent sites to download shows from other nations may provide the type of agency described by Hartley, but television is remains in the hands of those with an agenda, either cultural or commercial. The desire to maintain locality and emphasize cultural values through television has helped to create a more exclusive national identity than encourage individualized definitions of citizenship.

**Comedy and Identity**

Despite the popularity of comedy in both television and film, comedy has been greatly underrepresented in television studies. The importance of comedic television, however, cannot to be overlooked. Because both television and comedy operate on exclusivity and a mutual understanding of issues within societies, together, both reveal the ways in which identity plays out on television sets. Work has been done on both the roles and functions of humor and television in individual nations, yet only a few like Andy Medhurst, have done in-depth analysis on how comedic television functions within nations. Individually, television and humor both have the ability to bring people together. Literally, people have the ability to group around a television or watch a stand-up comic, but television and humor are also able to serve as a means to unite those living in the society in which both programs and comedies are produced.

Comedy becomes important in terms of discussing these issues of cultural identity and exchange. If, as Andy Medhurst, has claimed in *A National Joke*, that comedy is instrumental to
cultural identity, than what is seen on television becomes instrumental to the concepts of citizenship and identity (1). Medhurst describes comedy as a “brief embrace in a threatening world, a moment of unity in a lifetime of fissures a haven against insecurity, a refuge from dissolution, a point of wholeness in a maelstrom of fragmentation, a chance to affirm that you exist and that you matter” (19). Because comedy works mostly in deconstructing ideology it also utilizes cultural signs and symbols in order to play with cultural conventions. He claims that comedy, more so than any other genre, contributes more to establishing and reinforcing a national identity because it is so relational to the culture (39). The example of British programs being adapted in order to fit into American schedules and ways of life, as well as the conscious effort of British broadcasters to limit American programming, helps to further emphasize that comedy reinforces a type of cultural identity. Comedy is an esoteric genre, meant to disrupt and suture. Like television itself, comedy is both inclusive and exclusive. If the sole purpose of comedy is to provide pleasure to those listening or watching, then all are welcome to participate. Though comedy does rely on physical humor that can be pleasurable to multiple audiences, much of humor is derived from cultural references. In understanding a show like Monty Python’s Flying Circus (1969-74), it is not necessary to understand some of the more “elite” references, like the importance of particular philosophers, historical events, or the class issues relative to British culture. Audience members do not necessarily have to understand British government or bureaucracy in order to find “The Ministry of Silly Walks” sketch humorous; instead, pleasure can be derived from watching the ways in which John Cleese’s body contorts in order to perform some of the silly walks approved by the ministry. Because the sketch show relies so much on physicality, audiences unfamiliar with these references can still find pleasure in watching the
show, but for the sitcom, the pleasure of humor is more complex. Since the sitcom relies on situational humor, the structure of the show does not allow for the same physicality.

Brett Mills explains the structure and significance of the sitcom further when giving details as to the purpose of studying sitcom and cites the work of anthropologists’ assertions that humor acts as a tool for social bonding (10-11). Members of an audience watching the same program are able to recognize certain values, ideologies, and ways of life that are being subverted or confirmed through comedy and are able to laugh together. In terms of television, John Hartley and John Fiske in the seminal *Reading Television* discussed the importance of studying television, as programs reflect cultural values and identities that are considered important for maintaining a feeling of cultural togetherness. They considered television as serving similar functions of bards in pre-literate societies (86). The importance of their work lies in their evidence of television building a community and maintaining a sense of collective identity. “Television is a human construct, and the job that it does is the result of human choice, cultural decisions and social pressures. The medium responds to the conditions within which it exists” (17). Both comedy and television act as sites of togetherness based on communal knowledge of references central to the text. Audiences’ ability to decode the text in order to derive meaning is made easier by being a part of the culture and having access to the codes often used to relay messages to the audience. The use of comedy as a functional element in identity formation and reinforcement adds to what has already been written concerning the role of television in societies. Television’s functional role in various cultures has been linked to its ability to serve as a surrogate bard.
As a social tool, television comedy aims at bonding a particular group, one that is able to recognize the ideologies and values being commented on and also act as a representation of that culture.

For television, which is usually organized along national boundaries, the kinds of jokes which exist in sitcom reveal that nation’s mass consciousness and the aspects and events of the world which it deems acceptable to laugh at. (Mills 8)

In terms of British versus American senses of humor this is made obvious in the various ways in which certain subject matters are handled. While race, for example, played a small part in the British *The Office*, the American version deals more with race and racism in the workplace, by centralizing many of the storylines on Michael Scott’s belief that the United States is a colorblind society, which causes some disturbance in his relationships with minority characters. *Coupling* failed because of its inability to fit into the American television, because writers did not adapt the show for American audiences, as much as they placed the original program within an American context. Apparent in this cultural interaction through comedy, is a tension and the possibility of miscommunication, despite the awareness that neither American nor British imports have had a significantly negative or deterioratory affect on national audiences.

**US v. “us”**

If domestic television is made to reflect issues and ideologies specific to a particular grouping of people, then the importation of other nation’s television, must in some way, act as an interruption to that collective identity. The key for some would be in assimilation, but another option for those writing and producing comedies in national contexts is to utilize the difference of others in order to reinforce a sense of identity. In terms of comedy programs, Medhurst argues that “a sense of national belonging is strengthened through comparison with another identity
demarcated as definitely elsewhere, so one way of feeling belonging would be to feel not French” (28). While this is in reference to the amount of French jokes utilized in British comedy, it is that same sort of distancing and reassertion used in comedy programs concerning various nationalities. The Daily Show’s (1996- ) John Oliver, for example, has been consistently parodied as a representation of an old form of British imperialism, playing with the conceptions of what is considered British by the United States. Jokes concerning Canada as the United States’s attic heightens the perception of the United States as a more powerful and developed nation for the its audiences. The utilization of other national identities in comedy and television expands on the discussion of television and comedy as a space where “ourness’ and “otherness” is defined and used in terms to reassert. While the sitcom is not necessarily known for its political implications, having been considered for the most part as a light form of entertainment, the subtle ways in which the sitcom uses differences in order to comment on identity is one that should be further explored. The importance of marking differences becomes incredibly more significant when recounting the history of the interaction between American and British television, a past marked with concern over cultural imperialism and tensions concerning the varying viewpoints of their cultures’ values and ideologies.

The use of “Americanness” in British comedy may appear trivial and just a small way to slight one of the world’s more powerful nations, especially one that has had such a tempestuous relationship with Britain. Yet, a joke is never simply “just a joke.” The use of difference in British television marks a way in which taps into the British way of life. The jokes or situations involving “others” marks a particular view within British culture and taps into the concerns and views of the public. Jokes and situational humor are never made in isolation; rather they are reflections of the overall culture. In looking at a sitcom like Channel 4’s Peep Show, the use of
an American character is neither a parody, nor a harsh criticism of American ways of life, but the
use of her (Nancy) as a plot device and the ways in which she is characterized as an “American,”
reveals a greater sense of the relationship between American and British culture. Nancy’s
romantic relationship with Jez also represents the somewhat ambivalent relationship between the
two nations. While there is an emotional attachment, their differing values create conflict within
and outside of the relationship. By separating the two main characters, who themselves act as
representatives for Britain; she embodies the cultural interruptions of the United States. Her exit
helps to reinforce the communal sense of Britishness of the two characters and Britain that had
once been interrupted. Despite the fact, that the show remains apolitical and focuses on the
situational humour of two roommates’ relationship, the differences between their outward
appearance and inner monologue, this introduction of an American character functions as a
similar way to joking about the French, she represents everything that British culture is not and
her interruption of the British narrative and way of life serves to unite British audiences.

While the sitcom is viewed as less political, the sketch show format of comedy is far
more political in scope. Though it did not begin with *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, the sketch
show has become even more recognizable in both American and British culture, using the format
to demystify authority (Miller 133), commenting on those within a position of authority or
institutions in general. The sketch comedy format is known mostly for its ability to parody and
deconstruct certain truths accepted by a particular culture. *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) in the
United States is known for its satire and political humor, having commented on American culture
since 1975. Though sketch shows usually focus on the culture in which they are being produced,
as sketches require more of a knowledge concerning what is being deconstructed, the ways in
which parodying those from other nations or cultures is used similarly to other genres. The
British sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me*, utilized these same methods in order to comment on British culture, mostly focusing their attention on the conflicted aspect of the British-Asian identity within Great Britain. Whereas the show was primarily concerned with the documenting ways in which race and ethnicity mattered in Britain, the sketch show also addressed the ways in which American culture played a part in British culture. Most if not all of the program’s episodes include a reference if not a parody of American television, music, or film. Sketches not only comment on the importance of an American influence on British popular culture, but relate to the continuance of identity struggle. Minorities have to combat images of white Britishness as the status quo, but also with American values that carry through within their popular culture. Since the program’s focus is used as a way to redefine Britishness by highlighting the ways in which British Asian identities have played a part in the culture. Playing with stereotypes commonly used to mark British Asians, the use of Americanness works in multiple ways. Americanness is used as a means to reinforce Britishness that includes British Asians and other minorities, as well as a means to show the malleability of a national identity.

With the background and history of the interaction between American and British television, the foundation for further examination of these shows has been set. As Jason Mittell has outlined in his work with genre, in order to study the ways in which these genres and specific programs address representation and identity (18), it is necessary to remember the tensions and fears associated with cultural importation. In terms of looking at these shows as cultural ambassadors, it is essential to recount the ways in which identity and television are continually linked together and how television is no longer considered just an “idiot box,” but rather, a conduit for which national ideals, ideology, and values can be reinforced and asserted through the narratives, images, signs and symbols streaming into the living rooms, bedrooms, bars, and
waiting rooms throughout the United States and Great Britain. If television is the new bard, then it is important for us to understand what tales are being told. If comedy is based on deconstruction and suture, then it is vital that we understand what is being torn apart and rebuilt. If television comedy is viewed simply as a way to entertain audiences and contains little cultural value, than it is important to find the various ways in which identity is in fact weaved into their comic narratives and filtered through the screen in order to reassert the sense of national identity that television can provide.
Chapter 2
Identity Interrupted: *Peep Show* and American Interference

On November 2, 2007, Channel 4 celebrated its 25th Anniversary on television. In celebration, Channel 4 aired a special version of “Big Fat Quiz,” a celebrity panel show usually taped and aired at the end of each year. “Big Fat Anniversary Quiz” recounted the Channel’s memorable moments and original programming, but included in the quiz was a round of questions focused on American imports. During a question asked by Ricky Gervais, he also takes the opportunity to comment on Channel 4’s programming, joking that “[Channel 4 doesn’t] make any shows, they just buy ‘em in. Where’s the skill in that? “Oh look, we got the money.” Brilliant, well done” (“Big Fat Anniversary Quiz 2007”). This portion of the quiz illustrated a couple of things about Channel 4, the first being that Channel 4 had a long and rich history that deserved to be celebrated (as well as being mocked in the process) and that the success of Channel 4, in part, could be linked to American imports. It is clear through the tone of Gervais’s joke that the amount of American imports on Channel 4 is undeserving of the praise given during the 25th anniversary special. While American imports have been accepted into British television culture, within this joke there is an accepted dismissal of “too much.” This highlights the extent of wariness that surrounds American television in British culture. The panel show highlights Channel 4’s ability to purchase and air American programs that would be of interest to viewers, there is criticism for oversaturating the market with American programs.

This criticism is perhaps even more so aimed at Channel 4, whose major mission as the fourth terrestrial channel was to present challenging programs to viewers rather than keep them entertained so they would buy more products from advertisers. As the fourth terrestrial channel, Channel 4 was charged to present the British public with programming that they would not be
able to find anywhere else, much of which came from other countries (Dowmunt 250). Though
the use of American imports would be subject to scrutiny, the channel’s use of international
programming both set the channel apart as well as gave the public a means to recognize
differences between other cultures and their own. With increased access to “otherness,” coupled
with the fear of Americanization, the ability to play with difference comedically allowed sitcoms
like Channel 4’s own Peep Show to act as a place to reinforce and embrace their own Britishness.

Channel 4: Straddling Identities

Channel 4 began in 1982 as an answer to what was considered the “duopoly” held by the
BBC and ITV over television (Crisell 220). Much like the emergence of commercial television
with the advent of ITV in 1955, Channel 4 represented yet another option for viewers, one that
would cater more to the niche audiences whose interests were not being met by either the BBC
or ITV. According to Dorothy Hobson, Channel 4 was to straddle the line between innovation
and education (vii), offering alternatives to audiences who were looking for programs that
challenged the status quo, as well as appeal to what were considered “minority” audiences.
Crisell places these minorities into what he considers three broad categories: cultural, special
interests, and ethnic (198). Attempting to appease these audiences, Channel 4 under the
leadership of Jeremy Isaacs, began to air programs and films that catered to their desires, as well
as conformed to the governmental standards under which the channel was commissioned. As an
alternative station, the channel allowed itself to be more critical of British culture and those in
power. Though new to the television scene, Channel 4 presented itself as a liberal, forward-
thinking channel (Hobson 28), offering a different viewpoint than those of the BBC which had
always aimed to define Britishness and teach the concept to its audience. Through its source of
funding, outlined by the Annan Committee, which had authored its conception, Channel 4 was
able to provide more diverse programming. Supported by both funding through the Independent Broadcasting Authority and commercial advertising, the channel had financial security that allowed it to be less dependent on the support of either the government or audience (Madge 169). This security also led to the channel’s amount of freedom to air programs that would challenge viewers. Foreign films and independent productions marked the beginning of the program, as well as a small percentage of programs imported from other nations. In an interview with former Channel 4 Senior Commissioning Editor, Alan Fountain, a major priority for the channel was to offer a view of Britain and the world that audiences would not normally have access to through programming (Dowmunt 250). Fountain, expressed his desire as a part of the beginning of the channel, to bring European and American independent film to the United Kingdom. In bringing American films to Channel 4, for example, the editors chose to focus on the works of subversive directors, often directors of color, who undermined or questioned ideologies in American culture (250). In terms of American programming, the Channel began by airing what were considered classics, a part of a television canon that legitimized television as an important cultural tool. While Channel 4 needed imports as a means to fill schedules, the usage of American imports was also legitimized as a nostalgic look at television’s beginning (Crisell 199). It emphasized Fountain’s own “understanding of television as site of ideological struggle […and] Channel 4 as a means of continuing cultural political activity” (Dowmunt 248), placing more importance on the role of television within society. Rather than being an idiot box, simply used as a tool to dull the sense or entertain audiences, television was approached by channel editors as a means to inform audiences. While this had been the similar to the BBC’s approach to television, Channel 4’s programming was a little less patronizing, in terms of educating citizenship. Channel 4 aimed at offering different viewpoints of the world, but the main purpose of the channel was not to
mould citizens. In fact, in looking at the interview with Fountain, it seems as if programming was based on what the controllers wanted to air, rather than being concerned with what would educate or even please the audience. This point is even more clear in Dorothy Hobson’s discussion of the channel, in which she writes that Channel 4

allowed its programme makers to be aggressive and progressive. It flaunted its youth and allowed its youth programmes to be critical of the hand that commissioned them.

Programmes for black and Asian viewers were critical of the racist attitudes of the white population and celebratory of their own blackness. A stance unheard of on British television. Channel 4 had generally and specifically irritated, stimulated, delighted and disgusted its audiences. (28)

The purpose, unlike that of the BBC, was to challenge viewers and offer a different, more challenging television schedule. With the belief that Channel 4 was the channel of difference, critics and the channel’s controllers believed that Channel 4 would change the nature of television. No longer would audiences be obligated to watch one point of view, rather they would be openly challenged to rethink British ideology and values. While many thought this was a valuable aspect of television that deserved exploration, many viewers were uneasy. In an interview conducted by Hobson, a woman lamented that when she watched television she desired to be entertained, not bombarded with intellectual ideas and challenges to the British culture (28).

Yet, as networks became more competitive, the need to appeal to a greater mass audience became vital to the success of Channel 4. When in the Broadcasting Act of 1990 made the channel become wholly dependent on advertising as a source of funding and the importance of being a channel of difference was lost, as they needed to focus on gaining viewership. A large
part of appealing to a larger audience was the airing of American programs and eventually becoming the place to view American quality programs, like *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (Rixon 52). Because the imports were easier and financially more rewarding than producing and airing domestic productions, Channel 4 was able to thrive, but it came at a price of being defined, as Gervais pointed out in the quiz show, by its American programming. Not only was the purchase of these programs cheaper than airing domestic, they were marketed as “quality” popular shows, only something that could come from Hollywood (Rixon 52).

American programming was something that differentiated the channel from others. Yet, as the Gervais quote suggests, even the excitement of viewing shows made in America had become tedious, especially with the advent of satellite channels and smaller channels’ ability to purchase American programs. With more channels purchasing American imports in order to fill their schedules and attract their own niche audiences, Channel 4 became less distinctive. Critics have considered imports as being a cheap way to attract viewers to the channel and sell more advertising space (Malik 346). Despite some American imports being considered quality programs, like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Sex and the City*, and *ER* (1994-2009), there has still been a call for more domestic programs that are more representative of the niche audiences that Channel 4 was originally meant to represent. Between American imports and *Big Brother* (2000 - ), Channel 4 has begun to lose its credibility as a channel of intellectualism (Dowmunt 253-4).

The move from challenging programming to mass appeal has brought about criticism from critics concerning Channel 4’s abandonment of representing minority audiences, sponsoring independent talent, and losing the impact it once had as a channel that refused to replicate the cultural education policies of the BBC. Ricky Gervais’s voiced frustration and mockery of Channel 4’s reliance on American imports also becomes a call to the channel to include more
representations of Britishness. Clearly what Gervais has picked up on is that while American shows are included in the schedule and, as Rixon argues, contextualized for the audience in ways to make American interjections more seamless, that there is in fact a noticeable lack of representations of British life, culture and values.

The comment, however, relied on the Channel 4’s reputation for being the channel immersed in American television. Feeling the pressure to attract viewers with more domestic programs, the channel has more recently attempted to provide more domestic programs and negotiate between entertaining audiences and continuing with their original mandate of providing programs that provided a variety of representations of Britishness and experiences within the national context. What this has led to is experimentation with programming that does not aim to challenge viewers as it did in the past, but provide meaningful representations of Britishness, while also attempting to gain audiences for commercial purposes.

A *Peep Show* of British Identity

In recent years Channel 4 has increased the number of domestic programs, making a conscious effort to finance its own programming, being fairly successful with the teen drama *Skins* (2007 - ), the comedy *The IT Crowd* (2006 - ), and the innovative, yet familiar buddy comedy *Peep Show* (2003 - ). Despite not having built a major viewership and having been close to cancellation, the latter program has maintained a dedicated audience and critical acclaim that has kept the show commissioned for seven series, with the fifth having just finished its series in the summer of 2008. The latter program acts as an interesting case study. On one hand it is a familiar show focused on the antics of two male roommates, a standard sitcom cliché. The show, however, does live up to the original innovative spirit for which Channel 4 had been praised for, by using a point of view shooting style rarely if ever utilized in television and voiceovers that
indicate the two main characters’ inner monologues. *Peep Show* has received a warm welcome by critics, Ricky Gervais has called it the greatest sitcom since *Father Ted* (Wray 1), and as if to prove its worth, American station Spike (a network aimed primarily toward a male demographic) has commissioned writers and creators Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain to write an American version of the show ("U.S. Producers 'to Make Peep Show'"

While familiar, it still represents and critiques certain aspects of British culture that many would find challenging. There are episodes that deal with racism, sexuality, and identity. *Peep Show* does more than act as a means for Channel 4 to rebuild its credibility as an innovator. The show also acts as means of reinforcing identity. The program capitalizes on anxiety of identity struggle. If British identity is linked to empire and the loss of empire, then what is expressed by the main characters of Mark Corrigan (David Mitchell) and Jeremy Usbourne (Robert Webb), is struggling without having known life during or immediately after the dissolution of the British empire. They are confused over what is expected of them as members of British culture, fluctuating between what they want and what they believe are the cultural expectations. This is best revealed in the ways in which the show allows the audience into the minds of the characters. A major draw to the show, for example, is the ability of viewers to commiserate and empathize with the characters, through the usage of point of view shooting and voiceovers. The audience acts as witnesses to Mark’s and Jeremy’s actions, but unlike most juries, they have access to their thoughts, giving them a better understanding toward their motives. These two techniques also are used in order to remark on the nature of repressed feelings, the inability to express the wants and desires of each character and the consequences of these repressed feelings and urges. This is an elaboration of the stereotype or perhaps cultural characteristic of British people. David Mitchell in an interview with Michael Parkinson concerning his comedic partnership with Robert Webb
described the both of them as “good, repressed British people, if we ever had it all out, we’d say things neither of us could ever forget.” (“David Mitchell”). The characterization of British people as repressed is confirmed by Mitchell and Parkinson, his guests, and audience as they all chuckle in understanding of Mitchell’s characterization. Repressed desires and the actions that result are what drives the narratives of the two main characters and maintains the interest of fans of the show. This display of division also emphasizes what Mitchell describes as a British trait, one that is recognizable to British audiences. The program’s performance of a bardic function fits into the outline provided by Hartley and Fiske. Peep Show’s articulation of issues such as identity confusion and anxiety and their expression within the series is linked to that of the culture in which they belong. The show exposes some of these issues and deals with them in a way that is comedic. While issues such as racism, homosexuality, and foreignness may appear threatening, they are they are deconstructed through the use of comedy, which through dissection makes these subjects less threatening.

In articulating these problems, the writers relay these issues that would be familiar to audience through the two characters. Through comedy Britishness is celebrated and this is true in both the playful way the writers set up the main characters’ exploits and embarrassments, as well as their use of other identities (especially that of Americanness) within the series. In relishing in the awkwardness and anxiety produced by these series of anxious situations, the audience is reassured of their position within the culture. While the motivations of the two main characters are more transparent through the use of inner monologue, they are also more apt for criticism. Their thoughts provide an extra dimension to their character, one that allows audiences to hear thoughts that should remain unspoken by the characters. The access to these impetuous and often times alarming thoughts, allows the audience to feel more assured they themselves are normal
members of society. That because they can commiserate with the feelings and thoughts of these characters is normal and that they are normal. By watching the characters actions through the eyes of Mark and Jeremy, they can also be assured that they are not worse off than the two main characters. The fact that both Mark and Jeremy are representatives of the average British experience, that those watching also ensures the audience’s feelings of normalcy, through the viewing of their situations. *Peep Show* truly relies on humor derived by the situation. Their accentuation of embarrassment in various scenarios is only a slight exaggeration of the embarrassment that commonly arise in the everyday life of citizens. Through all of these examples, *Peep Show* fulfills the final bardic role by engaging audiences in order to “transmit a sense of cultural membership” (Hartley and Fiske 88). These bardic elements are emphasized through the interactions between Mark and Jeremy and those who enter into their lives.

While the sitcom has not been commonly linked to national identity until recently with the works of both Mills and Medhurst, *Peep Show*, acts as an example of how a television sitcom can portray and challenge aspects of a culture in a way that is funny and also less intimidating than a more serious genre. The comedy of the show comes from the rupture. Comedy itself is described by Medhurst as “an invitation to belong” (19). What *Peep Show* offers is an embracement of embarrassment as they bounce from one compromising scenario to another, with their inner thoughts documented. They are completely exposed to the audience. David Mitchell, who plays Mark in the series, contends that the audience’s ability to hear the inner workings of the two main characters is what makes the characters relatable: “I think everybody has thoughts like that, and that’s why viewers can identify with the show” (Welch 11). This relatability is also due to the embarrassment felt by the two characters (Pettie 1), which is made even more embarrassing by the viewers as they too experience these events. With the point-of-
view shooting techniques, the program allows the viewer to be rejected, overlooked, and insulted. The viewer is not omniscient; rather, the show encourages the spectator to become involved. But this type of connection between viewer and characters also make for anxious viewing and because of the insight into Mark and Jeremy’s thoughts, has caused some viewers to question their likeability (Rumbelow 23). Helen Rumbelow cites likeability as one of the prime reasons why The Office and Flight of the Conchords (2007-) are successful. But just because Mark and Jeremy have questionable thoughts, usually concerning harm to either themselves, each other, or others, does not necessarily make them unlikable. Granted, they are not as good natured as The Office’s Tim, but, like Mitchell contends, many have had thoughts of a similar nature.

This is important, because it also describes the functionality of show as fulfilling the bardic function. With the claim that everybody struggles internally with issues concerning their identity or interactions with the others, the show then is also providing the same context, storylines, and possibilities as the bard did and do in pre-literate cultures. Internal struggle is not commonly seen on television. While what the inner thoughts of characters can be implied through looks and actions, it is rare for viewers to have such access to the thoughts of programs’ characters. Perhaps this is most due to the viewers not wanting to identify with these characters and their thoughts, especially if these thoughts conflict with social norms. Suture then comes from the recognition that these thoughts will not result in anything more than embarrassment. Peep Show then provides the inclusiveness involved in storytelling, as it invites the audience to be a part of the characters’ lives through giving access to their thoughts, but also providing a space where these thoughts normally kept privately can be aired publicly. The writers allow
viewers to embrace what Mitchell would perhaps consider what a good English person would repress.

**Peep Show**’s Personality Crisis

In examining Englishness in comedy, Medhurst describes Englishness as going through a type of identity crisis (45), using masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness as examples of certain norms that are currently being questioned. In the characters alone, are two different representations of Britishness. Mark is outwardly uptight and repressed, obsessed with World War II history, and tied to traditional values. Jeremy, however, represents a new way of thinking, one that is infused with drugs and promiscuous sex. Unlike most characters within the sitcom genre, neither character is structured in a way that is likeable. But it is not that they are villainous or corrupt, but rather they are more three dimensional. The show is structured in such a way as to reveal the inner anxieties and thoughts that drive the characters in embarrassing and often times unethical situations. In providing these characters as exaggerations of a struggle with English identity, the writers invite the audience to share in this anxiety.

Because most of Mark and Jeremy’s relationship is displayed within the home, those met outside are shown as somehow interfering with their relationship. It is with these interactions with “others” that identity is confused, anxiety produced, and the sense of cultural membership is relayed to audiences. The connections between cultural membership, national identity and anxiety, is exemplified in the fourth episode of the first series. Mark begins to question his sexuality after developing a crush on his boss, Alan Johnson. What begins as an interest in Johnson (pun intended) as a powerful figure and a possible mentor turns into an infatuation, as he subtly takes on Johnson’s characteristics: growing a mustache, taking on an indifferent attitude toward those who do not fit into his business plans, and even making plans to further his
career by moving to Cardiff to work alongside Johnson. Mark goes through a full blown sexual identity crisis, questioning whether or not he is gay, whether his feelings are only directed towards Johnson, and whether or not it is possible that Johnson could be gay, thinking that because Johnson is black, it is nearly impossible. Mark even tests himself by renting a gay pornographic dvd, but turns it off upon seeing an erect penis, and internally expresses frustration that he still is unaware of his sexual feelings. These feelings for Johnson threaten the relationship between Mark and Jeremy. As Mark clearly expresses adoration for Johnson, Jeremy becomes increasingly jealous. Through this interruption, their relationship is framed even more so as a domestic partnership, with Mark as the cheating partner cuckolding his other half. There is even a break-up scene. Set in a public space, the audience hears Mark preparing himself prior to Jeremy’s entrance. The conversation itself resembles a breakup, with Mark explaining to Jeremy that this is the natural order of things, that it is time to move on and that he cannot live with Jeremy forever. While Jeremy appears to Mark as taking the news fairly well, Jeremy’s internal monologue suggests differently as he suggests to himself that “Maybe if [he] keeps smiling, maybe [Mark] won’t leave” (Armstrong and Bain, “Mark Makes a Friend”). By the end of the episode, Jeremy finally reveals to Johnson Mark’s crush and Johnson is left confused, leaving Jeremy holding Mark and suggesting that Johnson leave. The significance of this scene in particular helps to further illustrate Medhurst’s point concerning identity crisis. While crisis acts as the backbone of this episode, the end scene represents the past security of Englishness which according to Medhurst “is rapidly evaporating, meaning that much as masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness have become objects intensified reflection and study once those identities’ assumptions of cultural dominance were called into question so Englishness is now open to increasing interrogation” (45). This crisis, however, is managed comedically by the
actions that have taken place in the narrative. Mark and Jez’s embrace in the challenging eyes of Johnson, both reflects this sense of anxiety associated with identity crisis and makes it less threatening through the exaggeration of questioning sexuality and fears associated with the loss of masculinity.

Separately Mark and Jeremy represent two types of Britishness and masculinity, with Mark acting as a traditional representative and Jeremy as a more modern representation. Combined, they relate to audiences the struggles with their personal identities, which are tied to British cultural expectations. The expression of such identity struggle helps to illustrate these issues and help become a space for cultural identity reinforcement. The utilization, for example, of a formula throughout the series, and this episode in particular, is that of focusing on the male relationship that reflects that sense of nervousness and anxiety toward sexuality. This formula of homosocial bonds has been used multiple times in television, with shows like The Young Ones, Men Behaving Badly (1992-98), and The Mighty Boosh (2004 - ) to help deconstruct and reinforce masculinity. This format further reflects on male homosocial bonding and is driven by a recurring and often nervous fascination with the precise dimensions of love between men […] humour thrives at flashpoints of cultural nervousness […] the boundaries and complications of male devotion become an explicit part of the source material and subject matter of the comedies these men concoct with each other.

(Medhurst 111)

The situations present within the series concerning both the relationship of the two characters and others, help to alleviate those anxieties. Mark’s confusion over his sexuality is comedic because of its exaggeration, yet the situation does speak to the nature of strict definitions of sexuality. His confusion is not simply over whether or not he is straight or gay, but whether or
not he is only attracted to Johnson, or “bi-curious”, or falls into some other sexual category. What is being done then is not just defining sexuality as a fixed identity, but offering various interpretations of sexuality. Doing so opens up the strictness of sexual roles and allows for a more open definition of sexuality and hence makes the anxiety surrounding sexuality, and in this case masculinity, less anxious.

Sean Nixon has discussed the redefinition of masculinity since the emergence of the “New Man” in the 1980s and the “New Lad” in the 1990s. The new man emphasized the superficial appearance and invited men into a consumer culture that would enable them to better present themselves as men (374). As a means to maintain a more masculine lifestyle, however, the “New Lad” emerged, a form of masculinity that encouraged men to drink, womanize, and escape in male friendships (378). With the changes of definitions of British masculinity arising quickly and in some ways conflicting (the new man one of sophistication, the new lad one of debauchery), the expectations of masculinity remain in flux. With no solid definition of masculinity, anxiety then becomes a part of a part of male identity. Both Mark and Jeremy reflect this sense anxiety associated with attempting to maintain their masculinity and conform to the established images of masculinity. They also reflect the difficulty in conforming to a structured gendered image. Jeremy maybe considered a lad, but his inner thoughts betray him as a man who does desire a sense of security, as he does fall for at least two women in the series who he would settle down with. His relationships with Super Hans and Mark, however, also reveal his own sensitivity not expected of a true lad. His feelings, for example, are commonly hurt during times where he feels Super Hans is ignoring him, and his relationship with Mark rings more of a domestic partnership than just being flatmates. Mark, on the other hand can hardly be considered either of these images of masculinity, but this brings forth a type of anxiety of trying to conform
to at least one of these images. In trying to pursue women, for example, he attempts to present himself as a sophisticated man who is sensitive to their needs. In his friendships with men, he often finds it difficult to perform as a “lad” being overly concerned with how he is interacting with the group and recognizing the difficulty in which to perform an identity which he is not comfortable in even pretending. While neither conforms completely to a hegemonic masculine structure, they both feel and try to conform to a masculine image. The conflicting natures between their appearance and inner thoughts, reflects the insecurity that comes with these gendered expectations. The performance of such anxiety, however, helps to relieve some of the pressure perhaps felt by the audience who are also expected to conform and perform to particular differences. As Patricia Mellencamp has expanded upon in her work with I Love Lucy the caricature of these anxieties of expectations help to alleviate the pressures of conforming to societal pleasures. The comedy in I Love Lucy

replaced anger, if not rage with pleasure […] the shifts between narrative and comic spectacle the latter being contained by the resolute closure of the former—and the response of the spectator/auditor is split between comic and humorous pleasure, between denial of emotion by humor and the sheer pleasure of laughter provided by the comic of movement and situation. (338)

The same ways in which Lucy’s performance of the domestic wife and situation were handled helped to question and challenge women’s roles, while also reinforce women’s roles (she always remained in the domestic sphere). This is the same way in which Mark and Jeremy help to alleviate the concerns of those who feel compelled perform to a particular identity. By deconstructing these anxieties involving relationships, the writers are able to relate the silliness of this nervousness and invite viewers to laugh.
As the “Mark Makes a Friend” episode particularly focuses on sexuality, it also touches upon the issue of race, as Johnson’s blackness is brought up several times as an identity marker and Mark and Jeremy debate over whether or not Alan can be gay given that he is black. The issue of class is raised with Mark having to decide if a decision that would lead to success and newfound wealth is worth abandoning his jobless flatmate and best friend. While done subtly, this emphasizes certain cultural issues of import. These are the issues important to Britain, the program relates ways in which the British public views these issues and opens options for alternate ways of viewing, while also relying on the accepted cultural values to redefine them. This use of issues within British culture helps to express what exactly it means to be British, as represented through the experience of the main characters. Through the use of “others” within the culture, the British experience is being related to the viewer, through the viewer’s access to the characters’ inner turmoil. Yet, the concept of “Britishness” is not wholly defined until the introduction of Nancy, an American woman who begins a relationship with Jeremy. She represents a completely different “other,” a foreigner to the nation who brings with her a different set of ideals, values, and identities. The ways in which Nancy is framed and handled by the writers as a person of difference, helps to further define what it means to British. The use of her “Americanness” helps to differentiate the British from, not only another nation, but from a country whose culture has been so interconnected with British culture.

An American in Croydon

The character of Nancy acts as not only a plot device, but as a means to highlight the ways in which Americans differ from the British. This, of course, is not a new convention as jokes directed at other nations have consistently been used in terms of differentiating the national from the foreign (Medhurst 28). British comedy is no different. Throughout British comedy there
have been the sprinklings of stereotypes or jokes directed at another nation and its culture. While many jokes are centered around other European countries, like the taunting French in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) or reminders of Germany’s role in World War II with *That Mitchell and Webb Sound*’s (2003-07) and *That Mitchell and Webb Look*’s (2006 - ), hilarious depiction of two Nazi soldiers questioning if they were the “baddies,” references to Americans have also be related. While France and Germany are closer in proximity, the history between The United States and Great Britain is just as entwined. With the emergence of the United States as a nation after the Revolutionary War, the eventual appearance as a super power after World War II, and the output of American popular culture gaining popularity in Great Britain, it has become important to identify the differences between American and British culture. Despite the fear in the 1960s that American culture would destabilize the national identifications of British people, the ways in which Americanness has been represented is a bit more complicated. Because of the ambivalent nature of the British-American relationship, both nations have constructed stereotypes and attitudes of the other in order to emphasize their superior culture. In the United States, Britain has been viewed as a nation of traditional values, the epitome of a “cultured” society (Schwarz 165), yet also one with a condescending attitude towards American culture. Similarly, Britain has constructed American culture as one focused on consumerism and celebratory of the lowest forms of entertainment and resentful of its impact on its own culture. This relationship is probably best exemplified by what the British Film Institute has deemed the greatest British situation comedy *Fawlty Towers* (1975-79) (“The BFI TV 100”). In the episode, “Waldorf Salad,” an American, Mr. Hamilton (Bruce Boa) and his English wife (Claire Nielsen) stay at the rural hotel, only to be dissatisfied by Basil Fawlty’s (John Cleese) lackluster ability to manage the hotel. When Mrs. Hamilton registers at the hotel, she is alone,
but soon joined by her husband, who enters the scene complaining about the English weather and the inferiority of British automobiles and roads. Unaware that they are married, Fawlty makes derogatory remarks toward “the American,” to Mrs. Hamilton, even referring to him as garbage. Established are the ambivalent views both Americans and British have with each other. Their combativeness and defense of each other’s cultures is the beginning of the episode’s cultural conflict. Throughout “Waldorf Salad”, Fawlty treats the American as an inconvenience viewing him as pushy, and aggressive. As the episode continues, however, it is made clear that the American is only being more assertive than Fawlty’s regular guests, most of whom are British. The conflict that perpetuates the episode is one that reveals the issues and perceived differences that each culture has of the other, but mostly with a focus on the British attitudes toward Americans. At the beginning of a typical Basil Fawlty tirade, he begins to admonish the American by saying that “You must remember that here in Britain there are things that we value more [than money], things that perhaps in America you have rather forgotten about, but to for which we British are far far more important…” (Booth and Cleese “Waldorf Salad”). He is then interrupted by the British guests who also declare their dissatisfaction with the hotel, specifically with Basil Fawlty’s service. Hamilton’s presence is important as he acts as the stereotypical American. His presence is viewed by Fawlty as an intrusion, a disruption of the community of British guests. With his assertiveness and encouragement, Hamilton urges the rest of the guests to interrupt and lash out at Fawlty during his prioritization of British culture and American culture to voice their complaint with the running of his business. Hamilton’s presence exemplifies the sentiment that “the impact of Americanized mass culture did much […] to dislocate the native culture of the British” (Schwarz 166). It is important to recognize that
Hamilton is neither positive nor negative, but rather portrayed in the conflicting light that marks the ambivalent relationship between both cultures.

Though filmed thirty years prior to *Peep Show*, *Fawlty Towers* laid the groundwork for the ways in which the television sitcom could present a microcosm of the cultural relationship between Great Britain and the United States. *Peep Show* continues the use of American characters differently by using a female American character, Nancy, within the second series of the show. Nancy’s presence within the program is used similarly to that of Hamilton in *Fawlty Towers*, the difference being that she is not just the focus of one episode. Her presence is elongated, allowing her character to develop and present the presence of Americanness as less pronounced and her affects more subtle. She, like Hamilton represents cultural conflict, but her presence as a woman in a Britain disconnected from the concept of empire, represents something different. Whereas Hamilton’s presence was more ambivalent and only threatening to the establishment, Nancy’s interruption of Mark and Jeremy’s relationship helps to better reinforce British identity. While Hamilton helped those who felt repressed express themselves, Nancy’s presence only fuels more fears and anxieties.

Played by Rachel Blanchard, Nancy is the only American to be included in the series, appearing in most episodes of series two and returning for two episodes in series four. In comparison to most of the representations of women in the series, Nancy is framed as a conflicted liberal person. On one side she is hypersexual as she attempts to break all sexual taboos with Jeremy, while on the other she is deeply religious. She is not the Madonna/whore dichotomy: she embodies both. According to the writers this mixture of sexuality and religiousness is one that is perfect for making Jeremy’s life miserable (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class” Commentary). Nancy’s identity is one of opposition to the ways of life that
Jeremy and Mark represent in the series. As an American woman, her sexuality threatens that of Jeremy. As much as he considers himself a sexual being, Nancy’s sexuality overpowers him. When they first began their relationship, Jeremy was excited at the prospect of this new woman, who upon meeting at a dance class was at first convinced that she was a transvestite. Nancy from the first introduction is idealized as somebody new and exotic in comparison to the other (British) women of the series. It is the exciting possibility that attracts Jeremy to Nancy, as well as the benefits that come with a sexually open woman. Jeremy desires the pleasure associated with Nancy, but does not necessarily want to contend with the values attached to the pleasure. In one scene, for example, the audience sees Jeremy looking up at the ceiling and contemplating his transition from being dumped by another woman that morning to having sex with Nancy. Through this thought, it is recognized that Nancy brings pleasure, but as soon as this point is made, Nancy appears on top of Jeremy, chanting Jesus’s name and thanking Him for the sexual experience. After thanking Jesus, the camera cuts to Jeremy’s reaction, which is one of discomfort and uncertainty. He responds with “Yeah…thanks, Jesus,” (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class”) in order to appease Nancy, but he is clearly uncomfortable with her invocations of Jesus.

Nancy’s relationship with God and religion is one that confounds both Jeremy and Mark and is also parodied by the writers, who play with her spiritual affection. In this scene, for example, Bain and Armstrong, play with the genuineness of inciting God’s and Jesus’s name during sex. Not uncommon in television and film, the usage of God’s name during sex is usually not taken seriously as a part of a religious experience. Nancy’s genuine thanking of God then marks her as different. This marking stems from the writers’ intention to portray her as a woman from a small town in the United States, who has become more experimental after finding
freedom in Britain, but with this newfound freedom remains conflicted with her religious upbringing (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class” commentary). It is her religion, however, that acts as a major identifier, part of which is tied to her Americanness. Her strong tie to Christianity comes in opposition with the continuous decline of religious practice within Great Britain. Steve Bruce in his essay, “Religious Culture in Contemporary Britain,” claims that the

[...] secularization in Britain has taken the form not of strong and principled opposition to the churches or to religion in general, but of indifference. A religious society has been replaced not by a self-consciously secular one but by a society which pays occasional lip-service to Christianity and by a culture in which people still claim attachment to religious ideas and beliefs. (201)

To come in contact with a person who bases much of her identity in her religion, Jeremy is often portrayed as confused, conflicted, and concerned. As Bruce suggests, Jeremy does not care about her religious practices, unless it is to take advantage of her practices to bring him more pleasure, like agreeing with her that God created sex for humans to enjoy. When Nancy’s religious beliefs begin to become vocalized or intrusive in Mark’s and Jeremy’s lives, conflict arises. This becomes apparent once Jeremy attempts to make his relationship more exclusionary and Nancy uses her belief to maintain distance. She says “look, God obviously wanted us to enjoy ourselves, I mean that’s why he invented pills and clubs and lube and hardcore, but he also wanted us to give back and that’s where he created the homeless, the lepers and oil spills” (Armstrong and Bain “Jeremy Makes It”). From Jeremy’s viewpoint, the audience watches while Nancy uses this to legitimize keeping their relationship strictly sexual. Yet, the audience can surely pick up on the hypocrisy of her sentiments or at least recognize the conflict between what she does and what she believes. Though it is clear that Jeremy recognizes this as well, by telling himself that he
must “suck up to God” (Armstrong and Bain “Jeremy Makes It”) in order to convince Nancy to be more exclusive, rather than upset her by pointing out this conflict, he begins to change his life in order to show her that he too has a deep connection with God. He begins to change his life in order to appear to Nancy as having similar cultural values and beliefs. But even her explanation of God’s plan and her version of Christianity help reveal a difference between British and American culture that is not simply one of indifference and importance; rather, what is clear is a misunderstanding of Christianity that helps to legitimize a lifestyle. Her characterization is emblematic of the attitudes toward Americans’ religious attitudes. The writers’ intention to portray Nancy as a conflicted American who brings her American connections with religion and a great amount of sexual openness, reveals their own conception of the American small town upbringing. Nancy, to Bain and Armstrong, is representative of rural America and cultural values that help to form the United States’ national identity. This helps to set Nancy apart from the rest of the characters of the series. She is framed as completely different. Even as a woman in a show that focuses on two male characters, she is more so different because of her foreignness. She is even perceived by Mark and another of Jeremy’s friends, Super Hans, as a threat. They classify her as another Yoko Ono, another “foreign” woman linked to the dissolution of The Beatles (Armstrong and Bain “Wedding”). Through Jeremy’s desire for pleasure, he is willing to sacrifice his beliefs and value systems in order to appease her. Mark’s and Super Hans’s fear of her influence over Jeremy signifies this fear of disruption and possible separation. Their intention to break up the couple is a means for all three to reunite. Even though Mark and Super Hans are completely different in their own values, they can still reconcile in order to save Jeremy from a foreign partnership that cuts them out.
The dynamic between Nancy and Jeremy is even more revealing in light of a contemporary relationship between Britain and the United States, especially with the close partnership of Bush and Blair. While it would be a simplifying the relationship between these national leaders to say that they are equivalent to that of two fictional characters, the similarities help to illustrate the sense of distrust and fear towards Americanization. Nancy’s conflicting ideals mirror those of the United States, the inconsistencies as a United States superpower. Nancy acts as a representative of the United States after the rise of evangelical Christians in the United States, which has been “the section of the population most committed to uncritical flag waving, to simplistic understandings of foreign peoples and culture, and resistant to complex and nuanced discussions of the international issues facing the United States” (Mead 396). Not only is her religion an issue, but also the conflicting nature of her beliefs concerning religion, capitalism and freedom. In one scene from “Dance Class”, Nancy paints Jeremy black and claims it is their duty to God, Shiva, Nasdaq to break these sexual taboos and when questioned whether or not this experience could be racist, explains that because she is American she understands the issues of race (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class”). Yet, despite her obliviousness, she maintains control over Jeremy, disrupting his relationship with Mark, the most important relationship to the series. This control over Jeremy, however, is not her doing, rather it his willingness to go along with Nancy’s suggestions that causes most problems. It is the benefits of that come with their relationship that causes him to be more willing to go along with her suggestions. This is similar to the ways in which the United States’ and Britain’s relationship has been perceived in the past several years. In discussing the relationship with the United States, Blair claimed “Britain does not need to choose between being strong in Europe or being close to the United States of America […] but that by being strong in Europe we will further strengthen our relations with the
U.S.” (qtd in Coughlin 17-18). Britain had not intended to be seen as the United States’ complicit ally, but the relationship between Bush and Blair and their involvement in the War in Iraq, had been perceived as a means to appease the United States super power, as shown in Bush’s public defense of Blair of the latter not being “Bush’s poodle” (Assinder 1). If this was what public opinion made of the relationship between Bush and Blair, then surely it would be read similarly for Nancy and Jeremy. Again, though it would be simplifying the complexities of the allied relationship, the characteristics of the relationship are similar and most likely recognizable to audiences. The usage of Nancy as a symbol of American ideals and representation helps to reinforce the British identity, especially during a time, when American authority and power was being questioned. By representing her as an “other,” who disrupts the social order of the show, and is used to speak to a larger issue that would be at the time a major one of discussion in Great Britain, the storyline involving Nancy helps to unite both characters and audiences under an umbrella of understanding.

Reinforcing Through Differentiation

One of the ways in which a culture’s identity is reinforced, according to Medhurst, is through comparison and criticism of another (28). Nancy was always intended to be American, made clear by the Bain’s and Armstrong’s contention that they had sorted through countless headshots of Hollywood actresses before deciding on Canadian actress, Rachel Blanchard (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class” commentary). Blanchard also came with her past role as Cher Horowitz on the television adaptation of Clueless, where she played a rich, beautiful American girl, who while not brilliant, was able to negotiate her way into being successful. The character of Cher, from the both the film and television series, represented the ideal American teenage girl. For Peep Show, Blanchard’s character continues to be representative of American
culture, but within a different cultural context. The writers expressed surprise at the idea that such a big name in Hollywood would come to the England and be a part of the show (Armstrong and Bain “Dance Class” commentary). Bain’s and Armstrong’s impression of Blanchard as a major Hollywood actress, adds to the exoticization of Nancy’s character. Jeremy’s fascination with Nancy stems from her Americanness. She is too good to be true, as if she graces those in Croyden with her presence. Even when she is not physically present, her presence remains. Physically she represents an ideal, but beyond the superficial Nancy is characterized as hypocritical, selfish, and dominating. All of these characteristics, however, are subtle and only revealed through her relationship with Jeremy, who does not realize, even as she leaves him, that he is only able to love her on a superficial level.

The unevenness of this relationship is reminiscent of that of the England and the United States. As seen through their relationship with television, despite being allies and at times partners, there relies a tension within that relationship. Much like distaste expressed by Gervais toward the heavy importation of American programs, the fear and hesitation toward the use of American programs displays a wider range of issues between the two nations. With an already established way of life, the incorporation of American sitcoms has been possible and as Paul Rixon’s explains is done with careful consideration (4). Yet, much like Nancy’s incorporation into the lives of Mark and Jeremy, this addition also is disruptive. Americanness has a lot to offer and at first, Jeremy is perfectly willing to be complicit to Nancy’s impulses and desires, but eventually it takes its toll on him. The distrust of Nancy that arises throughout the series and epitomized in the scene where of Mark’s and Super Hans’s discussion to break up the two relates to the ways in which those within England view encroaching American culture into British culture. The incompatibility of Nancy and Jeremy is not a personal one, but rather a cultural one.
The relationship between Nancy and Jeremy further explores what former Ambassador Sir Christopher Meyer describes as an ambivalent one between the British and the Americans, based on a rich history of encounters that include wars and conflicts that have affected the relationship (325). This history requires both sides participating in the wrongs and rights conducted by each. While Nancy was portrayed as using Jeremy by the end of the second series, when she appears in the fourth series, it is Jeremy who acts selfishly. When they meet again at the gym in which Nancy works, Jeremy purposefully obtains a cleaning job and while Nancy agrees to be friends, Jeremy does everything he can to destroy her chances at building a relationship with another male coworker. It is here that Nancy concedes to Jeremy’s desires to maintain some sort of relationship and this time it is Jeremy who takes advantage of her trust (Armstrong and Bain “Gym”). Both violate each other’s feelings for their own ends, but at the same time they still try to maintain some sort of relationship. They are after all, still bound in holy matrimony.

The use of Nancy’s Americanness does more than just act as a plot device to keep Jeremy busy. It displays the type of relationship between the United States and because the audience watches as Jeremy struggles to appease Nancy, it becomes a source of understanding. Nancy represents the attractiveness of American culture, something that offers exciting possibilities and its temptations to abandon past ideals in order to be a part of their lives. But as Nancy challenged Jeremy’s values and cultural upbringing, American television challenged the bardic function and brings those within the culture together. Peep Show handled this challenge in a way that made the challenge to British cultural values less threatening. The writers were able to bring comedic light to the tensions between two cultures. At times ridiculous, the development of this relationship revealed that the American cultural interruption was not as serious as many
think or have thought that at the end of the day, that despite its popularity American cultural products would not be able to overpower the relationship that the British had with their own domestic products. After Nancy’s departure, there was no mention of her until her reappearance an entire series later. Jeremy moves on to another “love of his life.” The interruption of Nancy was a small blip on the radar and Jeremy quickly moves on to more women. The same is said through the use of her Americanness on a channel that had been dismissed for its heavy use of American imports that generated concern that the channel was helping to Americanize Great Britain. Much like the use of Hamilton in Fawlty Towers, Nancy’s usage helps to encompass the feelings and stereotypes of Americans into one character and invite audiences to recognize the differences between themselves and Americans, and embrace their on Britishness.

The issue in considering Peep Show as an example of representation of this relationship between American and British television, is that it represents a white and masculine definition of Britishness. While they deconstruct sexuality by expressing audibly their innermost thoughts and concerns dealing with their own masculinity, their representation of Britishness is one of little diversity. Britishness and whiteness are accepted as hand in hand with each other. Though this is not to say that Peep Show is necessarily advocating a Nationalist Front; rather, they reflect that even those who do have much of the political and culture collateral and power experience their own identity crises. Yet because Mark and Jeremy are white, middle class, and men, their national identity is less complex than those of minorities within Great Britain. What Peep Show does do, however, is pursue how Britishness and Americanness interact and how this relationship helps or hinders the cultivation of a strong sense of identity. One of the mandates of Channel 4 was to represent minority voices, but a variety of voices is hardly represented in Peep Show and yet significant in discussing national identity. If Peep Show helps to represent a white, male,
middle class perspective, in a nation where immigration has become more of an issue in Britain, especially after the fall of the empire. With increased emphasis on minorities within Britain, also comes the issue with representation. As Medhurst has already remarked, the security and dominance of white, British males have been challenged. Though considered an identity crisis, Medhurst also offers a glimpse of a possible end to the crisis, proposing that

the way forward, then is thinking through the politics of Englishness must be to maintain an awareness of multiplicity, possibility and plurality […]], particularly when the prevailing alternative is to collapse all the varieties and possibilities of Englishnesses into a rigid, inflexible and exclusionary oneness. (53)

It is the inflexibility of cultural standards that causes the most havoc for Peep Show’s main characters. In trying to live up to what they think is masculine they worry over their ability to perform masculinity. The inclusion of Nancy emphasizes this further with neither Mark nor Jez really understanding how to deal with her difference. The major issue reflected by Peep Show is the difficulty in attempting to live within rigid constructs, rather than approaching identity as more pluralistic than one accepted code of conduct. The fact is that Britain is a multicultural society, not simply white, Anglo-Saxon and male. Nancy is symbolic of an inability to recognize that Britain can no longer be considered as society consisting only of English people and that British culture is not concocted in a vacuum, but rather heavily influenced by the other cultures present within and even outside national borders.
Chapter 3  
* Goodness Gracious Me* and British Identities

In the second series of sketch comedy show, *Goodness Gracious Me*, a sketch featuring a meeting between programmers at the Indian Broadcasting Corporation aired. The meeting introduces the new director of Ethnic Minority Programming, a white Englishman, brought to the corporation in order to help better represent whites living in India. As the rest of the committee bring up ideas that revolve around white stereotypes, the new director becomes more and more frustrated, finally erupting with reasons why these new ideas are insulting and racist. When the head of the committee, however, begins to take away the Ethnic Minority Programming’s funding, the Englishman realizes that his role as programmer is not to actually give suggestions to enhance the representation of whites on television, but to just be thankful that there is a department for ethnic minority representation (Bhaskar, et al “Series 2, Episode 2”). Obviously a dig at the British Broadcasting Corporation, the sketch revealed the difficulty of being a minority within the television industry and the hardship in finding quality vehicles for minority representation. Ten years after the sketch, British Caribbean comedian Lenny Henry lamented on the amount of minorities in the British media, both on and off screen. He commented that “the status quo is predominantly white and middle class. And if you’re not that, well. Go to any meeting or go to any production company, you might have a black person in reception and an Asian person in IT or something. And that’s appalling” (Gibson 5). While these comments were met with hostility by some, including Newsnight anchor and Peabody recipient Olenka Frenkiel (Sherwin 1), fellow comedian Meera Syal agreed, contending that by not including more minorities on television, programme directors risk isolating minority audiences with the lack or
misrepresentation of minorities on television (Singh 16). Writer and actor Sanjeev Bhaskar reiterates this further, saying

I’ll give you an example of how screwed up things are. On a radio drama I’d like to feel that I had just as much chance of playing Mr. Darcy as anyone else because I can sound like him, yet many radio producers find it very difficult to extend their imaginations to employing anyone who’s non-white. And I think any contemporary urban drama on British television that doesn’t have black or Asian faces in it…then that surely has to be deliberate? You can’t claim ignorance. (Bhaskar 98)

What these complaints register is the fact that despite living in a multicultural society in the 21st century, race and ethnicity is still an issue, despite both performers having helped pave the way for both black and Asian comedians, actors, and writers. The comments made by these performers present a challenge to the white, middle class status quo Henry refers to, one that refuses to acknowledge that their complaints are simply that, unwarranted complaints. What is also demonstrated by those like Frenkiel, who ridiculed Henry’s comments as ridiculous and an example of reverse racism, is the misunderstanding of the struggle minorities have within the industry for representation. Frenkiel also took offense to former Director General Greg Dyke’s comments that the BBC was “hideously white,” with Frenkiel’s questioning “why is it okay to vilify white people for their colour and not black ones? It’s insulting” (Sherwin 1). What is forgotten or perhaps ignored is that minorities have always struggled, and according to those in concurrence with Henry still struggle, for representation on all channels, despite the attempts to form channels (like Channel 4) that would help present minority voices. Instead, television in Britain, according to Henry, Syal, and Bhaskar, continues to isolate minorities, prioritize white values and ideals, and hence help to establish whiteness as the societal norm. This lack of
representation helps to perpetuate the misunderstanding of various cultural groups within Great Britain and ignore the nation’s cultural diversity.

This struggle over representation is part of a larger issue concerning the identity of minorities in Great Britain. As demonstrated by the work of Syal, especially her part in the television sketch program Goodness Gracious Me, which revealed these issues of identity and gave British Asians a platform in which to comment on the duality of their identity. Aired on BBC2 from 1998-2001, the show parodied life in Great Britain, both white and Asian, and in doing so Asianness was reconfigured and re-represented so as to promote better understanding of Indian culture and a reassertion of their own sense of Britishness. Their play with identity reflected the conflict between British Asians and whites for defining Britishness, while also making a case for British identity as a more inclusive entity than what had been previously accepted. Essentially, the status quo should not be white and middle class; rather, it television should accurately represent Britain as a multicultural nation. One way in which Goodness Gracious Me writers and performers asserted their Britishness was their use of American popular culture within their parodies. Doing so enabled to enact the distancing of foreignness Medhurst discusses when approaching the subject of identity (28) while also showing those within the nation that identity is shaped and formed, not a strictly defined sense of self. By parodying white Britishness the writers/performers assert their Indianness, by parodying Indian stereotypes they reassert their Britishness while playfully remarking on Indian tradition and parodying popular culture helps to reassert their Britishness.
Duality of Identity and *Goodness Gracious Me*

In interviews with Bhaskar he continually remarks on the duality of his identity, describing once that “my head is in India, yet my body remains in Britain. I straddle the world like a colossus. Like a 5ft 7in colossus.” (Bhaskar 98) This pride in his identity as both British and Asian, however, comes after a long period of struggling over his identity and attempts to hide his Indianness. “Every kid wants simply to fit in and in this respect I was no different. It took me awhile to realize that having come from, and being able to run with two cultures, was a gift, not a curse. It also has become the basis for most of my work.” (Crompton 5). This also resembles the work of fellow *Goodness Gracious Me* alumnus and Bhaskar’s wife, Syal, whose novel (1996) and film (2002) *Anita and Me*, visually describes the hardships in growing up in rural England and negotiating between Indian tradition and culture with her Britishness. Both are loosely based on Syal’s own life, with the aptly named Meena acting as the adolescent protagonist struggling with her own identity. In *Anita and Me*, Meena idealizes the blond haired, blue eyed, Anita as the ideal of British girlhood. Throughout the film, Meena struggles to be stereotypical British while her family attempts to remind her of her cultural heritage through food, language, and holidays. Through witnessing acts of racism and violence directed towards Asians, Meena recognizes that her cultural heritage is inescapable and that the struggle of her parents as immigrants to Great Britain was a sacrifice made for her future. Though for her, Asianness and Britishness meet in order to form her identity, others within the community consider her foreign. Few whites accept her as being British, seeing her as simply Asian. Much like Bhaskar has related, Syal’s semi-autobiographical work relates the difficulty of being both Asian and British within the nation (*Anita and Me*).
The work of both Bhaskar and Syal center around the struggle of those who have multiple and at times conflicting identities. In the case of *Anita and Me*, Meena struggles to live up to the expectations of her family in retaining her Indian culture, but she also desires to fit into the white British culture. In discussing the identity of Asians within Britain, Tariq Modood claims that most of the second generation did think of themselves as mostly but not entirely culturally and socially British. They were not however comfortable with the idea of British being anything more than a legal title; in particular they found it difficult to call themselves ‘British’ because they felt that the majority of white people did not accept them as British because of their race or cultural background; through hurtful ‘jokes,’ harassment, discrimination, and violence they found their claim to be British was all too often denied. (74)

The inbetweenness related here is one that is made clear through the statements by both Syal and Bhaskar and relay to the experiences of many who juggle multiple identities. The history of representation of Asianness is one full of misrepresentation and stereotypes that lingered throughout British culture. Shompa Lahiri recounts that most representations of Indians in British literature “revolved around the notion of a ‘denationalised hybrid’” (97), one mocked for trying to be ‘white’ or distanced for being culturally backward for their cultural practices. Portrayed as a cultural Frankenstein, Indianness was defined by white British citizens as a means to maintain their stronghold over British culture and exclude Indians from participating in the cultural development of Britain (110). While the literature discussed by Lahiri is based mostly in the 19th and early 20th century, it still affected the views white British people had of immigrants and also those who were born in Great Britain to immigrant parents. The ways in which British
Asian identity was represented by the literature carried through, as shown by the experiences and sketches of those involved in *Goodness Gracious Me*.

The show works primarily with representation and redefinition. The ways in which white British literature represented Asianness, gave those involved with the show the material required to reassert and redefine their own Britishness and better illustrate for a mainstream audience what it meant to be British Asian. As Stuart Hall in “Fantasy, Identity, Politics” contends “sometimes the cycle of articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation is attractive only so long as we think we are going to do the rearticulating. When it is we who are rearticulated, we don’t like it so much” (67-8). The issues performers have had with media representation are the ways in which their identity has been misrepresented. The title *Goodness Gracious Me*, for example, was taken from a song featured in Peter Sellars’ *The Millionairess*, where Peter Sellars stars as an Indian doctor. Sellars, being white, performs what is considered “Indian” by speaking and acting what is considered Indian. While those within the series have contended that they enjoy Sellars and even his performance, there is an issue with the nature of representation, as having a white British man play an Indian doctor (Gillespie 98). It is a case of minstrelsy; one that takes what is stereotypically Asian and cements it with media representation. By continuing to display these types, the belief in these stereotypes becomes more acceptable. What *Goodness Gracious Me* attempted was to rearticulate Asianness in ways that helped to challenge the status quo.

Stuart Hall considers identity the convergence point of multiple identities; this is especially important in considering those who have ties to multiple ethnicities or cultures (65). He accepts that individuals do not have one simple identity; rather, they have multiple identities and that the outward persona is what constitutes as those meeting points. This convergence, however, maybe less subtle for those who fit into what society has dictated the norm; whereas
those who have a differing cultural heritage, like those who immigrated to Great Britain after partition and future generations. Not only do these identities (in this case Asian and British) meet, but these identities are in flux, able to change depending on the individual’s desire to conform to certain norms. As stated by Bhaskar, identity is something to be straddled, negotiated (Bhaskar 98). At home, the traditions of one culture can be enacted and celebrated, while outside the home there is an urge to cover and appear more a part of the ‘norm’. While at home Bhaskar may have eaten curry or chapatis, at school he claimed to have eaten fish fingers, in order to show that he was not so different as his classmates may have imagined (Graff 48). This coincides with Homi K. Bhabha’s assertion that “[…] ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the identity of society itself” (1-2). Goodness Gracious Me acts as such a site. The need for representation, which still continues to be stressed today, was especially true when producer Anil Gupta pursued a show that featured British Asians and commented on the duality of the identities that they straddled as both British and Asian. Goodness Gracious Me was able to not only represent a variety of interpretations as to what constituted as Indianness but also contested past representations by those who misunderstood Asian cultural practices.

Goodness Gracious Me and Identity Politics

Marie Gillespie has already discussed the ways in which Goodness Gracious Me functions as a forum for ethnic representation, with her article “From Comic Asians to Asian Comics: Goodness Gracious Me, British Television Comedy and Representations of Ethnicity,” but because her article attempts to cover both history and structure, she only broadly illustrates the functionality of the show. Gillespie’s article offers, however, an incredibly useful framework
toward tackling the issue of comedy, functionality, and identity. She discusses the ways in which
the show was structured in order to represent British Asians, while also not isolating nor
attacking white members of society (97). The creators and writers aimed to make the humor
universal and looked towards the ways in which Jewish humor in the United States had enabled
the Yiddish language and idioms to be adopted in the lexicon (98). The purpose in doing so
would to make the links between Britishness and Asianness more seamless, to present British
Asians as just as an important part of British culture as whites. Comedy by nature can be an
exclusive entity, since it is necessary to understand the context of the joke in order to be a part of
the process of joke telling (93). In a sketch like “Going Out for an English,” quite possibly the
show’s most popular sketch and listed as the sixth greatest sketch of all time by Channel 4 (“50
Greatest Comedy Sketches”), which reverses the power structure of Indians being subservient to
whites. The sketch takes place at an English restaurant in Bombay after a group of Asian diners
have spent the night drinking. The sketch centers around mimicking and mocking the actions of
rude and drunk white English people who abuse the staff and make obnoxious and ignorant
comments towards Asians and Asian culture (in this example food). The women in the sketch
objectify and exoticize their white waiter and remark on his pale white skin and reference his
penis size as he stands taking their order. The patrons mock the ways of speech and make
comments directed towards the oddities on the menu. When ordering the patrons and waiter go
back and forth:

P: What’s the blandest thing on the menu?

W: The scampi is particularly bland, sir.

P: I’ll have that…and bring a fork and knife.

P2: Listen, listen here. I’m going to have the same as him…
P3: No

P2: Yeah, except I’m also going to have prawn cocktails

P4: You’ll regret it in the morning (Bhaskar, et al “Series 1, Episode 1”)

The treatment of food acts as a marker of difference between Eastern and Western culture, while also serves as an example of the ambivalence by whites directed towards Asian culture and food. The request for utensils is treated as an anomaly, when afterwards the rest of the table laughs at the absurdity or perhaps even daringness of such an experiment. By asking for “the blandest thing on the menu,” the performers are highlighting the differences between Indian and British food, while also taking a jab at the ways in which whites treat Indian food as a challenge rather than for enjoyment. Though not based solely on the experience of Bhaskar, the sketch is reminiscent of an experience he had while at university. While out with friends, they made the assumption that he would order the spiciest item on the menu, because he was of Indian heritage. He has compared his experience of being Indian in Britain to wearing bifocals. “He emerged squinting into adulthood with ‘a sense of being at once part of society but also staring in at it’” (Graff 48). Bringing this sketch to a white British audience offers a glimpse of this experience as white British food is questioned and critiqued. The audience watches as the waiter becomes increasingly more uncomfortable with the situation, as he is judged sexually by the women, verbally and physically abused by the male patrons and his culture is mocked. When he does counter the patrons’, like suggesting that they may have ordered too much food, they turn indignant and even violent. Though white, because he is in Bombay and therefore represented as the “other,” he lacks the sufficient status and cultural capital it requires to fight back. This helps express to those unfamiliar with what it may feel like to not be included in the status quo what this scenario is like for those not considered a part of the culture. It is reflective of British
culture, but because it utilizes Asianness it is not as threatening as switching the roles. It highlights both the stereotypes whites have of Asians, as well as those Asians have of whites. It is stereotypes themselves that are taken to task, rather than the identities themselves. The actions by those who believe these stereotypes to be true are challenged with this reflection of cultural racial insensitivities.

What is remarkable is the reception of this sketch and the show in general. When watching the actors recreate “Going Out for an English” on the stage for an Amnesty International special, the camera pans to reflect a sea of white laughing faces (Bhaskar, et al. *We Know Where You Live*). Despite the fact that this particular sketch parodies the actions and behavior of white British people, it is done in a way that manages to include the audience without attacking them. It acts as a small nod of acknowledgement. Because the sketch also revolves around Asianness, where the performers are revealing the stereotypes that Asians have white British culture, it helps to neutralize the threat usually posed by such accusations. The sketch takes place in Bombay and makes an English restaurant an exotic place within the city. It presents itself in the likeness of London and identifiable to audiences, without actually openly blaming or attacking white British people. Since the main aim of those behind the series was to make it universal, they also, through sketches like this, include everybody in on the joke.

Multiple sketches are thrown at audiences with multiple forms of representation and commentary. The combination of multiple identities and stereotypes being parodied allows for the show to address issues of identity without appearing confrontational. If representation on the series revolved around the misrepresentation of Asians by whites, the one-sided nature of this commentary could be perceived as more so accusatory and not relatable to a mainstream audience. The show does not simply focus on the white British society; instead, the show
displays a wide range of representation, including traditional and modern Asian culture.

*Goodness Gracious Me* operates upon Hall’s contention that people do not appreciate their identities being defined by others. By flipping the roles of white and Asian, the program illustrates these cultural definitions. The “Going Out for an English” sketch in particular performs this function, but the program alone was made as an attempt to break racial boundaries and challenge the status quo through the use of comedy. They took the taboo subjects of race and ethnicity and played with it in ways that challenged the ways people see identity as static. What is taken as a given, that of society divided as British and Asian, rather than thinking of British Asians as a part of British culture, is subverted by the show in multiple ways. There is the inversion of the power structure by reversing the roles of the whites and Asians. This mode helps to explain for those unfamiliar with the difficulties in being perceived as different. These examples act as a means for cultural education, by viewing the actions of the performers which mirror that of whites then what is reflected is the ridiculousness of treating British Asians as not British. But while the show flips this hierarchy, what makes it less threatening is the way in which the show also parodies British Asians. Performer Nina Wadia has commented that these representations are all in a loving way and based on family members or friends (Wadia). In sketches like those involving two dueling mothers competing over their sons’ accomplishments, the priorities and cultural values of British Asians are commented on in ways that also question their culture. These series of sketches revolve around two older Asian women who usually find themselves talking to each other despite having obvious tension. When at a party, the mothers stand in the kitchen and begin talking about each other’s families:

M1: Still, very brave of you to show your face.
M2: Why?

M1: Oh, I just heard that your son is living with his girlfriend.

M2: I’m surprised the news is being discussed down at the dock.

M1: So, living with a woman and not married. Funny, I don’t remember anything in the Ghita about that one. Very new labour, very anti-foxhunting.

M2: Your information is incorrect, as per usual. My son is not living with his girlfriend. He’s living with several girlfriends. My son is a stud. (Bhaskar, et al “Series 3, Episode 3”)

The women’s competition over their sons illustrates several points about Indian culture that are gently poked with comedy. Their dedication to their sons and their desire to one up each other to the point of discussing their sons’ sexual prowess displays the focus on sons and the importance placed sons’ success as a marker of the family. There is also the emphasis placed on tradition over modernity. The mentioning of the Ghita in opposition to New Labour and anti-fox hunting both point out the differences between modernity and tradition, as well as Indian and British culture. The competition becomes which family is more Indian than the other. Through their children, their Indianness is determined. Whiteness is held as a negative as it conflicts with the tradition both women attempt to uphold. Within the context of the sketch, however, this type of competition over identity is made ridiculous by the extent to which the mothers will go to make their point. The structure of the show allows for the play with identity. As Gillespie argues “It is through comic performances of ethnicity that discourses placing immigrants as victims can be smashed, notions of cultural authenticity subverted, essentialised ethnicities, ridiculed, and new identities imagined and recreated” (98). These women’s prioritization of Indianness over whiteness and their inflexibility over identity is made just as ridiculous as the lack of flexibility
whites have in considering Britishness. The show does not act as a forum to ridicule whites and place minorities as victims of a racist society; rather, the notion of fixed identity itself is played with in ways that are universal. Stereotyping in order to maintain exclusivity is what is being taken to task, which is shown as an offense committed by both minorities and whites. But what is shown most notably in the “Indian Broadcasting Corporation” and “Going Out for an English” sketches is that these stereotypes are hold back people more so than those directed towards minorities. The stereotypes directed more towards the dominant culture, in the case of “Competitive Mothers” are used as a means to separate. Rather than straddle, as Bhaskar has stated, the women refuse. Both cases set up expectations. For those subjected to stereotypes, the sense of belonging inherent to community lacks, despite being raised within the culture. In stereotyping, those who wish to maintain exclusivity ignore the advantages of being more inclusive, as well as avoid acknowledging the influences that come from outside of what is considered the dominant culture.

“They Can Rebuild You”: Referencing America and Identity Reassertion

While Goodness Gracious Me plays with identity within Britain, they also utilize popular culture sources outside of the nation in order to reemphasize a sense of identity. All episodes within the three series either utilize or make mention of the United States, American commercial interests, or culture. Not only does the usage constitute the impact American culture has had on British culture, but also allows for more play with identity and making the seam between white British and British Asian identities less visible. The usage of other nations’ culture, as Medhurst has described, helps to differentiate one culture from another, creating an “us” and a “them.” Because comedy already helps to define a community by isolating those who “get the joke” and those who do not, the combination of both helps to unite audiences. This is especially important
when the audience consists of a multicultural audience split by racial and ethnic stereotypes and assumptions. It is too simple to say that those in the show are simply parodying American culture, since they use a variety of representations within those parodies to make a point concerning identity. Their pairings, however, with American popular culture help to build a more inclusive British identity.

The use of American popular culture in most cases is one where the structure is used and what is being parodied is traditional Indian culture. In a sketch called “The Six Million Rupee Man,” the structure of American television’s *The Six Million Dollar Man* is used. American accents are used, the familiarity of the slow motion running scene that has been parodied frequently, and the essential plot is used to link the sketch to the American program. The sketch mirrors that of the original program’s intro though the purpose of the sketch is to differentiate Indian from American. Instead of an astronaut (Steve Austin) falling out of the sky, the sketch involves a rickshaw driver (Sanjeev Austin) crashing his bicycle. When those in India attempt to rebuild him, the narrator mimics the opening of the original show “We can rebuild him. We have the power. We have the capability. We don’t have the ideal exchange rate,” (Bhaskar, et al “Series 1 Episode 2”) during which the camera cuts to marbles and prosthetic hands. Whereas in the original program Steve Austin was a secret agent who used his new bionic powers for missions, the main goal for Sanjeev Austin is to purchase sugar. Because of the low amount of money used to rebuild Sanjeev Austin, he is incapable of doing much else, with his boss having to inform him that he is worse now than before the accident.

*The Six Million Dollar Man* is iconic and very much representative of American action/adventure. The reference to American culture differentiates both British and American industries. Whereas the American program was able to afford to maintain the look of such a
program, the expected look, as determined by the sketch, reveals that the Indian industry would be unable to maintain similar standards. Yet, even the British industry would also have a difficulty in doing the same, which is why a show like *The Six Million Dollar Man* could be referenced easily. One of the many programs in the 1970s placed in prime time slots (Rixon 47), *The Six Million Dollar Man*, reminds the audience of the impact such trade has had within British culture. Acknowledging the popularity of such a program also means to recognize the significance of the program in providing a bardic element. If people were watching the program regularly as its popularity suggests, then it also means that viewers were obtaining a glimpse of American cultural values and learning what was relevant and important to Americans. If those ideals were in no way similar to that of British viewers, it is hard to believe that the program would have been popular enough to put it in peak time slots. Using this American program creates more possibilities for commentary concerning identity as being non-essential. As evidenced by the impact of American programs and the fear of British television being overwhelmed by American television, the incorporation of other cultural identities and values questions the nature of an essential British identity. What is considered stereotypically British is challenged, with sketches involving American references or parodies pointing out the incorporation of “foreignness” into British culture. While most of the sketches create a dialogue between British whites and British Asians, through the use of an outside cultural source more can be said concerning the variety of interpretations of Britishness. It becomes more than just a comparison of two lifestyles. The use of American formats or references acknowledges the infiltration of other cultural values into the nation, with the United States being one of the most influential due to its political and media power. The “Six Million Rupee Man” sketch, like many others perform multiple functions within such a small period of time.
Firstly, the sketch acknowledges the stereotypes of Asians. This enables those involved in the series to play with these misconceptions. In acknowledging these stereotypes, *Goodness Gracious Me* uses them to distance British Asians from these fallacies. These are exaggerations and so much so that it is nearly impossible to believe that the stereotypes are true. What indulging in the supposed backwardness of Indian culture also does is link the writers and performers to British culture. Because British Asians do not fit into the stereotypes displayed in the sketch, they cannot be linked with this construction of Indian culture. The absurdity of the rickshaw, the body made of marbles and straws, and economic instability help to close the gap between British Asians and whites. Sanjeev Bhaskar, who plays Sanjeev Austin, is not like the character he plays; rather, he is a child of dual cultures, but raised within a British context. By parodying American culture, the show uses a familiar tactic to include those in a British audience. The use of the American format and implantation of an Asian character into that format, models for audiences what is an apparent absurdity. An Asian in a program like *The Six Million Dollar Man* is made to look ridiculous but this is not an endorsement of Asian stereotypes. The sketch is acknowledging a way of thought that prevents Asians and other minorities from being included in more television programs. Much like the ways in which the sitcom *Peep Show* used Nancy as an American type in which to differentiate from and reassert a sense of Britishness, the reference to American culture is used as a means to reassert the cast’s and writers’ own Britishness. While acknowledging the difference of their cultural heritage, what is reemphasized is their conception of themselves as British citizens. The bridge between both identities, Asian and British, becomes shorter. Yet, the sketch also manages to reassert a sense of Asianness, not simply because it features cultural signs and symbols, but because it acknowledges the train of thought used against British Asians by whites. It subtly reaches out
towards minorities in the audience by saying that there is an awareness of the disparity and embraces their cultural identity as Asians.

This sense of communal gathering is further evidenced further by a sketch that uses the familiarity and popularity of Charlie’s Angels to make a point concerning the roles of women in Britain. Like Six Million Dollar Man, Charlie’s Angels was also a 1970s hit with British audiences and given a prime time slot in television schedules (Rixon 47). The original program helped to reflect and develop standards of beauty while also promote itself as a show that presented images strong women. The representation of strong women, however, is somewhat disingenuous as it heavily sexualizes the three angels in ways that make it clear that the important aspect of the show is not necessarily the crime fighting, but that the stunning “angels” who are meant to be watched. It is this framing that is openly parodied by the sketch “Channa’s Angels.” The concept is similar to that of Charlie’s Angels and like “Six Million Rupee Man” utilizes the opening credits to further make their point concerning the gender politics of this program. The premise is set up the same, in that three little “girls” (though the sketch emphasizes that they are three Indian girls) graduate from the police academy and face perilous assignments as police officers, but are taken away from that lifestyle by a mysterious figure who delegates them tasks. In the opening credits of the original, the reason for taking them away from police work are hazy, but is seen as a better opportunity to utilize the skills learned in the academy. For those in the sketch, these reasons are made clearer with Channa declaring that “all that rough stuff was culturally inappropriate” (Bhaskar, et al “Series 3, Episode 5”) and his rationale for having them work for him. Whereas in the original program’s intro, the women went from restricting police uniforms to scantily clad bikinis or sexy disguises, Channa’s angels are wearing saris, designating them as traditional Indian women and rather than cut to the women performing
stunts, the sketch shows the three women performing household tasks. When the sketch moves onto the actual plot, it focuses on the women taking a break from grocery shopping to chase criminals, only to be caught up in their saris. They are defeated, not based on a lack of skills, but because of their traditional clothing, which they must wear as traditional Asian women. When talking to Channa over the intercom at the end of the sketch, he reveals that this exercise has provided them with the lesson that “a woman’s place is in the home.”

The use of Charlie’s Angels, like The Six Million Dollar Man, represents the impact of these shows on British television, as well as culture itself. The only major change with the format, however, is the emphasis on Asianness. The parody takes the image of strong women in the traditionally masculine role of police officers and places them in an Indian context, which means placing the women within the domestic sphere. At least, this is the stereotype of Indian women. What is really accomplished by the sketch is not simply the revelation of Asian stereotypes of women, but of women in general in the media. The fact is that Charlie’s Angels is really no different than the sketch, only slightly different in what is deemed appropriate for women. Though the original does not place the women in the domestic, they are still expected to remain subordinate, both literally as they work for Charlie and figuratively as they are still subjected to perform their expected gender roles. The original angels were highly sexualized, being placed in situations that would often require sexy disguises, a constant reminder that even though these women could perform the same tasks as men, they were still very much women. The same type of representation is done in the sketch though much more blatant, making it clear that Channa’s angels can handle the tasks required of police work, but that this role does not fit with traditional roles. The sketch makes the traditional gender roles involved in the original series more pronounced. “Channa’s Angel’s” reflects the ways in which American television has
helped to shape the roles of women. Not only would British Asian women, like Syal and Wadia who play two of the sketches angels, have to live up to the expectations set by both their Indian and British cultures, but the impact of American representations of ideal women. The representations of these types of women are not directed only toward Asian women, but to all women within the viewership. British Asian women may better understand what it means to be a traditional Indian woman, but most can understand Channa’s statement of women belonging to the home. They can also recognize the ways in which the original, *Charlie’s Angels* represented and objectified women with the emphasis on women’s bodies and beauty. By mocking both Indian and American ideals of femininity, the performers and writers reinforce their own identities. They acknowledge these representations as something not ideal and therefore urge through the sketch a balance of these two ideals. The inclusion of both American and Indian representations shows the conflicting nature of identity as seen represented through television. There are already expectations within the culture concerning women’s roles, but with the addition of American programs like *Charlie’s Angels*, more expectations are added. The sketch exemplifies the conflicting nature of identity. Not only are British Asians expected to live up to British ideals, but they also must deal with American expectations, as well. Yet, the acknowledgement of the impact of American programs also presents this as a dilemma to all within the viewership. This is and has always been the fear of allowing American imports into British schedules. This is *Peep Show’s* Nancy in media form. Though not explicitly urging change, American programming offered more ideals to live up to for British citizens. Though the emphasis in the sketch is on Asianness, it is clear that the sketch is more general, opening up for all watching, to realize that these American programs have helped to establish and reinforce
expectations of identity. Duality is not expressed simply as a British Asian dilemma, but also as a 
British dilemma.

The use of American formats is the predominant method of showing how Americanness is used in most episodes, but there are a few sketches that stray from that structure, one of which touches upon the differences between Jews and Muslims. It opens with a mother and father discussing their son’s conversion to Judaism and disgrace to his family. The son is introduced and the audience is faced with a Woody Allen impersonation (Bhaskar, et al. “Series 1, Episode 5”). What develops is a conversation between son and parents concerning the two religions, with son recounting the many ways in which Muslims and Jews are similar. Without the Woody Allen impression, the discussion would be far more dramatic. The politics of the sketch are much more blatant than in the previous sketch. Yet, what is most interesting is the way in which Jewishness is linked to Americanness and that Woody Allen acts as a representative for the faith. Again, the seams between what are considered opposites are brought closer together. Considering the writers attempted to model their show after Jewish American comedy, the use of Americanness in the case can also be considered exemplary of the show itself. Whereas previously, America was distanced, in this sketch, the representation of Judaism through Woody Allen displays the ways in which American culture can be looked towards for guidance. To those behind the scenes of *Goodness Gracious Me*, the ways in which Jewish bits of language have eased their way into the mainstream and lexicon, binding Jewish culture American culture, is a marker of progress. Woody Allen acts as a type of representative, whose standup comedy and films helped make those ties, bridging the gaps between different ethnicities and cultures.

Though one of the aims, according to Gillespie, was to play with concept of an “essential identity” (98), the show is constantly reinforcing and reasserting identity. Baskhar’s comparison
to a colossus straddling identities is what the show is attempting to mend. There is no need to
straddle; rather, British and Asian identities are brought closer together. While acknowledging
their Asian culture, by discussing the variety of interpretations Asians have in defining their own
identity (religion, gender roles, education, etc), they also continually link themselves to British
culture. Their use of Americanness helps to accentuate their Britishness. Using American
popular culture references distances themselves from further foreignness. Because
representations of American culture have been used before British popular culture, its use helps
to include a wider audience in on the joke. Though the show may have been made in order to
provide the representation that Henry, Syal, and Baskhar continue to long for, it was still able to
appeal to a wide audience. The fact that the show did appeal to many whites, shows not only the
universality of the comedy, but also that a British Asian show could in fact make it on
mainstream television. By representing the misconceptions and stereotypes of British Asians, the
show also helped to inspire change. In an anecdote provided by actress Nina Wadia, she recounts
going into a pub with colleague Kulvinder Ghir, who had grown up in the area and had been
harassed in the bar before. After entering, she noted feeling uncomfortable because those in the
pub stared at them. Though Wadia first assumed that this was because they were not welcome
based on their race/ethnicity, she quickly found that it was because those in the pub had
recognized them from television and actually enjoyed the program (Bhaskar, et al. Back Where
They Came From). What may have years before turned into a violent situation was actually made
peaceful after the airing of program. Though this maybe an example of fame usurping racial
difference, the fact that the other patrons were familiar with the show and fairly positive
demonstrates just how far the show reached and the possibility of television to help relate
messages of change.
National Identity Goes Multiple

As American programming becomes more visible on British television channels, the issue of minority representation becomes even more important. Not only are minorities combating to commission shows that are not considered mainstream enough to air, but they also must struggle against the economic ease of purchasing American programs to air within Britain. Minorities are faced with the perception that somehow American programming is more representative of British culture than the shows that they are writing, despite having grown up or lived in Britain. Keeping minorities outside of the industry demonstrates, as Baskhar has noted with his comments concerning playing Darcy (Bhaskar 98) that British Asians are not capable of representing British interests and values; that they are in fact not British enough to be able to attract British audiences. As Wadia has asserted “we struggle, we work really hard, and we still don’t get it [work/show] because they think a non-British – by their standards, British meaning completely British, not of any other ethnic origin that we cannot hold our own show” (“Making Things Sweeter” 156). Revealed here is the nature of struggle over identity and representation. Wadia recognizes within the quote the ways in which British Asians have been defined by whites as “not British” and the act of definition those desertions require. Goodness Gracious Me’s, however, indicates that there is an audience for shows featuring British Asians and with the writers’ aim for universality, there should be little concern for programmers. Though the show helped to better represent British Asians, clear up cultural misunderstandings, and bring the identities of British and Asian identities, it did not and could not completely change attitudes toward British Asians. In terms of representation, the show was able to cover a multitude of identities and challenges in short sketches. At times inclusive, at others exclusive, Goodness Gracious Me was able to challenge an entity that many take seriously. Those involved were able
to take the definitions of others, which as Hall as said, is not something people are readily to accept. But Goodness Gracious Me is not used as an attempt to redefine as much as it is used to challenge the status quos and hierarchies attached to race and ethnicity.

*Goodness Gracious Me* functions as a site for challenging identity, but also as a site for people to embrace play with the concept of identity. Identity is posited as malleable. It allowed for all those in Britain to question their own sense of self, but also laugh at the absurdity of the social hierarchy, stereotypes, and significance most place on identity. Because all were put on the proverbial chopping block, it helped build a community that only comedy can provide. As Gillespie notes “Those who share a joke belong to a community, however temporary, of people alike enough in outlook and feeling to be joined in sharing a joke” (93). While *Goodness Gracious Me* featured British Asians it did not specifically focus on the Asian experience in Great Britain. While the show included many examples of Indian culture like religion, gender roles/expectations, and political history, at the same they made sure to include whites in on the joke by commenting on British culture through their use of Asianness. In using Asianness as the backbone for their comedy they appealed to a more diverse audience. They reflected the multicultural society in ways that had not been seen before. Though as Medhurst admits some jokes go over the heads of white viewers (10), with the array of sketches that comment on white British identity, the audience is somewhat reunited as a community. Yes, there are differences within the British community, but they are all British. The use of Americanness helps to reunite the community, as the United States is an outsider and considered at times a cultural intruder. The United States can be used as a mark of difference, especially by those in *Goodness Gracious Me*, who use Americanness to emphasize their own Britishness. By pointing out the differences between American and British culture, the writers and performers can reassert the fact that
British Asians are, in fact, British. Offering examples of American programs and figures also elaborates on the frustration expressed by those who feared the encroachment of American ideals that came with the increase of American imports on British screens. This serves to further align themselves with the standards set forth by British culture.

Though this show is very much concerned with representing all that is British, America is constantly evoked throughout the series. Not only does it represent the significance of the United States’ impact on Britain, but also helps to illustrate the struggles with identity. The usage of formats allows for a greater sense of play. On one hand, it helps to reassert British identity by differentiating British from American culture. On the other, it helped to reassert Asian identity by acknowledging Asian stereotypes and through over exaggeration, made them less upsetting. Both identities are brought together through the comedy of the series. While it is at first difficult to discern the significance of American popular culture references, it is made more clear through looking at the structure of the show and series of sketches. The insertion of Asianness into American programs helps to make an array of challenges to the essentialized identity in a short period of time. The program illustrates that British identity is not created in a vacuum, especially an identity that was at one time based on imperialistic endeavors. Britain is greatly influenced by the culture of others and is not an untouched island. Identity is one that is constantly in flux, malleable, and influenced by other cultures. *Goodness Gracious Me* makes the idea of an essential identity laughable and inherently the notion of “identity crisis by multiculturalism” less threatening.
Conclusion

The major terror in constructing this narrative of British and American television was that these programs would prove to have little to offer in terms of identity. Though I knew that the usage of American characters and references would be important, it would not necessarily mean that these would illustrate the points concerning identity that would make this project work. As it turns out these concerns were unwarranted. Both shows proved fruitful with representation and situations that in some way commented on the concept of Britishness, and in more ways than expected. After studying these programs, it became clear that Americanness was definitely something important to include in these texts in order to make a point. While it is a bit presumptuous to claim that this was the intention of their creators, through the analysis presented it is clear that this commentary in some form or another is present within the text. Whether or not the audience internalizes these concepts, is also difficult to determine, but I have attempted not to put words in the mouths of either creators or viewers. This was at times difficult, but only fair to all involved. What I hope has come through in this project is that there is more going on in these comedies than just an attempt to entertain audiences.

The question that I have used in during my research and viewing is if comedy is a release then what feelings or concerns are being released through these programs? This is the question I have attempted to work through. Though it is not one that I think is possible to answer completely, I would like to think I have put forth a valiant effort. The relationship between American and British culture and television has proven to be as interesting as I hoped it would be when determining that this would be the focus of this thesis. The ways in which the programs centered American culture within these narratives served to point out various aspects of identity that not even I expected when first beginning this project.
Peep Show seemed a more obvious choice for an object of study as it features an American character and focuses on her relationship with one of the main British characters. What was not expected was the amount of resonance such a secondary character could have in terms of expressing the issues of identity that were being considered during the time in which the series aired. While the allied relationship between the United States and Great Britain had always fluctuated, during the period of Bush and Blair, this relationship was even more ambivalent than usual. The insertion of an American character like Nancy, who is stereotypically American from her blonde hair to her hyper-religiosity, represented something more than perhaps it would have in the past. Characterizing her as such highlighted her difference and America’s difference from British culture and society. By accentuating her character flaws, viewers were invited to laugh at something that could, in the real world, be more threatening. The rise of evangelism in the United States and the ways in which George W. Bush made religion a major part of both campaign and administration caused many both within the United States and overseas nervous. For those in Britain, where religion is not as central to the culture, the exaggeration of religion within the character of Nancy implies the fear involved with overemphasis on religion, yet offers comedy that releases such anxiety. Nancy’s attempt to shape her life in accordance with Biblical teachings overflows into Jez’s in ways that interrupt his life, interfere with his own life, and also his self identity. The basis for comedy, however, comes with Nancy’s confusion over her own religious practice, the scripts’ mockery of her hypocrisy in terms of sexuality and religion, and the misunderstanding of Nancy. What in real life is potentially threatening, like the intrusion and the possible problems that come with the combination of power and religion, are deconstructed in ways that allow for comic relief. Viewers can identify these markers of Americanness and laugh. While they may not be watching collectively, there still remains a sense of collective
identity, mutual understanding that Nancy is different, not British, and that if even Jez can overcome, so can the viewers.

The concept of diminishing threat is also utilized in *Goodness Gracious Me*, another obvious choice in terms of identity, but more complex when it comes to referencing American culture. While it is clear that the representation of British Asians within the show already is aimed towards reasserting identity, the ways in which the program deconstructs and sutures identity is one that is far more complex than simply making a show with a minority cast. The program allowed for viewers to watch as racism and ethnocentrism were confronted, challenged, and comedically handled. In representing British Asians, those behind the show were able to highlight for a mainstream audience the experiences minorities face within Great Britain. By using comedy to illustrate these experiences, it allowed for a confrontation, but one that was destabilized through comedy. It brought to light issues, but did not threaten. The show also allowed for a more inclusive conception of Britishness. Rather than consider “British” as white Anglo-Saxon, the show reasserted their own identity as British Asians as also being British, which in turn opened the national definition to include more minorities. This was helped by the use of Americanness within the program. When using American formats, like *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *Charlie’s Angels*, they often employed stereotypes of Indian culture. By using both American and Indian representations, they reasserted their own identities as British. The differences prodded by the program placed them outside of both. Their ability to make fun of these representations helped them to include themselves within the definition of what it meant to be British, which includes not being American or Indian. Finally, using American formats helped to illustrate the importance of American popular culture within Great Britain. There is no interruption within the series of sketches that indicate that the references to American culture are
an interruption. There is no introduction, grandstanding, the sketches dealing with Americanness are seamlessly aired amongst those dealing with Asianness and Britishness. This supports Paul Rixon’s thesis that American television does not necessarily disrupt the flow of domestic television; in fact, American culture has influenced British culture and that national identity itself is malleable to outside sources.

Both shows are able to highlight what it means to British. They both present the flaws in strict definitions of identity, with Peep Show illustrating the anxieties caused when dealing with societal norms and expectations, and Goodness Gracious Me, aims to demonstrate malleability of national identity despite its rigid restrictions. Though both are different, both in format and representation, what they share is the usage of comedy to reflect such concepts as national identity. Comedy is so hard to nail down. It is fluid, constantly changing, and so subjective that it is difficult to describe. It is nearly impossible to describe why it certain sketches or situations are funny, without losing the comedy. Yet, it is for this reason that I chose to focus on comedy. Throughout this text I have attempted to write about the humor without assassinating the joke and hopefully intriguing others to view these programs. Comedy is an incredible tool understudied because of its difficulty and the fact that comedy is not taken as seriously as dramas. What both programs show that comedies are able to handle these issues far more covertly than dramas. While comedies seem all fun and games, it is clear through the analysis presented here that there is more going on than simply entertaining the audience. What I have attempted to really show is that while television itself performs the bardic function, comedy only accentuates television’s possibilities.

Comedy is exclusive in that relies on a common understanding by both presenter and audience. Without this jokes fall flat. This allows for many to not “get” imported programs.
Domestic programs both reflect and construct societal norms and expectations and so it is with this in mind that programs, especially comedies, can work with these expectations and offer viewers release from the anxieties and fears of living up to these norms. The process of deconstruction and suture is one that allows for viewers to understand that these expectations are manufactured, created and meant to be challenged. This is fundamentally how Americanness is used within these programs and others. With the United States acting as a super power and leader in media exportation, the ways in which these programs play with Americanness diminishes the power that the United States has within the Great Britain. While the use of imports in television schedules maybe necessary in order fill space cheaply, it does not mean that American values and cultures have to dominate British culture with American values.

Domestic television allows for agency in an age of media imports. Though American imports maybe seen as a disruption and even threatening to what may be considered “traditional” British culture. What both these shows display in their handling of Americanness is that first there is no such concept of a standard concept of culture, that is constantly changing and not concocted in a vacuum. With Nancy, for example, she is only a secondary character. While for a season she plays a large part in her relationship with Jez, she does not overwhelm the show with her presence and eventually leaves. This small space of time, presents itself as possible threatening story arc, but because the show centers on the two main British characters, she cannot possibly take over the space, nor maintain her importance throughout the series. Her American presence is for the short term, with the Britishness of the two main characters restored by her absence and the continuation of their struggles with British expectations. The same can be said with *Goodness Gracious Me*, where their sketches involving Americanness are few in comparison to the British fueled sketches, but still are able to relate the significance of American
culture in Great Britain. Again, while sketches involving American culture are present in at least one sketch per episode, it only highlights that there is an American presence, not that British culture is dominated by the increase of access to American popular culture in Great Britain. Also, especially with *Goodness Gracious Me*, that identity is not fixed. It is not something that is natural, but rather something learned and influenced from sources outside of geographical space. While there is importance in maintaining a cohesive collective identity it should not be so strictly defined as to not allow for some flexibility.

The anxiety of living up to an essentialized concept of national identity is what is dealt with by both programs. While *Peep Show* exemplifies the problem of believing that there is such a fixed identity, *Goodness Gracious Me* attempts represent the malleability of identity. Both acknowledge the ways in which American television and popular culture have played a part in British identity, but have not approached this as threatening or a type of encroachment. What both shows emphasize through comedy is the concept of renegotiation. American programming cannot be threatening to British identity, because the latter is not fixed, it cannot break or be entirely overthrown. Identity allows for some wiggle room and it is the ability of the individuals to renegotiate their identity in accordance to their own sense of what is and is not their own concept of British identity.
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