Conformity is often associated with television shows during the 1950s. This idea of conformity is conveyed by images of a white middle class family living in the suburbs with Mom as the happy homemaker and Dad as the breadwinner. There is a television show that strayed from that image: *I Love Lucy*. Desi Arnaz, who played Ricky Ricardo on the wildly successful television show, gave America a taste of the tropics. He created a Cuban persona suitable for American consumption. Ricky’s Cuban culture was a large aspect of the show. He is constantly resisting assimilation. A close examination of the popular television show reveals both Cuban-American tensions and the ways Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz helped smooth them and make the United States in the 1950s a more inclusive place. It also reveals the struggle over an immigrant’s identity. *I Love Lucy* questions the common perception of a mid-century homogenous culture.
I LOVE RICKY:
HOW DESI ARNAZ CHALLENGED AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
Who was Ricky Ricardo? ............................................................................................... 2
“What typical American girl is married to a Latin?” .................................................... 4
The Homogenous 1950s?: I Love Lucy and Ethnicity .................................................. 5
Speaking in “rumba tones”? ......................................................................................... 12
“What Whatever Happened to Men?”: Ricky Ricardo and Masculinity during the 1950s 14
Ricky Ricardo: Resistance or Conformity? ................................................................. 19
Ricky: The Male Buffoon? .......................................................................................... 21
What happened to Desi and Lucille after I Love Lucy? ............................................. 23
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 25
Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 26
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Introduction

In the 1954 *I Love Lucy* episode “Home Movies,” Ricky Ricardo became obsessed with his new movie camera. He took countless home movies of his wife, Lucy, and their son, little Ricky. He repeatedly showed his movies to Lucy and their neighbors, the Mertzes, who quickly grew tired of seeing them. When the Mertzes left and Lucy fell asleep during one of these showings, Ricky got insulted and refused to have them participate in a pilot film he planned to create for a television show. Ricky filmed the pilot of him singing “Vaya con Dios” with his movie camera. As usual, Lucy and the Mertzes wanted to get in the act. And so, using Ricky’s camera, the trio filmed a skit they had created that featured them as cowboys in a saloon. Lucy sneakily spliced together their western themed music number “I’m an old cowhand,” Ricky’s acoustic serenade and home movies of little Ricky. When Ricky showed the reel of what he thought was his performance to the TV producer Bennett Green, he was shocked at what he saw. His eyes characteristically popped out of their sockets and his jaw dropped. Green loved the tape and the audience laughed at the mayhem. This particular episode illustrated vividly how two cultures, American and Cuban, intersected in this television show and how the audiences were wildly enthusiastic. *I Love Lucy*, through the character of Ricky Ricardo, challenged the perception—and reality—of the homogeneity in 1950s America.¹

The 1950s were years of change in the United States. Postwar America contained multiple images of families, strict gender roles, suburbanization, consumerism, anti-communism and the pressure to conform to societal norms. Uniformity seemed important. Suburbs sprang up with very similar home plans that made each home indistinguishable from the next. Americans heard calls to spend, spend, spend on everything from new appliances to new automobiles. This was the era when the typical family seemed to be white, middle class, and nuclear, living in the luxury of suburbia. *I Love Lucy* exposed some of the cracks of that idealized image of society but also frequently confirmed it. Lucy’s antics and spending habits, Ricky’s culture and temper, and their relationship as a real-life married couple entered into the homes of Americans weekly through the new medium of television, and in the process undermined some conventional norms.²

Television burst on the scene in the postwar era. Before then radio was the primary source for entertainment and information within the home. Radios became popular during the 1920s. Television sets became available as a luxury item to wealthy Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1946 DuMont and RCA made television sets available to the public. By the late 1940s radio was struggling and television was slowly gaining more and more popularity. By the end of the 1950s, ninety percent of American households had at least one television set. Families gathered around the TV and watched their favorite programs, which by 1950 included the game show *What’s My Line*, situation comedies *The George Burns and Grace Allen Show* and *The Goldbergs*, children’s program *Howdy Dowdy*, and the variety program *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Television was a family affair. Although television was said to reflect reality, it often did not. For the most part ethnic minorities were absent from the medium or often portrayed as domestic workers such as maids and gardeners. Ricky Ricardo was an exception to this rule.³

² To obtain a general overview of the 1950s refer to David Halberstam’s *The Fifties*.
It is difficult to discern the number of Latinos who were living in the United States in the 1950s, since the word Hispanic or any similar term did not appear in the U.S. census until 1970. Also many Latinos, in this case Cubans, either identified themselves as either white or black. Although Cubans did not migrate in large numbers to the United States until the 1960s, the United States had a long history of Hispanic influence. This was evident not only in everyday life but also in popular culture. Latino and Latina actors appeared in silent films in the 1910s and 1920s and became even more popular in films during the 1930s and 1940s. Thanks to Desi Arnaz and Ricky Ricardo, Latinos reached a whole new level of recognition during the 1950s. 

Who was Ricky Ricardo?

Who was the man behind the television character of Ricky Ricardo on the immensely popular television show *I Love Lucy*? While Desi Arnaz portrayed a successful bandleader on TV, he struggled to make a name for himself in the late 1930s and 1940s. Although his ethnicity deterred him from obtaining mainstream roles in Hollywood and nearly cost him his role on *I Love Lucy*, in the end it made the show unique and contributed to its enormous popularity. Before he simply became Desi Arnaz to television audiences, he was Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha III. Desiderio was born in Santiago, Cuba on March 2, 1917 to Dolores de Acha and Desiderio Arnaz II. Desi’s father was a senator in Cuba as well as the mayor of Santiago. Desi lived comfortably as a child. He had a speedboat and a car by the age of sixteen and received the royal treatment anywhere he went. Sixteen-year-old Desi was planning on going to the University of Notre Dame to become a lawyer and then return to Cuba to practice. That dream fragmented in 1933, when President Gerardo Machado was overthrown. His father was a supporter of Machado and after the overthrow, his family was forced to leave Cuba.

Desi and his father arrived in Miami, Florida in 1934 with essentially nothing to start a new life in a new country. University-bound Desi now performed odd jobs, such as cleaning bird cages, to make ends meet. The Arnazes went from living comfortably in Cuba with three farms, a summer house, several boats, butlers, maids and chauffeurs to living in a warehouse chasing rats with a baseball bat just for a decent night’s sleep.

Desi’s life in show business began when a family friend recommended him to a man who had a local rumba band, the Siboney Septet, and needed a guitar player and singer. One night Xavier Cugat, “the king of the rumba,” spotted Desi and, impressed by his performance, invited him to audition for his orchestra. After Desi graduated high school Cugat gave him a job, and Desi abandoned the idea of college and moved to New York City.

Arnaz played six months with Cugat and decided it was time to go on his own. He moved back to Miami to start his own group. Cugat agreed to send Desi a band with which to start, but provided a horrible band with no training in Latin music. At that point Desi got the idea to start a conga line, a simple dance that encouraged mass participation, to distract the audience from booing the musicians. In 1937, Desi Arnaz led the first conga ever danced in the United

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4 For more on Latinos on film see Clara E. Rodríguez’s *Heroes, Lovers and Other: The Story of Latinos in Hollywood*.


8 Arnaz, 47-48, 50-53.
States in a Miami Beach nightclub. 9 This signified his break with his past in Cuba, since Desi’s father, while mayor, had banned the conga, which was associated with “immoral gestures.” The conga quickly became a hit and several clubs became La Conga.10

When tourist season ended in Miami, so did Desi’s salary. He did gigs here and there until he was spotted by the top musical comedy team in America, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. They had a new play in the making and needed an ambiguous Latin character. They chose Desi to play an Argentine football star. Too Many Girls opened in New Haven, Connecticut on September 28, 1939. When it opened in New York City on October 14, 1939, it became a big hit.11 Too Many Girls brought Arnaz his first big role and pushed Hispanic culture into the limelight with such tunes as “Spic and Spanish” (which Desi did not sing) and “She Knew How to Shake Her Maracas” which began with the lines: “Ev’ry Latin has a temper/ Latinos have no brains/ And they quarrel as they walk in Latin Lover’s Lane.”12 When it was turned into a film in 1940, it flopped. Although his movie career stalled, he was becoming a successful musician. On April 1, 1940, Time included the record Dance La Conga by “the orchestra of Desi Arnaz, the supple Latin glamor boy of Broadway’s Too Many Girls,” which included instructions on how to dance the conga by dance entrepreneur Arthur Murray in its monthly section of noteworthy phonograph records.13

Shortly after the disappointment of Too Many Girls, Desi participated in the Good Neighbor Policy campaign. During the 1940s the U.S. government sought to recognize and celebrate the Untied States’ ties with Latin America in an arrangement called the Good Neighbor Policy. The United States felt that this approach would discourage these nations in aligning with the Axis powers such as Germany, Italy and Japan. During the Good Neighbor Policy era, Latinos appeared in a positive light in motion pictures. In 1941 as part of the Good Neighbor Policy, Arnaz appeared in an engagement in Mexico alongside many Hollywood stars such as Clark Gable, Bing Crosby, Norma Shearer and Mickey Rooney.14 Desi knew that the only reason why he was in such an elite crowd was his fluency in Spanish. His role was to find out what the Mexican people thought of the Good Neighbor Policy. In other words, he was an interchangeable Latin. In the span of a decade Arnaz went from being a relative unknown to a surprising figure in foreign policy.

Not even his participation in foreign affairs could save his film career. After Too Many Girls, Arnaz got minor movie roles, usually typecast as the generic Latin character. He had all singing roles in the films for RKO studios which included Four Jacks and a Jill, Father Takes a Wife (1941), and The Navy Comes Through (1942). His first non-singing role was in the war movie Bataan (1943) for MGM. This was the role he liked most. He received recognition for this part in the form of a Photoplay magazine award for the best performance of the month. “It wasn’t the Academy Award but damn good enough for me,” Desi recalled in his memoir. After this film, he had a small stint in the army. When the war was over he returned to MGM to find

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9 Those who participated formed a line and held the person in front of them by the waist or shoulders and kicked on the fourth beat. Isabelle Leymarie, Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 92. Many sources dispute this claim such as Leymarie, 92 and Ned Sublette, Cuba and its Music, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 454.
10 Arnaz, 70-72, Sublette, 370-371.
11 Arnaz, 87-88, 99, 106, 12 Sublette, 454.
14 Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 140-141.
out the studios did not have a place for him. Arnaz went back to performing with his band which led Universal Studios to notice him and star him in *Cuban Pete* (1946), in which he played a Cuban bandleader. Arnaz’s last film before *I Love Lucy* was *Holiday in Havana* released in 1949, and all but forgotten now.¹⁵ Not until 1951 on *I Love Lucy* did Desi get the big break that he had hoped for.

Sixteen-year-old Desi Arnaz started with nothing in his new home of the United States of America. He struggled to achieve success as a musician and then as an actor, but his ethnicity prevented him from doing so. Then he met Lucille Ball. With her insistence, Arnaz created a character that brought his culture to the foreground and resisted ‘Latin’ stereotypes. The rest is television history.

"What typical American girl is married to a Latin?"

Although *Too Many Girls* did not prove to be the success that Desi anticipated, at least one positive outcome resulted. Desi met actress Lucille Ball, whom he married not long after in November 1940. Each of them had highs and lows in their individual careers during the course of the 1940s. Not until the start of the 1950s did they create the empire of *I Love Lucy* based on their relationship as a married couple.

Twenty-two-year-old Lucille Ball, from upstate New York, had arrived in Hollywood in 1933.¹⁶ She became a Goldwyn Girl (part of a troupe of female dancers for Samuel Goldwyn’s movie studio) almost immediately because of her good looks. She modeled and eventually became an actress. She was considered more of a comedienne than an actress and starred in many lesser known films with small roles, gaining the nickname “Queen of the B’s.”¹⁷

Desi and Lucille’s relationship was intense from the start. Neither was willing to compromise, and they constantly fought over everything although passionately made up afterwards. An example of this would be their short divorce in 1944. Desi volunteered for the army but was unable to go oversees due to torn cartilage in both knees from sports injuries. Between 1943 and 1945 Arnaz was stationed first at an Army camp as an instructor of “illiterates” and then transferred to the Birmingham Hospital in Van Nuys, California. He was in the “psychological section” to help with cases returning from war. When Desi joined the Army in 1943, Lucille felt that he was not being faithful, in her words “screwing everybody at the Birmingham Hospital.”¹⁸ She divorced him on charges of infidelity in 1944, but the divorce became null and void when they “reconciled” after the papers were filed.

In the late 1940s, Desi was working at the Copacabana Club, which was the place to be in New York. At the same time, Lucille Ball played the role of an absentminded wife always involving her unknowing husband in absurd positions in the radio show *My Favorite Husband*. CBS wanted to transfer this show to a new medium, television, with Lucille in the part she had played on the radio. Lucille and Desi had their own careers and had been trying to mend their marriage for years. They knew that the only way for their relationship to succeed would be for them to work in the same city, which meant working on something together. They had tried

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¹⁶ This section on Lucille’s early life comes from: Morella and Epstein, 9, 29, 44.


¹⁸ Arnaz, 170-172, 181-182, 188.
repeatedly to get producers to cast them together, yet neither they, nor the talent agents, were willing. “What typical American girl is married to a Latin?” they asked.19

The couple disagreed with that notion and formed Desilu Productions to produce their own show. They were determined to prove that the public would accept them together and in the summer of 1950 they performed throughout the nation as a vaudeville act. The act highlighted the misadventures of a Latin bandleader and his movie star wife (the plot for the sitcom was later changed to a housewife who desperately wanted to be in show business). They received great reviews, such as one in Variety that saw them as “one of the best bills to play house in months” and said that they “should have no trouble lining up dates.” The audiences loved the project, yet CBS still wanted nothing to do with it. Then NBC started paying attention.20

CBS still had a problem with the Cuban Desi being a part of the show. When lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II saw the pilot, he insisted, “Keep the redhead, but ditch the Cuban.” When he was told it was a package deal, Hammerstein responded “Well, then for God’s sake don’t let him sing. No one will understand him.” After hearing this, the sponsors (Phillip Morris represented by the Biow Agency) added a clause to Desi’s contract stating that his singing should be kept to a minimum in the show. Writers found a loophole in the contract. They cleverly made Ricky’s singing part of the plot of each episode. After the show hit number one, Desi demanded a revision in his contract and the sponsor permitted it.21

In order to make the show a success, both of them had to invest all their time in this project. This meant no more nightclub appearances for Desi and no more movies for Lucille. Lucy remembers the warnings of colleagues: “We were committing career suicide, by giving up highly paid movie and band commitments to go broke for TV.” The original name for the show was The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show, but that was not a very catchy name, and Desi was insistent that he should receive first billing. In the end, he did. I Love Lucy (the “I” represented Desi and Lucy was his nickname for Lucille) premiered on CBS on October 15, 1951.22

Despite moderate achievements as individual performers, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz collectively attained success beyond their wildest dreams. Television audiences delighted in the combination of their cultures and their portrayal as an all-American married couple. Lucy and Ricky conflicted with the image of an idealized family in the conforming society of the 1950s.

The Homogenous 1950s?: I Love Lucy and Ethnicity

On October 15, 1951 a Cuban bandleader, his scheme-plotting redheaded wife, and their nosy neighbors made their first television appearance. On this day, I Love Lucy premiered on CBS with the episode “The Girls Want to go to a Nightclub,” which had been filmed in front of a

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19 Arnaz, 194. Morella and Epstein, 68, 74.
21 Jess Oppenheimer with Gregg Oppenheimer, Laughs, Luck...and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 172-173.
The characters of the show included Ricky and Lucy Ricardo, played by bandleader Desi Arnaz and his wife, actress Lucille Ball and their neighbors Fred and Ethel Mertz, played by William Frawley and Vivian Vance. Producers initially rejected Desi as Lucille’s husband on the series, yet with persistence and charisma he created a Cuban persona suitable for American consumption. Arnaz used *I Love Lucy* as a vehicle to resist the conformity of 1950s television by incorporating his Hispanic background into the show. At the same time, he realized that his American audience did not want him to stray too much from the image of an ideal middle-class husband and capitalized on it. *I Love Lucy* pushed and challenged the boundaries of conformity.

Desi’s ethnicity, of course, played the largest part in the show’s unique appeal. Instead of turning off viewers, as many had predicted, Desi’s showy Cuban-ness had the opposite effect. Many people apparently identified with Ricky, and viewers wanted to see the Ricardos’ mishaps every week. By the spring of 1952, 10.6 million households were tuning their dials to see Ricky and Lucy. This marked the first time in television history that a show had reached so many people. By May 26th all four national TV rating services, Nielsen, Trendex, American Research Bureau and Videodex, agreed that *I Love Lucy* was the nation’s number one television show. *I Love Lucy* became such a sensation that department stores such as Marshall Field in Chicago closed on Monday nights and posted a sign on their window reading: “We love Lucy too so we’re closing on Monday nights.” Even in Detroit water levels in reservoirs drastically dropped on Mondays between 9:30 and 9:35 P.M. Apparently, people were holding off showering, washing and using the bathroom until right after *Lucy* was over. By March 1952, *I Love Lucy* had become the highest-rated television show reaching well over 11 million by the end of its second season. This meant that approximately 32 million Americans were watching the Ricardos and the Mertzes every week.

In 1952, *I Love Lucy* had another hurdle to jump: how to deal with Lucille and Desi’s pregnancy of their second child. Desi insisted that Lucille’s pregnancy should be written into the show. Producers had reservations since pregnancy was a taboo theme on television at the time. The network and the sponsors were uncomfortable about the idea. They wanted Lucy to hide behind chairs and other props. Desi thought this was ridiculous and wrote a letter to Alfred Lyons, chairman of the board at sponsor Phillip Morris. After that, everybody was quiet and Lucille’s pregnancy became part of the show. Desi found out years later that Lyons had sent a memo from England that read, “To Whom It May Concern: Don’t fuck around with the Cuban! Signed, A.L.”

A rabbi, a minister and a priest examined whether this would be offensive to the viewers. The clergymen approved the situation, but the censors demanded that the word pregnancy not be used. Rather the term became “expecting.” By the time Lucy told Ricky that she was *enceinte*, the French word for pregnant that CBS permitted, *I Love Lucy* was a hit in Canada, Europe, Australia, Japan and Latin America, and continued to be popular.

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23 Harris, 176. “The Girls Want to go to a Nightclub” was actually the second episode but was chosen over the first episode, “Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Murder Her,” because the quality of the performances was better. Andrews, 64.
24 Halberstam, 199.
25 Halberstam, 198. Harris, 182.
26 Jones, 69.
27 Arnaz, 276-280.
28 Arnaz, 281-282. Harris, 188.
Viewers experienced the pregnancy from the moment that Lucy told Ricky the news to the delivery of their child. Also the pregnancy played a significant role in the plotlines. In “Pregnant Women are Unpredictable,” Lucy and Ricky debate on baby names and Lucy felt that Ricky paid too much attention to the baby and not enough to her. In “Ricky has Labor Pains,” Ricky started feeling ill and a doctor diagnosed him with morning sickness. During these episodes, Lucy wore flowing, oversized tops that hid her belly and craved strange food combinations such as papaya shakes and pickles and pistachio ice cream with hot fudge and sardines. Watching all of those episodes, viewers experienced the whole process and became part of the Ricardo family when little Ricky was born in “Lucy Goes to the Hospital.”

Lucy Ricardo gave birth to little Ricky on 19 January 1953, just as Lucille Ball gave birth to Desiderio Alberto Arnaz VI. Forty-four million viewers witnessed this monumental event. The day before Lucy Ricardo gave birth on television, Dwight Eisenhower took the oath of office as president and only 29 million viewers tuned in. The Arnazes and the Ricardos had become so popular by April 1953 that they appeared on the cover of Life magazine one week and Look, its competitor, the following week and the first issue of TV Guide featured Desi’s photo on the front cover. That same year Desi and Lucy signed an 8 million dollar contract with CBS and Phillip Morris for two and a half years. The laughs and the money kept coming.

All this success came from a show that featured a Latin and his North American wife, a couple which according to preliminary critique would not pass as a typical American couple. Desi as Ricky Ricardo was selling what audiences wanted, the image of a typical American, if wacky, married couple in which the partners loved each other very much and complemented each other. At the same time Desi used his Cuban background to his advantage and refused to disregard his culture and assimilate.

But he portrayed Cuban culture in a particular way. Although I Love Lucy was seen in Cuba, it was not quite a hit there, as it appealed, most of all, to North American slapstick humor. In fact, Arnaz was in many ways not even considered to be Cuban. It is intriguing to observe what audiences saw as Cuban in the series since Cuban viewers were humiliated by Desi’s portrayal and deemed him a traitor to all Cubans.

In the third episode of the series, “Be a Pal,” Lucy attempted to rekindle the romance in their relationship by taking advice from Dr. Humphries’ new book How to Keep the Honeymoon from Ending. After two failed suggestions, Lucy tried the third; become his mother. This meant reminding of his happy boyhood. She filled their apartment with items to make Ricky remember his childhood in Cuba. She collected what North Americans associated with Cuba. There were chickens, a mule, several prop men taking siestas, Ethel dressed with a poncho and a sombrero.

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31 Sublette, 581-582.
with a big moustache (obviously Mexican), and Lucy performing a song in Portuguese dressed as Carmen Miranda (who was Brazilian). This illustrated the degree to which viewers lumped all Hispanics together and viewed them as the same. Other examples of this include the episodes “Breaking the Lease,” “Tennessee Ernie Visits” and “Lucy Writes a Novel.” In “Breaking the Lease,” Ricky and Lucy made a lot of noise in order for Ethel and Fred to release them from their lease. They performed what Lucy referred to as “an old Cuban folk dance,” El Breako the Lease-o, which turned out to be the Mexican hat dance. In “Tennessee Ernie Visits,” Lucy received a letter from her mother asking about her husband. She referred to Ricky as Xavier (as in Cugat, a Spanish-born Cuban-raised bandleader). Lucy responded that her mother knew she was married to a bandleader, she just could not remember which one. Finally, in “Lucy Writes a Novel” Lucy heard of a housewife who made a fortune from writing a novel and immediately got to work on her own masterpiece. She was inspired by the characters around her. She placed Ricky as a lonely immigrant arriving at New York harbor in a leaky cattle boat weeping at the sight of the Statue of Liberty. Ricky tried to correct her by explaining that he came from Havana to Miami Beach on a plane with musicians, but Lucy insisted that she would not change her story. Again, Hispanics, and in the last example immigrants, were interchangeable.

Instead of being confined to having rules imposed on him, Ricky Ricardo had a good deal of agency. When he arrived home in “Be a Pal,” he was astounded to see how Lucy had remodeled: “You like?” asked Lucy. Ricky replied, “No, I dunt.” He went on to say that if he wanted things Cuban, he would have stayed in Havana. “That’s why I married you,” Ricky reassured Lucy, “because you’re so different from anyone I’ve known in Cuba.” This gave Ricky the autonomy that Desi lacked. Desi lacked the choice to stay in Cuba, for he had to flee to escape persecution.

Desi, through Ricky, constantly rejected the conformity visible in television at the time. The most evident example of this could be seen in episode 53, “Lucy Hires an English Tutor.” Lucy was adamant about having their child speak perfect English. She insisted that Ricky should not talk to the child until he or she was 19 or 20 because of his accent, then went on to hire an English tutor to train the Ricardos and the Mertzes to speak the language properly. Instead of paying the tutor, Lucy promised that he could perform at Ricky’s club, The Tropicana. Mr. Livermore, the tutor, then had them carry out a simple exercise of pronouncing the vowels. Ricky said them in Spanish and Livermore asked him “Wherever, did you acquire that odd pronunciation?” Ricky fought back with “I went to school in Cuba, what’s your excuse?” In the end, Ricky made a deal with Livermore and, in front of Lucy, Livermore took on Ricky’s accent

33 “Be A Pal,” I Love Lucy, DVD, directed by Marc Daniels, 22 Oct. 1951 (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005). This episode gave the impression that Carmen Miranda was Cuban and seeing this as a child I thought Carmen Miranda was Cuban.
35 For more on Xavier Cugat and his relationship to Desi Arnaz, refer to the section entitled Who was Ricky Ricardo?
38 “Be A Pal.”
and even sang *Babalú*, Ricky’s signature song. Lucy felt defeated and replied that Ricky had won the battle of the accents.

This interaction revealed many different aspects about the show and about the characters. Lucy offered the English tutor a stint at the Tropicana for six months of English lessons. Why did the uptight English tutor want to perform at a Latin nightclub? It seemed contradictory and baffled even Ricky but according to Livermore he wanted to introduce his singing talent in Ricky’s “nocturnal bistro.” Perhaps, Livermore was unaware of the Latin theme in the club. Either way, Ricky appeared threatened by this man coming into his home and telling him how to speak, but instead of accepting the high class expectations forced upon him, he refused to give up his culture. He overtly rejected conformity and assimilation, and denied Lucy the opportunity to Americanize her husband. The Cuban won again. This episode also illustrated Ricky’s cleverness as a prosperous entrepreneur. He ran a successful business and was a convincing negotiator.

Desi used Ricky not only to defy conformity but also to challenge the censors. When Ricky got angry, he went into temper tantrums and he started speaking in Spanish. He sometimes even used profanity but, since most of the viewers could not understand it, no one complained, nor did the censors catch it. He got away with a lot in Spanish that he could not have in English. An example of this would be in a skit that he and the other cast members did on *The Bob Hope Show* in 1956. They performed an *I Love Lucy* parody routine with Hope. Lucille Ball and Vivian Vance played their roles of Lucy and Ethel, but Bob Hope played Ricky, Desi played Fred and William Frawley played the owner of a trained seal Lucy was using in an audition, Captain Blighstone. In this skit Lucy was once again attempting to get into show business. Hope then used racist jokes to dominate Arnaz. At one point the seal threw hoop around Desi’s neck. Hope asked if he had just come back from a “‘wetback’ luau,” to which Desi replied: “Mira qué tiene cosas el narizón, sinvergüenza, zoquete éste, carajo,” which loosely translated to: “This big-nosed, chump, cad has some nerve, hell.” Audiences could not understand him but they found amusement in the piece. Even critics reviewed the segment positively. Television critic Jack Gould praised it as “the broadest of farce but diverting fun.” 40 This again proved that although Hope thought that he had won, in actuality Arnaz was the winner. 41

Another example of Desi’s resistance against conformity was Ricky’s most memorable number *Babalú*. *Babalú* was first performed in episode 6, “The Audition,” and reappeared throughout the series. 42 Most Americans did not know that *Babalú-Ayé* was the Dahomeyan god of illness and disease, known to Cuban Catholics as St. Lazarus. A “white” Cuban aristocrat used Afro-Cuban influences in his performance. 43 Yet Americans did not seem to mind and were embracing tinges of Santeria and African culture without realizing it. He was not the one who first recorded it; that honor went to Miguelito Valdés. But Desi was the one who introduced it to white, middle class America.

Significantly, *Babalú* was in nearly every episode even when it seemed less than appropriate. One of these odd situations occurred in third season in “Tennessee Ernie Hangs

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43 Although scholar Ned Sublette argued that Desi failed in these attempts: “The black Havana dialect of the lyrics sounded fake in the mouth of Desi, a Santiago aristocrat.” 581, 534.
On.” The Ricardos and the Mertzes agreed to perform with Ernie, one of Lucy’s mother’s friend’s relatives, on a country variety show in order to win Ernie’s bus fare back to Tennessee, where he was from. They all performed as Ernie Ford and his Hot Chicken Pickers. Ricky, in farmer’s overalls, broke into a spirited rendition of Babalú with his conga drum. The group won the contest. Writers even forced Ricky’s culture into a barn performance!

In season 6, the last in the thirty minute format, Ricky’s Cuban-ness still appeared in the series. In the first episode of the season, “Lucy and Bob Hope,” Ricky bought the Tropicana and renamed it Club Babalú. He remodeled it, but still in a tropical theme. So who did Ricky have as the act on opening night? None other than Bob Hope. In a musical number Hope, Lucy, and Ricky performed, each with a separate part in the number. Hope tap danced and Ricky meringue’d. Hope commented that Ricky’s performance “set Cuba back one hundred years.”

The week after that episode premiered, “Little Ricky Learns to Play the Drums” aired. This segment effectively illustrated how Lucy and Ricky’s son, little Ricky, was a combination of both of their cultures. Lucy wanted Little Ricky to become something dignified, like a doctor, when he grew up. Ricky argued that he could be a drummer. Lucy replied that a drummer was good enough for her husband but not for her son. They finally agreed that Little Ricky should decide on his own and then they tried to influence him with toys such as a doctor’s kit and a drum. Little Ricky chose the drum, although it was not a conga drum but a drum with drumsticks.

Ricky’s culture was especially evident in the rich episode “The Ricardos Visit Cuba.” Little Ricky knew Spanish and now the tables were turned since Lucy butchered the language. Ricky jested with her, yet she did not appreciate it. He mentioned that she had made fun of his English for fifteen years. Lucy replied that Spanish was a foreign language and Ricky countered that English was a foreign language to him. “The way you speak it, it is to me too,” Lucy responded. Lucy was now vulnerable in the presence of Ricky’s family and had to impress Uncle Alberto, the patriarch of the family, who wanted Ricky to marry a Cuban girl. She had to convince him that Ricky had made the right decision. Lucy stumbled by calling Alberto a fat pig in Spanish, sat on his cigars, spilled punch on his light colored suit and broke his straw hat. After a disastrous evening, Lucy proclaimed that “Cuba may cut off America’s sugar supply.” At the end of the show Ricky performed in the Casino Parisien in Havana and sang “I’m a Lucky Guy” with lyrics like “In Cuba I’m a Cuban/ In the USA I’m a Yank/ Wherever I am I’m Home/ and I’ve got you to thank…In New York or Havana/ People make me feel I belong.” Ricky then introduced his wife, and son to the audience at the Cuban club. When Little Ricky joined him onstage, he addressed the audience: “even though Little Ricky was born in America I want to prove to you that there’s a lot of Cuba in his heart.” They went on to play Babalú together and Uncle Alberto finally accepted Lucy as part of the family, saying “anyone who’s the mother of a boy like that is all right with me.”

This episode again showed Ricky’s agency; it was his family, his culture that had to approve of Lucy. The American was essentially at the Cubans’ command. Lucy was the one

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who needed to impress her in-laws. Lucy also accommodated to Ricky’s culture in an episode in the fourth season when Ricky’s mother came to visit them. This may have had to do with Desi’s aristocratic background and seeking the respect and superiority that he once had, putting him back in a position where he had power, as he had in Cuba. Significantly, despite Lucy’s complaints about Little Ricky learning Spanish in “Lucy Hires an English Tutor,” little Ricky learned Spanish and had to teach his mother how to speak it. Little Ricky also played the conga drum with his father in the ending sequence. He was an American with a rich bicultural family. The audience was very accepting of this, perhaps because people saw Ricky becoming more assimilated, less like the “other.”

A depiction of Cuba that was not as flattering as previous ones appeared in the episode “Lucy Takes a Cruise to Havana” in the seventh season of I Love Lucy. Lucy and Ricky reminisced on their first meeting to gossip columnist Hedda Hopper from their suburban Connecticut home. Lucy went on a cruise to Havana with her co-worker, Susie McNamara, to find men. There they met their future husbands. When they arrived in Cuba, all Cubans played instruments and sang as well as drank rum, lots of it. This episode came as a surprise after a successful portrayal of Cuban life just one year before. Now Ricky’s culture appeared as a mix of stereotypes. Lucy was the one with agency in this episode, since it was she who convinced crooner Rudy Vallée to hire Ricky as part of his orchestra so they could be together. Although this particular episode did play up the stereotypes in certain aspects, Ricky’s culture still remained significant in the plotline and in the way the characters interacted with him.

I Love Lucy was not the only TV show to break away from the ideal of the white middle class family. During the 1950s and 1960s, 97% of families on television were white. Amos ‘n’ Andy, a 1928 radio show depicting stereotypical black characters, was the exception as it became a television show in 1951 with African-American actors. Ethnic serials, such as The Rise of the Goldbergs, depicted the lives of Jewish immigrants in a positive light. The TV Goldbergs premiered in 1949 and became the first successful television sitcom. Mama featured another ethnic matriarch of the Hansens, a Norwegian immigrant family living in San Francisco at the turn of the twentieth century. Both the Goldbergs and the Hansens dealt with the same issue of how to assimilate into American society. None of these shows had the lasting power or the invincibility that I Love Lucy did.

In the midst of the Cold War, not even I Love Lucy remained untouched by the taint of McCarthyism. In the fall of 1953, the public learned of Lucille Ball’s past affiliations with the Communist Party. Not long before in 1951, Philip Loeb, who played Jake Goldberg on The Goldbergs, was blacklisted for past affiliations with communism in the 1930s. The results, however, were very different. Desi and Lucille appealed to the public that she was only trying to please her ailing grandfather in the 1930s by registering for the Communist Party but never

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49 At this point, the series became a one hour show. It was also called The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour or The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show.
52 Jones, 13, 58-59, 15, 41, 43.
really planned on taking it any further. Lucille’s immense popularity and her relationship with television made her untouchable. Fans and sponsors supported her. Two months after the scandal broke, the *I Love Lucy* cast performed for President Eisenhower and others, including FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, in a CBS special *Dinner with the President*. On the flip side, Philip Loeb was not as fortunate. Although Loeb, like Lucille, denied his active involvement in the Communist Party, the sponsors for *The Goldbergs*, claiming he was too controversial, refused to back the show if Philip Loeb remained part of the cast. Loeb eventually had to resign for causing such a ruckus. After several years of unemployment, he committed suicide in 1955.53

Why did such similar cases have such different results? Lucille and Desi were the embodiment of postwar values. They exhibited Cold War values such as upward mobility and entrepreneurship. Timing might have been a factor as well. If this scandal had unraveled a year earlier, *I Love Lucy* might have suffered more.54 Yet there seemed to be much more behind this incident than those factors suggested. It seemed that gender and ethnicity played significant parts as well. Lucille effectively played the part of the naïve wife with her husband saving her reputation. Desi was the one who spoke to the press on Lucille’s behalf. He insisted that Lucille was “100 per cent American” and even compared her to Ike. He also added that they had voted for Eisenhower, demonstrating their devotion for the country.55 Lucille portrayed herself as the dainty, unknowing housewife who did not understand the consequences of her actions. Philip Loeb obviously could not have gotten away with playing the gender card.

Ethnicity was also a factor in why *I Love Lucy* did not suffer the same fate as *The Goldbergs*. *The Goldbergs* were Jewish. Jews have faced discrimination for centuries and this continued during the Cold War. The fact that Philip Loeb played a Jewish character could have been one of the reasons why he was treated as he was. *The Goldbergs* seemed to be an ethnic comedy while *I Love Lucy* was not. Lucille was an all-American redhead married to a light skinned Cuban. Desi used his experience as an immigrant to praise the opportunities that America had given him. He also told the press of his experience with communism in Cuba and his hatred for the system that destroyed his family. All of these factors contributed to *I Love Lucy*’s resilience in the face of McCarthyism.56

Desi Arnaz flaunted his differences and sought to incorporate his ethnicity into prime-time television. He knew that the show would not be as popular as it was without him in it and he capitalized on this. *TV Guide* reported that his cast members made fun of his accent on the set once and he replied, “Frankly, I can speak as good English as you do—but if I did, we’d all be out of a job.”57 He was a smart businessman and knew when to conform and when to resist.

**Speaking in “rumba tones”?**

Desi Arnaz’s ethnicity was a crucial aspect of *I Love Lucy*. Not only did his Cuban culture appear onscreen in most episodes of the show but it was visible in various print outlets that helped to reinforce his uniqueness and legitimacy. Generally, Desi’s ethnicity appeared in a less flattering light in print that it did on the air. Countless articles highlighted his “Latin

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54 Ibid, 52, 58.
55 Ibid, 56.
temper” but not all essays were so disparaging. Desi also used the media to his advantage by playing to the hearts of Americans. Arnaz became the embodiment of the American dream. This was one of the many reasons why this television show drew so many Americans and why Americans accepted *I Love Lucy* into their homes every week.

Ricky’s temper became a constant part of the show from the very beginning. Lucy created havoc, Ricky flipped his lid, the audience laughed, and Ricky and Lucy made up at the end. An episode that illustrated this theme was “Ricky Loses His Temper.” In this segment, Ricky and Lucy made a bet in which Lucy could not buy a new hat and Ricky could not lose his temper. In the end, Ricky did lose his temper but it was Lucy who lost the bet by buying a hat without Ricky knowing. The theme came up again and again. The most violent of these episodes was “Ricky Needs an Agent” in season four. In this episode, Lucy lost Ricky’s movie contract. Ricky lost his temper after hearing the news and started smashing vases and other bric-a-brac in the hotel room. He trashed the room, but the audience was ecstatic.

In print, Desi Arnaz’s temper appeared in nearly every article. A 1952 *New York Times* article described him as “voluble, volatile Desi,” and suggested that he spoke in “rumba tones.” Speaking of his success as a businessman, *TV Guide* stated that “all the success in the world can’t change the fact that he is an emotional Latin.” An article in *Look Magazine* commented along the same theme: “Desi has a Cuban temper which sometimes explodes on the set…” A 1953 *Cosmopolitan* article on Lucille described Arnaz as “the temperamental Latin,” but then went on to acknowledge his success by having such headings such as Desi Gets Credit for “I Love Lucy” and Desi is a Talented Producer. A *Cosmopolitan* article in 1960 described Arnaz as “a Latin American dictator, relaxing in sports clothes” and said that he behaved “rather like a dictator too—not a relaxing one, but a hard-working, demanding one” “flailing his arms like a Latin windmill.”

Those comments seem ridiculous and, to some degree, racist in today’s society, since they helped to reinforce the stereotype of the hot-headed Latin. But they were commonplace during the 1950s, and Desi-through Ricky-used such acceptance to his advantage by playing the part expected of him and capitalizing on it. This was illustrated in the main photograph accompanying the article “The Cuban and the Redhead” in *The American Magazine*. Desi pointed a finger angrily at Lucille as she displayed a guilty face with her fingers curled up to her chest. This not only showed Desi playing up to the camera but also revealed how Lucille played her part as well. This collaboration made the show the success that it still is.

As evident from that photograph, without Desi or Lucille the show would not have been so successful. *The America Magazine* wrote about the couple in 1952: “At first glance this oddly paired couple appears to have little in common, either with each other or with the plain family

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64 Frederick Christian, “Lucille Ball’s Serious Life with Desi Arnaz,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 1960, 70.
folk who find their weekly antics so amusing.” 66 Then it went on to explain *I Love Lucy*’s appeal: “The captivating thing about Lucy and Ricky is, we think, the fact that they hold a mirror up to every married couple in America. Not a regulation mirror that reflects truth, nor a magic mirror that portrays fantasy. But a Coney Island mirror that distorts, exaggerates, and makes vastly amusing every little incident, foible, and idiosyncrasy of married life.” 67 *TV Guide* also agreed that the show had a “universal theme,” the institution of marriage: “It is the single story line above all others with which the audience can most readily identify itself.” 68 The acceptance by the American public of this bicultural couple likely had to do with the color of Desi’s skin. If Desi had been darker, there would not have been an *I Love Lucy* show or an *I Love Lucy* empire. Also, Arnaz’s ability to pull the heart strings of Americans in the Cold War era with his stories of living the American dream contributed to Americans’ willingness to allow him into their lives.

In the press Desi openly praised his adopted home in several instances. In The American Magazine, he hailed the United States and the opportunities that he had available to him as an immigrant. Appropriately entitled “America Has Been Good to Me,” Arnaz gushed about his country and the power of the American Dream: “I thank God for America’s gift of free opportunity, her greatest strength and glory. I am humbly proud to be part of a land of plenty. Yet it took a long time for me to realize that I could be part of it, and so could be much happier and more secure than I ever was as an aristocrat.” 69 In another instance Madelyn Pugh Davis, one of the show’s writers, remembered when Lucille and Desi appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* at a testimonial in their honor. When Sullivan introduced Desi after Lucy, the Latin star said, “My first job when I came to this country was cleaning bird cages. We came to this country from Cuba and we didn’t have a cent in our pockets. From cleaning canary cages to this night here in New York is a long way. And I don’t think there is any other country in the world that would give you that opportunity. I want to say thank you, America, thank you.” Desi was teary eyed and at this point Sullivan broke away from his stoic demeanor and gave him a half hug. 70 There were many similar circumstances where Desi professed his allegiance to the United States and all of its ideals. This was another reason why Americans loved *I Love Lucy* and Desi. He represented stability and pride in an era of uncertainty.

The media’s portrayal of Desi Arnaz’s ethnicity was at times complimentary and at times belittling. Arnaz in many ways controlled the images that Americans saw. He created a persona that people expected and capitalized on it. He used his ethnicity to advance his projects and keep viewers fascinated. He was exotic enough to be interesting, but also similar enough to be safe to his viewers. Arnaz’s ethnicity and his use of his ethnicity brought millions of Americans to their TV sets every Monday night.

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**“Whatever Happened to Men?”: Ricky Ricardo and Masculinity during the 1950s**

In post-World War II America, men started questioning their roles in society - in both the corporate world and in family life. As television became the essential form of entertainment in the United States during the 1950s, Americans often defined idealistic expectations of masculinity, femininity, parenthood, and childhood on the basis of what they saw on the

66 Ibid, 27.

67 Ibid, 100.


television screen. Each member of a TV family played a distinct role in the new domestic comedies. Ricky Ricardo on *I Love Lucy*, one of the most popular television shows at the time, challenged the perceptions of white middle class American masculinity. Ricky’s ethnicity created an alternate, although safe, masculine ideal that the American public accepted.

Warnings of a decline in masculinity bombarded Americans in popular culture during the 1950s. This perceived crisis in masculinity was not new. Similar questions had arisen several times throughout the course of American history, most significantly during the 1890s. Urbanization and industrialization changed American life by reinventing conceptions of masculinity. Men struggled to maintain a balance between overly primitive masculinity and feminization.71 Then after World War II, men’s roles began to change again. In a pattern underway throughout the twentieth century, they began to drop the role of producer and to define themselves as consumer. Often confined to an office, the workplace seemed “feminized.” Men thought they had to take on “feminine” traits, such as teamwork, cooperation and social skills, in order to succeed in this white collar work. Instead of pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, which they were still expected to do, men had to work together to get a job done.72

Not only did men perceive themselves as feminine in this corporate environment, but popular media blamed women for the emphasis on domesticity and feminization. Author Phillip Wylie claimed in his 1942 book *Generation of Vipers* that women, more specifically their mothers, made men incompetent. “Momism”, he insisted, created feminized men: “The women of America raped the men, not sexually, but morally…” Mothers turned their sons into “sissies” and homosexuals. In Wylie’s mind, technology also contributed to this passivity, for he believed that women controlled television through censorship and consumerism.73

Since white middle class families typically lived in the suburbs, the men—breadwinners—had to commute to their workplaces, which made them increasingly absent from the home as they worked long hours in the corporate world. Dad’s role in the family diminished as the family became more consumer oriented with the mother in the leading role. To make up for this invisibility, the father appeared more than the mother on television, yet the crisis of masculinity was also apparent on TV.74

Despite having the primary role, men during the 1950s were incapable of running a household on television shows. Critics referred to them as “bumbling fathers.” *TV Guide* asked in 1953 “Whatever happened to men?” The article continued: “Once upon a time a girl thought of her boyfriend or husband as her Prince Charming. Now having watched the antics of Ozzie Nelson and Chester A. Riley, she thinks of her man, and any other man, as a Prime Idiot.” Instead of being the man of the house, he was now the “mouse of the house.”75 This article specifically referred to Ozzie Nelson on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and Chester A. Riley in *Life of Riley* but it could also apply to several other TV dads, such as Ward Cleaver on *Leave It to Beaver* and Jim Anderson on *Father Knows Best.*

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71 For more on masculinity in the 1890s refer to Gail Bederman’s *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917.*
75 Spigel, 60.
Ozzie Nelson was the most obvious example of the “bumbling father.” *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, like *I Love Lucy*, originated on radio. Ozzie and Harriet Nelson began their radio show in 1944. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which debuted on television in 1952, represented the Nelsons as a “normal,” wholesome family. Ozzie went from a bandleader to husband in the suburbs; his job on the show, if he had a job, never appeared in the show’s plots. Their real children, Ricky and David, played the Nelsons’ children on the show and Harriet played the part of the contented housewife who knew her role as wife and mother and wholeheartedly accepted it. The lives of the Nelsons seemed predictable. Ozzie was the authority figure and yet he always forgot things or misunderstood directions, which became the comic conceit.76

Television families never questioned the fathers’ authority. The fathers never raised their voices in anger towards their children or their wives. The programs focused on children and the trials and tribulations of parenting. The father’s and the mother’s primary identity was that of parent.

*I Love Lucy* was an exception to this pattern. Unlike Ozzie, Chester, Ward, and Jim, Ricky was not a bumbling authority figure. Desi Arnaz through Ricky Ricardo performed a different masculinity, a Latin masculinity that was exotic and acceptable to his white American audiences, since it did not threaten societal norms.77 His roles as father, husband, sexual being, Latin lover, and straight man conflicted with those of his peers and in turn made the show more engaging to TV viewers.

Unlike the other television fathers of the time, Ricky did not define himself, nor did others define him, as simply a father. Ricky and Lucy’s child did not play a significant role in the series until the last seasons. Ricky’s method of parenting was quite unlike the “ordinary” American’s. He wanted his son to be an all-American boy by playing baseball, watching boxing on TV and going hunting and fishing like most American men at the time, yet unlike most of his viewers and against Lucy’s wishes, his son had to speak and understand English and Spanish, so as to not neglect his culture. This was evident in his parenting skills from the time little Ricky was still an infant.78

An example of Ricky’s parenting came in “Ricky Minds the Baby,” an episode in the third season. Ricky got a week off from work since the owners were painting the club where he worked. He had planned to go a fight, play poker, and hunt—all very masculine activities. Lucy objected and insisted that Ricky use the week to do chores and spend time with little Ricky. Ricky agreed and went to tell little Ricky his favorite bedtime story, Little Red Riding Hood (Caperucita Roja). Ricky told a quite animated story in a mixture of Spanish and English as Lucy and the Mertzes spied in delight. Everyone, viewers included, seemed to enjoy this tender moment which showed Ricky’s gentle and safe side.

At the same time, Ricky was not confined to parenthood as Lucy was in this particular episode. Ricky insisted on taking complete control of the baby and gave Lucy the day off from her domestic obligations. Not surprisingly, Lucy did not know what to do with herself with a holiday. Ricky left their front door open and little Ricky snuck out into the hallway while Ricky

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77 This refers to Judith Butler’s theory of performative acts in which Butler argued that “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.” Judith Butler, “Performatives Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 3, no.1 (Dec., 1988): 522.
78 Pérez Firmat, 44.
and Fred were immersed in the boxing match on TV. In the end, Fred found little Ricky in his and Ethel’s apartment and brought him back to the Ricardo apartment before Lucy noticed her son was gone. Ricky, although not an attentive father, won and saved his masculinity and parenting skills from being tarnished. It was clear to the audience that Ricky’s identity was not just as a father since he had other hobbies and interests.79

Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Jim and Margaret Anderson and Ward and June Cleaver never raised their voices in anger but Lucy and Ricky were an exception. Ricky and Lucy argued like “normal” couples. They yelled and then made up at the end. Perhaps audiences accepted this because Ricky was Cuban and therefore had a stereotypical temper, but that did not explain Lucy yelling back since women were supposed to be submissive and not question their husband’s authority. Articles tried to explain the dynamics of the Ricardo/Arnaz household by saying it was foreign. According to the New York Times, “Both households operate in the Mediterranean tradition.” This meant that the husband ruled the household and did as he wished while the wife raised the children and knew her place in the background.80 The turbulent relationship of America’s favorite couple was not censored, surprisingly, considering the expectations of the perfect marriage during this time. The concern with family and togetherness conflicted with the story of Lucille and Desi, yet Americans were drawn to it.

Another aspect of Ricky and Lucy’s relationship that was very visible was the affection that they displayed towards each other. Ricky and Lucy kissed on the lips as couples usually do. They did not censor their displays of affection from the viewers. In fact, this was probably what made them so real and approachable to viewers. They ran into dilemmas that everyone could relate to and made up at the end. An example of this occurred when Ricky forgot their wedding anniversary (again), but in the end Lucy forgave him. They embraced and passionately kissed as if no one was watching. When Ozzie and Harriet showed affection towards each other it was rare. If there was a kiss, it was a peck on the cheek. They did not say that they loved each other and never told their sons how much they loved them on screen.81

Many of television’s dads in the 1950s were portrayed as asexual, having no interest in sex whatsoever. Ricky Ricardo defied that perception. Not only was Lucy pregnant on the series (and how else would you get pregnant without having sex), but the Ricardos’ bedroom played a large role in the series. Desi Arnaz even said in his autobiography that “the lack of romance and sex does not help any show. I think our audience could visualize Lucy and Ricky going to bed together and enjoying it.”82 Another dimension to this sexuality was the theme of a philandering Ricky, which was used repeatedly, at least once per season. Lucy suspected Ricky of having extra-martial affairs several times throughout the run of the show.83 This would have been inconceivable for Ward Cleaver or Ozzie Nelson.

82 Arnaz, A Book, 322.
83 This actually hit close to home since Desi Arnaz was a womanizer and did cheat on Lucille various times during the course of their marriage.
In the first season, Lucy read in the newspaper that a Cuban bandleader was “making cat’s eyes at his dancing mouse.” Lucy suspected him of being interested in one of his dancers. Ricky denied this, saying that it was merely publicity. Jealous Lucy did not believe it, especially when a piece of the dancer’s lacy dress ended up in Ricky’s coat. Ricky had promised to repair the dress since he had stepped on it and torn it during rehearsal. Lucy decided to spy on him and ended up in the musical number trying to keep Ricky and the dancer apart during the sequence.

In the second season, Ricky wanted to get Lucy some pearls for their anniversary. He contacted a neighbor’s wife who worked at a jewelry store and could get a discount for him. He went downstairs to visit her, while her husband was out of town, to talk about the pearls. Since he snuck around, Lucy suspected something and convinced Ethel to go on the painter’s scaffold to spy on them. In the end, after some chaos, Lucy got her necklace and all was well.

One last example appeared in the third season. In “Ricky’s Old Girlfriend” Ricky, Lucy, Fred and Ethel took a quiz to see how well they each knew their spouse. One of the questions was whether or not your spouse knew of your past romances. Lucy started naming names to get a reaction from Ricky, and Ricky brought up a name that Lucy had never heard before: Carlota Romero. Lucy got jealous and Ricky confessed that he merely made up the name. As coincidence had it, a real Carlota Romero was in town to perform. Ricky had known her many years ago in Cuba, when they performed together in a show. Lucy dreamt that Carlota came and took Ricky away and left her and little Ricky homeless and beggars. At the end Carlota turned out to be a plump woman, no longer attractive, and Lucy did not feel threatened any longer.

Something the other TV dads lacked was sexual attraction. Ricky had sexual appeal as the Latin lover. During the 1920s the image of the Latin lover recurred in Hollywood films, exemplified by Rudolph Valentino, who was of Italian descent, and Ramón Novarro, who was of Mexican descent. Before then, studios limited Latino actors to the “greaser” stereotype, of a dark skinned villain. The Latin lover, in contrast, assimilated easily. He had fairer skin, which made him exotic, yet desirable. Relations between the greaser and white women did not exist, whereas relations with the Latin lover appeared romanticized as seen on I Love Lucy.

Not only did Lucy constantly refer to Ricky as her “Cuban dreamboat,” but the show’s plot repeatedly cast him as the Latin Lover. For example, in the fourth season, Ricky auditioned for a movie role. This role was as a Don Juan-Latin lover type of character, and not surprisingly Ricky got the part. The Ricardos and the Mertzes went to Hollywood in order for Ricky to do the film. When they came back, the Ricardos’ elderly neighbor compared Ricky to Rudolph Valentino. Ricky was the new Latin lover. Another segment in which Ricky’s sexual prowess appeared—though in a backhanded way—showed Lucy and Ricky on a vacation alone together. Lucy wanted romance and Ricky wanted to go to sleep in order to wake up early to go fishing.

87 Benshoff and Griffin, 138-139.
“Whatever happened to that hot blooded Latin I married?!,” Lucy exclaimed. To which Ricky replied, “Latins have tired blood, too.”

Unlike the bumbling men on television, Ricky was the straight man to Lucy’s foils. He was the one who always thought ahead, knowing that Lucy would somehow wreak havoc. This was evident in “Lucy Learns to Drive.” In this episode the Ricardos bought a new car, and Lucy wanted to learn how to drive it. Ricky agreed to take her out for a driving lesson under one circumstance—she had to call the insurance company and insure the car. Needless to say she did not, and the driving lesson turned out to be a disaster. Luckily, knowing Lucy, Ricky had called the insurance company himself.

Americans took notice of the role Ricky played. Laura Bergquist of *Look Magazine* commented that critics loved the persona of Ricky Ricardo. One critic wrote “Reviewing *Lucy* every fall is like rediscovering America. It’s dazzling to find one TV show in which a husband isn’t portrayed as a perfect boob or grown up child.” Compared to Ricky, Ozzie Nelson failed as a man. He was inept and lazy. He did not adjust to this new postwar society of women, children, togetherness and consumerism. His family allowed him to think that he was relevant, but in this culture of masculinity, he was incompetent.

Gender roles were important in the 1950s. At a time when male roles were being questioned, Ozzie Nelson represented postwar societal anxieties. Masculinity was being redefined on television. Images of the bumbling dad entered American homes on a daily basis. Ricky Ricardo was the exception. He clashed with the expectations of white middle class American masculinity. His ethnicity helped to redefine masculinity by creating another form of masculinity that was new, interesting and exotic. At the end of the day his patriarchal power remained untouched, which was more than could be said for Ozzie. Ricky’s ethnicity, and in many ways his skin color, made him safe for American consumption and redefined what it meant to be a man in the 1950s.

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**Ricky Ricardo: Resistance or Conformity?**

Instead of completely assimilating into American society, Ricky Ricardo resisted the constant attempts to Americanize him and prevailed by incorporating his background into the Ricardo family life. Yet at certain times in the series, Ricky seemed to conform quietly without resistance. This pattern became more explicit when the Ricardos moved to the suburbs. Here he constantly had to negotiate his way between two cultures.

The suburban move came about halfway through the sixth season of *I Love Lucy*. There were thirteen episodes dealing with the suburbs. When the Ricardos became suburban dwellers, the plotlines minimized Ricky’s culture. The viewers no longer saw Ricky’s club, now called Club Babalú. The characters still jested about Ricky’s accent and Ricky had an occasional fit in Spanish, but other than performing the tango with Lucy for a PTA benefit or performing a Calypso number for Lucy’s Westport Historical Society, the musical numbers that were common in prior seasons disappeared.

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91 Bergquist, 75.
92 Gilbert, 160, 163, 152.
It seemed that Ricky’s assimilation was complete in the final episode “The Ricardos Dedicate a Statue.” Lucy wanted Ricky to dedicate a Revolutionary War statue and have him dress up in a period costume. Ricky refused to wear that “silly looking Yankee Doodle Dandy outfit.” He did not want “to be seen in those early American snickers.”93 In the end, he showed up to the dedication in the costume with powdered wig and all.94

Patterns changed as the seasons rolled by. During the sixth season his roles were smaller, but in the seventh season he was a crucial character once again and his culture surfaced once more. In the seventh season, the first episode viewers saw was “Lucy Takes a Cruise to Havana.”95 A few episodes later, Ricky rehearsed a dance number in their suburban living room with actress Betty Grable and her husband, musician Harry James, while contractors redecorated the club. In the Caribbean inspired dance number, “The Bayamo,” Ricky and Betty danced for television viewers in a lengthy four and a half minute performance.96

An episode in the eighth season showed Ricky having to defend his American citizenship. In “Lucy Goes to Mexico,” Ricky sang in Spanish for the USO in San Diego, along with French entertainer Maurice Chevalier who sang in French and little Ricky who sang in English. Ricky could not reenter the United States after spending the afternoon in Mexico since he had left his paperwork behind. A border inspector questioned Ricky’s American citizenship. Ricky declared that he was a U.S. citizen and that he had even served in the Army. When the border inspector replied: “Which army?” Ricky yelled back, “The American Army!”97 This illustrated Ricky’s desire to be different by still being Cuban but also his desire to conform by declaring himself an American citizen.

The last season, the ninth season, brought Ricky’s culture full circle. Not only did he perform the song “Cuban Pete” in Japanese at a geisha house in Japan, he also expressed his frustration with show business and his desire to return to Cuba.98 In the last episode, “Lucy Meets the Moustache,” Ricky, disappointed with his career in show business, wanted to move back to Cuba to run his uncle’s tobacco farm. Lucy found a letter in English that Ricky wrote to his uncle. He mentioned at the beginning of the note that it was easier for him to write in English now, since his Spanish had gotten a little rusty.99 This final episode suggested that Ricky had conformed in many ways but still struggled to maintain his Cuban identity. It seemed that he was conflicted about who he had became. He constantly kept trying to balance two different cultures.

93 Mispronouncing 'knickers.'
95 The sixth season (1956-1957) was the last season of the thirty minute weekly I Love Lucy show. The show continued on for three more seasons with the same cast in a sporadic hour long format instead of the weekly half hour format. These seasons have been referred as The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show, The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour and I Love Lucy Season 7, 8 and 9. More information on this episode is found in the thesis section entitled “The Homogenous 1950s?: I Love Lucy and Ethnicity.”
Although Desi, like Ricky, rejected constant attempts of conformity, in his professional life, he conformed. He became an accomplished producer and Desilu Productions took off. *Our Miss Brooks* in 1952 was the first television show he produced. Around that same time, Desi bought another company, which he named Zanra (Arnaz spelled backwards), to produce movies and rent equipment. Within the following years, Desilu produced *Make Room for Daddy*, and *December Bride*. Desi’s clever business tactics made him a success producing shows that displayed the idealized American life that he had long rejected.

One aspect of this idealized American life was consumerism. Consumerism made Americans even more similar than in previous eras, since Americans in general strove to be the same and have the same products as their neighbors. *I Love Lucy* reflected the consumerist resurgence in the 1950s. The idea of spending money was natural to Lucy. Nearly every show revolved around her buying a new dress, hat or stole. In the fourth season, Phipps Department Store wanted the Ricardos and the Mertzes to do a commercial to advertise their store and products such as dresses, shoes and mattresses. The whole plotline of this show was to create a commercial that advertised the store and show how convenient it was to shop at Phipps, since it had everything and anything a person could need or want.

Not only was Lucy spending money, but so were millions of Americans, and Lucille and Desi capitalized on the shopping spree. They used their personas to sell products. First they advertised their sponsors’ products, which eventually included Philip Morris cigarettes, Lilt home permanent, Sanka instant coffee, Golden Fluffo pure shortening, and Procter & Gamble’s laundry detergent, Cheer. Then they lent their names to various other novelty products. During the 1952 Christmas season, an *I Love Lucy* doll was a success. Shortly after Desi, Jr./Ricky Jr.’s birth, a doll celebrated the special event. The list of *I Love Lucy* items included a bedroom suite and living room set, identical to the Ricardos’, sweaters, lingerie, nursery sets, games, books, perfumes, and even drums. 

Although Ricky Ricardo often resisted conformity on the show by displaying his culture, there were various times where he found it more convenient and more profitable to simply conform. This was also evident in the off screen life of Desi Arnaz. He successfully negotiated a path between two cultures. He was Cuban enough to be considered exotic and different and American enough to be a valuable commodity to American audiences.

Ricky: The Male Buffoon?

From the vast array of merchandise to the never ending reruns, images of *I Love Lucy* are still prominent in popular culture. And scholars continue to consider the show and to reflect on its place in American culture. Feminist scholarship has widely accessed the character of Lucy, though Ricky Ricardo, ironically, receives less recognition for his impact on the show and its image of ethnic issues. But current scholarship on Ricky Ricardo and Desi Arnaz offers useful perspectives on the contributions to television and the society it reflected.

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101 “Mr. & Mrs. TV Show,” *I Love Lucy*, DVD, directed by William Asher (1 Nov. 1954; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005). This show was intended for broadcast on November 1, 1954 but did not air until April 11, 1955.
Historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. was critical of Ricky Ricardo in his book *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture.* Pérez argued that Ricky Ricardo “easily reinforced the dominant images: rumba band lease, heavily accented English, excitable, always seeming to be slightly out of place and hence slightly vulnerable, perhaps even childlike and nonthreatening.” He suggested that Ricky could only hold his own in Spanish when he was incomprehensible to the majority of television viewers. Pérez also used Ricky Ricardo as a metaphor for Cuba. He claimed that in many ways the United States created Cuba and in turn the United States created Ricky Ricardo. Both were seen as inferior, providing Americans with a perfect counterpoint: “foreign but familiar, exotic but civilized, primitive but modern, a tropical escape only hours from home in which to flout conventions, a place to live dangerously but without taking risks.”

Recent scholarship on Ricky has highlighted issues of masculinity during the 1950s. Elaine Tyler May argued, in her highly acclaimed book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era,* that fatherhood became the center of a man’s identity. She explained that fathers on television exercised authority over the home, which was evident in many shows of the era. She went to say that as soon as Ricky Ricardo became a father, he fully assimilated into white, middle class society. But countless episodes after Ricky became a father, I would suggest that this seems untrue, as his culture continued to distinguish him from others on the show.

As recently as 2002, Charles Ramírez Berg called Ricky a male buffoon. He described Ricky as emotional and simpleminded, and said that he served as the “second banana comic relief.” Berg explained that “what audiences are given to laugh at, are the very characteristics that separate him [Ricky] from Hollywood’s vision of the WASP American mainstream.” In other words, Ricky’s ‘otherness’ became the source of laughter for American audiences.

In Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg’s history of the American family, they described Ricky as the archetype of a “bumbling, clumsy fool and dreamer, taunted by his wife.” They continued: “ultimately it is she [Lucy] who is responsible for counteracting her husband’s harebrained schemes by providing bedrock of common sense.” That, too, is a curious assessment. Lucy was rarely, if ever, the “bedrock of common sense.” Ricky was the straight man, fixing all the problems that Lucy created.

Gerard Jones, likewise, seems to be quite confused about Ricky. He praised him in certain areas and then critiqued him in others. “Ricky is no bland, smugly knowing sitcom husband,” Jones wrote, “but a mercurial mass of cockiness, anger, self-delight, and stubborn authority, all made grotesquely funny by Arnaz’s accent and awkward delivery.” He praised Ricky for not being the same as the other dull husbands on television, but then described him as the male buffoon that scholar Charles Ramirez Berg argued he was. Jones then lauded Ricky for being the antithesis of Ozzie Nelson “and a couple of evolutionary steps beyond him” since all Ozzie was concerned about was his tutti frutti ice cream.

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107 Jones, 67-68.
108 Ibid, 95.
Some works dealing with ethnicity and Hispanics on 1950s television do not even mention Ricky Ricardo. Nina C. Leibman’s *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* argued that in films and television during the 1950s there was ethnic denial (an attempt to deny ethnic identity), ethnic repression (a character’s attempt to repress their ethnic identity), and an inferior portrayal of ethnic characters, meaning that they could not live in the environment with the “white” people. Where did Ricky fit into this argument? He did not attempt to deny or repress his ethnicity and he lived with his “white” wife in a “white” environment. Leibman used the example of the gardener, Frank, in *Father Knows Best*. His inferiority came through, according to Leibman, through his broken English, heavy accent and refusal to assimilate. Without the Anderson family he would have been helpless. This was not the case for Ricky and Lucy. Ricky would have been just as successful, if not more, without Lucy.

Although there are many critical and inaccurate analyses of Ricky Ricardo, there have also been many positive observations about Desi Arnaz and Ricky Ricardo. Scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat praised Arnaz’s autobiography, *A Book*, for its contribution to Cuban American literature and complimented Arnaz on not being a victim, but on taking advantage of the opportunities available to him.109

Douglas McGrath, writer and filmmaker, gave Desi Arnaz a glowing tribute in a *New York Times* article that ran on the 50th anniversary of the premiere of *I Love Lucy*. McGrath praised Desi Arnaz rather than Lucille Ball: “It was Desi who built Desilu, and it is he, along with—no less than—Lucy, who is indispensible to the show’s undying appeal.” It was Arnaz, he said, who “gave ‘I Love Lucy’ both a comic balance and an emotional base that are at the heart of its longevity.” Although, as McGrath acknowledged, Desi got the part of Ricky Ricardo because of Lucille Ball, “from that point on, every important creative decision was his.” Ball was never able to duplicate the success of *I Love Lucy*, despite countless attempts in television. McGrath argued that this was because those shows did not have “Arnaz’s taste and guidance.” Finally, McGrath praised Arnaz as a performer: “undervalued in his time, he was the only one of the four principle characters never nominated for an Emmy (as an actor—he won as a producer). Yet what he created in Ricky Ricardo was infinitely more advanced and complicated that William Frawley’s cheap grump.”111

All of these critiques showed that Ricky was a complicated figure for the time, and many still can not understand how he belonged to such a homogenous family culture. Although Ricky and Desi have been criticized on many levels, they have also, finally, been recognized for their contributions to American popular culture.

What happened to Desi and Lucille after *I Love Lucy*?

*I Love Lucy* ended in May 1957 and continued in a one hour format under the name *Lucy and Desi Comedy Hour* from November 1957 until April 1960. Although Lucille and Desi appeared to be a happily married couple onscreen, in both *I Love Lucy*, and the movie they made together in 1954, *The Long, Long Trailer*; their life together behind the camera fell apart. Desi realized this, “the more our love life deteriorated, the more we fought, the less sex we had. The more unhappy we were, the more I worked and the more I drank.” By the last seasons, Desi

109 Leibman, 165-166.
110 Pérez Firmat, 72, 76.
acted in, produced and directed episodes of *I Love Lucy* and had seven other Desilu series to maintain. Arnaz even hosted the ninth annual Emmy Awards on March 16, 1957.\textsuperscript{112} But emotionally he was a mess.

By the late 1950s Desi’s drinking was out of control. He assaulted an actor on a studio set and on September 19, 1959 was found stumbling drunk by two plainclothes policemen near a brothel. The officers were trying to help him into his limo when he lashed out at them. He was immediately arrested and jailed. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, after nearly two decades of marriage, divorced in 1960, as *TV Guide* indicated, “bringing to an end one of show business’s stormiest and most profitable marriages.”\textsuperscript{113}

After *Lucy*, Lucille Ball starred in the motion picture *The Facts of Life* with Bob Hope in 1960. That same year she appeared in the Broadway production *Wildcat* through the summer of 1961. Ball gave a great performance, but the show turned out to be a costly flop. Ball remarried, to comedian Gary Morton, in November 1961. Lucille returned to television in 1962 with *The Lucy Show* that ran to 1968 and *Here’s Lucy* from 1968 to 1974.\textsuperscript{114} Although both shows were successful, neither could match the success of *I Love Lucy*.

Although their marriage was over, their partnership and friendship were not. Desi produced *The Lucy Show* until his departure from show business in November 1962. Lucille bought Desi’s share of Desilu and became the president until she sold Desilu to Paramount Pictures in 1967. Like Lucille, Desi remarried. He wed longtime friend Edith Hirsch in 1963 and retired to a horse farm in Corona, California. Both Lucille and Desi approved of each other’s new spouses. Desi tried to stay out of the public eye, but he was reeled back in to produce the NBC situation comedy *Mothers-in-Law* from 1967 to 1969. He worked on his memoirs in the 1970s and published *A Book* in 1976. Both Arnaz and Ball appeared in several films with mediocre success. Desi died on December 2, 1986 after a battle from lung cancer and Lucille died three years later on April 26, 1989.\textsuperscript{115}

Desi never got the public recognition that his coworkers received. William Frawley, Vivian Vance and Lucille Ball were nominated for Emmys for *I Love Lucy*. Vance and Ball each won a statuette (Vance in 1954 for Best Series Supporting Actress and Ball in 1956 for Best Actress-Continuing Performance).\textsuperscript{116} Vance, though, said it was because of Arnaz that the series was so funny: “The three of us seemed so much funnier than Desi. The contribution that Desi made! The secret lay in his Cuban point of view, which he brought to three clods, who didn’t know what to make of it. That was the crux of so much of the laughter.” Even *The Hollywood Reporter* stated in 1952 that he was “the most underrated performer on network television.”\textsuperscript{117}

Desi Arnaz’s portrayal of Ricky Ricardo resembled many aspects of Desi’s life. He was a musical performer, married to Lucy, and Cuban as well, but the happily married part was only an imagined reality. Desi was not a perfect husband as he sometimes appeared on TV. He had his problems which included boozing, gambling, womanizing, and overworking. Onscreen he was the epitome of the 1950s all-American dream: a white-middle-class breadwinner with a homemaker wife. He was so convincing in his role that many thought and still think that Desi and Ricky were one and the same and sometimes refer to them interchangeably.

\textsuperscript{114} Andrews, 218. Harris, 260, 267, 286, 300.
\textsuperscript{115} Harris, 273, 283, 274, 322, 281.
\textsuperscript{117} Sanders and Gilbert, 56.
Conclusion

In “The Audition,” a 1951 episode of *I Love Lucy*, Lucy wanted to get into show business as usual and be a part of Ricky’s act. Ricky denied her the opportunity, although she eventually got herself in the show anyway. Ricky insisted that he wanted “a wife who’s just a wife”: a wife who cleaned the house, brought him his slippers when he came home at night, cooked for him and mothered his children. This segment illustrated the expectations of the 1950s. Women stayed at home with the children, did all the housework and were expected to be content about it while men were the breadwinners. Lucy constantly rejected her role as housewife while Ricky rejected Americanization; both sought to slough off the shackles of conformity. Lucy and Ricky’s unwillingness to conform captured the anxiety of 1950s Americans by presenting the idealized expectations and portraying the realities faced by America’s growing middle class.

*I Love Lucy* challenged and reinforced the ideal of white, middle class suburbanization. Although the Ricardos were avid consumers and moved to the suburbs, as many Americans felt pressured to do, they also defied the mythic ideals of a marriage. They fought, they yelled, they made up. In contrast to the images conveyed in other television shows, they showed how a real married couple related to each other.

Another aspect—the most significant aspect—of *I Love Lucy* that challenged conventions was that one of the main characters was Hispanic and made no attempt to hide it. In fact, Ricky’s culture was a constant theme of the show. But Ricky was not a threatening Latino; indeed, his very Cuban background was what made him intriguing and exciting. And so, in slightly subversive ways, he and the show took aim at conventional norms and stereotypes, and made difference just a bit more acceptable. Desi Arnaz’s convincing portrayal of the delightful Cuban bandleader changed the color of television and challenged the homogeneity of American life.

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118 “The Audition.”
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