HBO’s *Girls*
HBO’s *Girls*: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst

Edited by

Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally
Betty dedicates this collection to her millennial students—
you know who you are

Margaret dedicates this collection to her daughters, Lila and Serena
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... ix

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

*Girls*: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst  
Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally

Chapter One ...................................................................................................................... 10  
“All Adventurous Women Do”: HBO’s *Girls* and the 1960-70s Single Woman  
Katherine J. Lehman

Chapter Two ...................................................................................................................... 28  
Post-Modernity, Emerging Adulthood and the Exploration of Female Friendships on *Girls*  
Margaret Tally

Chapter Three .................................................................................................................... 43  
So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You’re in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That  
Nikita T. Hamilton

Chapter Four ..................................................................................................................... 59  
(Just White) Girls?: Underrepresentation and Active Audiences in HBO’s *Girls*  
Bokè Saisi

Chapter Five ..................................................................................................................... 73  
Hannah’s Self-Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism  
Marcie Bianco

Chapter Six ....................................................................................................................... 91  
Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in *Girls*  
Erika M. Nelson
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Girls and Growing Up: Self-Reflection and Creative Processes</td>
<td>Laura Tansley</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>Girls: An Economic Redemption through Production and Labor</td>
<td>Laura S. Witherington</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>Working Girls? Millennials and Creative Careers</td>
<td>Maryann Erigha</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>Queering the Single White Female: Girls and the Interrupted Promise of the Twenty-Something</td>
<td>Kimberly Turner</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>I Want Somebody to Hang Out With All The Time&quot;: Emotional Contradictions, Intimacy and (Dis)Pleasure</td>
<td>Melinda M. Lewis</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>Dancing on My Own: Popular Music and Issues of Identity in Girls</td>
<td>Chloé H. Johnson</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>“Occupy” Girls: Millennial Adulthood and the Cracks in HBO’s Brand</td>
<td>Chelsea Daggett</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contributors .................................................................................................................. 217

Index .................................................................................................................................. 221
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would, first, like to express their appreciation to all the contributors for their thought-provoking chapters, as well as their professionalism during the editing process. We’d also like to thank our families for “putting up” with our mental absence during this journey and all the people at Cambridge Scholars Publishing that made this timely collection available to all of you.
INTRODUCTION

GIRLS:
QUESTIONS OF GENDER, POLITICS,
AND MILLENNIAL ANGST

BETTY KAKLAMANIDOU
AND MARGARET TALLY

HBO’s Girls, which initially aired on April 15, 2012, had its season 3 premiere on January 12, 2014. Lena Dunham, the writer, director and star of the series, has created a whole new season of stories that have, in turn, been pored over and endlessly discussed in the media, especially on the internet as well as through social media. Girls is a member of an elite group of television series that has, since the early 2000s, attracted controversy and adulation, as can be attested to by the thousands of Facebook posts, tweets, comments and forum discussions on these various media. The proliferation of the internet and the capabilities for communication offered by the new social media cosmos, combined with TV’s new golden age in the early to mid-2000s, have undoubtedly led to a new way of approaching these fictional narratives. They have allowed for unprecedented freedom, on the part of their television audience, to express their feelings, criticize every aspect of their favorite show, and consequently create a global community of discussion, exchange, and examination of these programs. At the same time, the media critics of Girls, both online and in conventional news outlets, have themselves created a virtual industry of Girls criticism, analyzing and dissecting every nuance of the show.

It is within the cultural and political context of this spirited “chatter” in the media that this collection will be examining Girls’ first two seasons. Academic books usually take considerable time between writing and actual publication, and cannot, by definition, discuss issues that are occurring in real time, so to speak. On the other hand, scholars can benefit
from this time “lapse” or extension because they can step back and write, without being constrained by the very real deadlines that affect the lives of television reviewers and cultural critics alike. Hopefully, this distance can also allow for a more reflective and nuanced interpretation of a cultural work. By saying this, we are by no means implying somehow that journalistic writing, blogs and extensive posts in social media lack depth or sophistication; on the contrary, most of this collection’s chapters cite several articles and blog entries as bibliographical sources, since Girls is a relative new-comer in the US cultural arena and has been the subject of only a handful of published academic articles so far. What we hope to do in this collection is to benefit from these diverse voices in the media, while taking a “deep breath” and framing these discussions, as well as the series itself, in some larger cultural conversations happening around what place the young women on Girls find themselves in historically, and what this says about our own contemporary cultural and social landscape.

Girls and the Millennial Female

The current generation of twenty-something women in the United States are part of a new generation who are arguably constructing their identity as women in different ways than their mothers and grandmothers. Broadly defined, these young women are part of a “third wave” of feminism, which has had to respond to a changed set of economic, political and social circumstances. For example, young women today have achieved and, in many cases, far exceeded males in both educational and occupational terms. While this presents many opportunities, it also creates confusion in terms of re-negotiating traditional roles between men and women. In addition, by virtue of the explosion of social media as well as more conventional forms of media (film and television), these young women are exposed to a wide range of gender ideals, and have been able to craft a subjectivity that both converges with conventional images of femininity while at the same time possibly subverts them. Finally, despite the increases in educational opportunities and jobs, these young women have come of age during a period of deep uncertainty about the economy. This instability causes a problem for them in terms of prioritizing one particular life-course over another, whether job or family-related, since they cannot be sure they will be able to achieve it. Thus, this uncertainty helps to forge a subjectivity that is at once contingent and insecure.

In this framework, the popular representation of young women in recent film and television shows demonstrates how these tensions are being navigated. Sexuality and intelligence are often contrasted with one
another, for example, in these portraits, as smart young women are often shown to make “foolish choices,” in the name of trying to attain intimacy in heterosexual relationships. By contrast, the obvious intelligence of these young women can serve as a bonding agent with other young women, while at the same time offering a mechanism for them to find solace and comfort in the wake of sexual encounters that are difficult or confusing, or both. Oftentimes, these friendships are solidified over the act of commiserating over men, thereby creating a space where these young women are enriched by virtue of their capacity to relate to their women friends. In this way, these fictional female friendships serve as a kind of counterweight to the conventional image of young women competing over men.

One specific television show that has sought to portray intelligent young women who are caught up in these contradictions is the HBO series, *Girls*. Premiering in 2012, after receiving a flood of initial buzz and criticism, both positive and negative, this half-hour show is on during the coveted time slot of Sundays at 10:30pm. Created, written by and starring 26-year-old Dunham in the lead role of Hannah, *Girls* portrays the lives of four young women living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, two years after their college graduation from Oberlin College, an elite and alternative college in Ohio. The friends, Marnie (Allison Williams), Jessa (Jemima Kirke) and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), spend each week trying to support themselves financially with low-paying jobs in an urban landscape, and the friends deal with their struggles around relationships, careers, and friendships.

The first season of *Girls* was praised for its distinctive narrative vision in being able to depict more realistic images of female friendships, the female body, and dialogue that captured the ironic sense of humor of this generation of twenty-somethings. Dunham was dubbed “the voice of her generation,” while *Girls*’ season 1 won six Emmy awards, three Golden Globes, and a great number of other accolades. Nevertheless, the show also attracted a significant number of negative reviews, targeting mainly the “all-white” cast and the privileges most cast members enjoyed in real life. The great number of discussions *Girls* has instigated on a number of important issues (gender, millennial generation, employment, love, virginity, parents-children relationships and friendship,) led to this collection, which will endeavor to locate *Girls*’ place in terms of the recent descriptions of twenty-somethings as somehow being stuck in a new generational configuration where they are delaying the conventional hallmarks of adulthood: a steady job, marriage and a family. We will also try to ask, more generally, how *Girls* is able to reveal contemporary attitudes about young men and women, and whether there have been real
advances in how men and women relate to each other. Is the show positive, in terms of its portrayal of young women’s gains in society, or does it somehow represent a backlash, where young women are viewed as having lost something in the translation of the Women’s Movement in contemporary terms? We will explore this question through the narrative prism of race, gender and social class.

*Girls* has captured a great deal of attention from the popular press, and is a touchstone for a variety of debates about contemporary feminism, twenty-somethings and how this group of millennials has decided to leave open the question of adulthood. In sum, what we are hoping to achieve in this collection is to offer a variety of perspectives from different theoretical disciplines, as a way to capture why *Girls* has had such a profound cultural impact in the short time it has been on the air.

One question we will also be asking is if, by portraying the mistakes and tribulations of these young women, *Girls* is able to appeal to the sense of what is human in all of us. In other words, has *Girls* been able to tap into the experience that all of us who have ever lived through our twenties have had, and the pain and confusion that often accompanies this time of life? Like any number of “coming of age” stories, the prospect of reading our own life histories through the stories of these young women makes for compelling television viewing.

Finally, to the extent that there are particular stories to be told about the generation of millennials, and the specific ways in which they have to deal with not only coming after not only the second wave of the Women’s Movement, but also dealing with the challenges of continuing a social revolution that, arguably, has been stalled, *Girls* can offer a window onto how these young people are trying to cope with the debris of their parent’s unfinished business. Not only does the show speak to these young women’s confusions, but also to the larger cultural confusions that are very much in play as a result of having lived after a social movement whose outcome is still in question, even as many gains have undeniably occurred.

In the end, the stories on *Girls* are compelling not only for their common humanity, their ability to evoke our own “coming of age” narratives or their window onto a social and cultural movement which is still in progress, but for the stories they tell about the young women themselves. Writing about this kind of female perspective, Emily Nussbaum (2012) has noted that:

> As a person who has followed, for more than twenty years, recurrent, maddening debates about the lives of young women, the series felt to me like a gift. *Girls* was a bold defense (and a searing critique) of the so-called
Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst

Millennial Generation by a person still in her twenties. It was a sex comedy from the female POV, taking on subjects like STDs and abortion with a radical savoir-faire as well as a visual grubbiness that was a statement in itself.

This ability to hear the voice of a twenty-something woman, on television, at night, who is both generous and critical of her peers, is a revelation. Dunham has a deep empathy for her characters, and as a result, we as viewers have empathy for them as well. Like any good work of art, this ability to step into and empathize with the characters makes for a potentially transformative experience for us all and is, in the end, indeed “a gift,” and a surprising one at that.

The Collection

The first two chapters place Girls in a sociocultural context and trace its television and film precursors. Katherine J. Lehman’s “‘All Adventurous Women Do’: HBO’s Girls and the 1970s Single Woman,” argues that Girls can be seen as an extension of the 1960-70s “single girl.” Lehman claims that Dunham’s character shares many similarities to the dark heroines of films such as T.R. Baskin (1971), and Looking for Mr. Goodbar (1977), and a careful analysis shows how Girls is both a product of its specific time as well as a logical progression in representations of single women. Through a historical presentation of female friendship in film, television and real life, Margaret Tally’s “Post-Modernity, Emerging Adulthood and the Exploration of Female Friendships on Girls,” studies the bonds and intimacy the heroines of the show share and how Dunham uses these bonds to represent female friendships as multilayered and complex. These relationships, in turn, are seen not as a precursor to more conventional relationships that the young women will have with men at a later point in their lives, but are rather constructed as important enough to sustain and enrich them and indeed, serve as a model for relationships in other areas of their lives.

The next two chapters examine the controversy that Girls caused due to its representation of primarily white, middle-class characters. Nikita T. Hamilton’s “So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You’re in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That,” examines how Girls enters into discussions on feminism, post-feminism, race, and representations of young women. Hamilton argues that although Dunham is not obliged to represent black individuals on her show, she can serve as a paradigm of a writer who speaks best when he/she writes about what he/she knows best. On the other hand, Boké Saisi employs a qualitative
content analysis of Twitter responses to Dunham’s personal account (@lenadunham and to the official HBO Twitter handle (@girlsHBO in her chapter “(Just White) Girls?: Underrepresentation and Active Audiences in HBO’s Girls.” Saisi’s aim is twofold. First, she aims to demonstrate the issues that the lack of racial representation within Girls raised and second, explore how the viewers’ objections, which intensified mainstream media criticism, eventually led to the inclusion of an African American actor, Donald Glover, in season two.

Marcie Bianco, Erika M. Nelson and Laura Tansley examine the issue of authorship in Girls from three distinct perspectives. By first defining Hannah’s most memorable writing goals as instances of “satirical aesthetics,” Bianco studies the satirical tone of the series and shows how it establishes the “unique, and highly contested, brand of feminism” of Girls in her chapter, “Hannah’s Self-Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism.” Nelson’s “Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in Girls,” explores how Dunham’s work, her internet presence, and her recent celebrity status transform the figure of the auteur into “a collective and collaborative space of convergence.” Nelson argues that Dunham’s work embodies a sense of the classic auteur à la modern collective, recognized in 2006 by Time magazine as Person of the Year, who anonymously contributes to user-generated, online content via YouTube uploads, Facebook, Instagram, and blogs, while relying on Google searches for answers on how to navigate life’s most pertinent questions. Finally, Laura Tansley examines the Girls’ experiences of growing up, how they wrestle with identity through the construction of selves and stories of their lives, and how these selves are constantly re-evaluated, drawing attention to how we understand truth and identity, in “Girls and Growing Up: Self-Reflection and Creative Processes.” Tansley claims that considering and reconsidering the past, whether performed to understand, measure change, re/evaluate, or to forget, can encourage the creation of new selves. The author therefore uses specific examples from Girls’ episodes to prove how the heroines’ re-visiting and/or confronting the past helps them establish or re-establish their identity.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore millennials’ work issues. Laura S. Witherington’s “Girls: An Economic Redemption through Production and Labor,” offers a rich theoretical background on labor through a Marxist lens and addresses the criticisms Dunham has received regarding the show’s focus on a seemingly privileged group of educated young millennials. Witherington maintains that Girls differs from previous consumption-centered shows such as Friends and Sex and the City and presents an alternative attitude towards commodities, acquisition, and
work. For Witherington, while *Friends* and *Sex and the City* privileged consumption, *Girls* lauds production. Maryann Erigha’s “Working *Girls*: Millennials and Creative Careers,” offers a thematic analysis of millennials’ conversations about creative work in the first two seasons, and the impact of race and social class on the access of this generation’s youth to creative career paths.

Kimberly Turner and Melinda M. Lewis discuss the representation of sex and the questions Dunham has raised regarding the role of sex and sexual satisfaction for the female millennial. Using queer theory, Turner’s “Queering the Single White Female: *Girls* and The Interrupted Promise of the Twenty-Something” claims that the female protagonists in Dunham’s series try to exempt themselves from the reproductive culture which ensures what she calls “the futurity of the Child and the fantasy of wholeness,” allowing single white females to occupy the queer space of the sinthomosexual. Lewis’s contribution, entitled “‘I Want Somebody to Hang Out With All the Time’: Emotional Contradictions, Intimacy and (Dis)Pleasure,” uses textual analysis to examine the ways sex is portrayed between Hannah and two of her partners to discuss how Dunham represents intercourse, intimacy, and emotional conflict. Lewis argues that the sexual representations in *Girls* may privilege the display of the physical body, to the detriment of emotional access. The author maintains that, despite the realistic depiction of semi-naked and/or naked bodies, *Girls* does not sexualize the female body; instead, it is narratively deployed as being full of contradictions, challenging viewers’ expectations concerning these exact issues.

Chloé H. Johnson and Chelsea Daggett offer, in the two concluding chapters, if not “the voice,” then some voices of the millennial generation, particularly as they experience the ways in which millennials are represented on *Girls*, as millennials themselves. In “Dancing on My Own: Popular Music and Issues of Identity in *Girls*,” Johnson analyzes the ways in which music is selected and used on *Girls* as a vehicle for the millennial female audience to identify with the female characters. Johnson explores how music, used both diegetically and non-diegetically, allows the millennial viewers to enter into the “televisual text,” while at the same time helping them to form their own identities outside the text. The subjectivity of the young women on the show, and the reciprocal sense of subjective identity formation on the part of *Girls*’ millennial fans are constructed, in part, through the use of such contemporary musical artists as Robyn, Tegan and Sara, Icona Pop, and Santigold.

Finally, Chelsea Daggett also addresses the question of millennial identity as a member of this generation herself, in “Occupy” *Girls*:
Millennial Adulthood and the Cracks in HBO’s Brand,” by critically exploring how HBO tries to capitalize on such political movements as Occupy Wall Street. In Daggett’s reading, HBO was able to cultivate its status as a producer of “edgy” television shows by portraying the deeper reality for young millennials in this economy, as represented by the marginal jobs that the characters on Girls hold. The author claims that HBO enhances its own brand by directly challenging the politicians who criticize the Occupy Wall Street protestors as a group of privileged young people who won’t get a job. Girls takes this stereotype on and deconstructs it to reveal a group of young people who, despite their seemingly privileged status as graduates of a liberal, elite, private college, are nevertheless unable to attain the traditional “markers of adulthood.”

In sum, the chapters in this book have tried to ameliorate what has become an increasingly negative trend in American culture, which is the tendency to identify cultural artifacts like Girls in either wholly positive or negative terms. For example, one of the reasons why the HBO series has generated so much media and fan attention is that it has come to reflect a larger phenomenon in recent cultural criticism, which is now faced with a stark choice; as Michelle Dean (2012) of The Nation has noted, this choice consists of either being a fan of the show or a “hater.” Professional critics can no longer remain ecumenical by simply weighing in on the relative merits and drawbacks of Girls, but must either aver unswerving loyalty, which, as Emily Nussbaum (2013), has described, consists of “going native,” or alternatively, be “a hater,” who must denounce the show at every turn.

Dean (2012) has astutely pointed out that, just as partisan politics has become a disease in American politics, we are now living through an era in which cultural criticism itself is also forced to adopt an either/or attitude toward cultural touchstones such as Girls. This position of “hating” has targeted almost every aspect of Dunham’s background and professional life, and consists of seemingly endless tirades against her privileged upbringing, her narcissistic tweets, her supposedly easy ride to stardom as a result of her celebrity connections, as well as her recent acquisition of a 3.5 million dollar book deal, to name just a few. Behind this animosity is the larger and, for our purposes, more revealing, aspect of these commentaries, which revolves around Dunham’s fictional main character, Hannah Horvath. Hannah has become the “vessel,” as Dean observes, “into which everyone pours their hopes and dreams (as well as their fears and nightmares) for America, and in particular, for America’s young white women (2012). By stepping back and reflecting on not only the fictional universe of Girls, but the critical reception it has received, this collection
hopes to shed light on and more importantly, counteract the increasingly polarized atmosphere that characterizes the discussion of these young women in our cultural site.

**Works Cited**


**Notes**

1 According to our research, *Feminist Media Studies* dedicated its section of Commentary and Criticism to *Girls* in its 2013 second issue, featuring five brief articles and an editorial by Silva Kumarini & Kaitlynn Mendes (2013, 355-355).
CHAPTER ONE

“ALL ADVENTUROUS WOMEN DO”: HBO’S GIRLS AND THE 1960S-70S SINGLE WOMAN

KATHERINE J. LEHMAN

On HBO’s Girls, single women struggle with imperfect bodies, unfulfilling sex, financial crises, and daily degradations – a deliberate departure from Sex and the City. “I felt like I was cruelly duped by much of the television I saw,” creator Lena Dunham admits. Girls, she claims, speaks to the young women whose illusions were dashed upon moving to New York, who wear “mismatched sneakers” rather than Manolos and date slackers rather than millionaires (Frank Bruni 2012b).

While Dunham may share little in common with Carrie Bradshaw, her standpoint bears a striking resemblance to a much older predecessor: Gail Parent’s bestselling 1972 novel Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York. The fictional Sheila declared that life in New York looked nothing like a Doris Day film, and surmised that “Hollywood had been deceiving [single women] all these years.” Sheila lacks meaningful work, sleeps with unworthy men, and plots her suicide in intimate detail. The novel’s dark humor resonated so strongly with readers that fans “booed” the film adaptation for granting Sheila a conventional happy ending (Parent 1972; Pauline Kael, 1975, 85).

Sheila was one type of the “single girl” character who emerged in the media of the 1960s and 1970s. For every perky, triumphant Mary Tyler Moore, there was a character who failed to find fulfillment. Consider the 1977 film Looking for Mr. Goodbar, in which a barhopping teacher follows her sex drive to a violent end. Girls may be a distinctive series that speaks to the struggles of Millennials, but it also draws from established popular culture traditions that depict unmarried women as adrift, economically marginal, and sexually self-destructive. Historically, such images cautioned women against taking career ambition and sexual
experimentation too far, and portrayed urban singles scenes as dangerous, corrupting places. Yet these narratives also appealed to viewers seeking authentic depictions of their lives.¹

This chapter examines how Girls draws from 1960s and 1970s depictions of the “single girl,” even as it addresses contemporary concerns. Understanding Girls’ lineage enables us to place the show’s contradictions and criticisms in historical perspective. Like her predecessors, Girls’ Hannah Horvath struggles to reconcile feminist sentiments with her less progressive impulses, and expresses contradictory desires. And, much like the authors and filmmakers before her, Dunham has faced criticism for her narcissism, negative moral influence, and inability to represent female viewers in their diversity (Emily Nussbaum 2013).

**Girls’ Literary Legacy**

Although unmarried women have long been present in popular culture, “single girl” characters became prevalent in the mid-to-late 1960s, when young women began to move to big cities in search of employment and adventure. At a time when the average American woman married in her early 20s, expanded career opportunities and changing sexual mores made it possible for some women to delay matrimony. In her brazen 1962 bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*, Helen Gurley Brown urged women to seek pleasure and fulfillment on their own terms. She offered pragmatic advice for stretching one’s budget and navigating sexual advances, and even advocated workplace affairs in her follow-up 1964 book *Sex and the Office*. Brown subsequently transformed *Cosmopolitan* Magazine into a lifestyle guide, becoming an authoritative voice on the sexual revolution. Dunham has acknowledged her debt to Brown’s pioneering vision, both by tweeting a tribute of “wholehearted love” when Brown died in 2012 and basing her forthcoming book on Brown’s memoir (Rebecca Macatee 2012; John Cook 2012).

Brown’s notion of women as “single girls” lives on in the title Girls. Historically, this term was strategic, presenting the unmarried life as an extended adolescence bridging childhood and marriage. Calling adventurous women “girls” made them seem playful and innocent, minimizing their threat to traditional gender roles (Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett 1999, 14-15). In recent years, women have reclaimed the label “girl” as a means of celebrating their femininity, and punk feminists in the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s blended power and playfulness by calling themselves “grrrls” (Sarah Marcus 2010).
The “single girl” later became visible in television, in the breezy That Girl (ABC, 1966-1971), starring Marlo Thomas as an aspiring actress in New York, and the groundbreaking The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS, 1970-1977), featuring Moore as a producer in a male-dominated Minneapolis newsroom. Dunham reports that Mary Tyler Moore is one of her favorite series, and Girls’ pilot episode suggests that Hannah (Dunham) and Marnie (Allison Williams) often fall asleep watching Mary Tyler Moore reruns (Melissa Maerz 2013, Pilot episode). Like Mary, Hannah hails from the Midwest; Hannah also resembles Rhoda in her self-deprecating humor, half-Jewish ethnicity and frequent references to her weight.

While conventional “single girl” sitcoms in the late 1950s and 1960s offered optimistic visions of urban life, many popular novels and films were decidedly darker. In female-authored novels such as The Best of Everything (1958), The Group (1963) and Valley of the Dolls (1967), naive women set off for the city seeking adventure and romance. The Group, which chronicles the friendship of a group of Vassar graduates, was required reading for Girls’ writing team (Nussbaum 2012). These stories, which were adapted to film, chronicled multiple heroines’ struggles with heartbreak, abortion, addiction, and madness. In the 1970s films T.R. Baskin (1971) and the aforementioned Sheila Levine and Looking for Mr. Goodbar, single women engage in masochistic sex and even dabble in prostitution. Girls follows the visual conventions of these earlier films with its bleak apartments, unkempt heroines, and unglamorous sex scenes. While these 1960s-70s narratives served as cautionary tales that emphasized the dangers of women’s sexual and social liberation, they also channeled cultural anxieties about young women’s safety in the city. Experts warned that urban life subjected young women to mental illness and violent crime, and feared that women would lose their softness and femininity as they competed for dates in the smoky recesses of singles bars (Lehman 2011). But these novels and films weren’t wholly negative: just as audiences have applauded the authenticity of Girls, 1960s-70s viewers connected with these heroines’ dark humor and relentless sex drives (Ruthe Stein, Katherine Greenfield, and Terry Ryan 1977; Kael 1975).

Race, Class and the Single Girl

Even before its first episode aired, Girls came under fire for its lack of diversity. Critics complained that the stars all happened to be from privileged backgrounds, and argued that the series’ Brooklyn setting, realistic tone, and generic title demanded a more diverse lineup. Dunham
HBO’s Girls and the 1960s-70s Single Woman

(2011) defended the characters during a radio interview as being true to her experience as a “half-Jew, half-WASP” woman. Although I agree that Girls could benefit from greater diversity in casting, the series follows a tradition of depicting the “single girl” as white and middle-class and fearful of losing her privilege in an urban economy. Furthermore, the series cleverly emphasizes and pokes fun at its characters’ race and class privilege.

While Helen Gurley Brown’s writing spoke to women from humble class backgrounds, most media narratives have characterized single women as solidly middle class and college educated. Accordingly, the Girls are friends from Oberlin, an elite liberal arts college. Hannah receives financial support from her professor parents as she works at an unpaid internship; Adam (Adam Driver), Marnie, and presumably Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) also rely on familial income. When Hannah’s parents abruptly cut off their support in the show’s pilot, she is forced to find paying work and manipulate her way into more money. She laments her lack of financial resources: “I can survive in New York for three and a half more days,” she groans. Tellingly, Hannah’s parents make the decision not out of financial hardship but out of the desire to see their daughter mature, and to put their money toward more pleasurable pursuits like a lake house. Hannah’s reliance on her parents characterizes her as girlish, but their presence also provides the support and conflict characteristic of classic narratives. Mary Richards’ parents were a similarly supportive and irritating presence, living around the corner from their single daughter in Mary Tyler Moore’s second season. While the underemployed Hannah fears that her days in New York are numbered, she manages to survive through Marnie’s generosity, advance royalties from a publisher, and money she extorts from her friends and family. Girls is thus honest about Hannah’s financial needs, yet follows the implausibility of earlier narratives, which placed single women in apartments and fashions they couldn’t have afforded on their incomes alone.

Girls’ whiteness also follows established media conventions. With rare exceptions, “single girl” television series and films from the 1960s and 1970s featured Caucasian women. Mass media in that era aimed to appeal primarily to white audiences, and writers may have recognized that the life experiences of white single women and single women of color were very different at the time. According to journalistic accounts, unmarried African-American women faced segregated housing and bleak dating prospects in urban areas, and often found they had to tone down their sexuality to be taken seriously in the workplace. In contrast, white women sought liberation through emphasizing their sexuality, and media narratives
about white women centered on their loss of innocence and downward mobility (Dorothy Gilliam 1966; Ruth Ross 1967; A New Crop 1970). The rare depictions of African-American women in media often failed to depict their struggles: The television series *Julia* (NBC, 1968-71) featured Diahann Carroll as a single mother who worked as a nurse and lived harmoniously in an all-white neighborhood. While some viewers admired Julia’s pleasant, respectable image, many black critics accused the show of minimizing real-life racial conflicts (Aniko Bodroghkozy 1992). Jewish and white ethnic women did factor into 1970s media, often playing promiscuous characters – Rhoda, for example, provided a brash counterpart to the morally upstanding Mary. While Dunham has contributed to the representation of Jewish women on television, she claims she strategically avoided trying to depict the experiences of women of color (Dunham 2011). Some critics actually applauded Dunham’s decision to avoid superficial diversity by creating token characters. One critic argued that *Girls’* homogeneity was integral to the series premise: “The world of the show was small because the world of its characters was small” (Laura Bennett 2013).

Despite its seeming lack of diversity, *Girls* seizes opportunities to illuminate its characters’ privilege. In one memorable scene of season one’s episode four, “Hannah’s Diary,” blonde, British Jessa (Jemima Kirke) is working as a nanny and takes her employer’s daughters to the park. There, she begins chatting with other nannies, mostly women of color, and attempts to rally them into unionizing. The nannies initially mistake Jessa for a young mother, and her claim that “I’m just like all of you!” is played for humor – especially when Jessa’s grandstanding causes her to lose track of her mischievous charges. Similarly, in “Vagina Panic” (season 1, episode 2), when Hannah casually confesses to her gynecologist that she sometimes wishes she had HIV, the Indian doctor gently chastises her, reminding her of the less privileged women who contract and die of AIDS every day.

Although interracial romances were rarely depicted in 1960s-70s narratives about single women, people of color often represented excitement and danger for the sheltered white women who made their way into the city (Lehman 2011). Hannah and her friends use their relationships with people of color to broaden their experience and prove their liberalism. The second season introduced comedian Donald Glover as Hannah’s short-term boyfriend, Sandy. Hannah is frustrated by Sandy’s conservative political leanings, and the relationship fizzes when she tries to educate him on racial politics. In a scene designed to reveal Hannah’s “serious ignorance” about race and class, Sandy accuses Hannah of
fetishizing him. “White girls” like Hannah, he claims, are eager to date a “black guy” and venture into dangerous parts of town as rites of passage, but then can’t deal with who he really is (season 2, episode 2). For sheltered Shoshanna, people of color provide a welcome escape from her relationship with curmudgeonly Ray (Alex Karpovsky). In “It’s Back” (season 2, episode 8), she is thrilled at a chance meeting with party girl Radhika (Anjili Pal), whom she describes “the richest Hindi I know,” and expands her sexual experience by making out with a Latino doorman.

Women at Work

In many earlier narratives, the “single girl” was middle class and financially solvent, but faced barriers to full employment or realization of her talent. Even those in glamorous career fields were relegated to secretarial or caregiving roles. Mary Richards may have been an associate producer, but she often performed secretarial duties at a lower wage than a secretary would earn (Judy Klemesrud 1973b). Marlo Thomas’ character in That Girl performed odd acting jobs, including impersonating a mop and dressing up as a chicken. Although college educated, Sheila Levine struggled to rise above the typing pool; the disjuncture between her talent and the available jobs strengthened her suicidal urges.

At the beginning of Girls, aspiring writer Hannah leaves her unpaid internship for a short-lived secretarial job, where her main tasks appear to be word-processing and breaking down boxes. She later works the coffee counter at Café Grumpy alongside Ray, who is the manager. Although she achieves her dream of becoming a paid writer by the second season, the publisher’s demands on her schedule and sanity send her into a downward spiral. Her friend Jessa, who disdains traditional work schedules, trades more on her charm than her childcare expertise when working as a nanny. Only Marnie has a seemingly stable, glamorous career in the arts world, but her sudden layoff and unfruitful job hunt in season two prompt her to flaunt her sexuality in a hostess job.

The women’s downward mobility and underemployment, it seems, is motivated by the elitist sentiment that average jobs are beneath them. Yet, the series is careful to situate their employment struggles as characteristic of post-recession New York. Hannah refers to the “crazy” economy in Girls’ opening dialogue, explaining to her mom that “all my friends get help from their parents.” Jessa’s employer is filming a documentary about formerly rich people who are now homeless, and her husband is unemployed. Ray bemoans his $50,000 in student loans, and despite his
steady employment is essentially homeless, living out of his car (episodes 1.01 and 1.03).

Because of their economically fragile state, the women attach themselves to wealthier men and manipulate their way into paying the bills. When Jessa first meets venture capitalist Thomas John (Chris O’Dowd) at a bar (“Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too,” season 1, episode 8), she finds him distasteful but allows him to pick up the tab. “Thanks for handling the check,” she announces, motioning the bartender to come over. This aspect, too, is characteristic of single-woman narratives: Helen Gurley Brown’s writings advised women to supplement their income through dating wealthy men, and historian Kathy Peiss (1986) has identified a practice of “treating” – trading one’s company for gifts from men – among young working women in early 1900s New York. Furthermore, women in 1970s narratives traded on their youth and beauty, often stumbling into situations akin to prostitution. Marnie finds herself in this position when she realizes that artist Booth Jonathan (Jorma Taccone) perceives her not as his girlfriend but as sexy hired help.

Of course, “marrying up” could solve a single girl’s financial troubles; even Brown (1962) bragged about her successful marriage. In Girls, this is most evident as the newly unemployed Jessa falls for Thomas John, giving up her freedom for a stable life in an apartment with a $10,000 throw rug. Thomas John later accuses her of marrying him for money and offers her cash in exchange for a quick divorce. Although Jessa seems deeply hurt by his rejection, she leaves with $11,500 (“It’s A Shame About Ray, season 2, episode 4). Hannah spends a weekend with a stranger in an upscale brownstone, fantasizing about living in material luxury, in “One Man’s Trash” (season 2, episode 5). Marnie finds ex-boyfriend Charlie (Christopher Abbott) irresistible when he becomes the head of a successful software company; according to Dunham (Inside the Episode #10, 2013)², she is attracted to both his money and his masculine power. Shoshanna, meanwhile, chides Ray for relying on her for housing. These plotlines reveal both the women’s monetary need but also their desire to be financially supported by men.

As young women in low-wage work, Hannah and her friends are often subject to sexual harassment. Harassment was a common theme in earlier “single girl” narratives, as women both deflected unwanted advances and pursued flirtatious and romantic relationships with their bosses. Male employers on That Girl found Thomas’ character irresistible, and her sexual predicaments were played for laughs. Mary Richards’ older boss often crossed the line, dropping by her apartment or complementing her physique (Lehman 2011). When the legal concept of sexual harassment
HBO’s *Girls* and the 1960s-70s Single Woman

was developed in the mid-1970s, many critics feared that sexual harassment laws would take all the fun and flirtation out of the workplace. Popular media suggested sexual banter could add “spice” to the workplace and professional women were capable of protecting themselves against advances, a philosophy in line with Brown’s brand of female empowerment (Carrie N. Baker 2003). For example, career-woman action series, such as *Charlie’s Angels* (ABC, 1976-1981) featured single women humoring an off-color boss and using their sexual wiles to solve cases.

*Girls* acknowledges the realities of sexual harassment, even as its heroines seem to invite flirtations. Hannah is clearly uncomfortable when her jovial older boss Rich massages her breasts, and surprised by her coworkers’ blithe reaction to the practice. The women commiserate with her discomfort but assure her “you’ll get used to it.” For them, putting up with a “touchy” boss allows them workplace flexibility – her coworkers are older women who perhaps, because of their own class status as working-class women, haven’t been as sheltered as Hannah. When Hannah realizes that complaining to her boss would betray her colleagues and place greater scrutiny on her work performance, she turns to Jessa for advice. Jessa insists most women find sexual harassment erotic and suggests Hannah seize the reins and “hump” her employer. “Admit it, you’re sort of flattered,” she says (“Hannah’s Diary” (1.04); “Hard Being Easy” (1.05)).

Hannah does proposition her older boss – both so she can rack up life experiences for her memoir, but also, we suspect, so she can gain power and leverage in the workplace. Her boss is both shocked and amused by her behavior, denying her request for an affair and ignoring her attempt to extort him for harassment. Hannah’s embarrassment leads her to quit her job in “Hard Being Easy,” telling her friends she left due to a “sex scandal.”

Jessa, meanwhile, maintains a flirtatious relationship with her employer’s husband, smoking pot with him after the kids have gone to bed and accidentally inviting him to a party. She draws the line at an affair, and the tensions between them cause her to quit her nanny job. Marnie, meanwhile, invites male customers’ attention as a hostess, wearing skimpy shorts and suspenders that emphasize her breasts; her love interest, Booth, rescues her from leering customers but ultimately treats her as a sex object. These postfeminist women recognize harassment when they see it, and enjoy skirting the rules, but their efforts to seize control through sexuality rarely work in their favor.
Sexuality and Self-destruction

The moralistic tone of earlier single-woman narratives often equated sexual experimentation with danger. Women who lost their virtue typically were prey to assault, losing their sanity and even their lives. Case in point: the wayward woman in the 1960’s Where the Boys Are who mistook an affair for true love was both date-raped and hit by a car as punishment. As sexual mores changed and virginity loss became less of an issue, heroines took greater sexual risks and followed dangerous impulses. The suicidal Sheila Levine has sex with a cocaine addict who admits to finding her death wish sexy. Swinging single Theresa Dunn (Diane Keaton) in Looking for Mr. Goodbar takes increasingly greater risks in her search for a fix, getting hooked on drugs and inviting strangers back to her apartment. In one scene, a lover (played by Richard Gere) swirls around her with a switchblade in a dance she finds equally frightening and erotic. In the film’s closing scenes, she yells “do it!” as she is stabbed repeatedly by a lover she just met. These violent media narratives correlated to real-life journalistic accounts from the 1970s: experts claimed young unmarried women were prone to suicide, and single women admitted to endangering their own safety out of boredom and desperation. Theresa’s story was based on a real-life murder, in which journalists portrayed New York as a violent place in which thrill-seeking women were assaulted by men they brought home (Jack Olsen 1971; Klemesrud 1973a; Leslie Maitland 1974).

Girls, of course, takes a less serious tone, yet Hannah and her friends are thrill-seekers who willingly take risks and indulge in masochistic sex. We are introduced to Hannah’s darker side in the second episode, in which she enters an STD test clinic half-hoping she has HIV. “If you have AIDS, there’s a lot of stuff people aren’t going to bother you about,” Hannah muses. “Maybe I actually am not scared of AIDS... Maybe what I really am is wanting AIDS.” The exasperated doctor blames Hannah’s remarks on her age, wryly remarking, “You could not pay me enough to be 24 again.” The scene reveals the quirks of Hannah’s character, and the pressures of being in one’s early 20s. However, it also echoes earlier narratives that equated single women’s sexuality with self-destruction. Hannah is taken aback when she learns she has HPV, receiving the diagnosis when she is dressed in black gothic clothing and dark eyeliner. “I have pre-cancer,” she moans. Ultimately her sexual risk-taking becomes a badge of pride, as Hannah embraces Jessa’s maxim that “all adventurous women” have HPV (“Vagina Panic,” and “All Adventurous Women Do”).
The women’s dark impulses are also evident in the masochistic relationships they have with men. Hannah finds Adam’s dark desires both off-putting and alluring. As Katie Roiphe’s 2012 *Newsweek* article about working women’s sex lives suggests, Hannah finds it erotic to cede control and mimic powerlessness. When a conversation about her bleak job prospects in the pilot becomes a prelude to sex, Adam addresses her as a professional woman who needs to be humbled: “You modern career woman, I know what you like. You think you can just come in here and talk all that noise?” he grunts. “Um, no?” Hannah answers, somewhat confused.

Hannah’s sex scenes, which often involve her taking orders and looking awkward and expressionless, have been likened to rape. Dunham admits there’s a violent element, claiming she once had to reshoot a sex scene because it looked like she was being murdered (Team Coco 2012). *Girls* does depict Adam acting out desires in the absence of consent: in one scene, he urinates on Hannah in the shower as she screams. In another, the inebriated Adam orders new girlfriend Natalia (Shiri Appleby) to crawl into bed, an encounter that ends with him ejaculating on her breasts as she protests. While some critics identified these aggressive scenes as rape, Dunham claims she intended them as tragic miscommunications between couples and “left it up to the audience to determine what happened” (Amanda Hess 2013; Glenn Whipp 2013; Inside the Episode #9 2013). These controversial sex scenes could reflect the mainstreaming of BDSM and “raunch culture,” in which young women willingly participate in pornography and self-objectification as a means to empowerment (Ariel Levy 2006).

Hannah’s friends also seek danger in sex: Marnie, who is bored with boyfriend Charlie’s predictability, later sleeps with edgy artist Booth Jonathan. As foreplay, Booth locks her in an art installation where she is surrounded by video images of suffering. Marnie begs to be released but emerges from her torture chamber with renewed sexual vigor, declaring Booth to be “brilliant.” Shoshanna finally loses her virginity to a man who scares her: as she initially mistook Ray for a stalker and hobbled him with her self-defense moves (“Bad Friend” (2.03); “Welcome to Bushwick” (2.07)).

Male stalkers are a consistent concern in narratives of urban singles life, and they factor prominently in *Girls*. At her wedding (“She Did,” 1.10), Jessa jokes that she initially found her new spouse “creepy” and was prepared to call the Special Victims Unit when he showed up at her door. When Hannah breaks up with Adam, he becomes brooding and unpredictable, causing Hannah to label him as a “sociopath” and potential
Chapter One

murderer. Adam later uses a spare key to break into her apartment, his erratic behavior and laughter prompting Hannah to call 911. Dunham says she “wanted the audience to feel that there was a chance he was going to go insane.” By the time Adam’s sanity is established, he’s being led away in handcuffs (“I Get Ideas,” 2.02; Inside the Episode #2, 2013).

Hannah’s downstairs ex-junkie neighbor Laird (Jon Glaser) is also a shadowy figure, trailing her when she experiments with drugs. Hannah intentionally snorts cocaine for the sake of a good essay, and Jessa is revealed to be a former heroin addict who dropped out of college to enter a rehabilitation program (“Bad Friend” (2.03); “It’s a Shame About Ray” (2.04)). Even the more cautious Marnie and Shoshanna accidentally ingest strong drugs in Girls’ first season. These drug trips are played for comedy, and twice result in bringing couples together: thus, solidifying the link between risk-taking and romance.

Although the women bravely claim urban space as their own – spending the night with strangers, riding the subway solo, starting fights at a party – they do so with awareness of the risks they take. Hannah spends a weekend with a stranger but hesitates before entering his home, in “One Man’s Trash” (2.05). “You’re basically a complete stranger to me so, you know, I could be putting myself in a Ted Bundy situation,” she says. “He also looked handsome, clean, and probably had a brownstone.” Ultimately she is lured in by the lovely architecture. According to Dunham, women like Shoshanna fear “being raped and murdered” in industrial Bushwick, but are willing to venture there for a warehouse party (Inside the Episode #7, 2013).

Like earlier narratives, Girls also suggests that the city puts young women in psychological as well as physical danger. Popular culture has long connected urban single women with madness – a character in The Best of Everything becomes obsessed with a lover and falls from his balcony; Valley of the Dolls ends with one character committing suicide and the others addled by addiction; Theresa in Goodbar becomes unhinged and unable to care for herself before her violent demise. Hannah’s descent into mental illness, then, is a sympathetic portrayal of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and further equates female independence with isolation and madness. Hannah hints at her perilous mental state in season one’s episode 6 (“The Return,”) telling her parents, “I feel like a delusional, invisible person half the time,” and describing life in the city as frightening and lonely.

Ultimately, social isolation and writer’s block prompt Hannah to seize control of her life through obsessive counting and self-mutilation; that she punctures her eardrum is particularly tragic, as her hearing loss further
isolates her and dims the sensory experience so central to her writing. Dunham hints at the universality of Hannah’s breakdown, explaining, “Everybody has had that feeling of wanting to hide a thought process that was shameful to them” (Inside the Episode #8, 2013). Marnie, too, has a breakdown of sorts, becoming depressed and losing her social graces after losing her job. Even Jessa, beneath her confident exterior, is highly unstable and is prone to disappear when life becomes too much to handle.

**Modernity vs. Tradition**

In the season two finale (“Together,”) the shattered Hannah likens her life to picking up shards of glass on her own: no one cares if she gets hurt. Yet, it is ultimately Adam – not her exasperated parents or increasingly distant friends – who sees Hannah in distress over FaceTime and races heroically across the city to rescue her. “Adam running to Hannah was the only solution,” Dunham declares. “He needs to get his woman” (Inside the Episode #10, 2013). In a parallel plotline, Marnie reunites with boyfriend Charlie, who responds to her longing and need for him. Some critics found this romantic twist unexpected and jarring, too traditional for such an unconventional series (Michael Slezak 2013; Kaitlyn Phillips 2013). However, this interplay between tradition and modernity has long been a part of single-woman narratives. Typically, film and television characters pursued independence yet only found true happiness when they settled down with a steady boyfriend or husband. Such narratives appealed to the widest range of viewers – and managed to celebrate the singles life without undermining marriage.

Although Dunham has defined herself as a feminist, some critics complain the series is detrimental to women’s rights. Commenting on Girls’ bleak sex scenes, a New York Times columnist complained, “Gloria Steinem went to the barricades for this?” (Bruni 2012a) Interestingly, similar critiques were levied at Girls’ predecessors in the wake of the feminist movement: critics felt that the single characters in TV and film were too sexualized or provided false images of women’s progress in the workforce, and questioned the ability of these characters to represent viewers’ diverse needs and desires. Even Mary Richards, now remembered as a feminist heroine, was seen as too deferential and subordinate when Mary Tyler Moore aired in the early 1970s (Ellen Willis 1969; Diane Rosen 1971; Susan Douglas 1994).

At times, Girls presents female empowerment and independence as harmful to relationships. Back in the 1970s, experts feared that feminism had ruined relationships, making women aggressive and unfulfilled and
leaving men feeling inadequate and impotent (Karen Durbin 1972). Girls offers similar sexual dynamics. While most critics comment on Hannah’s mistreatment by Adam, Dunham seems more sympathetic toward Adam and the damage Hannah does to him, epitomized by his being hit by a car during a heated argument. When the ailing Hannah allows herself to be rescued by Adam, she finally “shows up” for him, Dunham explains. She explains Adam’s aggressive sexual impulses as “armor” for his vulnerability (Inside the Episode #9, 2013). Marnie and Charlie’s relationship suffers from a gender imbalance at the beginning: Marnie is repelled by Charlie’s feminine qualities, but his reclamation of masculine power draws her back into the relationship in a more subordinate position (Inside the Episode #10, 2013). In Girls’ world, relationships heal when women allow men to take charge.

Furthermore, Girls suggests that single women lust for adventure but truly desire marriage and stability. As a married employer tells the bohemian Jessa in “Leave Me Alone” (1.09): “Your dreams are not what you thought they’d be.” During her cocaine trip, Hannah admits to wanting to be married, even writing her wishes on the walls. She spends a licentious weekend at stranger Joshua’s upscale home, admitting she longs for the stability and material wealth he symbolizes (Inside the Episode #5, 2013). Despite her aversion to clingy Charlie, Marnie seems unmoored without a monogamous relationship and tries to push the edgy Booth into a commitment. Even bohemian Jessa seeks a stable father figure, a quest that fuels her hasty marriage to Thomas John. Jessa is revealed to be a lost soul who is “looking for a sense of home” (Inside the Episode #7, 2013). As conservative magazine Christianity Today interpreted the show’s message: “For all the vast economic and cultural changes that have rewritten the script of womanhood, there is one truth we can’t shake: We are made for relationship. […] We discover our truest selves only in connection to others, in the bonds of friendship, family, marriage, and civic and faith communities” (Katelyn Beaty 2013).

Girls is both daring and traditional in its take on reproductive rights. In the second episode, Jessa schedules then skips out on an abortion appointment, causing the women to reflect on their desire for motherhood. With a playground as her backdrop, rebellious Jessa announces a plan to have children “with many different men of different races”; in “Vagina Panic,” Marnie expresses fears that she is infertile and can’t fulfill her lifelong dream of motherhood. “I was put on this planet to be a mother,” she insists. These conversations counter the episode’s somewhat cavalier approach to abortion – a procedure that becomes unnecessary when Jessa gets her period.
Dunham’s decision to address abortion in her series’ second episode is a gutsy move, consistent with her self-definition as a “rabid feminist” (Whipp 2013). Some viewers have also found feminist sentiment in Dunham’s comfort with displaying her nude body. Gloria Steinem herself praised the series for its naturalism: “I am so relieved to see real people saying real words and wearing real clothes,” she said (Jennifer Vineyard 2013). Traditionally, the “single girl” was depicted as slim and beautiful, the object of male viewers’ desire; less attractive women were her best friends and sidekicks. Network television had strict restrictions on nudity, and even racy films like *Sheila Levine* and *Goodbar* weren’t as revealing as *Girls*. Dunham reverses the traditional formulas by placing herself at the center of the narrative and putting her imperfect body on display. She also resists the tendency for single characters to dress in trendsetting fashions or sport a wardrobe improbable on a working woman’s salary. Instead, she adorns her body in ill-fitting thrift-store fashions. Hannah does fit the model of the chubby, self-deprecating Jewish girl but resists the makeover trope evident in most media narratives (even Rhoda lost weight and won a beauty pageant in *Mary Tyler Moore’s* second season, trading her baggy sweatsuits for form-fitting fashions). If anything, Hannah’s fashions become more outlandish and her hairstyle more jagged as the series progresses.

Hannah and her friends do represent the distinct character types established in earlier media — the upright one, the neurotic one, the sweet one, the promiscuous one — allowing for multiple points of viewer connection and interpretations of femininity. However, the pilot episode insists that women are more complex than these simple characterizations. Gazing up at the poster of *Sex and the City* that inspired her decision to move to New York, Shoshanna describes herself as a combination of the iconic characters. “I’m definitely a Carrie at heart, but sometimes... sometimes Samantha kind of comes out. And then, when I’m at school, I definitely try to put on my Miranda hat,” she tells Jessa in the pilot. In a humorous fashion, Shoshanna advances the idea that women can assume multiple and even contradictory character traits.

Like many ensemble narratives, *Girls* emphasizes the importance of female friendships. The women occupy shared beds and even shared bathtubs, serving as consistent sources of support and nurturance in the absence of reliable men. Hannah and Marnie’s friendship has been compared to a troubled marriage, and Jessa and Marnie are briefly attracted to each other (Inside the Episode #9, 2012). Unfortunately, as in *Mary Tyler Moore’s* latter seasons, *Girls* moved away from depicting close-knit friendships between women to centering on isolated
relationships with men (Douglas 1994). The season finale finds Hannah hiding from Marnie before being rescued by Adam, Marnie back in a monogamous relationship, and Shoshanna sexually experimenting without her older friends’ guidance. Jessa has disappeared again and isn’t answering her phone, leaving Hannah in the lurch. These plotlines present women’s friendships as unreliable and secondary to connections with male lovers.

Ultimately, Girls is about contradictions, as privileged white women seek adventures worthy of an urban memoir, yet secretly desire stability. Hannah and her friends dwell in unfulfilling relationships, knowing they deserve better but acquiescing just the same. They value female friendships, yet fail to come through for each other at moments of crisis. They are comfortable being nude yet conscious of their weight. Girls may represent a pioneering vision for cable television, but it draws from much older traditions that represent single women as equally aspirational and tragic, unconventional and marriage-minded. Once again, the complexity of women’s desires and the constraints of popular media have produced characters that are as conflicted as they are compelling.

Works Cited


Notes

1 This article draws from arguments explored in detail in my 2011 book, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture*.


3 Jessa’s joke references the popular series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present), in which detectives prosecute sex crimes.
In April 2012 Lena Dunham organized a week-long film series in Brooklyn titled, “Hey Girlfriend! Lena Dunham Selects.” Her choice of films offers an important clue to what she sees as the essence of her HBO show, *Girls*. Dunham included eight films, ranging from Claudia Weill’s 1978 *Girlfriends*, to Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995), and *This is My Life*, the 1992 film by Nora Ephron about a female stand-up comic who is raising two children. Dunham said she found *This is My Life* moving because it not only explored the loneliness of the two girls while the mother was trying to make it as a standup comic, but also the mother’s experience of loneliness and distance from her daughters, even as she sets out to discover herself through her pursuit of work she cares about. David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) was compelling, Dunham said, because it offered a powerful portrait of female jealousy as well as a reflection on female body images. She chose the diverse films not because they all shared a similar point of view, but because they all demonstrated how “female relationships … are complex,” and added that complex female bonds are not often seen in contemporary films (Dave Itzkoff Mar. 7 2012).

Dunham’s observation that complex relationships between women are rare in Hollywood films and television is underscored by the fact that most of the films she chose for the series were made in earlier decades. This in turn may help explain why much of the critical reception of *Girls* has been negative: we’ve simply become unused to seeing popular dramatic entertainment that takes female friendship seriously as a focus and preoccupation. Many critics have focused on what they do not see in the show. For example, many criticisms center on the show’s lack of racial
diversity, or the class privilege and entitlement of the main characters. In pointing out these absences in the representation of race and class, the critics themselves seem unaware that they are perpetuating an invisibility that Dunham sought to address with her show.

This chapter explores the idea that *Girls* attempts to be *realistic* in its portrayal of friendships among young women, and how this view of friendship departs from many other representations of young women offered in contemporary television and film. Through a reading of episodes in seasons 1 and 2, I will highlight how Dunham’s female characters are enmeshed in oftentimes upsetting and intense friendships with other women, in ways that challenge traditional gender expectations. Female friendships and their emotions in Dunham’s work do not prepare for nor serve as a substitute for an eventual relationship with a suitable mate. Instead, their centrality in the narrative suggests they satisfy primary, not secondary, needs in women’s lives. I explore ways that *Girls* may be seen as echoing some larger trends that have been taking shape among millennials, including deferring marriage and childbearing, and forming households that include men and women who may or may not be in an intimate relationship with one another. Whether considered in light of this context or not, Dunham is positing, I argue, that female friendships deserve an equal measure of dramatic treatment as do romantic relationships, and are interesting in their own right as a source of art and creative attention.

Women’s investment in relationships with other women can be seen in light of earlier images of female friendships in film and television, including such relationships as were portrayed on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (NBC, 1970-1977), *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), and even as early as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957). Female friendships in these shows, however, were ancillary sources of support, rather than the central dynamic, in women’s lives. In the case of *Lucy*, Ricky was the main axis of the protagonist’s emotional and comedic universe. For Mary, arguably, the emotional gravity was with her “workplace family,” which included her male boss, Mr. Grant, Ted, Murray and the other lesser characters. By the time *Sex and the City* aired, the friendships among the four central heroines moved toward the center of the narrative, yet the central arc of the story often revolved around the main character, Carrie Bradshaw, and her quest for wholeness with “Mr. Big,” as well as the trials of being a single woman struggling with being unmarried and childless.

By making female friendship the emotional center of its narrative, *Girls* offers viewers an alternate scenario for an “emergent adulthood,” Jeffrey Arnett’s term for millennials who are living out their twenties in a
kind of extension of their adolescence (2000, 469-480). This emerging adulthood takes for granted that same-sex friendships will occupy a central place in the lives of young people, and will frequently include shared living arrangements. In this way, the female friendships on *Girls* speak to broader changes taking place for young people in the culture, which encourage them to imagine other relationships coming to the fore as a way to sustain oneself practically and emotionally in a world in which the traditional trappings of adulthood are no longer immediately achieved or even desired.

**Establishing Physical and Emotional Intimacy between *Girls***

One of the most important layers of complexity in the portrayals of friendship on *Girls* stems from the semi-autobiographical nature of the show. Dunham, who plays Hannah, is close friends with the real-life actress Jemima Kirke, who plays the “Euro-cool, confident” Jessa (Laura Bans 2012). Kirke describes her character as being the dominant one in the onscreen friendship, since she plays a confident and free-living woman, while Hannah is full of insecurities and passive-aggressiveness. In real life, however, Kirke describes their friendship as much more of a meeting of “eye-to-eye,” (Bans 2012). Playing scenes and taking direction from Lena has been described by Kirke as a positive experience because they are friends, while at the same time she notes it can be difficult to receive critiques from Dunham, precisely because she is a friend. In both cases, the real life friendship and the on-screen friendship are mutually reinforcing, and add a layer of depth to the portrayal of their fictional bond. That is, the intimacy that is achieved in real life between Dunham and her friends adds to the sense that these characters are also intimate with one another.

More generally, Dunham aims to establish intimacy between the female characters by placing them in situations that are intended to reinforce that the young women have an almost physical bond with each other, albeit one that is for the most part platonic. In the pilot, for example, Hannah and Marnie (Allison Williams) are in the bathroom, with Hannah eating a cupcake while in the bath. They are discussing Marnie’s boyfriend Charlie (Christopher Abbott), and how Marnie isn’t attracted to him anymore. As they are laughing about this, Charlie comes in and it’s clear he is breaking up what was a private conversation. In another scene of the pilot, intimacy between Hannah and Marnie is further established as they are shown in bed with each other, with one girl’s leg wrapped around the
other’s. Marnie had crawled into Hannah’s bed the evening before as a way to avoid sleeping with her boyfriend, and the ostensible reason was to watch re-runs of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The power of these images of physical intimacy between the two best friends, both in the bedroom and the bathroom, is echoed in subsequent episodes, in which the bathroom scenes in particular offer a kind of “women’s room only” feel as it is established as a place where the heroines can confide in one another.

In “It’s a Shame About Ray” (season 2, episode 13), Hannah is taking a bath and is singing. Jessa, who is back from Europe, comes in the bathroom and sinks in slowly in the tub. Hannah doesn’t look shocked or alarmed at the sight of her friend, and it is clear that Jessa has entered a comfortable space where she feels safe in the wake of the dissolution of her short-lived marriage to an older and successful real estate developer. Whereas the image of two grown women in a bath might initially suggest that there is going to be some sexual tension between them, the level of comfort the two friends have with one another is palpable and complicates the viewers’ expectation that this kind of nakedness would necessarily lead to sexual intimacy. Instead, Jessa is shown crying unexpectedly; Hannah takes her hand and holds it without saying anything. This shared moment transitions into laughter as they dissolve into hysteric over the “snot rocket,” that is produced from crying.

Many writers have commented on the ways in which *Girls* is radical in its use of nudity and specifically, Dunham’s nudity, whose body is more realistic and unconventional for film and television female characters where the norm is thin and toned (Elaine Blair 2012). What is noteworthy is how the nudity of a “regular” female body is used not simply to counteract stereotypical images of women in film and television, but as a kind of shorthand way of signifying the emotional intimacy between the girlfriends. For example, the female characters often change their clothes in front of each other and are frequently seen in various states of undress. Nudity is used as a signal that the women are close friends because they are comfortable being undressed in front of each other, and this allows Dunham to create intimacy without necessarily invoking sexual intimacy. The men and women on the show, by contrast, are not shown being nude with each other outside of their carnal relations. Nudity becomes, therefore, a kind of code-switching activity; on the one hand, it cements the friendship between the women, on the other it conveys the sexual intimacy between the male and female characters. Even when sexual intimacy is explicitly raised between the girlfriends, as where Marnie and Jessa are kissing at the apartment of the man who will eventually become Jessa’s husband (season 1, episode 8, “Weirdos Need
Chapter Two

Girlfriends, Too”), the kissing seems almost like a dare, or perhaps a way to connect with each other at the expense of the man who clearly wants in on the action. What this seems to suggest is that the emotional intimacy between the young women may lead, in relatively rare circumstances, to a crossing over into sexual territory. But the more central dynamic of the show focuses on how their physical intimacy, expressed through cuddling and connecting in the bedroom and the bathroom, both dressed and undressed, is more an expression of their emotional intimacy with each other.

Interestingly enough, the evocation of this kind of relationship between the young women as authentic and reality-based may itself signal a kind of wish fulfillment that Dunham wants to offer her viewers of what female friendships could be like. For, even as young women may find varying levels of comfort with their girlfriends, US culture is still puritanical enough that it would be hard to imagine too many grown women taking a bath together. Thus, Girls offers a kind of fantasy about the stripping away, literally, of inhibitions that the characters experience, leaving them and the viewer able to imagine a level of unselfconsciousness that might help them fully realize the depth of their feelings for one another in a non-sexual way. Put in other terms, if these young women live in a society in which casual “hook-ups” are increasingly the norm, and where young men and women routinely get naked in front of each other, even if they are virtual strangers, the policing of boundaries between women still dictates that bathing together would be considered transgressive. Girls tries to communicate an alternative emotional truth by saying it is possible to have an almost boundary-less sense of connection between young women.

Anger on Girls: “You’re a Bad Friend.”
“No, You’re a Bad Friend!”

In this space of emotional closeness, the idea of betrayal, jealousy and anger are inevitable, and Girls delivers on this possibility at the end of the first season. Just as the show tries to portray the love and sense of familiarity which girlfriends share, Dunham is no less stinting on the pain that can accompany this level of intimacy with another human being. In “Leave Me Alone” (season 1, episode 9), Hannah and Marnie have an explosive argument, which was seen brewing over several episodes. Marnie has been upset with Hannah for her perceived narcissistic self-involvement and this, combined with her break-up with her boyfriend Charlie, pushes her to the edge. As if asking for a fight to occur, Hannah asks Marnie if she is mad at her, at which point both descend into name-
calling and verbal attacks, with Marnie screaming at Hannah “You’re like a big ugly fucking wound!”

Whereas many of the attacks are based on criticisms of the other person (including Marnie calling Hannah “fat” and “selfish” and Hannah returning with therapeutic language about needing “closure,” that, as writer Elissa Schappell (2013) notes, was “like Woody Allen on estrogen”), the real damage lies in the realization that their relationship has become asymmetrical. While they used to be equal in college in terms of their finances, for example, by the time the fight occurs, Hannah has been living off of Marnie, not paying rent on the apartment they share, as well as committing other transgressions, including giving her key to her boyfriend Adam (Adam Driver), eating Marnie’s food and having loud sex to which Marnie has to listen. Schappell (2013) notes that in a culture that has gone from not recognizing female friendships to one which “prizes” them, the ultimate criticism that can be launched against another girl is to say “You’re a bad friend.”

When both young women, then, accuse the other of being a bad friend, Marnie inflicts a mortal wound when she reveals that Hannah has had to masturbate eight times a day since childhood. Though Marnie didn’t actually tell anyone this, it becomes the ultimate betrayal in the eyes of Hannah. Marnie moves out shortly thereafter, leaving Hannah to cover the rent. As the second season unfolds, the two recover from the fight, but the fact that the issues came out in a way that was tied to their emerging identities as adults, means that the new relationship will never be quite the same as the old one. Can friends who knew each other as younger women, Dunham seems to be asking her viewers, ever move beyond that original relationship, to honoring and supporting them as they shed those earlier personas? For, whereas it is often the case that the girlfriends are shown as reveling in the fact that they share memories of their earlier lives and selves, they seem equally betrayed that the other friend won’t accept the new lives and identities they are trying to create as emerging adults.

Where Dunham adds even more nuance to the characters’ relationships is by having them realize that there are life choices about work and earning potential that will play an increasing role in creating differences between them. Whereas the young women were all relatively financially equal in college, by the time they are in their twenties, there are real differences in their material wealth. That this wealth is founded not so much on their own earning capacity as on whether their parents will continue to support them, is less important than the fact that these financial differences create the potential for huge power imbalances between the heroines. These power imbalances, in turn, create tensions that are not
easily resolved by recourse to the earlier relationship they had with one another and must be continually re-negotiated in the face of adult realities around paying the rent; what work each person has to take to support themselves; what stresses each one feels over their ability to meet their expenses, etc. In terms of Hannah and Marnie, then, the fact that Marnie still has money coming to her from her family automatically confers on her a kind of privilege, both literally and symbolically, that changes the valence of their friendship.

In season 2, when Marnie becomes attracted again to Charlie, (in part because he has recently acquired money in his new job as CEO of a start-up company) the link between Marnie and her higher status is cemented in the viewers’ minds with the fact that she is attracted to and, thus, represents money. The miseries that are visited upon Marnie in this season relate to her loss of identity in other respects, her sense of homelessness after moving out, her loss of her job at the art gallery, and her break-up with Charlie. Though her vulnerabilies are revealed in such a way that her previously established uptight persona is upended, the fact that she still seems comfortable economically keeps her at least slightly asymmetrical with Hannah, a dynamic which continues to play out in their rehabilitated friendship.

One example occurs in “Bad Friend” (season 2, episode 3). After Hannah discovers that Marnie slept with her ex-boyfriend Elijah (Andrew Rannells), who had earlier confessed he was gay and in a relationship with a man, Hannah confronts her and accuses her of being unavailable to her: “What I actually need is for you to recognize that maybe I’m not the bad friend and you’re not the good friend. I don’t need to play by your rules anymore.” At that point, Hannah lists out some of those rules, which range from going to the distant Rite Aid to get Marnie’s prescriptions, to wearing appropriate clothing, to eating at Serendipity’s when Marnie’s dad’s girlfriend is in town. For Hannah, these are not the things that make a good friend. Rather, not sleeping with someone’s ex-boyfriend, or not doing something that “you know will intentionally really hurt another person is what really makes a good friend. And you did that.” Marnie ends the argument by saying she knows she is not a good friend to Hannah, and she feels like she will throw up, at which point Hannah says they can resume their friendship only if Marnie agrees that she was not being a good friend. The terms of surrender for Hannah include not only an admission of defeat from Marnie, “I’m not a good friend,” but indeed, that of the two, Marnie is always the bad friend. In this way, the balance of power is restored.
Friendships between the young women on *Girls* are not based solely on the positive attributes one usually associates with being a good friend such as affection and companionship, but on the seemingly easier requirement to not be a bad friend. Being a bad friend is not explicitly defined, but given the variety of examples, it seems like a very expansive concept. The broader point is that friendships between women can be so intense that to simply describe them in monolithic terms as either wholly positive or wholly negative misses their depth structure. And, while it might initially appear that Hanna’s and Marnie’s descent into anger and recriminations duplicates earlier images of women as competitive and punishing of each other, a further analysis reveals that Dunham is trying to explore a deeper truth about women’s friendships. What Dunham reveals through these characters’ conflicts are the ways the friends’ intimacy allows them to be vulnerable, but how that very vulnerability can sometimes leave them open to attack. Anna Holmes (2012), writing for *The New Yorker*, has observed that Hannah and Marnie’s fight is indicative of the “codependency, and the emotional brutality of friendship,” which is very different from simply portraying women who are engaged in a “catfight.” In fact, in terms of the narrative of that episode, the anger that the two characters have towards one another is proof of the intensity of their relationship and a kind of testimony to the depth of feelings they have for each other. As Holmes (2012) observes:

> It is other women, not men, Dunham […] seem[s] to be saying, who most impact the evolution of girls into women. Other women, not men, who provide the opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery. Other women, not men, who bear witness to the triumphs and tragedies of young womanhood. Other women, not men, in whom we both find and lose ourselves.

### Adulthood and Intimacy and the Changing Role of Women’s Friendships

In season one’s last episode, “She Did,” Hannah is confronted by Ray (Alex Karpovsky), her boss at the café where she works, about the topic of her most recent piece of writing, which concerned an ex-boyfriend’s problem with hoarding. Ray responds by saying, “What in the world could be more trivial than intimacy? Hmm? Is there anything *real* you can write about?” When Hannah asks him what might be a “real” thing to write about, he responds angrily, and after listing things such as cultural criticism, acid rain, panda bears, racial profiling, he explodes with, “How about death? How about death? Death is the most fucking real issue. You
should write about death. That’s what you should write about. Explore that. Death.”

In voicing this criticism, Dunham is voicing what many critics have accused her of since the beginning of the show, namely, that she and her team of writers deal with trivial, inconsequential topics that are a reflection of their own narcissistic interests, and bear no relation to what might be of concern to the viewing public. What this assumes, however, is that issues of intimacy are trivial and not interesting. For a good deal of women, on the other hand, the topic of emotional intimacy and, in particular, emotional intimacy between women, is of great concern, and Dunham’s ability to tap into the substance of many women’s interests represents for many, as Holmes (2012) has pointed out, a kind of “provocation” to her critics.

Rebecca Traister (2012) has observed that Girls tries to privilege the friendships between the women as akin to being “non-sexual lovers of each other.” She cites numerous scenes where the girlfriends compliment each other, as when Marnie tells Hannah how beautiful she is, despite the fact that Marnie is the conventionally pretty one, while Hannah routinely deprecates herself for being pudgy; other scenes include Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), who is rejected by a boy because she confesses that she is still a virgin, being comforted by her cousin Jessa who says, “if I had a cock, it’s all I’d do” (Traister 2012).

For Traister, these seemingly subversive comments are part of a much older tradition in history where women were portrayed as having intense emotional bonds with each other. Traister identifies some of these representations, from Shakespeare’s characters of Celia and Rosalind (in As You Like It), to the “Boston marriages” which referred to unmarried women who lived with each other in long-term relationships during the 19th century, as part of a recognized social relationship that could occur between girlfriends. These kinds of intense friendships between women were only questioned once marriage became the socially sanctioned space where affective feelings of love between individuals could occur.

Other scholars have also noted this historical shift, including Stephanie Coontz (2005), who found that it was only toward the middle of the 20th century that friendships between women came under scrutiny, because they were superseded by the presumed intimacy between men and women in marriage. Images of women as being competitive with each other, whether for other men or for jobs, became part of an understanding of women more generally, even to the point of viewing women as being nasty to other women from early girlhood on. Girls are now seen as somehow inherently aggressive, on a verbal level, to each other and
numerous accounts of this “mean girl” phenomenon began to flood the media in the later part of the 20th century.

Fictional Female Friendships: Then and Now

In thinking about the ways in which young women’s friendships have been represented in recent popular culture, it was arguably only since the 1980s that marriage as the primary site of intimacy began to be re-evaluated. This occurred within the larger historical context of men and women getting married later than they did in earlier decades. Girls is trying to chronicle this historical shift, even if it is taking longer in other film and television shows to come to terms with and represent this change.

One possible reason for this lag time may be due to the fact that, even as more women’s voices are beginning to be heard, as witnessed by new television series such as Whitney (NBC, 2011-2013), 2 Broke Girls (NBC, 2011-present), or New Girl (Fox, 2011-present), there is a sense that these shows don’t try to offer a distinctive female voice so much as reproduce the crassness and gross-out humor of male comedy shows. Girls, on the other hand, is aiming more directly at trying to portray an authentic female voice, or as Dunham has offered:

I really like all the new network “girl” shows. But someone once described the attitude of women on network TV as “Check it out, guys: ladies be talkin’!” And I think we were really careful about anything that rung false (Itzkoff March 2 2012).

Dunham’s quote reflects a larger problem of many television shows that are ostensibly about women. Even as new shows with female characters are being created, they are arguably not being made with an authentic women’s point of view. Compared to earlier incarnations, Girls has been able to offer a much more realistic sense of how young women actually talk to one another. Kirke contrasts the realism of Girls with Sex and the City, which is often called a precursor: “No, it’s not Sex and the City, where it’s a total lie. That’s four gay men sitting around talking” (Itzkoff Mar 2 2012).

And, while it would be wrong to argue that Girls is the only show that portrays female friendships, it is true that earlier images of girlfriends on television did not get at the tangle of emotions and sense of intimacy in quite the same way. Even though The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Sex and the City, I Love Lucy, Laverne and Shirley (ABC, 1976-1983), Golden Girls (NBC, 1985-1992), and Friends (NBC, 1994-2004) portray female friendships, Girls is different in that it offers a deeper level of physical and
emotional intensity. Scenes in the bathroom of the young women talking to each other while they are urinating, or sleeping together in bed and cuddling, offer a visual confirmation of a different kind of relationship than those usually portrayed in popular television, no matter how seemingly close the girlfriends are on other shows.

In today’s television landscape, the relative dearth of female friendships is unfortunately becoming the norm. A cursory glance at some recent shows reveals that while girls are a topic that has gained currency, friendships between women are few and far between. Other than Girls and TV Land’s Hot in Cleveland (2010-present) and, possibly, Parks and Recreation (NBC, 2009-present), the majority of shows that portray women have moved away from focusing on friendships and instead offer individual female characters who are the primary protagonist. Shows such as The Mindy Project (Fox, 2012-present), The Good Wife (CBS, 2009-present) and New Girl portray younger women who may have women friends, but this is not the central relationship in their lives.

Why has this happened in our cultural landscape? Is it because the Women’s Movement has yielded only a partial revolution in terms of substantive changes in women’s lives? Do these fictional heroines somehow signal that while women can and do make inroads professionally, being alone is the price they have to pay for their efforts? Are female friendships sacrificed on the altar of “having it all?” What is clear is that the storylines of these shows often revolve around the female character’s inability to find a man, or their stress over trying to balance romance or families with their professional lives. This is no less true when the genre moves from situation comedies to dramedies and dramas. Even on HBO, which supported and nurtured the creation of Girls, Veep’s Selena Meyers (2012-present) and Enlightened’s Laura Dern (2011-present) don’t have meaningful friendships with women.

Many writers, including Susan Faludi (1992) and Germaine Greer (1999) have noted the powerful backlash that occurred in popular culture against women in the wake of the Women’s Movement of the 1970s. Other writers, including Angela McRobbie (2009) have observed that, even when popular cultural representations of young women are supposedly progressive, as in images of girls with “girl power,” they emphasize the triumph of the individual girl, rather than young women seeing themselves as embedded in relationships.

Mary Celeste Kearney (1992), on the other hand, has identified a new focus on girlfriends in contemporary U.S. cinema for young women. Countering what she perceives are traditional theories of adolescence in film that focus on males, she has identified several films that offer explicit
portrayals of female friendship among teenage girls. These “coming of age” films, tied to larger developments in U.S. society around a prolonged adolescence, helped usher in a female youth culture that was then portrayed in “girl-oriented cultural texts,” including film and television shows. Combined with an extended adolescence was the influence of the Women’s Movement, which supposedly de-centered women’s primary emphasis on heterosexual relationships and allowed the importance of female friendships to be portrayed on screen, although these portrayals were primarily in independent films such as *Girls Town* (1996), and *Fox Fire* (1996).

In later years, other film scholars such as Karen Hollinger (1998) began to explicitly identify films such as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *Steel Magnolias* (1989) as offering rich portraits of complex female friendships. Whether these films were simply part of an earlier tradition of the “Woman’s Film,” or whether they constituted a new genre in and of themselves, may be open to debate. However, what is important to note for the purposes of this chapter is that there have been several historical moments in recent cultural film and television history where the subject of female friendship has been an explicit theme.

Allison Winch has argued that the so-called new genre of the “girlfriend flick,” is ultimately reactionary in terms of distorting the initial goals of the Women’s Movement. Citing such films as *Baby Mama* (2008), *Bride Wars* (2009), *Sex and the City* (2008) and *The Women* (2008), Winch contends that, while focusing on the “priority of female friendship,” in “intimate culture,” these films end up reproducing traditional female cultural injunctions of marriage and motherhood. These women-centered comedies were a positive development in terms of trying to portray real conflicts between women, but the friendships were often used as a way to “monitor” and “self-monitor” each other according to cultural standards of beauty and traditional women’s roles (Winch, 2012: 69-82).

It is within this recent cultural context that *Girls* can be understood as trying to portray something that has not been previously depicted in mainstream or cable television. Not only does *Girls* offer more realistic portraits of friendships between twenty-something women that inevitably have conflicts, but the policing of one another to fulfill a traditional cultural script for young women is nowhere to be seen.

In addition, *Girls* offers a new sociological paradigm in regards to what these friendships mean in the context of young people marrying later in life than earlier generations. In earlier eras, most young women would
be married, and with families of their own by their twenties, but this generation is characterized by college graduates who are moving to cities and forming households where they live with one another instead. Eric Klinenberg (2013) has noted that there are now over 31 million Americans living alone, up from four million earlier in the past century, and young Americans use their early twenties as a transition period en route to either living alone or eventually getting married. For Klinenberg, these friendships are necessarily fraught with tension, since they reflect a kind of “second adolescence.” Living together on relatively tight budgets, despite being supported in part or in whole by their parents, and dealing with the loss of privacy as well as the stresses of accommodating each other in tight living situations, can also increase tensions in these friendships.

*Girls*, then, seeks to be honest in showing both the positive as well as negative aspects of friendships between girlfriends, and it also has helped to correct an ugly stereotype that had recently cropped up of young women as somehow being naturally competitive with one another. The four young female lead characters have moved away from the cultural stereotype of young females as “mean girls,” that is, as individuals who use verbal aggression to establish their superiority and dominance in relationships. What the tone of the show suggests is a much more nuanced understanding of the ways that girls can support each other, while at the same time they can evoke jealousy, envy and anger.

One final question that may be asked is why *Girls* has generated so much controversy and heat in the media. Is it possibly too anxiety-producing for the larger culture to offer these images of bonds between women, and that this may be in part, at least, why there is so much attention being paid to and so much being written about the show in both the mainstream and alternative press? If books like Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men* (2012) have fed into the fears of men about their usefulness in the new cultural landscape, it may very well be the case that celebrating female friendships would reinforce their sense that they are somehow atavistic. Or, it could simply be that larger discourses about “neoliberal subjects” in the new economy who are essentially exhorted to go it on their own, has seeped into popular cultural representations so that it seems counter-cultural to instead portray the importance of connectedness between young women?

In either event, Dunham, in her own way, has offered a post-post feminist television show, if you will, to challenge women and men to re-think what had been consigned to triviality for far too long; friendships between women. She has remarked that the loneliness young women feel when they stop being friends is “horribly lonely… it is worse than lying in
bed next to a lover while you are thinking about another lover. It is a dramatically terrible emotional reality” (Leila Brillson 2013). By trying to portray these friendships in all their complexity, Girls has arguably offered something seldom seen in the larger culture, an honest look at one of the most important relationships a woman will have in her life. By telling stories about friendships between girls, Dunham is challenging her viewers to not only take girls more seriously, but to see friendships between these girls as something that might serve as a model for other relationships, including those between men and women.

**Works Cited**


CHAPTER THREE

SO THEY SAY YOU HAVE A RACE PROBLEM? YOU’RE IN YOUR TWENTIES, YOU HAVE WAY MORE PROBLEMS THAN THAT

NIKITA T. HAMILTON

On April 15, 2012, Girls premiered on the Home Box Office channel (HBO) and gave audiences a window into the lives of female twentiesomethings in America today. Their reality includes confusion, unemployment, love, loss and friendship without the expensive retail therapy that so often got the women of Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) through their ups and downs. The show resonates with both men and women of varying ages and races, but also raises a series of questions about feminism, post-feminism, race consciousness and representations of women on television (Josef Adalian 2012). Through its use of mumblecore, a sub-genre of American independent film pioneered by directors such as Andrew Bujalski, which utilizes naturalistic dialogue, low budget production values and amateur actors, Girls is meant to signify the reality of this group of twentiesomethings (Eric Hynes 2013, 1). Lena Dunham, creator and writer of Girls, made her film Tiny Furniture (2010) in the same style and continues to explore creating fiction that is close to her own reality.

Despite all the praise Girls has received, critics of the show have chastised it because the world these women occupy, which is situated at the center of multicultural Brooklyn, is devoid of racial diversity. In addition, Dunham’s exploration of womanhood does not definitively lend itself to either a feminist or post-feminist bent, which begs the question of what kind of presentation of female twentiesomethings the series is showcasing if these are the young women of “today.” Finally, in returning to the matter of racial diversity on the show, the question of whether or not racial consciousness beyond whiteness actually matters warrants interrogation. Does every race need to be visible on every show?
This chapter utilizes feminist and post-feminist literature, comparisons to post-feminist writings on *Sex and the City*, the previous HBO hit that *Girls* is often compared to, as well as examinations of racial consciousness, white studies, and diversity, for the purpose of exploring how *Girls* ignites conversations about feminism, post-feminism, race, and representations of young women. It also investigates what happens when a young woman is in the director’s chair and fails to capture, or to fully capture, these issues. And finally, this chapter aims to interrogate why not containing all of these approaches, all of the time, might just be what makes *Girls* a hit, in addition to how the show may offer an example of how black creative producers, directors, writers, etc. might similarly tell their own stories and move beyond racial stereotypes that continue to be disseminated in the larger culture.

**Girls: Feminist, Post-Feminist or Neither?**

*Girls* is first and foremost a window into the lives of young women. But, its exploration of womanhood does not firmly place it within feminism or post-feminism. According to Elinor Burkett (2013), first-wave feminism of the 19th and early 20th century was most concerned with gender equality (i.e. voting rights, property rights, etc.), and second-wave feminism expanded on those issues by including topics such as sexuality, family, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities. Third-wave feminism argues against the position that maintains all engagement with the pleasures of contemporary culture, including those that are traditionally feminine activities, are always politically retrograde (Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards 2000, 20-21). Third-wave feminism is defined as, “a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake 1997, 3).

The four main characters of *Girls*, Hannah Horvath (Dunham), Marnie Michaels (Allison Williams), Jessa Johansson (Jemima Kirke) and Shoshanna Shapiro (Zosia Mamet) do not sit comfortably within any wave of feminism. They could be classified as navigating between some aspects of both the second-wave and third-wave depending on the episode and sometimes even different days within the same episode. For example, when Jessa believes she is pregnant, in the second episode of season 1 (“Vagina Panic”), the girls rally behind her decision and right to have an abortion. Their actions and beliefs can be placed within the concerns of either the second or third-waves of the Women’s Movement. However,
within the same episode, both Hannah and Marnie participate in unsatisfactory sexual experiences with their partners, and Marnie attempts to convince her boyfriend Charlie (Christopher Abbott) to “just go about [his] business, piss [her] off and not give a fuck” because “that’s what men do.” These actions do not make female pleasure a component of importance and they reify gendered power structures, both of which are opposite to some of the agendas/beliefs of the second and third waves of feminism.

Women who identify with a particular wave often agree and disagree with certain aspects of other waves. However, they all acknowledge the existence and need for feminism, while post-feminists do not. In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi (1991, x) writes, “we’re told that feminism has faded into the background because its aims have largely been achieved. We’re told that young women don’t identify with feminism anymore because they don’t need to.” Post-feminism by definition means “past” or “after” feminism and Angela McRobbie understands it as this:

To refer to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined. It proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism (in Faludi 1991, 255).

Faludi viewed post-feminism as a tool of an undeclared war against women and more specifically feminists. As a result of their limited view, post-feminists see gender disparities as illegitimate instead of viewing them in collective terms or in terms of women’s shared interests. Georgina Murray (2007, 37) writes, “post-feminist difference means that as women we have no voice because we speak for no one.” Individualism comes to the forefront in post-feminism, leaving women who have supposedly gained equality to fend for themselves individually. So, this leads to the question, are the female characters in *Girls* post-feminists speaking solely for themselves, and not on the behalf of women everywhere, much like the women of *Sex and the City*?

**Sex and the City Meet Girls**

*Sex and the City* first aired in 1998 on HBO and ended in 2004. Between its start and end, a plethora of articles detailing its post-feminist bent were published by authors such as Amanda D. Lotz (2001) and L. S.
Kim (2001). The video blurb for the first season of the show said, “sexy, hip, smart and sassy, Sex and the City charts the lives and loves of four women and their quest to find the one thing that eludes them all—a real, satisfying and lasting relationship. Is such a thing possible in New York?” Though there is a bit of a “backlash” tone in the statement—the women are smart and accomplished, and that is what makes it difficult for them to find relationships—the show fully explored women’s sexuality and post-modern consumer culture (Jane Arthurs 2003, 87). Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), Charlotte York (Kristin Davis) and Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) had hobbies and careers, willing sexual experiences with different partners, and wardrobes filled with designer labels. They were models of post-feminism.

In addition, much like other television programs and films of this genre, such as Ally McBeal (Fox, 1997-2002) and Bridget Jones’s Diary (2001), the show contained what is termed “post-feminist irony.” Sex and the City included an almost constant emphasis on women’s physical appearance and sexual desirability as a source of their self-worth while simultaneously subjecting such emphases to ridicule. These characters were confident enough to declare their anxieties about possibly never finding a husband, while simultaneously recognizing that being without a husband does not mean they will go without men, and not being fearful of the sexual double standard (McRobbie 2004, 262). Unfortunately, whilst doing these things they also normalized gender anxieties about finding a husband and having children (Ibid.). The question that remains after this deeper analysis is whether Girls, the newest show about four women living in New York City, is also post-feminist in nature.

Though both Sex and the City and Girls are HBO shows about white, heterosexual women who are relatively youthful and socioeconomically situated in the middle-class and/or upper middle-class or higher, Girls is not really a post-feminist show. It does, however, contain some post-feminist characteristics. The selfishness displayed by each of the characters is hyperbolic, but is also indicative of a neoliberal, post-modern mindset in which the individual should be most concerned with oneself, and the ability to see past one’s own experiences and views is a rarity. In the pilot, Hannah’s parents tell her they can no longer support her financially as they have been doing for the past two years and she is stunned mainly because she thinks she might be the voice of her generation and that voice deserves unadulterated support. Hannah takes offense to her parents’ admission that they are not rich and that she should be independent. Later in the same episode, she gets high on opiates, and then requests they at least support her for another year. In season 1, episode 9, titled “Leave Me Alone”,
Hannah and Marnie have an argument about who is the bad friend in their relationship, despite both having repeatedly exemplified how loosely some millennials use the term “friendship.”

All of the women of *Girls* also feel free to have sexual experiences and show no fear of a sexual double standard, which is a positive aspect of post-feminism despite being based on the notion that the double standard no longer exists. Sex is both something to enjoy both inside and outside of relationships without apology. Hannah has sex with Adam, which as previously mentioned can sometimes be unsatisfactory, not because she is completely lacking in self-esteem, but because she wants to explore sex and relationships (Linda Martin Alcoff 2012). Finally, a concern with outward appearances is also present, as Hannah is usually seen in some state of nudity in each episode. This could have been viewed as embracing a body type that is not revered in today’s society, which would be a feminist statement if not for the fact that Hannah negates such a conclusion by bemoaning her weight. She mentions her dissatisfaction with her weight multiple times throughout the first season, but most memorably in the season finale (episode 10, “She Did”) during an argument with Adam (Adam Driver). As they are yelling at one another in the street, Adam says, “You think because you’re 11 pounds overweight you know struggle,” to which Hannah replies, “I am 13 pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life.” Though the viewers never see Hannah make a concerted effort to lose the weight, she recognizes there is an ideal she is not meeting, and her inaction does not necessarily connote acceptance of her own body.

So, despite the individualistic mindset and concern for body image, these women are not the driven post-feminist career women and fashionistas of *Sex and the City*. Hannah is a writer who the viewers witness throwing away her first big break at the end of season two. In addition, Jessa has disappeared, Marnie has no idea what she is going to do with her life and Shoshanna never seems to have any homework despite being a college student. The women of *Girls* are just trying to “figure things out” and pay their rent. There is also a lack of involvement in consumer culture in the HBO hit that was an intricate part of *Sex and City*. Hannah is often seen wearing ill-fitting clothing and though Marnie and Shoshanna’s styles are more mainstream, neither wears overtly recognizable labels. These women do not fall in love with a pair of Jimmy Choos as they walk down the streets of Manhattan. In fact, they do not seem to even leave Brooklyn. *Girls* does not fit into either feminism or post-feminism, but is instead arguably a complicated admixture of both.
Representations of Young Women and Millennials

Even though *Girls* is neither feminist nor post-feminist, many of its viewers and critics have admitted it is nice to see women being portrayed in ways that are more in tune with reality (Porochista Khakpour 2012). Waif-like, model body types are the exception, not the rule on *Girls*. “Behold the spectacle of everyday pimples and bad tattoos and unshaven skin and some fat and really awkward sex—what you see in your real life but rarely mirrored back in any pop cultural depiction” (Ibid.). In a media landscape where reality TV stars do not reflect reality, “Girls” is a taste of reality on screen (Ibid.).

This does not mean that the rest of *Girls* also represents the average American woman. These women are highly educated—Hannah, Marni and Jessa went to Oberlin College and Shoshanna currently attends college—and middle to upper middle-class (Alessandra Stanley 2013). Some women will not be able to identify with them at all, while others are able to identify with particular conversations or certain personalities which they as young women, young men, older women or older men have experienced. In a 2012 piece for *The Daily Beast*, Rebecca Carroll details how relatable she finds *Girls* despite being a black woman. Carroll takes issue with the lack of diversity on the show, but does not deny how it sparks memories and resonates with her.

Dunham is also critiqued for not properly representing millennials in the show. In a *Forbes* article, J. Maureen Henderson (2013) proceeds to list the ways in which *Girls* gets millennial life completely wrong. The women of *Girls* live on their own and though the viewers see Hannah begin the show with a money problem, it quickly becomes a non-factor in her life. Henderson contrasts this with the fact that a third of millennials live at home and most likely have approximately $25,000 of debt if they have a Bachelor’s degree. Henderson also mentions how ambitious and charitable millennials tend to be. According to *The Huffington Post* (2013), seventy-five percent of them donated money to charitable causes in 2011. All of these are traits the women of *Girls* unapologetically lack.

What is clear from the often unclear and complicated characters of *Girls* is that there is no perfect role model that could represent the average young college-educated woman. How would society even define this subset of women in the first place? It would actually be impossible and unrealistic to do so, especially in an age of celebrated individualism. Therefore, expecting *Girls* to be representative of all young women is neither useful nor constructive.
Race-Consciousness, Whiteness and Whiteness Studies

By reviewing whiteness studies, it becomes easier to comprehend how it is possible for mainstream U.S. media about current society, which is created and produced predominantly by white people, to lack racial diversity. Ryan Trimm (2005, 232) writes that “Blackness […] defines itself not only in its own terms but also in opposition to an other, a white other that in turn defines itself against black otherness.” This is a realization previously put forth by Richard Dyer (1997, 13) in White: Essays on Race and Culture where he notes that often times it seems as if the only way “to recognize white qua white, is when non-white (and above all black) people are also represented.” Whiteness is the standard and whatever is outside of it is “other.” Since whiteness is the norm, it is easy to overlook other races and ethnicities. The Hollywood entertainment industry has been eclipsing diversity since its inception. Friends (NBC, 1994-2004) received criticism for its lack of diversity from news outlets like ABC News and The Seattle Times and is still used as an example of a show with a “lily-white palette.” In 2003, Aisha Tyler had a recurring role during season 10 as a woman who initially garners attention from both Ross (David Schwimmer) and Joey (Matt LeBlanc). She was not the first black woman to appear on the show (Gabrielle Union was the first, in season 7, episode 17), but Tyler was the one who appeared on the show for the longest period of time and her presence was lauded (Lynn Elber 2003). Friends took place in Manhattan and even black extras were nearly non-existent. Sex and the City had Blair Underwood as Miranda’s love interest during season 6 and Sex and the City: The Movie (2008) featured Jennifer Hudson as a kind of Magical Negro (Matthew W. Hughey 2009, 1). Such attempts to integrate a black character into a well-established narrative structure are usually made after shows are accused of lacking racial consciousness. In 2000, NBC reached a deal to promote diversity by adding minority writers, producers and directors in order to halt a threatened National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) boycott (Gall Shister 2000).

Similarly, one of the biggest critiques Girls has faced is its lack of racial diversity. All four main characters are white, heterosexual women of similar socioeconomic status. They live in Brooklyn, a racially diverse New York City borough, but they lack black friends and even black neighbors. In response to the criticism, Dunham brought in actor Donald Glover for two episodes at the beginning of the second season. Glover, a comedian/rapper/actor, who embodies the term “black hipster” better than any other popular black male actor at the moment, was a perfect choice.
He played Hannah’s new boyfriend, who was a law student as well as a Republican. In the second episode (“I Get Ideas,”) Sandy and Hannah end up breaking up after Sandy reveals he did not really like the writing piece Hannah had sent him days before. She proceeds to tell him she does not like his political beliefs and the two quickly end up in an argument that highlights some of the issues people of color, both male and female, can encounter when they step into a “white” sector of society such as “hipsterdom” or higher education, or when they are in interracial relationships. After Sandy’s admission and Hannah’s subsequent rebuttal about his political stances, she says, “I also would like to know how you feel about the fact that two out of three men on death row are Black,” to which Sandy replies, “wow, Hannah I didn’t know that thank you for enlightening me about how things are tougher for minorities.”

Being a law student or a Republican did not cause Sandy to forget he was Black. He was not a token black character and he did not believe he lived in a post-racial society. Sandy calls Hannah out when she tries to claim she lives in a “colorblind” world. Hannah says, “The joke’s on you ‘cause you wanna know what? I never thought about the fact that you were Black not once,” and Sandy exclaims, “That’s insane! You should because that’s what I am!” He even expresses concern for his own fetishization during the encounter saying, “I knew this, this always happens. This always happens! I don’t even know…This, this ‘oh I’m a white girl and I moved to New York and I’m having a great time and oh, I got a fixed gear bike and I’m going to date a black guy…” Though the episode captured reality for some black people, for others, this admission was not enough to really move the needle on whether Girls spoke to their experiences in a meaningful way.

There were many articles that criticized the two episodes and the character of Sandy. The Atlantic’s Judy Berman, agreed with Ta-Nehisi Coates’ (2013) declaration that Dunham should stick to writing what she knows, which happens to be dealing with being white, wealthy and well-connected, and that black writers and directors need a platform to be their authentic selves. Other critics could not fathom the existence of a black Republican, which is interesting when one considers the last Republican primary, the existence of politicians like former Florida congressman Alan West, and the handful of black Republicans who exist at every top tier institution around the country. Furthermore, some black people are Republican because of some social issues they cannot support and/or for religious reasons. The Republican Party even has a history of reaching out to the black church for support, and at present it is no different (Michael Arceneaux 2013).
So They Say You Have a Race Problem?  51

Coates (2012) asks critics to think about who signs Dunham’s checks and who the show’s target demographic is when critiquing it. On the other hand, Helena Andrews (2013) lauds the character of Sandy and writes that she is proud of Dunham who is trying to tell her story. Damon Young (2013, 2) writes, “...a lack of that kind of diversity may be the realist thing we ever see on TV.” Young seems to be correct as the recent release of some results from an on-going Reuters/Ipsos poll revealed that about 40% of white Americans are surrounded exclusively by friends of their own race in 2013. Dunham and her writers are writing what they know. In a 2012 radio interview, Dunham said, “I really wrote the show from a gut-level place, and each character was a piece of me or based on someone close to me.” The issue that should be addressed is gaining more platforms for black writers, producers and directors to express their authentic selves, much like Dunham has been able to do. Also, black characters like Sandy are examples of a social reality that should be continued, whether white or black writers construct them. This being said, it is more likely for those characters to be created by black writers, which is a reality that should be taken into consideration.

Charles A. Gallagher (1997, 3) writes, “Whites perceive themselves, according to one account, as being part of a distinctly different, colorblind, sympathetic generation that has learned to look beyond “the color of skin” to “the beauty within,” in the 21st century. Therefore, the lack of diversity within television may not have so much to do with purposely leaving out black characters as it has to do with white content creators who are simply not thinking about the presence of race at all. Dunham has repeatedly said she writes from her own experiences (Tambay A. Obenson 2012). According to Forbes, her alma mater, Oberlin College, has a black population of about 5.5%. This makes it completely feasible that Dunham did not make the one token black friend that television often likes to put into play so “diversity” can be achieved. This does not excuse Girls from lacking extras who are people of color. However, as previously mentioned, most of the show takes place in Brooklyn, which, while currently being gentrified, is still full of people of color (Michelle Higgins 2013). The show should make an effort to display New York, and more specifically Brooklyn, as the melting pot it is. But, as far as the show having main black characters, it should be of no surprise that there were not any in the first season, and there was only one in the second.

Another possible explanation for the lack of diversity on the show could be “dysconscious racism,” a term Joyce E. King (1997, 128) defines as

a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant white norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness but an impaired consciousness or
distorted way of thinking about race as compared to, for example, critical consciousness.

If anything, this is what *Girls* is guilty of possessing. It was not so much that Dunham and her writers purposely left out black characters, but that they wrote about their norms and those do not include black bodies. Many articles voiced a different opinion. Jon Caramanica (2012, 1) wrote about his dissatisfaction with the “racial tone-deafness” in the second episode of the first season, noting that Jessa talked about wanting to have children with many different men, of different races, while the show contained none. Debra Dickerson (2012) said, “an abundance of chicks with normal bodies, but somehow no negroes.” There is an inability for some critics to imagine how black characters could be left completely out of the picture, but what could be described as tunnel-vision perceptions of society and dysconscious racism are both explanations for how this can happen.

Other Issues with Writing Black Characters

Constructing a black character that pleases everyone is an inherently politicized act, given the current state of mainstream culture where every representation is subject to analysis and argument. Even Shonda Rhimes, a hit director, writer and producer who also happens to be a black woman, cannot escape criticism. Her newest ABC hit show *Scandal* (2012-present) skirts around race despite an affair between the black female lead character Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) and the white President of the United States Fitzgerald “Fitz” Grant (Tony Goldwyn). Rhimes says, “I don’t think that we have to have a discussion about race when you’re watching a black woman who is having an affair with the white president of the United States. The discussion is right in front of your face” (Willa Paksin 2013, 6). Some do not agree with her and argue that the show is essentially wiped clean of America’s complicated history with race (Jason Parham 2013). For a show based in Washington, DC, the center of American politics, it does seem unrealistic for race to have come up less than a handful of times throughout the show’s entirety. Despite this, the character of Olivia is wonderfully human, containing flaws and strengths much like Dunham’s characters though her race is rarely mentioned (Ibid.).

Rhimes voiced her concern with the introduction of race as an explicit theme in the narrative and it is an important point to consider. “When people who aren’t of color create a show and they have one character of color on their show, that character spends all their time talking about the world as ‘I’m a black man blah, blah, blah. That’s not how the world
works” (Paksin 2013, 6). It is true that social reality does not operate as such, but it also is not devoid of racial issues and moments in which race comes to the forefront. The issue with how black characters are written is they are often created along a binary logic. The character is either preoccupied with race, or he/she ignores its existence. Neither is realistic, and it is possible that if writers took after Dunham’s lead and channeled their own experiences and encounters, race would come into the picture in a way that is more realistic and nuanced.

As one example of this possibility, Issa Rae, an actress, director, writer and producer, decided to write from experience when she created her popular web series *Mis-adventures of AWKWARD Black Girl*, and has continued to create black characters who reside outside of the conventional, stereotypical mold. She and Larry Wilmore, a producer and correspondent on *The Daily Show*, are currently developing a comedy show for HBO in which Rae will star (Nellie Andreeva 2013).

**Conclusion**

In a 2013 interview to UK’s *Metro*, Dunham said:

Women saying ‘I’m not a feminist’ is my greatest pet peeve. Do you believe that women should be paid the same for doing the same jobs? Do you believe that women should be allowed to leave the house? Do you think that women and men both deserve equal rights? Great, then you’re a feminist.

Dunham has made it known that she is a feminist and that her characters on *Girls* are based on her own experiences as well as those of her friends. For her, the women of *Girls* are feminists, though the show cannot be completely categorized as such. Dunham captures an aspect of reality people often forget: no one is who they claim to be all of the time. Now, the women of *Girls* do skip around feminist and post-feminist distinctions more than most, but that might be emblematic of the confusion which becoming an adult brings. Or, perhaps representing young women today involves a continuous blurring of boundaries and fluidity in defining one’s self. *Girls*’ female characters are imperfect both in mind and body, and that may be why they are able to represent young college-educated women in at least some form or fashion through their conversations and actions. Different people behave differently and how to capture that is an ongoing challenge for Dunham and other content creators to address so that viewers can catch glimpses of themselves on screen. It is quite possible *Girls* is a hit because it does not attempt to be everything to everybody,
but is instead a reflection of humanity, which includes picking and choosing the principles and attributes that one deems important from a range of mindsets.

Is it permissible for Dunham’s explorations to singularly involve white, heterosexual women? Yes, because she is admittedly writing what she knows and has never claimed otherwise. Dunham can bring in more diverse characters if she so chooses, but what is most needed are more opportunities for black and female content creators to gain access to media platforms like Dunham’s. The secret to creating black characters for television might be writing them as if they are human, with flaws, strengths and realistic encounters just like white characters have gotten to experience. However, in a country where women comprise over 51% of the population, but only hold seven percent of all TV and radio licenses, and people of color are 36% of the population, but only hold three percent of TV licenses, it is not surprising that opportunities seem scarce (Diversity). Advertising Age released a report in April 2010 which revealed that out of 1,379 commercial TV stations, only eight of them were owned by African Americans. Even if dynamic and interesting black and female characters are being created, there needs to be more opportunities to introduce them into the mainstream media.

The appeal of Girls is undeniable, and Dunham has opened the door a little wider for at least female directors, writers, producers and actresses. There are hopefully more content creators of various races, ethnicities, sexes and genders on their way through that door. Black women like Rhimes and Issa Rae have made it clear that success for black content creators is not impossible, and Dunham has revealed that it is perfectly fine to write what you know. Audiences should anticipate and demand characters who are female and who are people of color who depart from the same recycled stereotypes. Every race does not have to be represented on every show, but there should be a space for their non-tokenized presence on screen.

Works Cited


Aronson, Pamela. 2003. “Feminists or ‘Postfeminists’?: Young Women’s Attitudes Toward Feminism and Gender Relations.” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6: 903-922.


http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19960317&slug=2319275


Notes

1 See Pamela Aronson (2003, 905) and Patricia Gurin (1985).
2 Jane Authors (2003, 87) uses the term “post-feminist irony” when referring to the analyses of Germain Greer and Imelda Whelehan. Greer (1999) refers to Ally McBeal and her body while Imelda Whelehan (2000) references Bridget Jones’s Diary and the main character’s issues with weight and appearance as parts of their post-feminist critique.
3 Authors (ibid.).
CHAPTER FOUR

JUST WHITE GIRLS?:
UNDERREPRESENTATION AND ACTIVE AUDIENCES IN GIRLS

BOKÉ SAISI

Introduction

When HBO’s comedy series Girls, a show about the “assorted humiliations and rare triumphs of a group of girls in their early 20s” according to its official website, premiered in April 2012, it received a great deal of backlash about its conspicuous lack of racial diversity. The comedy, which is set in New York City—a city well known for its multicultural makeup—received similar criticisms as other television sitcoms set in the city with an exclusively white cast (i.e. Friends (NBC, 1994-2004), How I Met Your Mother (CBS, 2005-present), Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998), and Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004)) (Anna Holmes 2012). Although Girls was initially celebrated for its raw depiction of the personal and professional lives of its protagonists, the show was produced by a network known for its cutting edge—but rarely racially diverse—original series (Bambi Haggins and Amanda D. Lotz 2008, 163). Girls’ writer, producer, director, and star Lena Dunham, a 25 year old Brooklyn, New York native, received the brunt of the show’s criticisms. While online writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates of The Atlantic and television personalities such as CNN’s Soledad O’Brien raised issues about the comedy’s multicultural shortcomings, it was the responses from audience members that Dunham decided to address when responding to the backlash. Dunham states in an April 2012 Huffington Post interview: “When I get a tweet from a girl who’s like, ‘I’d love to watch the show, but I wish there were more women of color.’ You know what? I do, too, and if we have the opportunity to do a second season, I’ll address that” (Christopher Rosen 2012).
And that is what Dunham and the show’s staff writers attempted to do. The premiere episode of the second season starred NBC’s *Community* (2009-present) actor Donald Glover, an African American male. While it has been argued that the inclusion of the actor served as a token appeasement for critical viewers, a point I will examine further, I maintain that it is the criticisms and concerns that viewers directly raised to Dunham (@lenadunham), the official HBO twitter handle (@girlsHBO), and through hashtag conversations via the microblogging site Twitter—thus fortifying any mainstream media criticism that the show received—which led to the inclusion of Glover in season two. In so doing, active audience members disrupted, however briefly, depictions of normative whiteness set in place by the erasure of racialized minorities in the comedy series, requesting the inclusion of substantive characters of colour and resisting the television industry’s tendency to hire predominantly white actors.

**Race on Girls**

Television programming in North America is notorious for its racial underrepresentation and has historically been a site for the preservation of white characters within the media industry. Whiteness, the naturalization and privileging of white culture and persons, within television is normalized because of its “ability to render itself invisible” (John Gabriel 1998, 2), that is, the cycle of the proliferation of white characters—created by predominantly white writers and white producers—become normative because that is the only image ever shown. Gabriel (1998, 3) argues that “what both epistemologies and ontologies of whiteness have in common is their exclusionary characteristics.” As such, racialized characters who are excluded from television are rendered immaterial, and when they are included, it is often in stereotypical ways that marginalize them even further. This practice is an extension of processes that relegate racialized individuals to the periphery of the medium and society at large, as whiteness “racializes values, aesthetics, and forms of inclusion and exclusion” (Gabriel 1998, 5). Jodi Berland (1997, 65) supports that, within communicative spaces, certain knowledges are placed in the centre while others are placed in the margins, which are “the external or dependent pole in a spatially administered dynamic hierarchy of politico-economic power mediated technologies and modes of communication.” The knowledges in the centre aim to retain their power by controlling such communicative spaces (ibid.) The American television industry elite, in maintaining power over that communicative space, produce an inaccurate image of America.
by depicting it as exclusively white. In the same vein, Benedict Anderson (2006, 6) claims that the media works to create an imagined community within the national consciousness. Thus, whiteness on television becomes a means of creating an image of a nation that fails to depict large sectors of the population. Gabriel (1998, 5) terms this process whitewashing, that is, “the process of cultural bleaching and [...] how such dominant versions of nation and ethnicity are made”. In so doing, televisual products become spaces that valorize racial hierarchies, naturalize white supremacy, and mask the fact that these practices are indeed taking place.

Within a media landscape in which the erasure of race is a common practice, television programs which lack racial diversity such as Girls continue to flourish. Some critics have argued that Girls has received magnified scrutiny with respect to a lack of racial representation due to the attention the show received before it even aired (Ta-Nehisi 2013). Others maintain that the casting of an all-white group of actors is questionable because it is set and filmed not just in New York City but “in Brooklyn, the most statistically diverse city in the country,” (Julianne Escobedo Shepard 2012) thereby further insulting the majority “minority” populations which are rendered irrelevant. Feminist critiques of the backlash to the show’s racial shortcomings highlight the potentially unfair and magnified scrutiny a female-created television series has received, given the prevalence of all-white casts on other series, especially when few other television shows so frankly document the experiences of young women (Christina Greer 2013).

However, opponents of this feminist critique maintain that documenting white women’s experiences as representative of the whole gender fails to acknowledge the intersection of race and gender (as well as sexuality and non-conforming gender identities) and how these lived experiences may differ (Kendra James 2012). My analysis of the lack of racial representation in the series rests upon not only the show’s initial character whitewashing, but also on Girls’ subsequent response to criticisms about that fact. In response to viewer backlash, the show’s producers cast an African American male character, who, though far from exemplifying stereotypical black masculinity—the character is a university educated self-professed Republican—was included for a mere two episodes. I argue that irrespective of this inclusion—that aimed to very briefly remedy an individual on-screen case of racial erasure—Dunham’s response to viewers’ displeasure with Girls’ whiteness was itself an example of the structurally discriminatory entertainment sector within which it was produced. The lack of racially diverse writers, producers, directors, and actors on Girls is indicative of an entire system of racial exclusion that is
the American television industry. The brief inclusion of a racialized main character in the show illustrates a mere acknowledgment of the voices resisting systemic racism, but not much else.

The proliferation of white characters in the American television industry is often propagated by the utilization of racially exclusionary and exploitative hiring practices emblematic of much of the entertainment industry as a whole; Girls’ producers have been publicly lambasted for participating in such practices. The show has received criticism for the fact that all four lead Caucasian women are the daughters of prominent artists and television personalities. Girls star Jemima Kirke, when asked about the shows nepotistic tendencies, replied with the following:

I know. It looks really bad. [Laughs.] It looks terrible. Come on! It looks shitty. I don’t think that was on purpose. I think that was a mistake. And let’s face it, Lena’s a daughter of someone who’s connected to kind of a world of celebrity, and so she’s naturally going to have friends who are in similar situations, and that’s who she reached out to. She reached into, you know, people that she knew, people that she understood and that she could relate to, because that’s what she was writing about, people with similar feelings (Jada Yuan 2012).

Arguably, individuals immersed in the culture of Hollywood and the television industry are more likely to have the network connections necessary to succeed in the highly insular world of the entertainment community. However, these practices reproduce whiteness within the industry because those already in positions of power (white Americans) hire within their circle of acquaintances who have similar lived experiences (Darnell Hunt 2005, 294). This means that any—namely racialized—person who is not already part of the television elite will have an exponentially harder time solidifying any sort of employment, on or off screen, save for the few on-screen token roles created specifically for them.

A casting call for the show posted on Breakdowns Express, an online acting job database, illustrates the token inclusion of racialized minorities in Girls thus far, placing white characters (and whiteness) in the centre—where those in it “work to maintain power over communicative space” (Berland 1997, 65)—and relegating the few background characters of varying ethnic backgrounds to the margins. For example, the casting call sought out the following: “[20 YEAR OLD NANNY], Female, sexy, 18-20 years old, from El Salvador, MUST DO SOUTH AMERICAN/CENTRAL AMERICAN ACCENT. Encounters Jessa on the playground in a group of nannies. (2 lines) [emphasis in original]” (Elspeth Reeve
2012). The tertiary nature of this role is evidenced by the two lines the character is meant to deliver. Similarly, the insistence at the hands of the casting directors to insure that the hired help not only be physically marked by their ethnicity, but that marker be reinforced with a Latin accent, discursively replicates the assumption that domestic work is meant for South American immigrant women. Racialized women are habitually cast as domestic workers while immigrant women in particular are portrayed to be subservient—a contrast to the portrayal of racialized males as threatening and criminally inclined (Stephanie Greco Larson 2006). These exclusionary practices and reductive depictions move these individuals to the margins of the television industry, a process that has constructed ethnic minorities in limited ways within the discursive space.

Television, through disseminating mass produced and standardized content, is a medium particularly vulnerable to stereotyping due to the underrepresentation of those who are not in the dominant class (Theodor W. Adorno 1954). George Gerbner (1998, 185) contends that “underrepresentation in the world of television means a relatively narrow (and thus more stereotyped) range of roles and activities” for those who are underrepresented. This is problematic because television and mass media, as notable agents of socialization, are elemental to the way people learn about and perceive of race (Larson 2006, 13). Larson posits that the media “helps makes sense of the things we do not experience and the people we do not know” (2006, 14). As such, the stereotypical depictions of racialized minorities render their lived experiences as a caricature, which then works to reaffirm white supremacy and racial hierarchies as the natural order. This practice is well in place within the production of Girls.

In the show’s pilot, there are three racialized minorities present in marginal and stereotypical roles. The first is a young East Asian-American woman, Joy Lin (Elaine Chun), who is hired at the company where both her and Dunham’s character Hannah Horvath intern in. When Hannah asks to be hired full-time, she is instead fired. The plotline implies that Joy Lin is hired due to her technological aptitude and overachieving nature, stereotypes ascribed to East Asian Americans. Joy Lin is also a tertiary character—she says two lines—and is included in the episode only to further the plot of the white protagonist. Likewise, there are two visible African Americans at the end of the episode. One is a background character behind Hannah as she walks down a busy New York City street. The other is a homeless man who calls out to her, exclaiming that she exudes what is quintessentially New York about New York, delivering a single line. This type of tokenistic racial inclusion illustrates the marginal
ways racialized minorities are included, if and when they are, into *Girls*. These roles also present racialized minorities solely in relation to white characters, as though their lived experiences are not or could not be central to a story line. Larson (2006, 34) contends that “racial injustice can be derived entirely by omitting racial diversity or failing to acknowledge that race makes a difference.” Token characters, largely displaying less than flattering characteristics, are portrayed as though they represent an entire group of people, thus exemplifying the way in which racism is deployed. In this way, the erasure of racialized minorities in *Girls* alongside token racial inclusion works to minimize the nuanced voices of racial minorities in this particular communicative space. As a result, resistance to *Girls*’ lack of diversity came from the show’s critical viewers, who questioned the ways the experiences of racialized minorities were erased from the comedy series.

**Girls on Twitter**

Contemporary audience research by scholars such as Stuart Hall and David Morley have offered that viewers are active in their consumption of cultural products and thus able to articulate, variously interpret, and resist media content—as opposed to being passive receivers of messages disseminated through mass media (Eunice Ivala 2007, 126). A similar view is expressed by Henry Jenkins (1992) who not only argues that audience members are active consumers who critically analyze and engage with media products, but that they also participate in critiquing and reworking content in order to fit their particular and subjective needs. This participatory work is conducted based on an understanding that meanings embedded in and derived from cultural products are open to interpretation and thus require consumers to construct a version of the medium that satisfies their mediated needs, namely through fan work (i.e. fan fiction) and media resistance; the latter approach, I argue, is evident in viewers’ criticisms of *Girls*. Jenkins (1992, 119) claims that “the social dimension of meaning production becomes the basis for collective action against the corporate executives or program producers who exercise such control over program content.” Likewise, active viewers of *Girls* took to Twitter to collectively voice their disapproval of the series’ racial underrepresentation, thereby bringing their criticisms directly to the show’s producers.

Viewers publicly aired their concerns on Twitter, a microblogging site that allows users to send 140 character messages at a time to an audience of “followers.” More often than not, however, these feeds are also publicly available to anyone who searches for a user’s Twitter feed. Thus,
disseminating information via Twitter allows a user to distribute succinct information, not just to a list of subscribed followers, but to an incalculably wide set of readers.

Twitter, as a potential means of media resistance, specifically enables users to engage in conversations with like-minded individuals, who aim to challenge the status quo within media institutions. In their study of Twitter’s role in fan fiction, Tim Highfield, Stephen Harrington, and Axel Bruns (2013, 336) argue that its use points “to an understanding of, and an attempt to realize, opportunities to ‘game’ the systems of media industries to generate conditions which support and favour the objects of the fans interest.” This method of resistance places the audience in a position of discursive power, as their reactions to cultural products are imperative to the success of said products. For television audiences in particular, Twitter can be utilized to discuss the merits and shortcomings of a television program in real time, criticism that media producers, who also frequently use Twitter themselves, can use to gauge audience reception and potentially implement suggestions that fans and critics suggest. Jenkins claims that fans create an organized system of critique that enables them to converse about their likes and dislikes of a cultural product. The author also asserts that organized fandom is

an institution of theory and criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their relationship to it (1992, 86).

This participatory means of audience engagement is evident in the way Twitter was used by viewers of Girls, who read the erasure of racialized minorities from the narrative as a problem with the show as a whole.

In order to demonstrate the issues that the lack of racial representation within Girls raised, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of Twitter responses to Dunham’s personal account (@lenadunham) and to the official HBO Twitter handle (@girlsHBO). Users were able to respond directly to the show’s producers by using the ‘@’ sign to construct a message and send it to a specific Twitter user. Additionally, I employed the same content analysis on hashtag conversations—a ‘#’ sign that marks a Twitter message as part of a larger conversation within the Twittersphere. Hashtags are made accessible via the search function on the Twitter website and mobile application. I collected Twitter message samples from the results of the following search terms: “#Girls,” “#Girls and race,” and “#Girls and diversity.” I examined all tweets between April 15th 2012 and April 25th 2012—dates between the premiere of the first season of Girls
and the ten day period in which much media content about the lack of diversity surfaced. Secondly, I examined Twitter responses directed to the same two accounts and using the same hashtag search terms, from January 13, 2013—the premiere of the second season of *Girls* which starred African American actor Donald Glover—onwards. I examined Twitter posts specifically because of the ability for audience members to directly respond to the show’s producers, as well as because the bulk of this diversity debate took place online.

A qualitative content analysis enabled me to examine the Twitter posts that illustrated potential dissent about the racial makeup of *Girls*’ leading characters. In his exploration of the methodology, Jim Macnamara (2005, 6) contends that content analyses, which takes a humanist approach, “studies media content as a reflection of society and culture” and as such aids in elucidating meaning behind media content using a non-intrusive methodology. I compared the audience responses between both previously stated time periods to illustrate how it was due to audience resistance that the producers of *Girls* created a racialized character, and how the inclusion of Glover’s character Sandy, who was only written into a two-episode arc, was received.

In analyzing the Twitter feeds during both previously stated time periods, four prominent themes regarding the show’s lack of racial diversity were extrapolated. First, Twitter users contended that there was a clear lack of racial representation and that when there were racialized characters, they were shown in tertiary and tokenistic roles. Second, users raised the issue of ethnic representation in all television shows, arguing that *Girls* was simply one example of a larger phenomenon. Third, audience members, largely those residing in New York City, where the television show is filmed and set, argued that the show’s lack of diversity replicated the segregationist mentality which much of the city’s inhabitants already experience, that is, while the city may be ethnically diverse, there is still seclusion within its neighbourhoods. Lastly, Twitter users raised a gendered critique, stating that the show, which is written, produced, and directed by a female, and has four women in lead roles, was held to a higher accountability standard in comparison to similar shows with all male casts, such as HBO’s *Entourage* (2004-2011). Users also “retweeted”—posting another user’s twitter post on your own feed—articles and blog posts written in more mainstream online outlets that responded to the show’s lack of diversity.

Twitter posts lambasting the show’s producers for excluding racialized characters—or including them in a tokenistic manner—were rife. For instance, Twitter handle @TokenEditrix commentated that “Jessa’s nanny
talk proves that @lenadunham has a great ear for the tone deaf way Gen Y’s deal w/race and class. She’s on it. #GIRLS.” The tweet refers to Kirke’s character, Jessa, who takes on a nanny job, and converses with other—exclusively racialized—nannies in a manner that dismisses the tenuous nature of race relations in America. This exchange displays what has come to be called “hipster” style or “ironic racism,” a discursive mode adopted by many Generation Y’s, displayed by Jessa’s dismissive take on race on screen, but also present behind the scenes as well. Show writer Lesley Arfin received much backlash for failing to realize the racialized and classed nature of her statement when she tweeted: “What really bothered me most about Precious [the 2009 film] was that there was no representation of ME.” Twitter handle @lorenamendez219 directed her critique to Dunham and co-producer Judd Apatow when she stated: “@lenadunham @JuddApatow I want to watch #girls but the lack of diversity (it’s all white girls!) is frankly disappointing and unnecessary!” This user utilized the direct nature of the medium to express her concerns about the cast’s racial synthesis. In a swift response to much of the criticism, news broke in May 2012 that Glover would be joining the Girls’ cast in season two. Critical audience members expressed their concern with what could potentially be a tokenistic inclusion. Twitter handle @temasmith stated: “For all the talk re #GIRLS lack of racial diversity, I’d rather a bunch of white ppl than any tokenism. Hope Donald Glover isn’t @girlsHBO.” This concern was mirrored by audience members’ criticism about whiteness in the television medium as a whole.

Twitter users outlined the exclusionary nature of the television industry that works to discount the presence of and contributions made by racialized minorities in society. For example, handle @trehug states: “Yep, late to #GIRLS. Like it. Is it weird I wouldn’t have noticed diversity-lite cast if it wasn’t ‘red flagged?’ Maybe #FRIENDS desensitized me.” User @readingincolor reiterated this sentiment when he/she asked: “Can someone please explain to me why there is YET ANOTHER SHOW SET IN NYC WITH NO (ethnic) DIVERSITY? #girls #friends #sexandthecity #etc.” While this point was raised both within Twitter and in journalistic criticisms about the show, some Twitter users lamented that this homogenous depiction of the city was emblematic of a segregation problem in New York City. Twitter handle @amirsaid stated: “People still talking about the ‘lack of diversity’ on #Girls? Listen, New York, great as it is, offers many experiences. One* is segregation.” However, some users countered that claim, like @cassiebelek, who stated: “I’ve been bothered by the lack of diversity in #Girls. No one in NYC lives in an all-white world.”
Lastly, employing a feminist analytic, Twitter users critiqued the reasons why the female-led show received such a vigorous amount of criticism for its lack of racial diversity. Twitter user @upthefrumps questioned: “Just wondering if as many venues of media devoted hours of critical analysis to the lack of diversity in ‘entourage’? #girls #boyswillbebboys.” Likewise, @Tarracarron asked: “Has anyone ever complained about the lack of racial diversity in Woody Allen movies? Only difference I see is #girls was created by a girl.” In raising these criticisms, users attempted to complicate the conversation about racial diversity within a patriarchal media environment, particularly regarding a show with a creator who maintains the series is feminist in its nature (David Rensin 2013). This critique, alongside the other three main themes extrapolated from viewers’ Twitter posts, indicates the extent and range of views that were heard in response to the question of whitewashing on Girls.

Criticisms about Girls’ lack of meaningful racial representation arguably led to the inclusion of Glover into the series’ second season. Some congratulated the show’s producers on Twitter for this implementation, particularly when the news released about his character made it seem as though Glover would be present throughout the season. However, some viewers’ opinions changed when they realized, after two episodes, he was no longer on the show, making it once again, a shining example of television whitewashing. Twitter user @Brandeness stated: “I’m kind of really disappointed Hannah’s black boyfriend only last [2] episodes. I guess they only wanted diversity briefly #Girls.”

This response was notable on Twitter and also throughout online media. Ex NBA player and activist Kareem Abdul Jabbar published a scathing review on the Huffington Post in January 2013. He wrote:

This season that white ghetto was breached by a black character who is introduced as some jungle fever love with just enough screen time to have sex and mutter a couple of lines about wanting more of a relationship. A black dildo would have sufficed and cost less.

Likewise, Judy Berman of The Atlantic lamented that the show “continues to cast non-white actors only when race defines their character—which is to say, she [Dunham] still doesn’t get it” (2013).

In this way, racial inclusion in Girls, stemming from audience reactions to the show via Twitter and media criticisms, was seemingly an appeasement to critical viewers who raised real concerns about the show’s lack of diversity. However, what Glover’s brief inclusion also illustrates is the ways in which racialized minorities in the television industry are still considered to be an afterthought. As such, Girls serves as an example of
how the concept of racial inclusion in the entertainment industry is still understood in a superficial manner, thereby disregarding the need not only for proportional and meaningful racial representation on-screen, but behind the scenes as well. If non-stereotypical characters of substance are not being created and cast by white writers, producers, and directors, the presence of racialized individuals in those positions is evidently needed. A move towards such across-the-board representation largely requires critical audience members to actively engage with the cultural products they consume, products that are created within a seemingly unchanging racially stratified industry. I contend this racial marginalization, within a “post-race” environment, is still present in Girls, where the spirit of “ironic racism”—which serves to dismiss the very concept of race based discrimination—still lives on. Chris O’Dowd (@BigBoyler), an actor on the show tweeted: “Fellow Americans, and lady Americans (who for some racist reason don’t follow @JuddApatow or @lenadunham) watch #Girls on HBO tonight!”

Active audience members resisted the racially exclusive content in Girls via Twitter and in so doing, worked to dismantle normative whiteness within the television medium, which relegates racial minorities to the margins. Television viewers, once considered to be cultural dupes who passively received media content, are no longer passive (if they ever were). In fact, television viewers can effect change in the media landscape, as evidenced by viewers’ Twitter reactions to Girls’ lack of racial diversity and the subsequent inclusion of a black actor, on the show. However, the inclusion of a racialized main character who is no longer present after two episodes may not be the change for which viewers and critics alike had hoped. This inclusion may have briefly added some on-screen diversity, but Glover’s short-lived character elucidated the tertiary nature of racialized characters, highlighting the abysmal lack of racial diversity both on-screen and in the creation of entertainment media in general. Although active audience members may have resistant aspirations, we must ultimately consider the power hierarchy between producers and consumers, if fans are in fact ultimately a “powerless elite” (Jenkins 1992, 89) whose opinions may only matter in terms of garnering ratings and keeping them up. In exploring this quandary, I argue that in the case of Girls, active audiences exercised their limited agency within the confines of a racially exclusionary and representationally exploitative television industry.
Works Cited


Yuan, Jada. 2012. “‘Girls’ Jemima Kirke on Her Abortion Episode, Her


**Notes**

1 The lack of diversity on HBO is evidenced by its popular but racially homogenous new series, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) and *Veep* (2012-present), and long running programs, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present).

2 Throughout the article, the sociological term “racialized” is used to emphasize the socially constructed nature of the process by which racial categories come to be understood as factual. Race may be taken for granted as a real classification but it is in fact the process of racialization that associates particular characteristics—often negative—with an arbitrary signifier of race such as skin pigmentation, eye shape, or hair texture (See Das Gupta et al.).

3 Although the methodology did not require interaction with human participants, the collection of data via Twitter raises concerns about privacy and consent of research participants. Michael Zimmer (2012) argues that the use of data collected from social media websites is presumed to be public information and thus researchers may assume that social media users do not have an expectation of privacy. However, this assumption does not take into account the context within which a message is published and for how long a user may want their message to remain public (i.e. the message may be deleted). Anonymization, the process of attempting to remove identifying markers from a set of data, may be employed in order to circumvent this dilemma. However, Paul Ohm (2010) maintains that this process may be moot since the data set can be used to re-identify a subject. Thus, the author suggests that a researcher ought to measure the risk of identification in a given circumstance when using a data set. As such, I elected to include users’ Twitter handles in this paper because of the ease with which the data sets could be used to identify individual users (e.g. a Boolean search of the Twitter messages could be used to yield a subject’s user name). Additionally, the use of hashtags in each of the Twitter posts made users’ messages searchable and available within a wider Twitter conversation about *Girls*, as did the inclusion of two notably public Twitter handles (@lenadunham and @girlshBO). Therefore, I inferred that the Twitter messages were made public and thus were utilized with minimal risk of breaching users’ privacy.
CHAPTER FIVE

HANNAH’S SELF-WRITING:
SATIRICAL AESTHETICS, UNFASHIONABLE 
ETHICS, AND A POETICS OF CRUEL OPTIMISM

MARcie BIANCO

Is the careful deliberation and fashioning of one’s self an ethical enterprise inevitably bound in satire? One would think so after watching the first two seasons of Girls, HBO’s hit cable series that plays witness to the central protagonist’s cultivation of the life she desires in the unrelenting city of New York. Hannah Horvath, like most jejune, creative 20-somethings, wants to make a life in the City as a writer—as an essayist and memoirist, and also as the occasional blogger. “I have work, and then I have a dinner thing, and then I am busy, trying to become who I am,” she rebuffs her parents’ invitation to spend time with them during their visit to the city from Michigan, shortly after they announce that they are cutting her off financially, at the beginning of the show’s pilot episode. “I am… trying to become who I am”—a captious comment that cleverly doubles as the dramatic catalyst, as well as ethical imperative, of the show. These moments depict what I call Hannah’s “satirical aesthetics,” which both inform her interpersonal ethics, or how she relates to others, and demonstrate how the employment of satire establishes the show’s very unique, and highly contested, brand of feminism.

By examining how Hannah’s satirical aesthetics shapes her ethics and how, in turn, this ethics expresses Girls’ feminism, this chapter engages in extant critical dialogue in two ways: by challenging those criticisms of the show that fail to comprehend its tenor of satire, and by expanding the dialogue about how the show conceives of feminism that is less about a political ideology and more about a mode of rhetoric and a championing of difference. The objective is to move away from reductive criticisms that rely on vague, and arguably relative terms like “privilege” to dismiss the literary and philosophical complexity of the show. In terms of cultural
criticism, the crux of thoughtful analyses, in the form of recaps or meta-commentaries, has occurred online rather than in academic publications. While critics like Emily Nussbaum (2013), whose “Hummingbird Theory” posits Hannah as an “alienating-yet-sympathetic figure,” have hinted at the elements of satire in the show, others remain willfully ignorant. Serena Daalmans (2013, 361) admits that she is incapable of reading the show as satire when she concludes that because of Girls’ “grandiose sense of narcissistic self-entitlement it fails to actually step-up as the televisual voice of my generation.” The wonderful irony here, of course, is that Daalmans appropriates one of Hannah’s iconic, ironic phrases—“I think I may be the voice of my generation… well, at least a voice, of a generation”—to make her point.

When critics fail to understand the show as satire, they consequently assert that it is an embarrassment to feminism. The lynchpin of “privilege,” exacerbated by Hannah’s world of middle-class white women (and only white women), has resulted in a critical impasse, not just in terms of genre, but in terms of feminism as well. Or, the only type of feminism observed by these critics is in regard to the show’s body politics. As Catherine Scott (2012) observes, “[i]t is about time we saw some sex scenes that contained normal female bodies rather than baby-oiled mockeries of femininity. But those are about all the feminist victories we can claim from Girls.” Andrea Ayres-Deets (2013) even went so far as to deem Girls “white girl feminism at its worst.” Lauren J. DeCarvalho (2013, 368) contends that Hannah’s “sense of self-entitlement” is a product of her “reaping the rewards of (but not crediting) second-wave feminism.” However, Katherine Bell (2013, 363) thoughtfully acknowledges that “discourses of postfeminism and privilege are called upon in the show largely to be scrutinized.” This sentiment is echoed by the show’s co-creators, Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow, in a Rolling Stone feature:

Dunham: A lot of people think depicting some version of privilege is, in and of itself, unexamined.

Apatow: People talk about the show as if we’re not aware of all the awful mistakes they’re making... People say, ‘Oh, they’re self-entitled or self-involved,’ and I always think, ‘Yeah! That’s why we have her steal the tip from the maid in the first episode!’ You can say, ‘Where are all of the ethnic people?’ and I might say back to you, ‘Yeah, where are all the ethnic people?’ (Brian Haitt 2013, 49).

Both Dunham and Apatow underscore how cultural critique is subtly depicted in Girls. As I will demonstrate, this critique arises through the use of a variety of satire’s rhetorical devices, such as irony, exaggeration,
analogy, and juxtaposition, and thus exhibits a type of feminism that is less politically aggressive and more reflexive and observational. This particular brand of feminism effected by Hannah’s satirical aesthetics is one not predetermined or guided by gender or sexual difference. It is a feminism invested in ambiguity and difference, and thus finds its rhetorical and generic correlative in satire.

The genre of satire, by definition, is reflexive, even reactionary; it is critical commentary on culture, and, not surprisingly, the genre of choice on the internet. Satire, writes Edward E. Rosenheim (1963, 23),

is an attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars. The ‘dupes’ or victims of punitive satire are not mere fictions. They, or objects which they represent, must be, or have been, plainly existent in the world of reality; they must possess genuine historic identity.

Not only do Dunham’s words about depicting and thereby interrogating privilege come to mind, but it is arguable that Hannah’s entire world and all its inhabitants—and not just those characters who embody the middle-class, white millennials—are satirized on the show. The challenge, and the success, of the satire depends upon the audience, as Rosenheim (ibid.) indicates: “[t]he reader must be capable of pointing to the world of reality, past or present, and identifying the individual or group, institution, custom, belief, or idea which is under attack by the satirist.” Transmission of satire, as noted in the above summary of Girls’ criticism, becomes the responsibility of the audience. Or, as Matthew A. Henry (2012, 204) conveys in his study of satire in American culture, satire “is both hard to execute and hard to control.” Instead of calling attention to one’s own ignorance, many viewers take to the internet to castigate Dunham’s “privilege” and how it saturates Girls.

By the same token, satire functions as a significant rhetorical mode of feminist address. Barbara Johnson (2003, 165) might call this—“where one may be critical of a framework of which one is nevertheless still a part”—Dunham’s own form of “political correctness” in the vein of W.E.B. DuBois’s “double consciousness”: “the knowledge that one is viewed, not just viewing.” Opening up and examining “historic ident[ies]” through satire is precisely the method of feminism that Sara Ahmed discusses in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, whereby the breaking down of identities and institutions—products of historicity—is also a challenge to “the ordinary” and to heteronormative tradition (2004, 168-190). This method of critique requires distance: one entity must be separated and distanced from another entity in order to address it. Difference, in other words, requires distance—and this is precisely the
logic by which satire operates as a mode of rhetorical discourse. Difference, as both championed in the concepts of “intersectionality” and “diversity” by feminists of color such as Audre Lorde (1984), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (2002), as well as feminist materialist philosophers like Elizabeth Grosz, is the quintessential generative material and conceptual force that enables feminism to move beyond the limits of identity, beyond the (re)production of sameness. As Grosz (2011, 96) elucidates,

[d]ifference means that there cannot be one aim, goal, or ideal for all sexes, races, classes, or constituencies, no common goal, interest, terrain of negotiation. Only liberalism gives us the pretense of unity through its assumptions of a rational, self-identical subject who knows its own already existing interests and can thus adequately represent all others in the same broad position.

After queer theory, feminism has come to embody the philosophy of difference, of affirming difference despite neoliberal political strategies of homogenization and assimilation. As the elevation and articulation of difference, satire is a rhetorical mode that embodies this philosophy, especially when the technique of satire employed does not project its own set of morals onto the object of satire.

The concept of a satiric aesthetics finds its correlation in ethics; indeed, the two are philosophically inseparable. Hannah’s assertion that she is “trying to become the person [she is]” bespeaks this correlation. The juxtaposition of a futurity (“trying to become”) with a present (“the person I am”) is ironic, but it also indicates that Hannah knows who she wants to become, and that she is sculpting her life in order to become that person. This idea of “becoming” carries with it ethical undercurrents, manifested as Hannah’s ability to act and to effect ends via those actions that are, in turn, conducive to her becoming. The “art of ethics” is drama: the long-standing connection between the theater and ethics—visible from Plato and Aristotle forward—is predicated on the significance given to bodies, to their movement, and to the affects emergent from bodily interactions. In his second book on Spinoza’s Ethics, Gilles Deleuze (1988, 119) asserts that “the art of [ethics and] the Ethics itself consists of “organizing good encounters, composing actual relations, focusing power, experimenting.”

Influenced by both Nietzsche and Foucault in his reading of Spinoza, Deleuze acknowledges the aesthetic element of an ethics, the “stylizations” that essentially come to define the daily techne that comprise an ethics. “It’s the styles of life involved in everything that make us this or that,”
Deleuze (1995, 100) maintains, indicating the inherent connection between aesthetics and ethics:

establishing ways of existing or styles of life isn’t just an aesthetic matter, it’s what Foucault called ethics, as opposed to morality. The difference is that morality presents us with a set of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values [...] whereas ethics is a set of optional rules that assesses what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved [...] What are we “capable” of seeing and saying [...]? But if there’s a whole ethics in this, there’s an aesthetics too.

My understanding of “ethics” is explicitly aesthetic in nature and therefore departs from a traditional understanding of ethics as a morally prescribed set of principles employed as a political condition to elevate man’s community (vita activa).3 The “styles of life” can also describe the verbal and physical actions that are “dramatized”—as a kind of stylization—in performance, on stage or on screen.

Working from Deleuze, I define ethics as the stylized ways of living—inherently aesthetic and deliberately divorced from morality. In aiming to show how a satiric aesthetics gives rise to a feminist ethics in Girls, I will articulate and examine those rhetorical techniques that produce witty, pointed critiques of social norms and liberal, political ideals. From the audience’s perspective, these moments present a seeming disjunction between aesthetic pleasure and social decorousness. Hannah is alluring and provocative, and we are compelled to watch because we can’t “turn away from her cringe-worthy train wreck.” The aforementioned critics like Ayres-Deets and Daalmans render these moments exhibitions or consequences of Hannah’s “immaturity,” “privilege,” “whiteness,” or “self-indulgent narcissism”—or, even more inanely, her ingratitude to her feminist elders (DeCarvalho, 368).4 In this line of thinking, Hannah’s ethics is comprised of acts of this cluster of signifiers, or characteristics. Read literally or simplistically, her acts, behaviors, and language do seem to impart such an ethics. But, read otherwise, as a poetics of rhetorical techniques juxtaposed with sometimes contradictory or ironic bodily actions, her ethics acquires a complexity that refuses this simplistic, patronizing reading.

The brilliance of the pilot’s opening scene is that it lays open Hannah’s privilege immediately; instead of hidden or unknown, we are told that Hannah’s parents have been “bank-rolling [her] groovy lifestyle”—from paying her part of the rent to her phone bill—for nearly two years, since she graduated from college. The explicit specificity of Hannah’s person—as a middle-class, white female millennial—describes the necessary
historical locality, or identity, imperative for satire, as Rosenheim suggests. That is, the middle-class, white female millennial is, from the very first scene of the very first episode, even before the screenshot of the title, pinpointed as the show’s intentional object of satire—she is “Girls,” or, as Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) hilariously declares in a later episode, “Obvie, we’re the ladies!” (It is not, as Bell, along with other critics, attests, a statement asserting universal representation of all women.) The show functions primarily in the satiric form of imitation that is sometimes parodic; this frame or mode of satire is set at the show’s inception.

“I’m a growing girl,” Hannah responds to her mother’s enjoinder to slow down eating. Surrounded by multiple plates of food at a high-end restaurant, the first image we have of this “growing girl” is indeed that of a spoilt, white, middle-class millennial feasting off her parents’ earnings. “Growing girl” signifies a kind of arrested development particular to the millennial generation, well documented throughout social media—in 2012, Pew reports, a record 216 million millennials were living at home with their parents (Richard Fry 2013). The dramatic conflict of this episode, as well as much of the series, is how her parents’ decision to cut her off financially affects her ability to pursue her career. The conflict, familiar to all creatives who try to live in New York City, is between work and career; it is a question of how to be a self-sustaining creative in a city increasingly hostile to creativity and the arts. Hannah’s parents regard this decision as “giving [her] a final push,” as if she’s a four year-old learning how to ride a bicycle. At this moment the innocuous, Americana scene of a happy white family eating dinner together takes a turn from comedy to satire. Being an only child, Hannah feels that this decision is “very arbitrary,” and proceeds to rationalize how lucky her parents are to have her as their child and to support her in becoming the great person she intends to become. Exaggeration and incongruity—two devices of satire—are in abundant use in this scene. “I could be a drug addict,” she says, deadpan. “Do you realize how lucky you are?” is not to be taken as a rhetorical question. The seriousness of Hannah’s question creates a hyperbolic effect. Her mother, incredulous, engages in Hannah’s repartee, in the role of the audience:

Hannah: Last summer my friend Sophie had two abortions—right in a row—and her parents didn’t support her.

Mother: What does this have to do with anything?!

Hannah: I’m just saying that I am so close to living the life I want; the life you want for me…
As Hannah’s mother rightly points out, the example of Sophie’s abortions has no logical consistency with Hannah’s argument. As a technique of satire, the incongruity is humorous in its irrelevancy and its sense of desperation. Hannah’s security blanket has been taken from her; the incongruity produced by her comparison to Sophie, as well as to drug-addicts and pill-poppers, is highly melodramatic—woe is the affliction of the millennial.

At the end of the episode, an opium-induced Hannah marches to her parents’ room at the luxurious Warwick Hotel in order to persuade them to finance her for two more years. “Mom? Papa?,” she coos, rapping on the door. The scene begins with her infantilization, similar to the first scene of the episode—this is how she enters into a relation with, and specifically positions herself in relation to, her parents. She is the baby, their baby, their “growing girl.” Yet, Hannah only wants to be patronized in only one sense of the term: “Coffee is for grown ups!,” she yells at her father, when he tells her to drink a cup to wake out of her opium stupor. “I’m 24 years old, don’t tell me what to do!” Hannah’s petulance represents the satirical disparity between her ontological age and her behavioral age, and is a definitive characteristic of her played upon for satirical effect. After her parents refused her demand for $1100 a month for the next two years, Hannah slumps off the chair onto the floor and, melodramatically laying her hand to her forehead, sighs, “I am going to die, like Flaubert, in a garret.” Flaubert actually died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1880. For literary aficionados and the creative cognoscenti, it is well known that he was a “mama’s boy” and lived off his mother’s wealth until her death in 1872, at which point he fell into financial destitution. The 19th century decadent is arguably the precursor to the 21st century millennial. The irony—made explicit through this direct allusion—is palpable.

The feigned fainting, the exaggerated comparisons, the hyperbolic bodily gestures and language—this scene demonstrates the art of Hannah’s language and actions. The final scene, which shows Hannah waking up in her parents’ hotel bed, solidifies the satire. Hannah wakes to find her parents gone and immediately rings room service for breakfast. She is informed, however, that her parents’ account at the hotel has been closed. Indeed, as her mother reiterated the previous night, they are “not an ATM.” Hannah’s sense of entitlement is a twist on the egalitarian ideals of feminism that smacks of the pre-feminist notion that women need to be taken care of: the desire for “equal pay” is filtered through the millennial sieve as the desire for “equal entitlement.” This idea is underscored at the beginning of the episode, when Hannah tells her parents “all of my friends get help from their parents” as a justification for their continued financial
support. In the vein of egalitarianism, why shouldn’t she continue to be supported? This is why the juxtaposition of the two twenty dollar bills on the desk in the hotel room is so significant. Not only, she thinks, is she entitled to the twenty dollars her parents left her, but she is also entitled to the twenty they left for the maid.

Hannah’s identity as a writer represents the distance—a distance that is ontological as well as temporal—vital to satire. Writing is the spatialization of life, the conscious rendering of life a posteriori in narrative form. As informed in the pilot episode, the viewers know that Hannah is writing a memoir in the form of the essay, but she’s only completed four of the nine essays because she has to “live them first.” That Hannah is always looking “for the story” results in a number of meta-textual moments that Maša Grdešić considers evidence that the show is “highly self-conscious” (2013, 358). This self-consciousness is also manifest as a product of the satirical moments that occur through allusions to Hannah’s writing and to the synecdochal object of the journal itself. Knowing that Hannah’s always looking “for the story,” it’s not unusual for friends to chide her for engaging with them at a critical, rather than personal, level. They feel objectified, like characters willfully manipulated in a story. In 1.2 (“Vagina Panic”), Jessa (Jemima Kirke) demands that she “stop staring at her face so hard” because “she is not a character in one of [Hannah’s] novels.” Adam (Adam Driver) later demands the same, frustrated with the imposed distance she has erected between them: “I’m a beautiful fucking mystery to you” (1.10, “She Did”). During her roommate breakup with Elijah (Andrew Rannells) in 2.4 (“It’s A Shame About Ray), she laments having “made a mistake of trying to repurpose [him],” and Elijah responds, “Repurpose me?! I’m not some vintage cardigan.” She is completely consumed by “the story”: She seduces her boss and quits her job “for the story” (1.5, “Hard Being Easy”). She sleeps with Laird (John Glaser) in 2.3 (“Bad Friend”) “for the writing.” The lyrics to Charlie (Christopher Abbott) and Ray’s (Alex Karpovsky) song are quotes from her “diary” (1.4, “Hannah’s Diary”), which she later corrects as her “notebook—it’s notes, for a book” (1.5), and, in the same scene, she demands that same critical distance from Marnie (Allison Williams) as a type of evaluative peer review: “If you had read the essay and it wasn’t about you, do you think you would have liked it?” (She wants Marnie, to evoke a line from 2.3, to “get on [her meta-] level!”)

Hannah’s career as “the voice of [her] generation… well, at least a voice, of a generation” attains high parody in episode 2.3, when she is given a freelance assignment for *jazzhate* (an online magazine that is an explicit parody of *xoJane*). The Editor-in-Chief suggests either a
“threesome with some people off Craigslist” or doing “a bunch of coke” and “just write about it.” Desperate for inspiration, Hannah looks to the art piece on the wall: the words “This is your comfort zone” encased in a frame with a black arrow pointing away from it and toward the phrase “where the magic happens.” Instead of reinforcing a critical distance, Hannah needs to break outside the frame of her narrative and immerse herself in the “magic.” There is a figurative distance marked by a literal separation between “magic” and “comfort” in the Editor’s sign. This distance, to evoke Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, is essential for the fantasy of both zones of magic and of comfort to continue—it is essential for the perpetuation of the belief in the dichotomy between magic and comfort. This distance marks the space that makes the psychological projection and promulgation of the fantasies of each zone possible. The reality is that neither exist, at least not independently or independent of each other. “Magic” is dangled as the idealized coke-fueled other that we long for outside the drudgery of the supposed norm, our “comfort” zone. What Hannah’s coke-fueled adventure reveals to us, however, is that the magic is simply an acknowledgement of one’s comfort with or complicity in the traditional, heteronormative structures from which she so intentionally distances herself. Or, put otherwise, the critical distance integral to Hannah’s satirical side collapses with the other Hannah, the millennial being satirized, such that the Hannah we witness in this episode is wildly similar to the crazed, crack-filled Shoshanna from the Bushwick Party in Season 1.

“I know I said I was against the marriage industrial complex, but that’s what I want!” she confesses to Elijah, from the wedding veil to the cake-tasting (she specifies that at least twelve cakes must be tested). It takes so much cognitive energy to be critical all the time; the coke represses this faculty in Hannah. Instead of criticizing everything, she loves everything—hence the inclusion of Icona Pop’s “I love it,” in the scene at the Greenhouse dance party. “I don’t care, I love it,” is the song’s repeated choric refrain. Hannah, indeed, doesn’t care. She loves everything: “It’s Wednesday night, baby, and I’m alive!” The comfort Hannah finds, therefore, lies primarily within herself: this is where the magic happens.

One reason why Hannah’s aesthetics is so overtly satirical is that she is constantly thinking of “the story,” and therefore operates as both narrator and protagonist (of her memoir). Her daily living is vigilantly framed and lived as if her writerly self were separated from her character self, the embodied figure on screen who lives in “Hannah’s world” in Greenpoint, working part-time at Grumpy’s café. That is, writing the self demands stepping outside the self: this critical difference is manifest as language, as
writing. The humor is that Hannah lives as if she were a character watching herself from the director’s perspective. Her character is always cognizant of the “scene,” and thus frequently feels exaggerated, like a caricature. This is evident in the melodramatic hand on her forehead during the Flaubert scene, and during the finale of season 2 (“Together”), when she asks Laird if she looks “scary thin,” and then proceeds to recount the sad, pathetic “glass story” (“no one really cares if I get cut by glass. If I break something no one says, ‘Let me take care of that’”), right before she, again, faux-faints in an act of seduction. “Laird,” she cries, “please be reasonable, ok?! I don’t have the strength to fight you off this time!” Laird scoffs at her passive-aggressive advances, telling her she has a “pretty dark scene going on inside” her head. As narrator, her point of view is limited; she is genuinely taken aback by Laird’s declaration, “You know what, Hannah, you are the most self-involved, presumptuous person I’ve ever met. Ever!” She apologizes, admitting that she “didn’t think about him as a person.” Indeed, he is not a person but a character in her story, her world. “Hannah’s world.” On a meta-level, Dunham makes herself the object of satire. As calculated, self-reflexive, caricature, Hannah enacts a process of misrecognition, whereby there is a continual reinforcement of this character not only to sustain “the story,” but to sustain her real, writerly self. The distance between these two selves is maintained by the critical perspective and abetted by fantasy—the fantasy of Hannah the character and Hannah’s complete control over “her” narrative.

Part of the running joke of Girls is that Hannah can’t see herself, in large part due to the fact that the self she sees is the one she is narrating in her mind. Laird is not the first person to call her “self-involved.” Her fight with Marnie in 1.9 (“Leave Me Alone”) is replete with accusations of her “selfish[ness]” and various manifestations of narcissism. “You’re like a big ugly fucking wound,” Marnie shouts at her, before their fight regresses into an argument about who is actually “the wound.” Marnie’s substitute, Elijah, expresses the same sentiment: “We’re all just in Hannah’s World! It’s all ‘Hannah! Hannah! Hannah!’ all the time!” This misrecognition is crucial to maintaining Hannah’s character. “To misrecognize,” Berlant explains in Cruel Optimism (2011, 131), “is not to err, but to project qualities onto something that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have.” As season 2 progresses, we witness a number of moments of Hannah in front of a mirror, convincing herself that she is “good and fine,” that she is still the character whose “worst stuff [she] says is still better than the best stuff some other people say.” The collapsing of these two identities—of the writer with the character—begins midway through the second season; in
fact, the collapse occurs simultaneously with the moment she lands an e-book deal. Hannah’s satirical aesthetics transform, from witty repartee and insightful meta-commentary to what Laird rightly observes as “dark” and depressing scenes of psychological exhibition.

The predominant and catalyzing theme of Girls is Hannah’s becoming “the person she is.” With her conscious self-articulation and self-fashioning in the world around her, this becoming is coterminous with the act of self-writing—this particular form of creation magnifies the correlation between aesthetics and ethics. “The subject,” Judith Butler explains, “forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in a way that not only a) reveals self-constitution to be a kind of poiesis but b) establishes self-making as a part of the broader operation of critique” (2005, 17). Hannah’s various trials and tribulations that punctuate each episode illustrate the continual negotiation between her desires and the normative codes that constrict and regulate them, whereby her ethics is ultimately the expression of this site of normative regulation of her self-fashioning. From failing a job interview in episode 1.2 because she appears to be “not used to office environments” (because “jokes about rape, or race… aren’t ok”), to her breakup with Sandy (Donald Glover), negotiation also manifests as satire through performance.

During her breakup with Sandy (2.1. “I Gets Ideas”), she tells him she didn’t “even think about [him] as black once”—the rationale being that not seeing race is an act of political correctness when in fact it is an act of political blindness. She then reinforces, through negation, this sophisticated “ignorance” by quoting a line from the chorus of Missy Elliot’s “Work It” ("put that thing down, flip it, and reverse it"), which, upon being called on it, exclaims “I don’t know who that is!… I don’t live in a world with divisions like that.” Sandy’s response, of utter disbelief, is that of the viewers’. The irony of appropriating the line from “Work It” bespeaks the larger issue of black cultural appropriation by white people, which is heightened by Hannah’s willful ignorance of “not seeing race.” On another meta-level is the critique of political correctness: trying to be politically correct oftentimes results in non-politically correct actions. Hannah’s repeated transgressions of societal norms, sometimes comical, sometimes cringe-inducing, signify the line where satire begins and ends. These transgressions also impart an ethics, to return to Butler again: “To make oneself in such a way that one exposes those limits is precisely to engage in an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms (2005, 17).” This “critical relation” manifests primarily through acts—of exaggeration, parody, irony, incongruity—that constitute the satirical moments not only of Hannah’s aesthetics but also her ethics.
When tasked with the job of writing an e-book from an editor who thinks that she has indeed located, to ironically and explicitly allude to the first episode, “a voice…of [her] lost generation,” Hannah freezes, her anxiety (OCD, or what Adam hilariously calls her “OCDC”) takes over and she is unable to write. “I didn’t know who was writing it. Did your hymen grow back? Where is the sexual failure? Where’s the pudgy-face, slicked with semen and sadness?,” her disappointed editor scoffs at the chapters she has brought. “What I’m getting here is a lot of friendship,” he condemns, shaking his head. “It’s very Jane Austen” (2.9, “On All Fours”). Consequently, she withdraws from the world, even going so far as to hide under the bed to avoid Marnie’s visit and consciously leaving a voice message on Jessa’s phone that will never be checked (because Jessa does not listen to her voice messages). Until the e-book deal, Hannah’s self-writing was provisional; the contract made it legal, made it real. She loses herself because she is no longer her sole audience; she is demanded to write for another. Her critical, satirical, voice disappears upon the possibility of her being written by another, larger audience. This much is indicated in season 1 when she decides to read the story about an imaginary online boyfriend who died instead of the one about the hoarder boyfriend at her former writing teacher’s literary reading, because Marnie disapproves of the latter. Worried about “being trivial,” Hannah writes what she believes to be a more satisfactory, more profound essay. “It didn’t really come together for me,” her teacher confesses to her afterward, “What you should’ve done is read that hysterical piece you sent me, the one about the guy with the garbage.”

The act of writing her self for an audience opens the field of critique outside her self; she is no longer her sole critic—and this terrifies her, arrests her ability to think, write, and function in the world. This refusal to be or to accept critique—from Marnie, from Adam, from Sandy—is a well established, inherent quality in Hannah. As a result, her ethics is collectively “unethical,” because she refuses a certain kind of civic engagement with the world outside her. In order to write a self that, in turn, establishes an ethics, Butler (2005, 136) contends, this “ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.” The consequential schism between her mind and body reflects this anxiety; it also signifies Hannah’s inability to allow herself to become undone in the sense of writing her self honestly and openly, instead of writing her character for others to see/read.
Critics point to Hannah’s ethics—what they deem to be unethical in the sense of immoral and fervidly narcissistic—as evidence that the show lacks feminism. Again, as many writers like the aforementioned Scott and Ayres-Deets attest, Girls’ “white girl feminism” exists only in terms of shattering myths about the female body—specifically, Hannah’s body, which presents the non-idealized female body, in all its naked-and-eating-a-cupcake-in-the-bathtub glory. “Lena Dunham,” Julianne Escobedo Shepherd observes at Alternet (2013), “is certainly admirable for her willingness to exhibit her non-model-esque body on film, a very welcome counterpoint to the unrelenting deluge of unrealistic body standards we are expected to aspire to.” “But,” she continues, averring the show’s one-note feminism, “it also seems like we might be so desperate for images of ourselves that are even mildly realistic, we give certain films and shows a pass in other arenas.” The show’s positive body politics is undercut by its whiteness; there is very little diversity of racial, ethnic, and gendered female bodies on screen.

Girls’ feminism is much more complicated than the visual representation of bodies on screen. Here Nussbaum’s “Hummingbird Theory” on the depiction of multifaceted female characters suggests the type of feminism at work in the show. Julia Chasman (2013) concurs with Nussbaum in an article about the show’s “accidental feminism,” citing not only Dunham’s “fearlessness in presenting every conceivable view of a contemporary young woman’s state of mind, and body,” but also the gamut of responses it has provoked—positive, negative, and everywhere in between—as evidence. The show’s feminism, I agree, emerges in the complexity of the female characters on screen. To invoke Johnson (1987, 153), “self-contradiction […] is so vigorously repressed in women” that any sign of it has the potential to jar, displease, and repulse audiences—hence Nussbaum’s “unlikeable” hummingbird. The difference between Hannah’s satirical, writerly self and the one satirized portrays this contradiction, which is what presents the authenticity of character. Johnson, too, proposes that “the sign of the authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference” (ibid.). That women are replete with complex, even contradictory desires and behaviors is a hallmark of the show. Not only is Girls successful in depicting complicated women, but it passes the Bechdel Test for featuring relations between women. This, too, is a sign of its feminism, because, to quote Johnson once again,

[a]s long as a feminist analysis polarizes the world by gender, women are still standing facing men. Standing against men, or against patriarchy, might not be structurally so different from existing for it… [C]onflicts among feminists require women to pay attention to each other, to take each
other’s reality seriously, to face each other. This requirement that women face each other may not have anything erotic or sexual about it, but it may have everything to do with the eradication of the misogyny that remains within feminists, and with the attempt to escape the logic of heterosexuality. It places differences among women rather than exclusively between the sexes. … [F]eminists have to take the risk of confronting and negotiating differences among women if we are ever to transform such differences into positive rather than negative forces in women’s lives (1998, 194).

This turning toward each other, of understanding the differences within each woman and between and among women, is precisely what Girls, much like its predecessor, Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004), accomplishes. The aesthetic quality of Hannah’s ethical self-creation arguably demonstrates a poetics of cruel optimism. “A relation of cruel optimism,” Berlant contends, “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing […] These kinds of optimistic relations are not intentionally cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially (2011, 10).” In Girls, we are given a number of red herrings—Hannah’s parents, Marnie, Adam, Elijah, Sandy—as to who actually impedes Hannah’s becoming. Is it her parents’ stubborn denial of financial assistance? Is it Sandy’s inability to be a supportive partner? It is none of these, even though Hannah believes these red herrings embody the collective “obstacle to her flourishing.” What we discover by the conclusion of season 2, however, is that Hannah is her own obstacle—as each of us, in our own way, impede our individual success. She is her own perennial obstacle; “the inability to learn,” José Muñoz (2000: 401) maintains, “is part of the satire.” What does Hannah desire? To complete her book, thus garlanding her with the title of “writer.” But the book is actually a synecdoche of her own becoming. “When we talk about an object of desire,” Berlant explains, “we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (2011, 32). Granted, if one is aware of the satirical aesthetics infused in Hannah’s ethics, then Hannah-as-object would appear to be nothing short of her own purloined letter.

Nihil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio.
Works Cited


Notes

1 All quotations are from Girls, HBO, USA, 2012-present.
2 Apatow’s reference to the scene in which Hannah steals the maid’s tip is, ironically, the same scene that Lauren J. DeCarvalho points to as evidence of Hannah’s “postfeminist entitlement” (2013, 368).
3 The purpose of an ethics is to discover the greatest ways of living in order to create the happiest life possible for the individual. Historically, the philosophical study of ethics is attributed a greater significance when it is regarded as a condition of politics. In classical philosophy—from Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero, onward—ethics was imagined as counterpart to politics, thereby relegating ethics to a secondary branch of philosophy, as that which serves as building block to the formulation of a politics. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle elucidates the connection between the individual and the polis as early as the second chapter of the first book: “For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve it; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states” (2001, 396).
4 DeCarvalho writes, “Hannah projects a sense of entitlement, stemming from reaping the rewards of (but not crediting) second-wave feminism” (2013, 368).
5 Girls fans will recall that in episode 1.2, Hannah brings up abortions again—this time in relation to Jessa, who’s scheduled an abortion that afternoon—only to dismiss its severity: “I’m going home,” she tells Adam, “to get my cell phone charger, and then I’m going to a job interview, and then I’m going to accompany a friend to her abortion.” Adam replies, “Shit! That’s really a fucking situation,” and Hannah says, “Is it, really? People act like it’s a huge deal, but how big a deal are these things, actually?”
6 Her childishness is a notorious characteristic of hers; one that Tina Fey, as Blerta, the newest “Girl,” mocked in a recent skit on a September 2013 Saturday Night Live. In the skit, Blerta comforts Hannah, who is lamenting the loss of Adam:

Blerta: “It’s ok, you’re only 15.”
Hannah: I’m not 15. I’m 24 years old.
Blerta: 24? What the fuck is wrong with you?!

On a meta-level, this also comically alludes to the 2013 Golden Globes, during which Dunham thanked Fey for being such an inspiration, and Fey teasingly responded later in the telecast, “I’m glad [I] could get you through middle school.”
Here my understanding of language as the spatialization of life is derived from the work of Henri Bergson, particularly as discussed in his 1911 text, *Creative Evolution*.

*xoJane* is a website about women’s culture that leans toward the scandalous, and overtly sexual. After episode 2.3, the Internet was abuzz with the parody; even *xoJane* gleefully posted about it, “Um, Did *xoJane* Get Parodied on ‘Girls’ Last Night? Because that is Freaking Awesome” (Mandy Stadtmiller 2013). *xoJane*’s founder, Jane Pratt, loved the recognition, according to “Jane Pratt Embraces ‘Girls’ Parody” (Kat Stoeffel 2013).

The epigraph of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” which translates as “Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than excessive cleverness.”
CHAPTER SIX
EMBRACING THE AWKWARDNESS OF AUTEURSHIP IN GIRLS
ERIKA M. NELSON

*Girls* chronicles the modern life and musings of a group of young, internet-savvy millennials of the NetGeneration, much like social media does—with each woman enthusiastically assuming authorial authority with relative ease, only to soon falter and fumble with her amateur lack of narrative finesse and restraint. The series has generated and inspired, through careful advertising and promotional efforts, a wave of fan participation through various social media outlets, enabling viewers not only to identify with the series’ characters, but also to create meta-narratives about the show’s reception by sharing their own experiences and commenting on the show’s content in petits récits. Given the awards the series has won and the sheer volume of commentaries on the internet, *Girls* appears to have struck gold and hit a recognizable nerve of modern digital life.

At the center of the series is Lena Dunham’s quasi-autobiographical protagonist, Hannah Horvath, the self-obsessed, chatty, aspiring author, played by Dunham herself, which further obfuscates the boundary between author and actress, fact and fiction, reality and illusion. As Dunham has attested, Hannah and most of the characters are invariably drawn from many of her own personal experiences. The other girls of *Girls* are Marnie (Allison Williams), Jessa (Jemima Kirke), and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), all remarkably different characters, who live and work, as Hannah does, in Brooklyn, NYC, desperately in search of a meaningful, exciting, and successful life, while dealing with the complexities of love and life via Twitter, texts, and tumblr.

Since blazing her path into the public arena with her series, Dunham has been “haunted” by the pilot’s ominous lines of her fictional underdog character Hannah: “I don’t want to freak you out but I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a voice. Of a generation.” Dunham
and her alter-ego, Hannah, embody a modernized version of the classic *auteur*, characterized by a tricky relationship of hybridization between creator and the creation (e.g. self vs. projected image of self) and *écriture collective* (collective writing or creation where others contribute collaboratively to one’s own creation or content) —all standard, modern phenomena of Dunham’s generation.

In spite of her protests to the contrary, Dunham is indeed recognized as “a voice of her generation,” as well as an influential trailblazer and millennial auteur in today’s multi-media digital landscape, having captured (and also offended) the sensitivities, hearts, minds and TV screens across America with her dramedy, which since its debut in April 2012, has received unprecedented cross-media attention in the ever-changing multi-media landscape. Entertainment critics, Facebook friends, fans, and foes alike have shared their diffuse views and often polarizing opinions of Dunham and the show across a vast array of social media platforms—with even the likes of actor James Franco (2012) and NBA Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (2013) weighing in on the debate, writing for *The Huffington Post*.

This chapter examines the interplay between the author, her work, and such narratives. In particular, it explores how Dunham’s work, internet presence, and recent celebrity refigure the ‘auteur’ model into a collective and collaborative space of convergence, which serves as a site where self-expression, power relations, and modes of representation are dramatically re-negotiated. Dunham’s work embodies a sense of the classic auteur à la modern collective. Her work is characterized by its “hyperculturality,” a term introduced by Byung-Chul Han (2005) to denote the exponential dispersal and free-floating exchange of cultural images, practices, artefacts, forms of expression, and identities found in new media forms, especially those tied to the internet. Han’s understanding of hyperculture as a rhizomatic space of de-substantialized diffusion, which dissolves traditionally-recognized cultural and textual boundaries and celebrates the seemingly free movement and proliferation of interconnected works within the unlimited network of simultaneous subject positions, is particularly suited to an analysis of Dunham’s auteurship. A key aspect in this chapter is the collaborative nature and hypercultural convergence of new media support, which informs all aspects of Dunham’s auteurship and creative work. There are countless numbers of anonymous fans who support Dunham’s creative endeavor by commenting on, sharing, retweeting, and proliferating her work. These contributors, recognized in 2006 by *Time* magazine as Person of the Year, gain access into the shaping of Dunham’s auteurship, and include the type of people who—like Dunham’s lead
character Hannah and her friends’ characters in *Girls*—contribute to user-generated, online content via YouTube uploads, Facebook, Instagram, and blogs, while relying on Google searches for answers on how to navigate life’s most pertinent questions.

The hyperculturality of Dunham’s creative work brings together auteurship, reception and spectatorship of media audiences, and multimedia content in the form of memes into a complex relationship of convergence, challenging how each of these are commonly understood as separate aspects of creative work. More precisely, an examination of Dunham’s auteurship, her authorial persona, her creative work, as well as the perception and reception of her work, illustrates how classical forms of media analysis, including auteur theory, can adapt to and illuminate such cultural and digital convergence. The founder of auteur theory, François Truffaut, asserted in 1954: “A true film auteur is someone who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of just producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material.” Truffaut believed that a great auteur always leaves their own unique, distinguishable, and lasting “imprint” on their work.

Indeed, this aspect of auteurism remains. Even today, audiences and consumers within the new media landscape pick up such artistic and auteurist memes and make them viral, thereby subverting traditional notions of authorship, and contributing to a collective conception of the author, which comes to include everyone who remixes or creates a new iteration of a meme. As Henry Jenkins (2008) stresses, digital media is participatory in nature, and this audience participation is part of a larger cultural shift at work in our social dynamic that is altering and subverting the traditional nature of authorship and spectatorship.

Part of *Girls*’ success comes from its fresh and daring approach in its portrayal of relatable moments, shared and retold with clever, witty comebacks. *Girls* goes where few television series dare to go—straight into the awkwardness of real life’s many typically hidden, painful, shame-ridden scenes and misguided moments of half-realized potentials, bad sex, sleazy jobs, and compulsive, overanalyzed obsessing. The series not only portrays these scenes with ruthless, unapologetic honesty and quick wit; it also unflinchingly dwells in these spaces in-between, lingering with a certain degree of *Schadenfreude* in the strange, alienating craziness of modern life where each of the young female protagonists searches to make their mark in life. The result is a glimpse into otherwise overlooked or edited moments, i.e. those “outtakes” that are typically left on the cutting-room floor and not captured or celebrated on celluloid. But again, *Girls* is of the digital age and revels in its crosslinked, “tweetable,” and status-
update worthy moments. As such, it is markedly different than its predecessors, most notably HBO’s *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), the series most often cited in comparison to *Girls*, which also featured four—yet far more glamorous and competent—women’s similar searches for love, happiness, and a career in NYC. In the realm of polished, airbrushed, clichéd illusions of made-for-TV moments, *Girls* offers a current alternative, reveling in the world of female insecurities and misguided attempts to master life through Gchats, texts messages, snarky tweets, online Google searches, and confessional blogs. *Girls* builds on the success of *SATC* in introducing viewers to similar yet diverse dilemmas of modern life, including questions of career, success, life, and how to get the elusive love interest to commit to a long-term relationship. Yet *Girls* sorts out these situations with a fresh and realistic sense of candor and self-deprecating humor—a hallmark of Dunham’s signature style—that was absent in *SATC*. *Girls* is also noticeably current, incorporating the latest technological advances and current social media trends, as Dunham captures and chronicles a whole new set of standards for millennial relationships. When in doubt, the girls of the show ask each other how best to navigate through the obstacles of modern life via technology and its new rules.

For instance, in the pilot, as Hannah and Marnie are walking down the street in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Greenpoint, they analyze Hannah’s problematic relationship with Adam, especially concerning their technological communication. Marnie enumerates the “totem of chat,” explaining to Hannah: “At the bottom there’s Facebook, and then texting, and then email, and then the phone, and then—in theory—face to face.” But she quickly adds, “that’s not of our time.” Hannah promptly recognizes that her level of communication, i.e. texting with Adam, rates very low on this scale. Frustrated, she complains: “How can I get him to talk to me in person when he won’t respond to my texts?” When, later in the episode, Hannah has been able to see Adam after texting him, she tells him face-to-face, “Seriously, this was really, really nice. It was really good to see you. See you soon?” —to which Adam replies, “Sure. Text me.”

Dunham’s witty mapping out of the minefields in modern, tech-driven relationships has helped solidify her place as auteur and voice of not only her generation, but also of the times. The situations and scenarios Dunham presents reflect back to us our own negotiations as parents, children, lovers, and friends with new technologies in the complicated arenas of love and life, with technology adding a new dimension to age-old dramas of unrequited love. When, for instance, early on in their relationship, Hannah contemplates when to call and when to text Adam, Adam chooses
Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in *Girls*

...to maintain a safe distance, preferring to text. Hannah, on the other hand, longs for a relationship full of the whole spectrum of communication. Yet as their relationship evolves, and then quickly devolves, the challenges of communicating face-to-face become more and more apparent. Hannah, for example, discovers at the end of the relationship that she actually knows very little about Adam because she has never asked, and realizes she has treated him as poorly as he had treated her. Adam, like Hannah, is a complex character, whose moods quickly swing from violence to vulnerability to distanced apathy. The ease and allure of instant and constant communication, which technology now offers, is shown to collide with personality issues and personal limits when silence becomes the preferred response.

Technological communication and social media play a central role not only in the lives of the young *Girls*’ cast in the show itself, but also in all aspects of the show’s promotion, reception, and in Dunham’s hypercultural auteurship. Even before Hannah was able to “speak” to audiences, i.e. before the series’ premiere, she (Hannah) and by extension her creator Dunham already had a multi-platform and much-discussed presence—thanks to strategic marketing and promotion efforts that had pre-scripted Dunham’s successful, yet unsubstantiated entry into the media landscape as the author, actor, and creator of the series. Hannah’s lines about being “a voice of the generation” had already been “pre-viewed” in the show’s trailer and vetted with critics. Showcasing and previewing new shows and brands via trailers, previews and promotional ads and posters are by no means new to television or its viewers, and increasingly the World Wide Web has come to play an integral part in the promotional campaign. Yet in its marketing campaign, the *Girls* promotional team managed to find and exploit innovative ways to woo potential viewers and fans.

In addition, HBO took to popular social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, tumbrl and Twitter, to market *Girls* to the techno-savvy, in an attempt to lure individuals who could identify with the show and the characters’ messages, including their “assorted humiliations and rare triumphs.” On Twitter, for instance, HBO launched the show’s @girlsHBO account and introduced various relatable hashtags, including what soon became its signature hashtag: #mistakesGIRLSmake. Benefitting from the proliferation of tweetable and retweetable quotes, scenes, and scenarios sent via .gifs, Twitter, and tumbrl that elicited identification, shock, sympathy, and witty comebacks, the site began to build a fan base of followers. The hashtag #mistakesGIRLSmake remains a hallmark of the show and also Dunham’s work and fame, making Dunham and the cast appear more relatable, comical, and accessible than
many other artists of their stature. Yet, the hashtag in many ways does not
directly link to the reception of Dunham’s work itself, as much as it
responds to the manufactured hype in anticipation of the series.

The show’s marketing strategies, however, were focused on directing
any attention and support they could, regardless of whether they
adequately reflected the show’s premise or Dunham’s auteurship. At the
South by Southwest (SXSW) film and media conference in March 2012,
for instance, the Girls promotion team went even further and created the
festival’s “first-ever launch of a TV show,” complete with an organized
social media scavenger hunt, in order to introduce the brand, promote the
show, and attract potential fans and advocates, offering free use of
bicycles with the Girls logo in an HBO-sponsored bike share—all of
which had little to do with the content and context of the show itself.5
Nevertheless, attendees and Austinites alike followed, tweeted, and
retweeted posts to the @girlsHBO twitter account in exchange for free
food and drinks from local Austin vendors, “eventually earning the show
nearly five thousand followers in less than a week,” according to
TaskRabbit’s blog, even though the series premiere was not screened
there. The marketing successfully created a buzz about the show before its
launch, so much so that it started people talking about it without even
having seen it. Twitter user @poniewozik, a Time columnist, for instance,
tweeted “#SXSW vets: has another TV Show ever done a launch at the
festival like @girlsHBO this year? Feels like the brand is everywhere
here.” In its final message tweeted right before the series aired on
primetime, the HBO Twitter account hyperlinked its tweet to an Instagram
photo of the “official #GIRLS poster,” featuring the four main female
characters sitting together on a sofa, each looking off in different
directions as if to signal their distinct perspectives and self-absorbedness.
Only Hannah stares directly into the camera in an awkward hunched
position, as if to beseech the audience for sympathetic understanding. The
headline reads: “Living the dream. One mistake at a time.”

Girls was intent on building a witty and ironic conversation and/or
controversy with fans and critics alike à la Facebook. The Girls-related
marketing campaign was not only out to capture the attention of the HBO
viewers, but also to firmly establish the series in the social media bubble
on the most significant social platforms of digital culture, thereby
encouraging and eliciting viewers’ participation in its celebration of all
things awkward and amateurish relating—if only tangentially—to the
series. Indeed, as Kate Storey (2012) remarked in her report on the first
episode:
So much was written about the first 30 minutes of "Girls" before it even aired. Critics, reporters, every person with a Twitter account in Brooklyn had a point of view about Lena Dunham. Those who already love her think she gets what it’s like to be a twentysomething living in Brooklyn—the authentic, real deal. Those who don’t doubt her authenticity and don’t get the hype.

Zoe Toffaleti (2013, 27) admitted: “Girls is such an over-analyzed, over-praised, over-criticized series that I’ve been hesitant to even confess that I’m writing about it.” Nevertheless, write she did, as did many others.

**Hannah and Authorship**

What remains most appealing and perhaps relatable about the series, however, is Dunham’s ability to portray Hannah as a character who moves people’s hearts in her search to be heard and loved for who she is. This search is simultaneously her quest to express her own personal creative vision in her writing as authentically as possible. After all, Hannah sees herself as a budding author, and like any *auteur*, she seeks to leave her own unique, distinguishable, and lasting “imprint” on her work. Having studied creative writing in college, she is keenly aware of what success might look like and what it might mean to be a successful author. Hence, she is always on the lookout for “real” experiences from her own life that could serve as genuine inspiration for her work.

However, Hannah’s failures are far from magnificent, and in the series, she is typically depicted as struggling with all aspects of writing, e.g. writer’s block, and how to earn a living as a writer. This battle between asserting her identity and independence as a writer, while also surviving financially and paying her bills, lies at the crux of the series. It is introduced in the first scene of the pilot when Hannah delivers her infamous message of being “a voice of her generation” to her visiting parents who inform her they are cutting off her financial support. It is a scene full of wry humor and self-mockery; Hannah is shocked, upset, and protests as best she can—to no avail, but with an overly-pronounced sense of entitlement.

Hannah desperately desires to be an *auteur*, but realistically remains far from success. Instead, she struggles with self-doubt, jealousy, and even something as simple as what to wear to her own reading, as beautifully depicted in season 1, episode 9 (“Leave Me Alone”), when Hannah is given the opportunity to read in front of an audience and her former creative writing professor. Hannah is particularly vulnerable, as earlier in the episode the four girls had attended a book launch featuring their former
classmate and Hannah’s nemesis, Tally (Jenny Slate), who has just completed a bestseller about her boyfriend’s sudden death, or as she explains to Hannah, she “water-birthed her truth.”

Hannah suddenly becomes more insecure than ever, so she turns to others for guidance. Relying on Ray for advice, she chooses not to read the essay she wrote about a guy she met in college who was a hoarder, but rather writes a new essay on the subway on the way to her reading, about a guy she met online, who died. Professor Powell, however, is disappointed with Hannah’s last-ditch effort, which is clearly a knock-off of Tally’s success. After the disastrous reading, Hannah heads home, only to find Tally’s book on the kitchen table. Marnie not only bought the book, but also told Hannah how much she liked it, stating: “She’s a really good writer. She captures something really true about the uncertainty of being our age. I cried twice.” Thus, in one fell swoop Hannah’s high hopes are dashed by her nemesis, who has managed, at least by Marnie’s assessment, to achieve exactly what Hannah had hoped for in her infamous lines to her parents.

These two episodes display the artistic insight and thought that emerge in the series. Dunham’s creative spark, coupled with the her sardonic, unsentimental humor and heightened self-awareness, makes clever, thoughtful comedy out of her character’s own shortcomings, even if only to serve, as Alessandra Stanley suggests (2012), as an unsettling, “acerbic, deadpan reminder that human nature doesn’t change.” Dunham, not Hannah, is the true auteur, and as auteur theory postulates, Dunham as a talented auteur of an “artistically ambitious” project leaves clearly identified and identifiable traces of her unique style in her work, which shines through the collaborative and collective process of filmmaking.

Dunham’s mark is not only apparent in the writing of the series, but also in the acting, and in the character of Hannah herself. It is thus a multi-layered mark, corresponding to what Andrew Sarris describes in his 1962 article “Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962.” There are three premises that define a director as auteur according to Sarris’s auteur theory: the director as “technician,” which draws upon technical competence and technique; the director as “stylist,” or metteur en scène, which speaks to his or her distinguishable personality and individual style; and finally, the director as “author” or “writer,” who creates the interior meaning of his or her work (Sarris in P. Adams Sitney 1971, 121-135). Dunham inhabits all three aspects of auteurism in her work, so much so that it is often difficult to distinguish between the layers.

Although an artist’s work should not be conflated or confused with the author, misreadings and misinterpretations abound in today’s multi-media
Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in Girls

landscape. Thus, many artists who multi-task roles in the creation of their work, as Dunham does, often find themselves surrounded by derivative words, images, and implications for which it is claimed they are responsible, while they, in fact, have little, if any, influence in directing the reading of their material. The situation is further complicated through brand marketing and the policies of strategic identity management, not to mention the commercial commodification of an artist and their work in the modern mediascape. In Dunham’s case, as much as she seeks to put her misappropriated lines into artistic context, they appear inextricably linked not only to Dunham’s fictional character, Hannah, but also to Dunham, the series Girls, and her new found celebritydom. The blurred lines, however, also work productively to Dunham’s advantage as a celebrity, echoing the media’s adage, “there is no such thing as bad publicity.”

Viewers and Authorship

Indeed, Girls works in its bad publicity. A notable “amendment” and “identity-transforming relationship,” to use Sherry Turkle’s 2011 term, is Dunham’s decision to introduce a black man, Sandy (Donald Glover), in season 2 as Hannah’s new, albeit short-lived love interest. This narrative choice sparked new rants, rumors, and discussions that Sandy’s introduction was more likely token than tableau. In his first on-screen moment (season 2, episode 1, “It’s About Time”), Sandy’s first words, “You wanted this and now you’re fucking getting it,” as he and Lena have sex, are clearly directed at those who wanted more diversity. Viewers now have their own stage and access not only to the show, but also to other members of the audience and potentially the celebrities, creators, and actors of the show, as well as the auteur herself. This influences—if only in limited fashion—the course and content of the show, as well as the meta- and extra-textual discussions. Given the dawn of new technologies, reality television, YouTube, and Web 2.0, the concepts and constructions of fame, stardom, and celebrity have become more complex, spawning a new era where random “nobodies” can become “micro celebrities,” reality stars, and internet sensations overnight. Rather than being mere pawns in a system of manipulation, celebrities, critics, and fans alike have found a unique kind of platform on the World Wide Web, where identities are constructed and reconstructed, power relations are redefined and renegotiated, and access to success appears more tangible and realizable than ever before.

These changes have also opened up new potential for different forms of interaction, communication, and empowerment. The digital interaction
between *auteur* and audience is quickly becoming an open and integral part of the production and is drastically changing the playing field, blurring the lines meta-textually as well as multimedi ally. Nowadays, fans of *Girls* participate in creating the show’s reception. They generate their own .gifs of favorite scenes, list the most quotable lines of the show, imagine new scenes for the girls, speculate on how Marnie’s on again, off again boyfriend Charlie will be written out of the show after having had creative differences with Dunham, online chat with the author, discuss the value of inventing an actual app like Charlie’s Forbid, and post their own #mistakesGIRLSmake entries, such as @StacyLKurtz who tweeted @girlsHBO “eating ice cream and Doritos after working out #mistakes GIRLSmake.” They, too, can become a “voice” in the conversation.

While Dunham and Hannah may well have become commodities of contemporary consumer industry and the objects of high praise and heavy criticism, Dunham remains not only one of the most talked about, influential, and successful celebrities of the digital age, but also one of the youngest award-winning writers, directors, and executive producers. Her partners, Judd Apatow and Jenni Konner, who share the executive producing responsibilities, are both successful and established Gen Xers, the generation, as Susan C. Herring (2008, 71-92) points out, typically taxed with the creation of professional television, music, and film content designed and marketed to millennials. Herring adds that “although these products are targeted for youth consumption, they do not necessarily reflect youth perspectives,” (ibid.) referring to how millennials approach life and chronicle success altogether differently. However, Dunham is one of the few millennials who are out to make their mark and speak from a millennial perspective. Dunham’s own success reads like an implausible modern fairytale for struggling artists. The young Oberlin College graduate had just premiered her first indie feature film *Tiny Furniture* (2010) at the South By Southwest Film Festival in Austin, TX in 2011, when she received an email from Apatow, creator of *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000) and writer/director of *The Forty-Year Old Virgin* (2005), among others popular film and television narratives. The two then met up in New York City, “just hung out,” and began discussing plans for the creation of a new HBO show, *Girls*. Apatow agreed to “help Lena navigate television work and help her keep her style and vision while adapting it to a half-hour format” (Lauren Bans 2012).

Dunham’s hypercultural work, internet and social media presence, and recent celebrity are indeed hallmarks of “her” generation, the NetGeneration. When these hallmarks are taken together, they reconfigure the classic *auteur* model à la mode, i.e. in bold new ways of the most modern style
and fashion, serving as sites where self-expression, self-identification, and modes of representation, relationship, and communication are dramatically changed and the level and layers of clever artistry are appreciated. Franco (2012) touches upon this in his article entitled “A Dude’s Take on Girls,” in which he compares Dunham’s portrayal of Hannah to young women he knows who are just out of college and/or M.F.A. programs, whose movies and stories feature storylines that would “fit right in on Girls.” He notes one key difference:

But Lena Dunham has an advantage those graduate students don’t. Hannah can be as big a loser as Lena wants because, in the end, Lena is anything but a loser: she is a writer-director-actor spearheading a show on HBO. [...] and Lena is the ultimate creator, so no matter what she puts the girls through, she is always in control. Her name is always at the end, where it says “Created by.” They say living well is the best revenge, but sometimes writing well is even better.

Thus, the fateful words, “I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a voice. Of a generation,” coupled with a relentless marketing and promotional campaign on behalf of HBO, have revived a dying “writer’s ethos” and reinvigorated a modern “portrait of the artist” as a young woman for a new audience at a critical juncture, thereby fueling a debate not only about what it means to be a young person in modern society, but also what it means to be an artist and auteur in this day and age. These questions also tie into how identity and art are now shaped, formed, transformed, and managed through created virtual identity politics. It is a far different world from that of the past, and the old models require radical rethinking. Dunham’s observations on the death of the “voice of a generation” concept with the beatnik generation are not far from the facts. Tim Corrigan (1994, 104) speaks similarly about the death of the auteur and points to the early 1970s as a time when “the commercial conditioning of this figure [the auteur] has successfully evacuated it of most of its expressive power and textual coherence.” Dudley Andrew (1993, 80) locates the cause of the author’s demise in “the incessant flow of televisual images [that] has eroded the stability of texts.” Conversely, Corrigan (1994, 135-136) argues that there is a resurfacing of the auteur in televised images, as the result of self-conditioned circumstances of production and reception, as well as of the technological environment of media society, indicating that the same commercial conditioning has also simultaneously “called renewed attention to the layered pressures of auteurism as an agency that establishes different modes of identification with its audiences.”
Dunham’s “voice” and modern auteurship resemble this kind of multi-layered intertextuality of representation and identification. Yet, in accord with her characteristic comedic self-deprecating stance and the show’s embrace of girlhood, it appears appropriate to discard the once highfalutin, elitist term auteur and use what Zoe Toffaleti (2013, 25) has suggested as a strikingly more feminine, fashionable, and politically correct alternative, auteuse. Dunham’s auteuseship is not only used strategically as a crucial self-referential, narrative element in the show’s marketing and promotional purposes, which sets out to tell the story of an unknown struggling artist seeking (and in Dunham’s case, gaining) success, but it also speaks to larger dynamics of Web 2.0 digital culture as a relatively new system of textual and meta-textual production, holding a mirror, as it were, to its audience, and reflecting back the potentials, power, and pitfalls of created digital identities, while engaging the audience in dialogue. This process of creating space for audience participation echoes what Andrew (1993, 83) describes as a characteristic of auteurism, as the auteur “marks presence of temporality and creativity in the text, including the creativity of emergent thought contributed by the spectator.”

What is unique about the hybrid brand of auteurship associated with Dunham, Hannah, and Girls in its full cross-media presence (including its writing, text, production, TV series, supplemental interviews, posters, t-shirts, tweets, Facebook profiles, etc. related to its cultural phenomenon) is precisely this social nature; it rewrites auteurism into all aspects, expecting and eliciting a response from all who are willing to participate, while still maintaining strains of purity, authenticity, artistry, as well as hybridity. While exploiting the practices of “micro-celebrity,” personal branding, and strategic self-commodification, the importance of one’s own voice and cultivating one’s own persona are valued. This does not necessarily translate into the greatest art, but it reflects the times in thoughtful and reflective ways. The showering of industry awards since its first season, as well as all the professional and amateur critiques, tweets and retweets of the series, indicate Girls appears to have hit a recognizable nerve of the shadow side of modern digital life.

Indeed, the media landscape of the World Wide Web is an ever-present feature in Dunham’s work and also figures heavily in the understanding of this new breed of auteuse. As was already mentioned, in 2006, Time magazine recognized YOU as Person of the Year. The magazine featured a computer screen and celebrated “YOU. Yes, you,” i.e. everyone who anonymously contributes to user-generated, online content via Wikipedia, YouTube uploads, MySpace, and other WWW platforms, in a collaborative effort to create and share information as part of Web 2.0’s
massive social experiment, explaining in the subhead of its cover: “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.”

Lev Grossman (2006) highlights the voices of all the millions of people who have contributed their voice and content to the web, but ends his explanation with a sense of caution, understanding all too well that “Web 2.0 harnesses the stupidity of crowds as well as its wisdom.” However he ultimately believes in the power of Web 2.0 to create dialogue between people: “It’s a chance for people to look at a computer screen and really, genuinely wonder who’s out there looking back at them.” This is the world and the potential Dunham captures with remarkable genius and a good sense of humor in Girls.

As an aspiring author and avid blogger, Dunham’s fictionalized characterization of Hannah clearly identifies her as one of “these people,” one of the YOU addressed by Time’s award, who is trying hard to balance work and social obligations, while searching as if to accumulate enough meaningful life experiences to share with others. She texts, she tweets, she ponders, and typically flounders, hoping to contribute deep and witty insights on the WWW. Throughout her triumphs and tribulations, however, she always remains self-conscious of her aspirations to be a writer and to capture her experiences either through writing, tweeting, or texting. The trope and “portrait” of the young artist seeking his or her voice is well-known in both literary and film traditions; however in Hannah’s case, it takes on a modern twist. Hannah is recognizably aware of purposefully creating and constructing her image, her experiences, and her art.

For Dunham and Hannah, the act of creation, not only in terms of writing, but also in gathering materials and experiences for her work, is foregrounded throughout the series as important “status update” moments, an attitude which is certainly not lost on those who have grown up or simply spent time constructing their Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace pages. Such a representative moment occurs at the end of episode 3 of season 1 (“All Adventurous Women Do”). When a scheduled meeting with her ex-recently-turned-gay college boyfriend Elijah (Andrew Rannells) turns out differently than planned, an emotional Hannah insists on trying to get the last word, but alas Elijah gets it with “Good luck to you. Your dad is gay.” Hannah is devastated but rather than calling a friend, she goes home and stares at her computer screen, thinking of the perfect comeback tweet to convey her feelings. Hannah begins with the lines “You lose some, you lose some,” which she quickly deletes. Instead, she types the dramatic line: “My life has been a lie, my ex-boyfriend dates a guy.” Music comes on and she edits the last line to create her final
product: “All adventurous women do,” she tweets, harking back to what Shoshanna had shared with her earlier in the day, that Jessa had “like, a couple of strains” of HPV. And in one fell swoop, Hannah reclaims and destigmatizes her diagnosis. Then she dances to the song by Robyn called “Dancing On My Own.”

As this scene indicates, in spite of the many egalitarian moves at building community and collaboration, one remains alone in one’s journey through struggles and failures to create meaning and art. Replicating success like Dunham’s still requires real creativity, comedic talent, commitment, and a fair amount of good luck (if not a fortuitous email from Apatow). Even then, the chances that one can score so well with “mistakesGIRLSmake” is still slim to none, and the verdict on our online world and its virtual connectivity is still out. Turkle (2011, 1) remains skeptical, stating in the beginning of her book Alone Together: “Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities.” Digital connections appear to offer the perfect remedy: a sense of companionship that addresses our vulnerabilities, loneliness, and longing for intimacy, without the demands of nurturing a friendship. As Turkle (2011, 1) further suggests: “Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”

And texting, as we know, ranks low on the “totem of chat” that Marnie has explained so clearly to Hannah and the show’s viewers. Ultimately, it is, as Dunham herself suggests, important to find a balance and continue to dialogue with each other while safeguarding one’s own expression as something special:

It’s that mix of staying true to yourself and not reading everything, while not staying so isolated that you don’t grow creatively based on peoples’ critiques of what you do. I want to hear the audience and respond to them, but I also want to protect what’s sacred about the thing that I do (Rosen 2012).

Ultimately, even in the hypercultural convergence of new media surrounding Dunham’s auteurship, there is nevertheless a return to the basics. It is after all still Dunham’s unique voice and her commitment to stay true to herself and her experiences—the traditional hallmarks of any auteur—that continue to enliven and give rise to her work and all of its reiterations.
Embracing the Awkwardness of AUTEURship in *Girls*

**Works Cited**


Notes

1 Susan C. Herring (2008, 71) defines the term “NetGeneration,” as the people who were “born in the mid- to late-1980s and the 1990s,” and adds that “this generation […] socializes more online, downloads more entertainment media, and consults the Web for a wider range of purposes than do present adults or young people of the previous generation.”

2 *Petits récits* refer to small, often local narratives, typically written as first person accounts that work to replace, respond to, or enhance a larger narrative. Jean-François Lyotard proposed that metanarratives, understood as universalizing narratives, should give way to *petits récits*, or more modest and “localized” narratives, which can “throw off” the grand narrative by bringing into focus the singular event through diverse accounts (Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak and Kent Still 2007, xvi).

3 Megan Johnson (2013) begins her report on an interview with Dunham and her mother, artist Laurie Simmons, stating: “Don’t tell Lena Dunham she’s the “voice of her generation.” The *Girls* creator and star says that line, from the pilot episode of her hit HBO show, follows her around wherever she goes.”

4 See the *Girls*’ website.


6 Naturally it is understood that film and television are collaborative arts, involving the input of a multitude of trained professionals to create the finished product. Indeed, one of the major critiques of auteurism was that it ignored every other contributor and technician involved in film, as well as the importance of the story line. See Brody (2012) and Emerson (2012).

7 Though criticized for being elitist and dogmatic, Sarris’s article was groundbreaking at the time of publication. Sarris had spent some time in France with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics (André Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, et al.) and published the essay in *Film Culture* in order to explain the French notion of what he called “auteurism” for an American audience. For more, see Jim Emerson (2012).

8 See, for instance the 2013 online article, entitled “*Girls* Season 2 On HBO: Hannah’s Black Boyfriend—Token Or Tableau.”
Looking back is never simple, never straight-forward (or straight-backward), especially when faced with the interpretations of others, including an other, older self. The past becomes something changeable, something difficult to stabilize because of our continual development and so we are driven to evaluate and re-evaluate, reflect and re-reflect over and over again in order to understand who we are now. The four female leads in Lena Dunham’s Girls (HBO, 2011-present) are constantly self-examining and reflecting, often because they feel entitled to (their self-involvement practically insists on it), often because they’re confused about who they should be, who they were, and who they want to be. And so how can we, how do they, organize this juggling and balancing of selves? Rebecca Solnit (2013, 3), examining the nature of storytelling in culture, writes “we tell ourselves stories in order to live”; by using creative techniques to construct narratives and create stories, we find ways to order the chaos of re/memory, and begin to understand ourselves.¹ This chapter will consider how the women of Girls use creative processes to confront their pasts and examine their experiences of growing up, how they wrestle with identity through the construction of selves and stories of their lives, and how these selves are constantly re-evaluated, drawing attention to how we understand truth and identity.

Girls’ episode 1.3, entitled “All Adventurous Women Do,” is an illustration of the kinds of relationships that can exist between past and present selves, between past and present understandings of identity. From the outset, the issue of how we know each other and how we understand each other is under scrutiny. Marnie’s (Allison Williams) college boyfriend Charlie (Christopher Abbott), who she feels increasingly disconnected to, has shaved his head in support of a co-worker dealing with cancer, and Marnie hates it. Hannah (Dunham) is dressed like a goth
Girls and Growing Up: Self-Reflection and Creative Processes

in a black hoodie, skirt, fishnets and makeup for what we can assume is an aspect of her and Adam’s (Adam Driver) role-playing. When Hannah opens the bathroom door, revealing her look to Marnie and Charlie, Charlie responds saying “you look like you want to put a hex on popular girls,” referencing the 1996 film *The Craft.* Hannah responds, “ok, *American History X.*” These allusions are not contemporary, and are films these characters probably experienced on VHS, maybe even DVD, maybe even late night on a movie channel (Hannah would have been seven and nine when *The Craft* and *American History X* were released, respectively).

Marnie’s reaction to Charlie’s change is so dramatic, as if he’s done something irrevocable. When she says “I feel like I don’t know you anymore,” the suggestion is that perhaps she’s been having a relationship with a past version of Charlie, the Charlie she met and fell in love with in college, rather than the post-college Charlie who she seems to be frustratingly out of love with. By shaving his head, Charlie creates a visual disconnection with his past self which Marnie finds almost horrifying. It’s also possible her reaction indicates how she seems to be breaking up with a past self, the self that fell in love with Charlie, because she wants something different now. Charlie is a good guy, a nice guy, unlike Booth Jonathan (Jorma Taccone), the artist she meets at a gallery event later in the episode, who is rude and obnoxious. But Booth is direct, unequivocal, doesn’t pander. He is explicitly sexual and explicitly masculine: “I want you to know, the first time I fuck you, I might scare you a little. Because I’m a man, and I know how to do things.” Her college self, the self that found Charlie attractive, stable and sweet, recedes after this moment, becomes a memory that she distances herself from. She rushes away towards something else, to something she’s not quite comfortable with yet, not quite ready to embrace. She hastens to a lockable room back in the gallery where she can masturbate, alone, as another self whose desires and sexuality she discovers there, but whom she leaves there when she returns home, and returns to Charlie.

Considering and reconsidering the past, whether performed to understand, measure change, re/evaluate, or to forget, can encourage the creation of new selves. Sometimes we are destabilized by the revelation of this, by understanding all of a sudden that we aren’t who we used to be; sometimes we are reassured. But because of all these reasons for, and consequences of, considering the past, we are able to establish or re-

In reading a book which is an old favourite with me [...] I not only have the pleasure of imagination and of a critical relish of the work, but the pleasures of memory added to it [...] [Re-reading] bind[s] together the different scattered divisions of our personal identity.

Spacks (ibid. 4) reflects, then, that re-reading is a way to “consolidate identity,” to bring disparate and/or familiar selves together over some common ground. If we consider ourselves as a text that can be read, re/considering the past becomes a way to establish a version of our life narrative, creating connections and disconnections between events, feelings, relationships, places and more. Spacks’s book, part essay, part autobiography, part biography of the books she chooses to re-read in order to understand the process of re-reading and why we do it, notes the analogous, “dynamic tension between stability and change” (2011, 4) that is shared between a re-read text and the reader. So in this process of self-reflection through the re-reading of a text, Spacks not only draws attention to what can change and what can be preserved in a self, but also to the separations and links that exist between selves.

In “All Adventurous Women Do,” Hannah receives word from her gynaecologist that she has HPV. Having offended Adam by accusing him of passing an STD on to her, she leaves, pit-stopping at Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) and Jessa’s (Jemima Kirke) apartment to change. She talks with Shoshanna about the game show she’s watching, *Baggage* (GSN, 2010-2011). Describing the plot, Shoshanna discusses a contestant’s small, medium and large baggage: “her littlest baggage is that she spends $1000 a month on her weave... her medium baggage is that she plans her wedding after the first date and her biggest baggage is that she pokes holes in condoms.” Having found the show on YouTube, I know that during the course of *Baggage*, hosted by Jerry Springer, each piece of baggage is revealed by opening a suitcase, which is a heavy-handed metaphor, particularly when the lid is lifted on each contestant’s secrets as part of the grandiose revelation. When Shoshanna reveals her baggage (IBS, doesn’t love her grandmother at all, virgin, from smallest to biggest respectively), Hannah responds to her biggest baggage almost dismissively: “yeah, but that doesn’t count because soon you’re going to have sex, and you’ll forget that you ever didn’t have sex and then you’ll have to pick a new baggage, so, it doesn’t count”. Shoshanna’s sofa-Slanket self is preoccupied with her virginity, and convinced that this is what defines her. And it does, but as Hannah points out, this is only what defines her for
now. Here, Hannah alludes to the dis/connect that will be established wherein Shoshanna is irrevocably linked and separate from the version of her that was once a virgin. When we reflect on our past and recognise a change or consistency, we also recognise that the change or consistency originated in a different self; a self that was surrounded by different contexts and has yet to experience everything the self who is engaging in the reflecting has experienced. A separation takes place when we understand we are no longer that self, but also an acknowledgement that this self is part of a narrative being created which is joined to other selves; a paper-chain of people. When we come to realise that we have changed, sometimes significantly so, sometimes slightly, we break apart and see that version of our self standing in front of us instead of within us. In a kind of miotic process we re/produce selves, borne of our selves. The communication that exists between these separate selves also joins these selves, linked as they are by a narrative thread created as we consider the stories of our lives.

Hannah’s feelings that being a virgin ‘doesn’t count’ in terms of baggage also draw attention to the relationship between self and truth, by highlighting that Shoshanna won’t be able to identify herself as a virgin forever. This understanding of self is so tenuous because of how transitory it is, Hannah barely acknowledges it. She can’t ever un-eat the cupcake she pinpoints as her medium baggage, just as she can never not have HPV, which she lists as her biggest baggage. These aspects of her identity cannot be undone, or changed, unlike Shoshanna’s virginity. Self for Hannah needs to be attached to something stable, something that is true, it seems. But the instability of truth means that what Hannah chooses to identify as true, and identify with, may not always remain in the way she understands; a constant process of negotiation is required, as Hannah discovers later in the episode.

Truth and reality, fiction and non-fiction are constantly blurred in *Girls* through Dunham’s choice to employ her experiences within the story lines of the show. Producer Jenni Konner says of Dunham: “something happens to Lena the night before, she literally comes in the next day and pitches it” (Emily Nussabaum 2012); something like sticking a cotton bud so far down her ear it requires medical attention, which Nussabaum highlights in the *New York Magazine* piece devoted to *Girls*, along with buying an apartment in New York and learning to drive, as an illustration of how busy Dunham’s life is during the run-up to the premiere of the first season. But perhaps we can assume it was also successfully pitched as a story idea later on, it being an incident in season two of the show. Dunham says about Hannah, “she’s mine and she’s me and I love her,” demonstrating a
connection akin to that which occurs between selves, perhaps making Hannah part of Dunham’s identity (ibid.). Conflating the line between fictional protagonist and non-fictional author also reflects the negotiation that the characters perform to establish identity, grappling between an understanding of who they think they are and who they actually are. Just as meaning is not only created by an author of a text, but also by the reader, identity is formed through both a process of creation and interpretation. Kirke elaborates, suggesting that she was a lot like Jessa when she was younger: “I think a lot of girls at that age... get their personality confused with who they are” (ibid.). This extends to outward reflections of identity as Dunham explains the character’s wardrobes: “the clothes are really meant to reflect the fantasy the girls have about themselves and are sort of unsuccessfully fulfilling” (Karen Schwartz 2013). Fantastic versions of selves can be manifested through a desire to change, conjured by force of will and imagined in to being like a character. We wear these selves, or characters, until we imbibe them, or we pursue them until we disregard them for another kind of future self. We may never successfully become these selves, they may remain a fiction of us, but they are an aspect of our identity none-the-less. Hannah illustrates this when she states, “I am busy trying to become who I am” in the pilot episode of Girls. Who she is (who she wants to be) has yet to happen but this self has already become a part of her. The reality of her self then, her true self, is a fiction in this moment.

Self-reflection, then, occurs between past, present and future selves in a number of ways. Just as Spacks uses re-reading to unpack the past to understand change and consistency in her present self, Lesley Arfin, a Girls staff writer for seasons one and two, explores the present to understand her past in her Vice-column-turned-memoir, Dear Diary (2008). A collection of her diary entries from age eleven to twenty-five, alongside reflections on the events she describes by her twenty-eight-year-old self and interviews with the people involved, Dear Diary is a recollection of the process of Arfin traversing high school, college and beyond, becoming an addict and sobering up, but also a meditation on how we work with the past. Dear Diary is filed with the negotiation between truths; different understandings and interpretations clash, separating and building to create a narrative.

One of the many interesting moments in the book occurs when Arfin confronts two women, Wendy and Sheryl, high school friends who ostracised her in the sixth grade and did those brutal things that teenagers are capable of, like leaving deeply hurtful notes in Arfin’s locker at school. When Arfin tracks these two women down she isn’t just looking for truth,
she’s also confronting the self that Sheryl and Wendy created. What she
discovers is that the insecurities she developed from this event, projected
on to her by her schoolmates, were mainly imaginary. She writes up a
conversation between her and Sheryl:

Lesley: Why did you guys hate me all of a sudden?
Sheryl: I feel like Wendy wanted to be where you were, like with Alli and
me.
[Lesley:] She wanted to be BFF with you guys and bump me out?
[Sheryl:] Right.
[Lesley:] Was it because of something I had done?
[Sheryl:] I can’t really remember. I think rumours were started that weren’t
true... I also think Wendy Webb orchestrated a lot of that from behind the
scenes (2008, 10-11).

Wendy becomes the instigator for the mean behaviour in Sheryl’s
version of high school. Wendy, of course, has a different interpretation:

Lesley: When I interviewed Sheryl I asked her why she turned everyone
against me in 6th grade, and she told me it was YOU.
Wendy: My retroactive memory of your history and mine is that I
considered you somebody who I’d known forever, since early, early
childhood, and then I remember we had crazy fighting and hatred in
middle school. We kind of moved on from that and got over it but never
really reconnected and eventually just drifted. I honestly have no
recollection of a note or what happened. I wish I did. It’s kind of strange
that I wouldn’t remember, which leads me to believe that maybe she’s
right? (ibid. 15-16).

At this point in the story of Dear Diary, Arfin’s desire for an
understanding of the catalyst for their fallout seems to have been thwarted.
She was looking for reasons, for answers, but the answer seems to be is
that there were no reasons, nothing tangible at least, no one thing. The self
established by Wendy and Sheryl in the sixth grade is made solid by Arfin
through her insecurities, and the manifested self is a combination of all
their efforts to imagine the worst possible kind of Lesley Arfin. Again this
past self is established as a kind of fiction when interrogated by Arfin in
Dear Diary, but it remains part of the narrative of Arfin’s life, Arfin’s
structured memoir, because it forms such a significant part of her
understanding of her self, then and now.

The nature of truth, its flexibility and its relationship to our
understanding of self is ultimately destabilized for Hannah during “All
Adventurous Women Do.” Having been told by Adam that he’s been
tested and convinced by Shoshanna that it’s the courteous thing to do, Hannah decides to confront her college boyfriend over the contraction of her STD. She is reluctant at first about confronting Elijah (Andrew Rannells), describing the messy end of their relationship to Shoshanna: “he broke up with me because he needed ‘space’, but then he called me every day for six months crying, so...,” she nods, hinting at the conclusion Shoshanna should reach, and then explicitly tells her, “it would open a lot of old wounds for him, like I think he’s still in love with me.” From Hannah’s point of view, Elijah pined for her after their break up in such a way that she worries what affect a face-to-face meeting might have on him. She considers Elijah to be susceptible when it comes to her, and because of that she should make sure she acts responsibly around him. Her idea of him is that she has such a hold over him, if they were to see each other, he wouldn’t be able to control himself and they would inevitably have sex. Shoshanna responds pragmatically, “well, like, but that’s ok because you both already have HPV.”

This is Hannah’s story of her and Elijah; this is the narrative she has chosen for their relationship and its aftermath: unrequited love and sexual tension. So Hannah resigns herself to what she feels will be inevitable and meets with him. What she discovers is that the Elijah she had created, the Elijah from her past that she assumed would feel about and behave towards her in the same way she felt he did during college, does not tally with the Elijah she encounters now. Elijah’s gay, and feels he has always been gay: “did I always want to have sex with men? Yes. Did I think about men when we were together? Yes.” Hannah reacts strongly, mirroring Marnie’s reaction to Charlie’s shaved head as both women are confronted suddenly by a realization that they are being forced to re-evaluate the past. Hannah’s story of ‘Hannah and Elijah,’ and her understanding of who Elijah was but also of who she was with him and after him, has collapsed, has shattered into something she’s unable to make sense of in that moment. She struggles with the notion of him, but also with what that means for her and the story she had in place for her self. She becomes angry and accusatory. Elijah responds, “I am being my authentic self,” the self that he knows now, (which links to the selves he was with Hannah) that creates the narrative of his coming out.

Hannah’s difficulties with resolving this conflicting version of past events leads to Elijah also becoming angry. Equally perturbed, perhaps, by the self he has to acknowledge that Hannah has created and maintained, Elijah projects this back on to Hannah by associating her now with who she was in college. Responding to Hannah’s suggestion that he may have given her HPV, he says, “quite frankly, Hannah, I resent the accusation.
You were always like this,” challenging her to see how she likes being associated with someone else’s interpretation of her self. When Hannah suggests that she was lied to for two years, Elijah asks “by who?”, and then suggests that she knew about his sexuality, as he did, and simply refused to acknowledge it: “we are only as blind as we want to be.” Hannah denies this, and instead suggests that Elijah has adopted certain traits since she knew him, such as a “fruity little voice” which she describes as a “new thing,” something her version of Elijah didn’t have.

Multiple versions of Elijah and Hannah are alluded to during this conversation, selves that are created to serve as narrators and characters for the stories both Hannah and Elijah have about their shared and separate past. The use of these fiction techniques reveals what is real and what is not real is almost impossible to establish and/or maintain. The truth of their relationship and who they were when they were in it changes continually throughout the conversation as they remember and re-remember certain aspects, as well as use current interpretations to re-understand and create new versions of themselves and their relationship then and now.

There are selves we could live without, selves we try to forget, selves that we try to emulate every day. There are selves we feel no connection to, can barely remember being, and selves that we thought we still were until abruptly we realize somehow we are no longer. Sometimes selves are created outside of us, with or without our permission, with or without our awareness.

On New Year’s Eve 2012, a friend and I spoke about how we’d gradually been seeing less and less of each other. We’d become estranged for no reason we could ostensibly pinpoint other than we no longer lived in the same city and found we were terrible at keeping in touch. We’d seen each other twice in the last three years, once relatively recently, a few weeks previously at a mutual friends’ wedding where we’d been able to reconnect and drink and dance and gossip, and we reminisced about the good time we’d had that night. ‘We should see each other more often,’ we said to each other. ‘We should make more of an effort,’ we said to each other. ‘We were close once, weren’t we,’ we said. We stood in the living room of a friend of hers, someone who I’d never met but who had been generous with her hospitality for Hogmanay, handing out plates of chilli when we arrived and glasses of cava for The Bells.

It was a great New Year’s. There were enough of us for it to feel celebratory, few enough for it to feel intimate despite the new introductions. Fairy lights and party poppers, homemade fondant fancies and four crates of Furstenberg; New Year’s had its way with us and we felt affectionate for the past, hopeful and happy. We took our shoes off at midnight for the
kissing and singing, to feel the shag of the newly laid carpet between our toes like warm, mossy grass. Someone started playing records: we jived to “I’m a Cuckoo” by Belle and Sebastian, we admonished bad relationships to The Smiths’ “Cemetery Gates.” “Drinking to Move on” by Grand National and three Old Fashioned’s each made things take a maudlin turn. My old friend swayed over to me and asked in to my ear if I remembered the party after the wedding we’d been at earlier in the month, at a cottage a few of the guests were staying at.

“Vaguely,” I said; there was an open bar and we’d made the most of it.

“Do you remember being outside on the patio talking with so-and-so?” she asked.

I did remember because I’d been smoking. I’d had three roll-ups that night and my hangover had been exponentially worse for it.

“Well, I was in the kitchen,” she continued, “and the windows were open and it was noisy but I heard you, I heard you call me a glory hole. I heard you say to so-and-so that you thought I was like a glory hole,” she said.

I stepped back, turned my head which had been pressed against her mouth, to look at her and her expression. She was smiling, but only because she seemed to feel awkward. Telling me this was uncomfortable for her, perhaps because she felt as if she was calling me out and she didn’t want to embarrass me, but she wanted to confront me. I was, and still am, 100% sure I didn’t say this. That turn of phrase, with its suggestion that I wouldn’t approve of someone’s sex life, particularly for women but for men too, simply isn’t something I would say or think. I told her this.

“You did,” she said, her eyes adamant, “I heard you.”

She was convinced, and even though, or perhaps because, I protested so vehemently it was hard to persuade her otherwise and eventually we had to drop it, sensing that neither of us was going to change our minds about what we thought we knew.

An unintended self of mine was created between us that night. A self of mine created by her, utterly true for her, and a self I was not responsible for creating and one that is not true for me.

The process of re-considering the past for Arfin (2008, 59) means “an obligation to tell the truth,” even when that is uncomfortable or difficult for those involved in the more traumatic aspects of her life. But in describing her creative process, she writes “my challenge was to turn the boring stuff in to life-changing events, the embarrassing bits into humorous ones, and the pathetic moments into important learning experiences,” revealing how she has re-evaluated moments in her life,
altered their significance and altered their truth (ibid. 231). In response to a question posed by Brad Listi (2013) for the podcast *Other People* about the details contained in *Dear Diary*, Arfin suggests that the reasons she remembers the starter jackets worn by boys at the ice rink was because she was “obsessed,” and these obsessive moments become reference points for her (Listi 2013). The time she describes in *Dear Diary* when the zipper of her coat got caught and, high on ecstasy and acid, she began to panic, is a small moment but when today “[my coat] get[s] stuck, I know how to fix it” (ibid.). That moment becomes tied to every moment when her zip gets stuck, making a history of selves that owned coats with awkward zips. For her, this means something, or at least meant something during the construction of *Dear Diary* and her other life stories, enough for her to want to not only include it, but construct it in to an episode of the narrative of *Dear Diary*.

Arfin, with her story of patience and perseverance and zips, chooses to give it significance and she narrates it in to her multiple existences. She, like many of us, finds these moments in her past but she also makes them what they are, demonstrating how we can create the moments of dramatic conflict in our life narratives and choose how to interpret moments of in/significance. This process of constructing significance is so important to Arfin (2008, 232) that she encourages others to do the same, “remember that mistakes are only worthwhile if they get written down in a diary.” In being able to narrativize her past, Arfin establishes her selves and highlights how memory and its re/evaluation is an essential part of establishing identity. Hannah too, seems to stabilise emotionally only through a process of placing a narrative over the day’s events. Before this, with her identity shaken, she is tipped off balance.

The final scenes of “All Adventurous Women Do” take place in Hannah and Marnie’s flat. At home, after her meeting with Elijah, Hannah sits on her bed with her laptop contemplating how to describe the day in a tweet. She begins with, “You lose some, you lose some,” deletes this, then writes, “My life has been a lie, my ex-boyfriend dates a guy,” deletes this as well, then finally settles for, “All adventurous women do.” Pressing enter creates a schism separating a former self from the present self; a former self who believed a man was desperately in love with her, a former self who has “pre-cancer,” split from the woman who now considers contracting HPV as a kind of life achievement.

In this moment too, Hannah chooses how she’s going to re-interpret the past. She assesses the perspectives, the possible narratives, the frames she could use to re-understand her relationship with Elijah, and settles on the story that focuses on experiences, experiments and adventure. When
Marnie arrives at the apartment, Hannah has seemingly forgotten how upset and angry she was, forgotten the other narratives, the sadder, more self-pitying versions of the story of her and Elijah, and committed fully to the version which is shocking but funny, and something she ultimately knew all along. After hearing that Elijah is gay, Marnie laughs and says how funny she thinks this is. Hannah suggests that “funny is one word for it, I was going to go with fucked or sad,” but funny seems appropriate for right now. In this moment of self-examination, Hannah re-writes an aspect of her life, and by doing so, makes a decision about the kind of person she wants to be. Mark Freeman (1993) writes, “in deciding how one’s self will be rewritten there is, inevitably, a moral component involved: one is making a determination about what sort of self one ought to be and, as a function of this determination, what sort of history to write.” Hannah doesn’t want to be ‘fucked’ or ‘sad,’ she wants to be funny.

This scene also captures, as Ron Currie Jr. describes in his 2013 article ‘On Louis CK and Truth in Fiction,’ how social media has developed the ways in which we create stories of ourselves and understand identity:

[F]or the first time the self-referential nature of autobiographical fiction perfectly represents the culture at large. More than represents it—informs it, becomes it. Our real lives and the lives we broadcast on Facebook are not the same, yet they reflect one another ad infinitum, like mirrors of graduating distortion lining the halls of a funhouse. And in certain ways, the doppelgangers we create in our media are becoming more real, both in our minds and the minds of others, than we are ourselves.

Hannah’s “edited narrative” is the truth of what happened to her that day; but it is one of many truths she knows about the day, one of many truths she could have placed at the centre of the story of her HPV diagnosis, but she chooses to become the adventurous woman she creates in a tweet (Currie Jr. 2013). Again, Girls reflects this conflation of the line between non/fiction by not only drawing attention to how we narrate and create our lives through social media, but also through Dunham’s employment of autobiographical events into the fictional world of Girls, an approach which is also used by Louis C.K. playing Louie in FX’s Louie (2010-present), and Marc Maron playing Marc Maron in IFC’s Maron (2013-present). Currie Jr. elaborates, “the realities of our days become the edited narratives we post on Facebook and Twitter, in the same way that the realities of Louis C.K.’s days become the edited misadventures of a comic in New York City named Louie” (2013).

There is a line between Louis C.K and Louie, Dunham and Hannah, but that line is something moveable and scrutable, as Dunham describes:
“I don’t even know where my line is, but I know I have a line. There are certain modes of me that don’t end up in the characters. But I like the idea of people seeing that stuff and feeling like they know me” (James Poniewozik 2012). Hannah becomes a version of Dunham through Dunham herself and those who watch Girls see Dunham in Hannah, which Dunham actively encourages. In the same way, the tweet that Hannah sends which represents an adventurous self, confident that contracting HPV is compelling, blurs with the self that hours previously had been completely distraught by the same information. Who we are and how we present ourselves in social media are separate but also intrinsically linked; they are separate selves but also part of our constructed life narrative.

As the final scene of “All Adventurous Women Do” continues, together Hannah and Marnie recalculate what they knew of Elijah: “he seemed gay,” “yeah, he seemed gay” to “he was gay” and “yeah, he was gay,” and how obvious it all was because “he only ejaculated like 30% of the time.” The notion of hindsight here could be exchanged with the practice of re-reading of the past. By capturing the moment in which the past, a purported fixed and stable thing, changes, this scene illustrates how readily we narrate our existences but also how we are constantly forced to re-narrate as well. In order to reflect how our past and present selves are constantly changing, we reach new understandings of the past through our understandings of the present, which means our past, present and future selves change again. Cyclical and perpetual, we constantly build and layer our selves as we create the stories of our lives.

The final moments of “All Adventurous Women Do” is a joyous embrace of selves reflected in the choice of soundtrack. Hannah and Marnie, having spent the episode dealing with the trauma of the unexpected self revealing itself quite suddenly, and learning to cope with the multiplicity of truth and understanding, dance unselfconsciously and exuberantly with themselves to Robyn’s “Dancing On My Own.” They may not have achieved it entirely, but they have learnt that the past needs to be evaluated and re-evaluated to suit their current contexts, their current selves, and that they will have to create new stories themselves. By communing with the past we not only gain insight in to the process of re-remembering and begin to understand how a story can have many different beginnings and many different endings, and that the characters that populate the text that is a life can be many versions of very different selves, but we also understand how essential structuring and re-structuring the past into narratives is to our construction of identity.
Works Cited


Notes

1 This quote can also be attributed to Joan Didion who originally wrote the line in *The White Album* in 1979.
2 *The Craft* (1996), about four disenfranchised high school girls who turn to witchcraft to seek empowerment, and *American History X* (1998) the story of two brothers, gang affiliation and the difficulties of escaping those affiliations, are films that are part of my past; films we watched as teenagers at sleepovers, in the middle of the night, away from parents because of the violence and horror contained in them. They were a part of my vernacular growing up; but I’m nearly eight years older than Hannah so her relationship to these films would be different.
I wonder if, because she wasn’t old enough to watch them when they first came out, she would watch them when she, and the films themselves, were older, less relevant. Perhaps she watched them insincerely, as a joke. When we watched them we took them deadly seriously. I wonder if Hannah did with these films what we did with *The Omen* (1976): give them a running commentary, a silly narrative, laughed at how bad the special effects were, how fake the blood looked.

Shoshanna also plays down the seriousness of the situation by telling Hannah that Jessa has a couple of strains of HPV, and that it doesn’t bother her. In fact she’s oddly proud of it, as Shoshanna relates that Jessa believes “all adventurous women do,” giving us the title of the episode.

Margaret Atwood (2001, 345-346) in *Alias Grace* writes, “when you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.” This is how Hannah seems to feel at this moment: shaken and unsure. It is not until later in the episode, through the placing of a narrative structure around the day’s events by writing a tweet, that she is able to tell the story of her and Elijah to Marnie.

Simon Amstell, in his stand up show *Do Nothing*, says “The problem is that we feel like we’re living into the future. Really what we’re doing is living into the past. We’re constantly repeating moments from the past hoping for better endings.” Determining ‘better’ is up to the individual; it could be a better understanding of self, it could be knowing that a past self is different to who we are now, but what’s clear is that this process is essential in forming identity which Amstell highlights in his stand-up show that centres on ways to establish himself as a comedian and not a kids’ TV-presenter.
Since its April 2012 pilot, *Girls* has been criticized for its attention to a privileged class of educated, young, white adults who struggle with narcissistic and banal challenges: the protagonist Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) has been supported by her middle-class parents through college and beyond and has the luxury of choosing a job based on its capacity to fulfill her creative needs, not based on a need for economic survival. Dustin Rowles’s 2013 review credits the general antipathy towards the characters to their class advantages: “It has less to do with the way they look, the fact they’re unlikable, or nepotism (which isn’t even a real issue) and has most to do with our disdain for privileged white people.” Although this charge accurately censures the navel-gazing that not only Hannah, but most of her friends indulge in, it misses the self-deprecating tone of the series, which consistently critiques the characters’ selfish impulses. The series does not ask that the audience take Hannah’s troubles seriously, but adopts a narrative remove that is critical of the characters’ trivial and selfish egotism.

*Girls* achieves this narrative distance through its characters’ criticism of each other and through the juxtaposition of their expectations with the economic reality presented visually. The layers of their contemporary economic circumstances represent the complexity of post-modern class distinctions. Those distinctions are reified in the way characters judge each other’s post-graduate achievements and in the way the series is intertextualized within the framework of other television series that clearly inform it, primarily *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *Entourage* (HBO, 2004-2011), and *How to Make It in America* (HBO, 2010-2011). *Girls* redresses the culture of superficial
consumerism developed in previous series and redeems its characters’ narcissism, at least partially, through redirecting their energy away from consumption and toward production. I will argue that the examination of Girls’ rejection of the standards of consumption that have become the norm in situation comedies in favor of a labor-driven approach to economic decisions will reveal that class consciousness transcends the realm of Jimmy Choo stilettos (Sex and the City) and Patrón tequila (Entourage), through a neo-Marxist approach.

The superficial similarities to Friends might appear too obvious to be worth commenting on, but a brief comparison is important to establish Girls within the context of its predecessor and to see how this show subverts the expectations of an audience accustomed to Friends-type narrative complications, character development, and plot resolutions. Both series follow a group of friends who are single and in their mid-twenties, through career and relationship struggles in New York City. Both series feature characters whose diverse personalities and backgrounds suggest they would not be friends, and yet, the group somehow melds around the complications of their differences. The characters on Girls march a few steps behind those of Friends in developing careers, and they emphasize their college educations more frequently, as their humanities credentials are the foundation for the type of employment and success they pursue.

While Girls deserves to be contextualized within the history of ensemble comedies set in New York, its approach to production and consumption diverges noticeably from that of Friends. This difference marks a critical cultural shift in attitudes toward commodities, acquisition, and work in that while Friends and Sex and the City privilege consumption, Girls lauds production. Soon after its pilot, Friends began to influence its viewers’ style and purchasing decisions. The “Rachael” became an often requested haircut; the characters’ clothing led sartorial choices; and home décor shifted to reflect the quirkiness of Monica (Courtney Cox) and Rachel’s (Jennifer Aniston) apartment: bright colors, oversized furnishings, bohemian simulacra that belied a commercial intentionality. The attention to style and fashion betrays a locus of consumption. Shopping rarely occurred during the action of the show, but the results of careful shopping and consumption dominate each scene.

Take, for example, Rachel and Monica’s extravagant apartment, a critical setting throughout the series. The two-bedroom apartment at 90 Bedford Street came to Monica through the death of her grandmother, a brief storyline intended to assuage viewers’ incredulity that a chef and a waitress could afford such a luxurious rental. The Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation estimates that a one-bedroom apartment
in the same building would rent for $2,695 today (Dana 2011). Although
Monica’s life of largesse is explained (at least cursorily), Chandler
(Matthew Perry) and Joey (Matt LeBlanc) maintain a similarly spacious
home, even if it does not benefit from the semblance of feminine
decorating sensibilities, and the “boys’” employment is not significantly
more impressive: Chandler is a middle manager and Joey a sometimes-
employed actor.

Thus, the treatment of consumption in Friends can be described as
inflated, and if the impact of Rachel’s hairstyle can be extrapolated to the
show’s overall approach to consumption, the series may have led many
down a path more serious than bad hair. Consumption and selection of
commodities are often considered markers of class and class values, and
Diana Kendall criticizes the media for their inaccurate portrayal:

Rather than providing a meaningful analysis of inequality and showing
realistic portrayals of life in various social classes, the media either play
class differences for laughs or sweep the issue of class under the rug so that
important distinctions are rendered invisible. By ignoring class or
trivializing it, the media involve themselves in a social construction of
reality that rewards the affluent and penalizes the working class and the
poor (2011, 210).

Perhaps no Friends episode demonstrates the exalted role of consumption
than “The One with the Apothecary Table,” (season 6, episode 11) in
which Rachel lies to her roommate Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) about the
source of their new coffee table. Rachel is sure that Phoebe will not
approve of the table because it was mass-produced for Pottery Barn and
not “one-of-a-kind” furniture with a “history” and “story behind it,” and so
she tells Phoebe she bought it at a flea market. The appearance of novelty
trumps real patina. In a 2004 speech, Patrick Connolly, a vice president for
Williams-Sonoma (the parent company of Pottery Barn) stated that the
felicitous product placement was “the gift that keeps on giving. The
phones light up with catalog requests every time [the episode] airs” (Beth
Negus Viveiros 2004), suggesting that consumption in Friends literally
influenced real buying patterns, even in syndication.

Phoebe’s taste aligns to Jürgen Habermas’s summary of Karl Marx’s
early yearning for “a philosophically romanticized prototype of handicraft
activity” (1987, 65), in the vein of John Ruskin and William Morris.
Although Habermas notes Marx “eventually gave up his orientation to the
prototype of craftsmanlike praxis” (65), its influence as an alternative to
mass production survives for good reason. The appeal of Friedrich Hegel’s
concept of man’s relationship to labor—man whose nature is to produce—remains as a clear alternative to base consumerism.1

*Girls* overtly rejects the inflated expectations for consumption of the 1990s, despite its insistence on integrating contemporary brand recognition. Early in the first season, Charlie (Christopher Abbott) explains that he is making a coffee table for Marnie out of street garbage “in the style of this thing she likes from Restoration Hardware” (season 1, episode 4). This is the same coffee table that he violently rips from Marnie (Allison Williams) and Hannah’s apartment when they break up (season 1, episode 5). Restoration Hardware, although more upscale than Pottery Barn, sells similarly mass-produced home furnishings, and in fact, the two are considered market competitors. Despite Restoration Hardware’s self-description of its stores as “galleries,” its commodities follow the lead of Pottery Barn in their appearance, which emphasizes the *semblance* of patina, history, and re-use. Thus, Charlie’s coffee table is an authentic version of an item mass-produced to look like it was recycled from garbage. When Marnie sees Charlie’s apartment for the first time, she tells him that his wood craftsmanship is amazing, like a “Target ad” (season 1, episode 5). He is offended, partially because of the comparison to low-end retail.

The distinction between the economic foci in the action of *Friends* (centered on consumption) and *Girls* (centered on production) is important in another influential way—through the setting of the coffeehouse. Employment at a coffeehouse is one more superficial similarity between *Girls* and *Friends*, and in this venue, also, *Girls* approaches life in New York from the perspective of production, not consumption. In *Friends*, the usual scene in Central Perk involves some combination of the characters lounging on the sofa and chairs engaged in a group conversation. Even though the pilot has Rachel waiting tables, she rarely actually works, but instead chats with her friends. In contrast, when Hannah briefly works at Café Grumpy, the coffee shop that Ray (Alex Karpovsky) manages, the viewers see her and Ray performing actual work (season 2, episode 4). The camera captures Hannah sweeping floors, taking out the garbage, and filling orders. Her stint at the café, her brief interlude at the law office, and the internship she holds in the pilot all confirm Hannah’s confession of baggage, that she is “unfit for any and all paying jobs” (season 1, episode 3). The string Hannah’s jobs and the emphasis other characters place on defining who a person is and what a person is worth through what a person does demonstrates the critical difference between *Girls* and *Friends*. While *Friends* concerned itself with consumption, *Girls* focuses on production,
and many of the traditionally Marxist approaches to consumption are re-interpreted through that particular lens.

For example, often compensation determines a job’s status and a worker’s class membership, since compensation, in turn, determines one’s potential purchase power. More money translates into more stuff. However, status through employment in Girls does not follow this expected model; instead, status is defined through abundance of abstract labor. Sean Sayers begins with Friedrich Hegel’s “ascending scale” of the forms of labor and extends Hegel’s hierarchy into our post-industrial economy. As Hegel did, Sayers distinguishes the levels of the scale through the “degree of mediation that they establish between subject and object (nature)” (2007, 437). From direct appropriation (such as hunting or fishing), to agriculture, to craft and industry, the initial levels trace an obvious path of work abstraction from immediate survival toward social interdependence and division of labor. “Universal” work is not so obviously defined, as it grew quickly during the Industrial Revolution, and Sayers includes in this category “commercial, administrative, and other kinds of service work” (2007, 441). Yet, beyond these foundational levels of labor, Sayers extends post-industrial work to include what Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri term “immaterial labor” (Sayers 2007, 443), found at the crux of the production anxiety faced by Hannah and her friends.

Sayers splits immaterial labor into two categories: symbolic labor, or the labor of the mind, artistry, or creation; and affective labor, which addresses feelings or emotions (444-5). Both the Hegelian hierarchy and Sayers’s extension elevate the most abstract labor, and the hierarchy often maps onto perceived social status, as well. Girls neglects the first two levels (direct appropriation and agriculture), for the New York setting eliminates these as likely areas for employment, but maintains the heuristic by placing characters into situations where their social status changes quickly, not based on their absolute or perceived wealth, but based on the perception of the abstraction of their vocation. In Hannah’s social world, an unpaid internship trumps paid menial labor. Sayers’s classification of “legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers” (2007, 447) as affective labor seems questionable, even considering that these workers have making someone happy as part of their job. Sayers delegates them to affective work because they do not directly produce a commodity, although the legal assistant and flight attendant fit more with universal labor, and fast food workers do indeed produce a commodity: the meals they prepare and serve. The one affective labor position in Sayers lists that aligns to labor in Girls is caretaker, as Jessa (Jemima Kirke) is a
nanny for Jeff (James Le Gros) and Katherine (Kathryn Hahn). The other central characters aspire to positions in symbolic labor while they toil at universal work.

Jean Baudrillard is useful in the analysis of Hegelian and post-Hegelian levels of labor, as he relies on David Reisman’s “notion of the ‘standard package,’” or “the collection of products and services which constitutes the basic heritage of the middle-class American” (1988, 37). Baudrillard uses the standard package to demonstrate that needs are culturally defined, and that consumption follows cultural expectations, not discretely defined needs. While Friends redefined the standard package for middle class consumption by inflating it, Girls redefines the standard package as middle class production through symbolic labor. The characters who appear most successful in their careers are those who perform symbolic work: the artist Booth Jonathan (Jorma Taccone), the professors Tad (Peter Scolari) and Loreen (Becky Ann Baker) Horvath, and Powell Goldman (Michael Imperioli), and the filmmaker Katherine Lavoyt. Other characters, like the doctor Joshua (Patrick Wilson) and the venture capitalist Thomas-John (Chris O’Dowd) engage in employment typically termed “white collar.” While a physician may also be classified as part of affective labor, the venture capitalist performs immaterial labor that seems neither symbolic nor affective. Both characters display more concern for consumption than production. Thomas-John obsesses over the status he accrues through the cost of his furnishings and his particular taste and style, and Hannah remarks that she didn’t realize there were houses like Joshua’s in their neighborhood (season 2, episode 5), suggesting both admiration for the taste of his brownstone and a hint of aversion to sharing her community with a home that represents consumption society. Thomas-John’s preoccupation with material things and status make him a superficial stereotype of Wall Street greed. Joshua doesn’t seem as vapid at first, even though Hannah posits that his “sweater cost more than [her] rent” (season 2, episode 5), yet when she exposes her vulnerabilities and anxieties about writing, he ducks the conversation and avoids further involvement, signifying that he lacks depth and substance.

The Girls’ standard package for middle class heritage and membership is achievement of employment in a symbolic labor field and continuous production of intellectual commodities that remain abstracted from income. The abstraction from nature in the performance of labor assuages the implicit dirtiness of engaging in economic gain at all. Hannah’s perspective on symbolic labor strictly divides jobs that convey the necessary intellectual or artistic capital from jobs that merely produce a paycheck. On a visit home to Michigan (season 1, episode 6), Hannah
spends the evening on a date with a pharmacist, Eric (Lou Taylor Pucci). She ponders the idea of moving home to write her book, but when Eric suggests she consider an open position at a florist, she counters, “No, I would get a real job, like a teacher.” When Eric inquires further into her job and finances in New York, she tells him she is a writer, but is annoyed when she must admit that she makes no money at writing. Her irritation stems from having to admit financial failure, but also from confronting the economic implications of production. Hannah seeks complete artistic freedom, and she asks her parents to provide it through continued support and through joining her illusion that symbolic labor is so abstracted from nature that it is also abstracted from the economy. A universal labor position at a florist does not meet her standard for intellectual labor, but being a teacher is a “real job,” even if it falls short of her New York writing aspirations.

Hannah may represent the extreme end of the spectrum of characters’ attitudes toward production, but other characters are more equivocal. Adam (Adam Driver) joins Hannah’s purist views of artistic production, stating in regard to compromising and changing his play, “I would rather do nothing for the rest of my life than have my name attached to something mediocre. Your integrity is all that matters” (season 1, episode 8). Some characters, like Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) and Sandy (Donald Glover), are students and not yet part of the production systems. They are consumers of knowledge and instruction, but their majors suggest more practical careers: math and law, which also draw on intellectual, immaterial sources but generally yield more stable financial compensation.

Ray has resigned himself to universal labor as a café manager. When he recognizes that his lack of ambition in a symbolic field threatens his relationship with Shoshanna, he considers finishing his Ph.D. in Latin, but his boss, Hermie (Colin Quinn), convinces him to stay in restaurant management (season 2, episode 10). Hermie argues, “She doesn’t want a Latin scholar. She wants someone who can support her and keep buying her bread-shaped purses.” Hermie is wrong. Shoshanna would respect Ray more as a Latin scholar despite her desire for kooky purses. Hermie convinces Ray to remain in food services, but his argument draws on the appeal of consumption, not on the fulfillment of achieving intellectual goals.

Marnie struggles in the world of symbolic labor expectations, too, as her impulse is toward consumption. Her interest in Restoration Hardware and Target ads identifies her as a participant in consumer culture. Her discomfort with production reveals itself through interaction with others’ employment and her own tenuous employment. Marnie is an administrative
assistant—universal labor—at the outset of the series, yet the low level of her job on Sayers’s labor heuristic is redeemed in that she is an assistant to an art gallery, and so she participates in the world of symbolic labor, even if she is on its periphery. She is laid off and, desperate, finds employment as a hostess at the Wedgewood Club. She understands that she can procure a position as a hostess at a posh bar because of her looks, as this is “a pretty person job” (season 2, episode 2). She musters the courage to admit publicly that she holds a job that conveys no status, but when she confronts Charlie’s new girlfriend, Audrey (Audrey Gelman), she crumbles under her catty barbs (season 2, episode 4). Audrey, who is starting a specialty mustard company, asks Marnie how the job search is going. When Marnie answers that she has found a job, hostessing at the Wedgewood Club, Audrey pointedly follows up by asking, “As, you are hosting a poetry slam or an open mic night type thing?” Audrey’s response could be considered a generous way of letting Marnie explain her position further to increase the cachet of the job, but in fact, it is a ploy to undermine her by demanding further explanation. Marnie counters by asking Audrey, “Where do you get your headbands?”

While sociolinguistics might focus on the one-upmanship in the conversation, which conveys how conversations about work establish status, it is also important that Audrey discusses labor while Marnie counters by addressing consumption. Asking where Audrey buys her headbands directs attention to the vanity of her hipster attire. The kooky headbands, worn across her forehead and often adorned with feathers, reveal Audrey’s efforts to appear unique and cool, when any effort to appear cool negates the effect. Because Audrey trumps her in labor status, Marnie directs attention to her own superiority through apathy toward consumption.

Marnie’s interactions with Booth Jonathan indicate her confusion about the labor market when he believes he has hired her to help host a party and she believes she is co-hosting as his girlfriend (season 2, episode 6). She indignantly rejects the five hundred dollars he offers her, and tells him that she “fell in love with the idea of him,” or the idea of him as a successful artist. She respects his spacious brownstone, but even more, she is cowed by what she considers his brilliant artwork, including a towering sculpture of televisions that imprison the viewer. It is his work, not his self or his purchase power that she finds attractive.

Although Marnie is jealous when she finds out Charlie has a new girlfriend, it isn’t until she learns he has started his own business that she becomes manic to retrieve him. The business, running an application for phones called Forbid, relies on symbolic labor from Charlie. His own
description of the application, “It prevents you from calling someone you shouldn’t, be it an unrequited love or someone who fired you,” lumps romantic relationships with former employers, acknowledging the level of stress and attachment formed through work (season 2, episode 8). Marnie’s discussions with Charlie revolve around his newfound success and wealth, something he brushes off, but not until he concedes financial success. He does this humbly, but purposefully, as if he knows it would be gauche to gloat about money, but he can’t resist allowing Marnie to twist a little by seeing that his worth has increased economically, even if she didn’t recognize his merit when they dated.

It would be easy to conflate Sayers’s levels of labor with wealth, but the two cannot mingle. At every level of labor, there can exist multiple classes. One can picture a wealthy, educated farmer who performs agricultural labor and actively works the land, and not just a farm owner who share crops the labor to someone else, just as it is easy to picture a poor, uneducated artist of any medium. However, within the *Girls* paradigm, the “standard package” for being middle class may not include wealth but must include success in symbolic labor. Perhaps the reason for idealizing symbolic labor lies in the desire to escape the “Culture of Narcissism” identified by Michael Skovmand in television series, such as *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997-2002), *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), and *Friends*. Skovmand writes,

> They [characters in the series mentioned above] are beyond the civil rights movements, Vietnam, Watergate and the yuppy optimism of the Reagan era, no longer with any confidence in the larger emancipatory creeds their parents and grandparents clung to. In their place there is a restless individualism, a post-ironic self-consciousness and a peer group of post-adolescent friends. Larger concepts such as ‘society’, ‘politics’ or ‘justice’ are not totally jettisoned, but are seen as problematic, compromised as they are by the rhetoric of the parent generation. Instead, there is a deliberate minimalism, where the emotional minutiae of the personal world are magnified into ironically gigantic proportions. (2008, 92)

Hannah’s generation retains its parents’ larger values while struggling to redefine them. For example, Jessa both emulates her father’s aimless nomadic spirit and resents it. Thomas-John chafes at his parents’ conservative standards, but cannot break from them, despite his attempt to enjoy Jessa’s free-spiritedness. Thus, the girls in *Girls* seek middle-class identity without having to accept middle class expectations for consumerism. The abstract job becomes the most sought after cultural capital, instead of the well-furnished home.
As symbolic production replaces consumption as the critical marker of middle class identity, three Marxist aspects of consumption shift toward production in the *Girls* post-modern interpretation: commodity fetishism, relative poverty, and the inhumanity of miserable consumer existence. Marx explains that commodities appear to be very trivial and simple things, but they are actually mysterious since through social interaction they assume a value outside of their usefulness (use-value). The process of fetishizing an object “converts every product into a social hieroglyph” (1978, 322). In this same way, symbolic labor is fetishized in *Girls* as each job imbues its laborers with value beyond what they are capable of producing. When Joshua plays hookey to stay home with Hannah (season 2, episode 5), she asks him whether doctors can actually do that and what happens if he calls in sick. He answers glibly that ten or twenty people die. Although he clearly jokes about it, and no one argues that doctors do not deserve sick leave, his nonchalant manner stems from the fact that he is replaceable. In his absence, another doctor will fulfill his duties. Yet, when Hannah’s e-book editor calls and demands better pages from her, she finds no way to substitute for completing the work herself. In a basic sense, Hannah and Joshua demonstrate simple supply and demand: Joshua’s labor—even that of a highly trained physician—is in higher supply and less demand than Hannah’s labor, since she is unique. Her role of symbolic laborer is fetishized because only Hannah can write Hannah’s memoir.

Hannah’s resistance to writing reveals how she has fetishized the labor. We assume that she is capable of completing the project, as we know from her former professor Powell that she is talented, more so than former classmate and nemesis, Tally (season 1, episode 9). She has time on her hands and plenty to write about. She has been given an advance, and her ambition to “have a book” motivates her. She has proved that she can write quickly and under pressure, as she was able to write a short piece quickly for a reading that she performs for Powell’s writing group (season 1, episode 9). Yet, she sits and stares at her computer screen, and instead of writing, conducts Internet searches on obscure topics. Hannah has written plenty before, but she fetishizes the labor of writing for publication, or actual labor divorced from school-work or personal writing. Once writing becomes work, Hannah freezes in a state that cannot be encompassed by the idea of writer’s block. She has followed the advice of her editor and collected quixotic experiences, including using cocaine for the first time and having sex with new partners. The disconnect between an activity at which she is competent and the performance of that activity occurs when Hannah must confront the difference between the
fetishized and imagined version of writing a book and the reality of writing. When her editor threatens to sue her, she mutters to herself, “I’m going to write a book in a day. I’m going to write a full book in a day,” yet she does not write but indulges in a search for compassion among her group of friends and family. At the end of Season 2, Hannah has made no progress on the pages she owes her editor, although this cliffhanger is overshadowed by her reunion with and rescue by Adam. She cannot resolve the fetishized act of writing with the reality of sitting before her computer and generating text.

Hannah’s inability to produce the text she has committed to write demonstrates the alienation of production from labor. While it could be argued that she doesn’t labor very intently, Hannah would assert that she has. Not all labor is productive, and symbolic labor is vulnerable to a productivity deficit, in part because its abstraction renders it economically tenuous. *Girls* emphasizes the way symbolic labor and symbolic commodities exist in a volatile market that can leave the producer (writer, artist, etc.) empty handed despite her efforts to work.

Another ideological complication of consumption derived from Marx is the miserable existence of the consumerist chase for more. Marx describes the rendering of workers into an “inhuman” state through alienated labor (1978, 94). Likewise, an economic reality centered on symbolic labor manufactures misery, anxiety, and stress, even though symbolic laborers maintain ownership of the means of production—their creative, intellectual, or artistic talents. With the pressure to produce a book, Hannah’s adolescent obsessive-compulsive disorder returns (season 2, episode 8). Her OCD twitches and counting quickly overwhelm her and exacerbate the social pressures to produce her book. The production fetish is the social relationship formed through an idealized understanding of production, and Hannah encounters the social weight of the challenge she has accepted in the book deal at every turn, including Booth Jonathan’s party (season 2, episode 6) and even at her psychiatrist’s office (season 2, episode 8) when she finds that he, too, has written and published books. Just as Marx explains that the rivalry to obtain commodities creates misery, the struggle to establish status through symbolic labor creates misery as well as, in Hannah’s case, mental illness.

Dana Becker considers the cultural implications of the type of stress and anxiety Hannah constantly professes and exhibits. Becker classifies stress as a Foucaultian “technology of culture” and determines that current explanations and uses of stress as a concept—technologies—are “middle-class answers to primarily middle-class problems” (5-6). Becker concedes that poverty is stressful, but argues that the current approach to stress
derives from a subjective and culturally constructed phenomenon that is essentially middle class in its perspective, particularly in the way stress has been commodified. Whole industries market products toward the stressed, including specialty bath products, chocolate, alcohol, athletic equipment, and tourism. Hannah’s interaction with the commodification of anxiety includes pharmaceuticals and therapy, both of which remain less accessible to the working class.

Using Michel Foucault to understand the technology of the culture of stress reveals a desire to accrue cultural capital for middle class symbolic labor. This is not to say that Hannah’s—or anyone’s—OCD symptoms are not real. They are as real as any of the technologies of culture. Her stress exposes middle class vulnerability to the question of whether its existence can be justified when the poor suffer so much more. In order to balance the social equation, the middle class develops technologies of suffering, but in addition to their altruistic self-flagellation, these technologies continue to identify the middle class as a more privileged class. Becker writes, “as long as the middle class continues to be seduced into believing that we need to pull ourselves and others up to the level of the least stressed or vulnerable among us through exhortation or public health campaigns or medication and psychotherapy, it is unlikely that we will take on the work of reducing inequalities in our society” (174).

The cultural capital generated through a peculiarly middle class form of stress is enhanced through another aspect of the redefined theory of consumption in the transformation of relative poverty into relative production. James E. Foster (1998, 336) defines relative poverty by examining a standard of living within the context of mean, median and mode of overall wealth, and then determining a cutoff at a percentage below these measures. Relative poverty recognizes a dearth of resources, even when one may survive above a subsistence level. Virtual poverty is similar to relative poverty and occurs when the “virtual poor feel that they suffer ‘virtual exclusion’ in not being able to buy what they wrongly believe that the majority can buy” (Social Poverty 2013). The difference between the two is that with relative poverty, a person compares herself/himself to her/his neighbors or others whose consumption she/he can somehow monitor. Virtual poverty occurs when the poor view an inflated version of class and consumption through the media and then feel excluded socially because they cannot compete with the image presented to them. Both relative and virtual poverty impact social relations.

Relative production also derives from social interactions and heightens the stress of middle class symbolic labor, just as relative poverty increases the anxiety of anyone who realizes he/she is poorer than his/her neighbors.
The anxiety of relative production, as demonstrated in *Girls*, is unique to middle class symbolic laborers. Working class laborers are less likely to feel inadequacy in their production unless they are concerned about its impact on retaining employment and their source of income, because they have been alienated from their labor. The owner of the means of production is rarely involved in the actual labor, and any consideration of relative production is tied more to profit. For *Girls*, the middle class symbolic laborer is the only one who will compare his/her own production to those around him/her and feel insecure because of a shortfall in the product itself, not just in compensation. For example, Marnie does not compare her hostessing skills to other hostesses or restaurant employees, and Ray is not bothered by the thought of more productive café managers. However, both Ray and Marnie feel threatened by their lack of symbolic labor, especially when they see others succeeding in that realm.

Hannah’s reaction to Tally (Jenny Slate) is among the series’ best examples of relative production. Hannah’s resentment of her college nemesis’s success could be classified simply as professional jealousy, and that certainly explains some of her reactions at Tally’s book reception (season 1, episode 9). However, Hannah’s concerns reach beyond envy. Professional jealousy encompasses the attention and financial gains someone else enjoys, in addition to seeing someone else advance faster than oneself. Hannah and her friends who are symbolic laborers espouse little concern for the money or fame their production can gain them. They have been inducted into a social stratum that values the actual product beyond its use-value in bringing them professional advancement or compensation. We might consider Hannah’s desire for productivity to be materialist if she were looking to profit from her production, yet even Charlie’s acknowledgement that he has made lots of money from his app, seems humble, almost embarrassed. The culture of symbolic labor demands that production remain symbolic, even when the worker does profit from the labor. While Hannah desires the professional accolades Tally garners, she also longs to have published a book as tangible recognition that she belongs to the group of talented writers she wishes to be part of. Tally’s success heightens her longing, but it doesn’t initiate it.

Labor for profit cannot be symbolic. The intellectual endeavor involves abstraction and symbolic labor must remain abstracted to be symbolic. In the pilot episode, Loreen Horvath whines to Tad when Hannah begs for their continued support, “I want a lake house. I work hard. I want to sit by a fucking lake.” The senior Horvaths’ jobs as professors should produce symbolic work, but their approach to the work is no longer abstracted. Loreen desires the use-value of her labor be converted to recreation or
consumption. A lake house could be a status symbol, but Loreen’s exasperated plea does not lend itself to that interpretation. She wants a reward through recreation for her work. Like the younger generation, Loreen eschews consumption for the sake of status, but she is more focused on consumption than Hannah and her friends.

*Girls* redefines the middle class as symbolic laborers who focus on production, not consumption. The visual representation of the characters’ consumption contrasts with the initial example of excess in *Friends*. Several Brooklyn apartments showcase the diverse bohemian tastes of the characters, but none of them indulge in the inflated style of *Friends* or *Sex and the City*. Hannah’s apartment, which she shares first with Marnie and then Elijah, is grubby and small. It is filled with comfortable but mismatched furniture. Charlie’s exquisitely constructed “Target ad” furniture fills his tiny space, so that the only place to eat is a truncated table atop the bunk-bed. Adam’s apartment best demonstrates the anti-consumerist approach to set design and living space, as it is full of trash. When Adam’s new girlfriend Natalia (Shiri Appleby) visits his apartment for the first time, she tells him it is depressing and dark (season 2, episode 9). When he orders her to crawl to his bedroom as part of demeaning foreplay, she mutters, “This is so filthy with nails and shit,” which is accurate. The camera drops to her eye level and nails, dust, discarded boards and buckets litter the floor. In other scenes, Adam uses power tools in his carpentry, and the result of work is strewn about the place. His bed is a mattress on top of wooden pallets. Despite his lack of concern for the appearance of his apartment, Adam is very concerned about the appearance of his work. He refuses to compromise on his play, since he refuses mediocrity, but his credibility with Natalia is compromised when he invites her to his dark apartment.

While it might be tempting to classify the *Girls*’ characters as the younger siblings of those in *Friends* or *Sex and the City* and guess that their emphasis on production is a result of naiveté straight from their liberal arts credentials, a more generous reading of the cultural moment for which Hannah seeks to be a voice yields an optimistic interpretation. It is true that Hannah’s parents seem more concerned with traditional acquisitions in their desire for a lake house, but the interior of their Michigan home belies excessive materialism (season 1, episode 6). The set harkens to the middle class represented by *Roseanne* not *Friends*. Set designer Rosemary Brandenburg describes the decision she is often forced to make regarding “which middle class” the director wants, “well loved, and a little bit shabby” or something “much more upscale with up-to-date furnishings” (Krissy Clark 2013). The Horvath home is neat and the
exterior sports curb appeal through groomed shrubs and lawn and containers of annuals. But the ranch-style home clearly represents a realistic suburban home, not an idealized catalog version of domestic consumption. The kitchen appliances are old, not stainless, and the cabinets are contractor-grade, not custom. Their television is small and their Volvo station wagon is not a recent model. Even though Loreen wants the reward for her work in a lake house, she presents a realistic interpretation of the reward for her work and investment. The Horvath home décor lends consistency to the Girls visual theme, since it would have been easy to place them in Brandenburg’s upscale home. Keeping the sets consistently on the “little bit shabby” side focuses the visual message on production, not consumption and resists the tendency to treat sets as an opportunity to promote the viewers’ commodity fetish for displayed furnishings.

Girls represents a shift away from decades of inflated images of the middle class. Just using simplified and pared down sets would not be enough of a replacement for the illuminated walk-in closets that Carrie Bradshaw (Sara Jessica Parker) inherits as her due in marrying Mr. Big. Instead, Girls seeks to nudge the cultural pendulum in the ascetic direction and replace consumption with production. Heejung Park’s controversial research with Jean Twenge and Patricia Greenfield bears this point out through psycho-social studies of surveys administered to young adults over decades. Park examines the survey results for trends, and although her overall message has been that the current generation of young adults exhibits greater levels of narcissistic tendencies, she reports the generation that includes Hannah and her friends is less materialistic, even though they want “a job making lots of money.” She finds that “the increase in desiring to own expensive material items reversed” (2013, 1). Douglas Quenqua (2013) summarizes Park’s argument: “younger generations are increasingly entitled, self-obsessed and unprepared for the realities of adult life.” Hannah’s claim to be a voice for her generation supports Park’s meta-analysis, but the research suggests that a less materialist approach to life is not necessarily less self-centered. Hannah’s focus on production remains narcissistic, although it is not centered on acquisition.

Girls captures the best and worst of the zeitgeist of Hannah’s generation. More important, though, is the potential for the series to expand its elevation of production and reverse the inflated materialist tendencies of previous popular series. Feminist and body image critics have lauded Dunham’s vulnerable nudity for its potential to return the expectations for women’s appearance to reality, and the approach to consumption and production could work the same way on the economy.
The key is in replacing consumption values with production values, not just in deflating the image of commodities. If *Friends* ushered in an economic recession, in part, by virtual poverty which led to over-use of credit to purchase out-of-reach commodities, perhaps *Girls* can restore consumers’ expectations to reasonable levels.

**Works Cited**


http://gvshp.org/blog/2011/09/22/so-no-one-told-you-life-was-gonna-be-this-way-2/.


http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/07/10/1948550613495419.abstract.


**Notes**

1 The appeal of the apothecary table might also be considered through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s move to redefine economic criticism apart from Marx and instead align to a post-structuralist semiotic model for understanding the significance of consumption. For Baudrillard’s *homo economicus*, consumption relies on a “system of signs that differentiate the population” (1988, 3). In describing accumulation, Baudrillard asserts that the display of excess commodities, as in department stores, become “the magical negation of scarcity,” but more important, commodities become a “repetitive and metonymic discourse of the consumable” (30). The nature of the Pottery Barn simulacra of a living space, replicated in multiple apartments and homes, demonstrates the semiotics of consumption. Each piece of the ensemble represented in the Pottery Barn catalog pages that Rachel leafs through as she sits in Central Perk is a metonym for the whole and represents the consumer’s unique place in purchasing the life represented by the gestalt of the signs. In this way, the consumer differentiates himself/herself within the population and as part of the population. The density of the catalog itself, each item in every photograph numbered so that it can be ordered, creates a universe of conspicuous consumption where the viewer can inhabit multiple living rooms at the same time or sleep in dozens of beautifully made beds. As Baudrillard notes, “Few objects today are offered alone, without a context of objects to speak for them” (31), and *Friends* drives home that point when Rachel’s conflict is resolved by a random stroll by a Pottery Barn shop window that features the apothecary table and the other items from the tableau Rachel has been unable to resist. Although Phoebe is appalled that Rachel lied to
her and deceived her into living in the mass-produced environment she hates, she confesses that she can think of nothing but the one lamp in the window that they do not yet own. The sum of the items works its own seduction, or as Baudrillard defines, the “calculus of objects” (31) that elicits a consumer response.

2 Examples of respected internships in Girls include Hannah’s initial stint in publishing, from which she is “fired” when she requests pay and Elijah’s unpaid work as an assistant for a curator of dance.

3 The market value for the supply and demand paradigm rarely extends to the compensation commanded by symbolic labor such as Hannah’s artistry. Superstars in symbolic labor are uncommon.
CHAPTER NINE

WORKING GIRLS?

MILLENNIALS AND CREATIVE CAREERS

MARYANN ERIGHA

Created by Lena Dunham and produced by Judd Apatow Productions, the HBO dramedy Girls (2012-present) follows four young women living in Brooklyn in their early to mid-twenties. Work is a major concern for the title characters—Hannah (Lena Dunham), Marnie (Allison Williams), Jessa (Jemima Kirke), and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet)—and to their fellow members of the millennial generation, born anywhere from 1979 to 2004. Hannah longs to become a writer. In fact, most of her friends aspire to do something artsy. She and her friends snub typical, rationalized work and instead aspire to careers in creative industries, which span sectors such as publishing, film, television, design, music, and visual art. While their aspirations for creative careers might be a result of their coming of age in a dismal economy, I would argue that their ability to pursue them owes more to their social class status than to their generational membership.

The Severe Recession, as it has sometimes been called, lasted roughly from 2008 to 2011, but its impact still continues to be felt, resulting in it being called a “jobless recovery.” For Hannah, Marnie, Jessa, and Shoshanna, the age-old question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” takes an unexpected detour as they prepare to enter the labor market in the midst of the worst economic recession in recent history. Many millennials who entered adulthood during the economic downtown had to place their career plans on hold (Alec R. Levenson 2010, 259). Instead, they have opted to stay in school for graduate and advanced degrees, volunteer for organizations such as Teach for America or AmeriCorps, explore various career avenues through internships or low-paying part-time jobs, or even travel the world (Karen K. Myers and Kamyab Sadaghiani 2010). These post-recessionary times create a bleak employment landscape which, accompanied by a rise in labor market precariousness and decreasing job stability and security in employment
Working Girls? Millennials and Creative Careers

(Steven Vallas and Christopher Prener 2012, 331-53), makes finding a steady job, much less a meaningful one, difficult. This socioeconomic situation provides millennials, perhaps more than members of previous generations, with both the incentive and motivation to pursue careers that have intrinsic value and are not perceived as mundane, routine, 9 to 5 white collar work. This chapter offers a thematic analysis of millennials’ conversations about creative work in the first two seasons of Girls. The show’s portrayal of work closely resembles C. Wright Mills’ and Max Weber’s notion of a Renaissance work model, as Girls portrays millennials as both desiring and pursuing creative careers. However, to many observers, this pursuit does not constitute legitimate work. Race and social class also impact millennials’ access to creative career paths. Only the privileged and well-to-do can vigorously pursue creative work, as I will discuss shortly.

Escape from Rationalized Workplace

Max Weber (1952) and Robert Blauner (1964) argued in their seminal writings on modern-day labor, that contemporary rationalized labor in organizations tends to separate workers from a sense of purpose. As the workplace becomes increasingly depersonalized and rationalized, the traditional ways in which work provides meaning is no longer part of the experience of laboring (Robin Leidner 1993, 179). This analysis of how work changed from providing self-fulfillment to a sense of estrangement is a classic reading of the kind of alienation that these social theorists, including Karl Marx, saw as characterizing modern society more generally. The classic view of the artisan laborer, who finds not only meaning but also creative expression through the products of his/her labor, is replaced in this conception with the view of modern society as one where the worker is simply selling his/her labor power for a paycheck (Richard Sennett 2008).

The millennial protagonists of Girls abhor this idea of undertaking work that would be devoid of meaning, and they recoil at the type of work in which they imagine the majority of individuals are engaged. Such work is perceived to be boring, unpleasant, rigidly structured, and not integrated with leisure (Jeffrey L. Kidder 2006, 47). Though in fact there are increasingly some contemporary jobs, such as graphic design, that are more creative and do not rigidly follow a 9 to 5 schedule, the characters in Girls more generally identify contemporary work as stifling and tedious.

The show’s protagonists make several references to their lack of affinity for modern day work. Of all the girls, Jessa, the free-spirited,
world-traveling bohemian, is most unamenable to a day job. In the following conversation from season 1, episode 4 (“Hannah’s Diary”), Jessa gripes about the daily time constraints inherent in a typical post-college job.

Jessa: You know what the weirdest part about having a job is? You have to be there every day, even on the days you don’t feel like it.
Shoshanna: Do you not feel like it today?
Jessa: Today is fine. I just don’t know how I’ll feel tomorrow.

Jessa finds it impossible to accept this rigid regularity. In season 1, she holds a babysitting job watching two elementary school-aged girls. For Jessa, babysitting is only a part-time job, yet she still feels trapped by the notion of a day job, even one with ample variation in the workday—sleeping children, walks to the park, and lots of downtime.

Adam (Adam Driver), Hannah’s boyfriend, is also vocal about the restrictions of modern day work. In the pilot, he says that supplemental income from his grandmother helps him avoid the pitfalls of typical full-time employment: “It gives me the freedom. I don’t have to be anyone’s slave.” This notion of being a slave to one’s employer echoes Jessa’s desire to exercise agency over her own schedule. Like her millennial friends, Hannah also desires freedom from the confines of work when she is saddled with a looming deadline for an E-book contract. In the finale of season 2 (“Together”), she implores her father to bail her out of the contract and lend her the advance money she has already spent, because she desires the “freedom to process things”—a freedom from time constraints, deadlines, paychecks, and other parameters for work.

Another characteristic that makes modern day work unappealing to millennials is the stigma that it is boring. Jeff (James Le Gros), the father of the children Jessa babysits, refuses to tell her about his occupation. Jessa is puzzled over his non-disclosure about a seemingly commonplace topic. Curious, she asks him, in season 1, episode 3 (“All Adventurous Women Do”): “Is it because the answer is boring or because you don’t have a job?” Here, Jessa places not having a job on the same platform as having a “boring” job. To her, each offense is equally reprehensible. The importance of having an interesting job also carries over to Jessa’s dating life. In season 1, episode 9 (“Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too,”) Jessa first describes her future husband, the venture capitalist Thomas-John (Chris O’Dowd), as a lackluster, drab fellow. Before she has feelings for him, Jessa is initially turned off by Thomas-John’s expensive suit and tie that epitomize a New York businessman’s attire and the humdrum life of a stable career.
In season 1, episode 6 (“The Return”), when Hannah’s parents ask about her job (which she actually quit without them knowing), she lies and reassures them: “It’s the same boring job, but a job.” In her mind, a typical post-graduate job leading to a bright but rather unexciting future is exactly what parents would want for their young millennial. Hannah’s mom suggests that she apply for a job organizing lectures at the local university, which would also bring her closer to home. Hannah quickly and unmistakably makes it clear that she is not interested in any usual, mundane position and replies: “You know, if you’re gonna do this all weekend, just don’t.” They have not yet reached home and Hannah is already mildly annoyed with her parents’ insistence on her pursuing more conventional work. Throughout the series, Hannah remains firm in her conviction to not entertain even the faintest idea of succumbing to a traditional career.

**Creative Work as the Ideal**

As was previously mentioned, the characters on *Girls* embrace creative work, which falls under Weber and Mills’ notion of a Renaissance view of work; one that is intrinsically meaningful and centered in craftsmanship. Work is synonymous with play; it is self-gratifying and is not performed for an ulterior motive (Sennett 2008). Millennials have high expectations for meaningful work in their careers (Sara De Hauw and Ans De Vos 2010, 294). Most important, creative careers offer work-life balance as millennials “want fun, fulfilling work, with flexible hours, good salaries, and ample vacation” (Lianne George 2009). This desire for work flexibility causes millennials to navigate towards flexible career paths (K. W. Smola and C. D. Sutton 2002) and lifestyles that balance their personal and professional lives (Bryant Ott, Nikki Blacksmith, and Ken Royal 2008; Andrea Hershatter and Molly Epstein 2010, 219). Artistic careers satisfy these key elements in this generation’s vision of the workplace, as they are perceived as “cool jobs in hot industries” (Gina Neff, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Sharon Zukin, 2005, 307) and provide an escape from the routine of modern day work, which is increasingly undesirable, as well as rare, in the new economy.

The desire for creative careers is ubiquitous in *Girls*. Hannah actively pursues a writing career and is working on completing a memoir. Marnie first strives to be a curator and later hopes to become a singer. Jessa’s passion lies in painting. Adam aspires to be an actor and also dabbles in woodworking. Charlie (Christopher Abbott) sings, plays the guitar, works at an architectural firm, and later starts a small company that designs
phone apps. Ray (Alex Karpovsky) is a body percussionist in a band. Elijah (Andrew Rannells) works at an archival footage place and later as an assistant to a curator of dance. Only Shoshanna’s career aspirations are underdeveloped, as she is in college and yet to venture out into the workforce.

More important than the mere presence of creative work in these characters’ lives is their veneration of it. Their attitude towards artistic “employment” may originate from their common educational background at Oberlin College, which has a reputation of encouraging socially engaged, counter-cultural and artistic students. On several occasions during the pilot episode, the characters describe being artists as their fate or destiny. Hannah tells her parents that while following her dream of writing, she is “busy trying to become who I am.” Hannah knows she is a writer in her heart; she is only undergoing the process of becoming a writer in the eyes of others. Jessa also insists that being an artist “is just what people are.” She tells Hannah: “Why don’t you just tell [your parents] you’re an artist? You just need to tell them once and for all that you’re an artist.” Adam’s statement closely parallels this idea that artistry is predestined. He tells Hannah after she quits her last job: “Might need to face up to the fact that you’re just not meant for a job in the traditional sense. He has other plans for you and I.” The characters understand creative work as a kind of calling, almost divine in its inspiration. They identify two categories of people: those who perform traditional work and the chosen ones who are deemed especially talented to perform creative labor.

This ordaining of occupations runs the risk of backfiring against them if they are not perceived as artists. In season 1, episode 9 (“Leave Me Alone,”), a former classmate negates Adam and Jessa’s observations about Hannah being a natural writer. She suggests that writing comes naturally to her, but not to Hannah:

You know someone like you [Hannah], you’re always really sweating it. You know, you’re really working at it and I really admire that effort to do something that’s not maybe… uh, the most natural to you.

Hannah’s former classmate distinguishes between natural writers like herself and impostors like Hannah. She tells Hannah that writing her book “wasn’t much of a labor,” in fact it just “poured out” of her, but perhaps Hannah tries hard to write essays because the talent might not be there. Buying into this notion that creativity is an innate ability, Hannah feels insecure that she may not live up to the talent she thinks she possesses. Marnie also fears she might be missing the vital artist gene when, during a
job interview, an art dealer tells her that she doesn’t see her in the art world. Such a view of artists—naturally being or not being a creative type—minimizes the amount of work that goes into producing art and instead places the onus on possessing some mystical, innate ability. *Girls* paints a millennial generation that not only idealizes being artists, but also worships creative cities—places where many creative people live. Artists tend to be clustered in a few metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles or New York City (Pierre-Michel Menger 1999). These cities and other emerging creative centers, such as Seattle, Washington and Austin, Texas offer opportunity, amenities, and openness to diversity for artists who need the ability to freely express themselves (Richard Florida 2002). Creative places also provide access to individuals who have an appreciation for a specific art (Howard Becker 1976) and close networks for inspiration, production, distribution and dissemination of news about trends (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005).

The portrayal of creative centers as magical hubs in popular culture influences millennials’ trek to New York or Los Angeles in early adulthood. In season 1, episode 2 (“Vagina Panic”), Marnie cites “seeing *Rent* twelve times;” a musical about bohemians living in New York City’s East Village, as the reason she moved to The City. When Hannah visits her hometown of Michigan in season 1, episode 6 (“The Return”), she runs into an old friend, Heather (Vanessa Ray), who is heading to Los Angeles on a whim to pursue dance. She doesn’t know anyone there to help her get auditions or settle down, but she is drawn to Hollywood and hopes to make it big there. We get the sense that Hannah made the same decision two years ago when she left college, with the same hopeful optimism that Heather exhibits. She equally idolizes creative cities—her choice cultural habitat is New York. In the mirror, psyching herself up for a night out, Hannah talks about how great and cool and so much better being in New York is than not being in New York. She tells herself: “You are from New York so you are just naturally interesting. The worst stuff that you say is better than the best stuff that other people say.” She understands New York as the ultimate transformative place that makes her (and her art) into something more “interesting” and meaningful than she is, just by virtue of living there.

At the same time, Hannah’s mind is filled with doubt. She sees how her financial situation, being jobless and owing back rent, could easily be different in another city. She tells Adam on the phone that her friend’s apartment in Michigan is huge and he pays very little for it. She whines that they are “in New York, being slaves to a place that doesn’t even want them.” However, Hannah quickly snaps out of this momentary lapse.
Certainly some places are better for artistic careers, yet for these millennials, idealizing New York and Los Angeles occurs even in the midst of irrationality—in Hannah’s case growing debt and lack of financial stability.

While pursuing a career in the arts has always been a difficult endeavor, it is even more of a struggle today as it has become increasingly competitive. The number of professional artists, writers, and performers pursuing creative careers has increased from 525,000 in 1950 to 2.5 million in 1999 (Florida 2002). For the relatively few successes in the arts, there are many failures. Though it is true it has always been a risk to pursue a career in the arts, on Girls there is the accompanying glamorization of the ‘starving artist,’ which creates a disincentive for the characters to abandon artistic pursuits even in the face of increasing competition for the few jobs that are available in these fields (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). In spite of these harsh realities, the characters in Girls specifically and many millennials more generally believe the chance of realizing this dream is worth the risk.

**Working Girls?**

Although millennials exude a palpable passion for art and “art-friendly” cities, their creative careers often toe the line between working hard and hardly working. In season 1, episode 6 (“The Return,”) Hannah’s old friend from high school asks her: “What’s your real job in New York?” She responds: “I’m a writer”, to which he retorts: “And that’s how you make money?” He finds it hard to believe she can sustain a livelihood as a 24-year-old writer. Hannah’s former college classmate, who is a published writer, also questions the validity of her writing career, intimating that Hannah’s creative pursuit is not actually working.

Collectively, these statements point to the understanding that whatever Hannah is doing, it is not work in the traditional sense. Moreover, her work does not have the kind of markers that would signal she is able to be a professional writer: having an agent, an editor, a sizeable paycheck, and a publishing contract with a legitimate press. The perception is that, in striving to be a writer, Hannah is only pretending to work. An assessment of her “job” against any standards of actual work reveals to the casual observer that she is doing something other than work.

This skepticism of creative labor as legitimate work carries over to the scrutiny of Hannah’s daily routine. When Hannah tells Adam she got fired from her internship, he responds: “You mean they don’t want you to be hanging out there anymore?” Adam perceives her internship and her
writing as hobbies, activities she does for fun, but not as work. His observations can be linked to Hannah’s ethos about employment. She is hardly ever seen writing onscreen; mostly, she talks about writing and tries to have experiences, which for her, qualify as being an artist. Many artists feel the need to construct an appearance of being eclectic or experimental consumers. They desire rich, multidimensional experiences and build a unique creative identity around an experiential lifestyle of creative activities (Mark Banks 2010). Hannah builds her creative life around adventures that she does “for the story,” such as doing cocaine and having diverse sexual encounters. Jessa and Hannah even brand their sexually transmitted infection as an experience; having HPV (human papilloma virus) is something that the title of season 1, episode 2, “All Adventurous Women Do,” suggests. For Hannah, having these sexual and drug-related misadventures are critical to gather material to be transformed into autobiographical writing.

In Girls, parents are the biggest skeptics about millennials’ creative pursuits. When introducing Jessa to his parents (season 2, episode 4, “It’s a Shame About Ray,”) Thomas John lies and tells them that “Jessa is a talented artist trying to work out which avenue to go down, probably graphic design.” His parents are used to him dating industrious women, so he is worried Jessa would not meet their standards. Likewise, there is a debate whether Hannah’s parents would accept her quest for a creative career. In the pilot episode, Marnie thinks the baby boomer generation would not understand an artistic career path, but Jessa is adamant that Hannah’s experiential lifestyle should count as work:

Marnie: Just tell them you’re going to get a job. That’s much more convincing.
Jessa: Tell them you’ll get tuberculosis in a garret if you have to. Tell them it’s what Flaubert did.
Marnie: Flaubert is not a good role model and have you met her parents? She can’t just do the whole artist thing.
Jessa: Tell them that Picasso did it. Rappers who were poor and sold their tapes in the street did it. It’s what Elvis did. It’s what Mick Jagger did. It’s what my stepbrother did. They all stuck to their guns.

Despite Marnie’s objections, Jessa believes Hannah should continue having her experiences as work. In doing so, she is in the great company of famous artists who traveled that path before her. Eventually, Jessa asserts Hannah’s parents will come around to accept her work as not only uniquely creative but also legitimate. Still, Marnie and Thomas John
believe parents and outsiders find it difficult to recognize creative pursuits as real work.

Hannah’s mother directly addresses her skepticism of how her daughter spends her time when she says: “We can’t keep bankrolling your groovy lifestyle.” The combination of work and fun in the same occupation causes older generations to perceive millennials’ creative pursuits as all play and no work. Hannah’s mother wants to help her daughter get a job, but in doing so, she does not want to supplement her leisure. She urges Hannah to work at the university or start a blog, which perhaps will lead to more secure employment in the future.

Marnie is also criticized for not making sustained attempts at finding work. She desires to become a museum curator, but loses her job at an art gallery because her employer couldn’t afford two employees, and fails an interview for a similar position. Afterwards, Marnie takes up a stint as a hostess or a ‘pretty girl job,’ in a restaurant with a clientele of predominantly older men. There, she runs into Booth Jonathan (Jorma Taccone), an artist, who is surprised to see her working as a hostess and not in the art world. Marnie immediately becomes defensive: “There weren’t a million curatorial openings in the city.” To which Booth responds: “I love that. I love when young people are passionate about something and then they just give up the second that they have to struggle.”

Booth’s critique of Marnie’s lack of stick-to-itiveness is aligned with many authors’ beliefs that millennials feel entitled to jobs that are both meaningful and well-paying (Myers and Sadaghiani 2010). Generally, having grown up in more stable economic conditions, many millennials expect to launch lucrative careers that provide them with comfortable lifestyles. After college, they expect to make a lot of money and some even expect to become famous (Jean M. Twenge 2006). While breaking into the art world has always been difficult, Girls portrays Marnie as a young millennial who does not want to eke out a living and pay her dues before she is able to attain some modicum of success, perhaps because she still receives financial support from her parents. Though Marnie and Hannah are in fact working at low-skilled service jobs, their eccentric definitions of work and entitled attitudes allows the other characters in the show to question whether their efforts to pursue creative work are truly legitimate.
Most fictional portrayals of millennials are written by Generation Xers or Baby Boomers, instead of emerging from this younger generation of new adults. Created and directed by a millennial, Dunham’s *Girls* breaks this trend, offering a depiction of the millennial generation from a voice of one of its members. Dunham’s position is uncommon; it is an unprecedented feat for a young woman in her mid-twenties, or even a young man of that age, to have a show on HBO. Critics of *Girls*, such as Kia Makareshi (2012), suggest that nepotism played a large role in Dunham and her fellow actors being cast, as each of the four female protagonists has famous and well-connected parents working in the creative sector. The fact that the main heroines are also white and relatively financially secure, despite their pursuit of the arts, offers insights as well into how race and social class might impact millennials and their professional aspirations. Just as the actresses have connections that allowed them to create and star in *Girls*, white millennial women of privilege also have similar access to the kinds of resources that might allow them to pursue careers and lives in the arts. *Girls*’ characters willfully pursue their artistic paths on the fringes of New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the United States and even the world. In addition to becoming a writer, Hannah’s simultaneous and arguably most important quest is to survive economically in New York City. In the pilot’s opening scene, Hannah sits in a restaurant having dinner with her parents when they promptly inform her they are cutting her off financially. Hannah is left struggling to come up with the rent in Brooklyn, which is pricey even on the most barebones budget. Creative cities are incredibly expensive and therefore it is almost impossible for a young artist to support herself financially in them without substantial economic support. For Hannah and her friends, financial assistance from family and friends facilitates their ability to continue on their creative journeys.

Many millennials move back home after college or live at home because they cannot afford to move out. Others are saddled with college loan debt as large as their parents’ mortgage. However, millennials in *Girls* are merely “slumming it” when they cry poverty. Initially, Hannah is supported financially by her parents, then by Marnie who continues to pay Hannah’s rent on the promise that Hannah will one day pay her back (which Marnie is convinced will never happen). Hannah is privileged to have parents who footed her bills for two years after college and a wealthy friend who can afford to not only cover her rent, but also to possibly never
be reimbursed. Ray is also supported financially by friends, and he is the least well off in the group. His parents are deceased and he would be homeless and living in his Mitsubishi, but he spends most of his time at his girlfriend Shoshanna’s apartment.

In Shoshanna, Marnie, and Jessa’s cases, the invisible strings of parental support are present. Shoshanna is 22 and in college, yet lives in an apartment that costs $2100/month. Marnie is able to cover her own rent and Hannah’s when the only work she does is answer phones as a receptionist and later attends to clients as a restaurant hostess. Likewise, Jessa’s lifestyle of jetting across the globe to Paris, London, and other world capitals cannot be sustained by her on-again, off-again babysitting and live-in educator jobs. These expenses seem unaffordable for young millennials without full-time jobs. Commenting on this reliance on parental support, in episode 4, season 1 (“Hannah’s Diary,”) Ray tells Marnie, “It’s not adult life if your parents pay for your Blackberry.” These millennials receive substantial financial support from their parents, relatives and/or friends to make their creative dreams possible. Without this kind of support, they would have great difficulty achieving or even contemplating lofty creative pursuits. Yet, television is in the business of projecting fantasies for its viewers, and adopting a creative lifestyle is a fantasy for many young people. The characters in Girls project fantasies of how their millennial viewers would like to live. They are privileged in a way their viewers are oftentimes not; and their privileged status allows them to imagine themselves as artists, outside of the mainstream.

However, an array of diverse experiences is missing from many texts about the millennial generation. The majority of books describe a white middle/upper class group (Eric Hoover 2009), while ignoring the experiences of others—for instance, the approximately twenty percent of American millennials who grew up in poverty (Child Trends), the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities, or those who grew up in rural areas. Several authors, such as Fred A. Bonner II, Aretha F. Marbley, and Mary F. Howard Hamilton (2011, 2), have taken up this issue of millennials’ one-dimensionality in the literature. The demographic diversity of millennials is ignored while the focus is on a singular, mostly homogenous group. Portraits of diverse groups of millennials are also missing from popular culture, because most are too young to have gained any access to mainstream cultural production to produce their own narratives. Others belong to marginalized groups, such as African Americans, who have been historically excluded in large numbers from producing images airing on major television networks.
Racial/ethnic and social class barriers likely impact millennials’ opportunities and outcomes in their pursuit of creative careers. Though some millennials’ parents (and friends) often subsidize their living expenses, as Ron Alsop (2008, 19) claims, others lack the time, resources, and social capital to help their millennials professionally or financially. On average, African American and Latino families have far less accumulated wealth that they can extend to their children than white families, and lower class families of all races may not be able to subsidize their children’s adult lives (Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro 2006). Where young people grow up (e.g. suburbs or city), their parents’ occupations, and their family incomes significantly impact their career choices in adulthood.

Even in the same situation as whites, African Americans or Latinos would likely fare worse due to discrimination and preferential treatment for whites. For instance, in episode 4, season 1 (“Hannah’s Diary”), when Jessa is in the park with other babysitters and nannies, she finds that although they all do the same job, she gets paid considerably more than the other women who belong to different minority and immigrant groups. Though they have been working longer than Jessa and she is younger than them, her white privilege affords her greater compensation for equal work. Even if racial and ethnic minorities were able to receive the same amount of support from their parents, whites would have an added advantage in pursuing cultural work due to their disproportionate economic advantages in the labor market. Added to this is the fact that African Americans or Latinos might also be denied loans or other opportunities that would otherwise enable them to pursue artistic avenues.

As a consequence of these and a host of other factors, few examples of racial/ethnic minority millennials ultimately get to appear on mainstream television and film. This gap in representation is reflective of the larger inability of non-white racial groups to participate in creating mainstream media (Ed Guerrero 1993; Maryann Erigha 2013). This dearth of opportunity is even greater for young adults. Furthermore, creative careers usually take an indefinite amount of time to develop, which means lower-income racial or ethnic minorities would have fewer chances of being able to survive economically and would most likely have to abandon their artistic pursuits.

In the pilot of *Girls*, Hannah tells her parents: “I am so close to the life that I want, the life that you want for me.” But “so close” does not give her parents a good enough indication of precisely when Hannah would be able to support herself. For some, success can happen overnight. For most, success in a creative industry will never come, or it will be a fleeting “one hit wonder” fame with no longevity to support a sustained livelihood.
(Robert R. Faulkner and Andy B. Anderson 1987). The creative sector is extremely competitive. The number of people seeking work in creative industries far surpasses the number of available jobs (Richard E. Caves 2000). Hannah’s former boss at her internship reveals in the pilot that he receives about fifty internship requests everyday, which he routes into his spam folder.

Overall, Dunham’s Girls presents a millennial generation with idealistic dreams of their place in the world and how they can impact it through creative work. It could be argued that this generation is going to produce more artists, because they were deprived of more conventional forms of work. However, analyzing conversations about creative work on Girls reveals that its characters are involved in or aspire to this professional path not just because they are millennials, but more importantly, because they are privileged. Like many other renderings of millennials, Girls depicts a relatively privileged group of young people that fails to portray the larger reality of millennials who are from other ethnic, racial and economic groups. Though many millennials hope to realize their creative aspirations, racial and social class barriers prevent their artistic dreams from fully materializing into a tangible venture. Accordingly, more popular culture portrayals of other groups—of different social classes and races—would help broaden our understanding of the challenges, tensions, and joys millennials face in their pursuit of creative careers.

Works Cited


**Notes**

1 The age range of the millennium generation is debatable. Most estimations suggest their birth years begin between 1979-1982 and end between 1994-2004. Alec R. Levenson (2010, 257) corresponds their birth years to the span between the early 1980s and the late 1990s.
Dunham is the daughter of painter Carroll Dunham and photographer Laurie Simmons. Jemima Kirke is the daughter of songwriter Simon Kirke, who has written songs in soundtracks for popular movies such as *Almost Famous* (2000) and *27 Dresses* (2008). Zosia Mamet’s father is famous Hollywood writer/director/producer David Mamet, whose screenplays include *The Untouchables* (1987) and *Hannibal* (2001). Finally, Allison Williams’ father is Brian Williams, the Emmy award-winning host of *NBC Nightly News*. 
CHAPTER TEN

QUEERING THE SINGLE WHITE FEMALE: 
GIRLS AND THE INTERRUPTED PROMISE 
OF THE TWENTY-SOMETHING 

KIMBERLY TURNER

Girls marks a change in the cultural perception of single white female culture. Following another immensely popular HBO series, Sex and the City (1998-2004), Girls chronicles the lives of four women in their mid-twenties trying desperately to launch their lives as independent adults in New York City. Girls in many ways establishes Sex and the City (SATC) as its foundation through sly references in the pilot episode and its continued mirroring of the single white female (SWF) characters for the remainder of the first season. However, while SATC engages post-second wave feminism and culture, as well as “the meaning of women’s sexual equality in the wake of the social and cultural achievements of second wave feminism” (Jane Gerhard 2005, 37), Girls specifically talks back to SATC’s construction of the SWF and her investment in coupling and futurity.

Indeed, a number of the themes and situations which SATC utilizes to reconsider the role of motherhood and hetero-marriage privilege in the life of a SWF reemerge in Girls. Yet, as a fruit of third wave feminism and queer theory, Girls borrows these same themes to interrogate the very notion of futurity and its stake in the lives of the twenty-something women expected to reproduce for futurity’s sake. Drawing on Lee Edelman’s 2004 No Future, I argue the twenty-something SWF characters on Lena Dunham’s Girls attempt to exempt themselves from the reproductive culture which ensures the futurity of the Child and the fantasy of wholeness, allowing SWFs to occupy the queer space of the sinthomosexual1.
Although the show does not purport to replace SATC, *Girls* is, however ruefully, a “post-*Sex and the City* show” (Emily Nussbaum 2013). The circumstances of the two shows certainly bear similarities, and *Girls* does, arguably, ground its understanding of the SWF in *SATC*: both series feature the lives of a demographically narrow subset of women, the “cosseted white New Yorkers from educated backgrounds,” and their experiences as single white women in both the dating and professional worlds (Nussbaum 2013). Indeed, *Girls* actively acknowledges the seeming resemblances between the shows in the pilot episode. Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), *Girls*’ über-feminine, straight-laced Charlotte², adores *SATC* and hangs a poster from the 2008 movie on the wall of her loft. When her British cousin Jessa (Jemima Kirke)—in many ways the show’s sexually voracious Samantha³—comes to live with her, Shoshanna gushes, “I think I’m definitely a Carrie at heart, but like, sometimes, sometimes Samantha kind of comes out. I mean, when I’m at school, I definitely try to put on my Miranda hat.” This alignment leaves Hannah, a memoirist and *Girls*’ protagonist, to fill the role of the sex-columnist Carrie⁴, on whom *SATC* centers; finally, Marnie (Allison Williams), the most reserved and responsible of the four girls, matches Miranda⁵ in her drive to succeed in New York’s competitive work force. The parallels between the two shows’ characters thus ground the girls’ performances of SWF-ness in *SATC* and create a space for *Girls* to begin rethinking the construction of the SWF within the context of the millennial generation⁶.

As part of this reconfiguration of the SWF, *Girls* specifically rejects several key *SATC* tropes. Hannah differs from her *SATC* counterpart Carrie not only in body and dress, but also in financial status. Most obviously, Dunham’s Hannah is “short and pear-shaped,” a marked deviation from Sarah Jessica Parker’s perpetually thin-framed Carrie (Nussbaum 2013). Although she films a number of nude scenes, Dunham often “lets herself look like hell,” revealing “her skin breaking out, her belly in folds,” and “her chin doubled” (ibid.).

The presence of an otherwise stigmatized body differs radically from *SATC*’s portrayal of always coiffed, thin-normative bodies. Hannah is not overly concerned with maintaining a certain weight, nor does she often complain about her body or engage in critical self-deprecation. She is simply larger than her female cohorts. In an interview with *New York Magazine*, Dunham, who also writes and directs *Girls*, says, “I’m naked all the time… A way of saying with these bodies, you know: Don’t silence them” (Nussbaum 2013). The cultural stigmatization of adiposity does not
quiet Hannah’s sex life either. In “Vagina Panic” (season 1, episode 2), she admits she’s had sex with “two and a half men,” a number which steadily rises over the course of the show. This treatment of fatness in Girls differs markedly from its predecessor’s. Indeed, SATC’s exclusion of fat women typifies the cultural assumptions that fat-bodied women cannot live the sex-positive or even sexual lives of the thin-bodied women who dominate the show and its sexual discourse.

None of the characters of Girls identify with their fashion-forward SATC counterparts either. Hannah, especially, does not don clothes that speak to her family’s social status or wealth; indeed her outfits are often ill-fitting and decidedly cheaper than Carrie’s. Apart from their families, the girls constantly lack money and, as a result, are still dependent on their parents for financial security even in their mid-twenties. Indeed, the opening scene of the series features Hannah’s parents cutting her off after she requests $1100 per month for the next two years as she begins her writing career. Because of their financial constraints, the girls “live in shifting roommate arrangements” (Nussbaum 2013) often paid for by wealthy older family members. The characters’ fluctuating living spaces in Girls are particularly significant given SATC’s Carrie’s repeated love of her apartment and Charlotte’s desire to have her home featured in home journals.

Edelman’s No Future and the Single White Female

In light of the differences in the representations of the SWF in SATC and Girls, Edelman’s No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive offers an approach for re-scripting the twenty-something SWF as a queer figure. Edelman examines the role of queer theory and the queer figure in a culture that remains highly invested in the concept of futurity. He argues that Western culture systematically grafts the notion of futurity onto children in order to create for itself a sense of accessible subjectivity.

The Child, for Edelman (2004, 10), functions to create and sustain an “unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness;” a subject becomes a subject through the Child and the Child’s promise of the future. Children, then, transform into what Edelman (op. cit. 11) calls a culturally constructed idea of the Child, a “telos of the social order.” The Child, “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (op. cit. 21). In this configuration, the Child serves to validate the authority of heteronormative, marriage-normative culture. Of course, because the Child figures so prominently in the
construction and survival of the heteronormative imagination, the Child exists in an entirely vulnerable, impressionable state and is subsequently considered an innocent being always in need of protection. This focus on the Child, Edelman (op. cit. 11) contends, allows very little space to imagine alternative understandings of the future.

Cultural obsession with the Child presents a unique problem for the study of queer theory and the figural queer. Queerness, for Edelman, does not specifically denote homosexuality but instead the embodiment of our cultural “remainder” (op. cit. 25). Drawing on Lacan, he identifies this remainder as jouissance, “a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (ibid.). In the context of the Child and reproductive futurity, jouissance thus represents a cultural death drive, a drive which “always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle” (ibid.) If queerness serves to interrupt the solidity inherent in the notion of subjectivity, then, queerness “can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (op. cit. 17). Queerness can therefore only be figural, “a structural position” that denies reproductive futurity just by virtue of its existence (op. cit. 24). It is by embodying queerness, Edelman (op. cit. 27) argues, that those people “inhabiting the place of the queer” begin to undermine the cultural position of the Child and undo the politics of reproductive futurity which serve to naturalize heteronormativity.

Of course, queers’ denial of futurity does not come without a measure of contestation. For a heteronormative culture invested in the promise of an imagined futurity, queerness continually occupies a site of blame (op. cit. 13). The “fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments” which denies futurity is “inherently destructive of meaning” and is thereby “responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (ibid.) Only by renouncing queerness can the queer person be reconfigured as an individual invested in the future (op. cit. 47). Edelman (op. cit. 47-58) sites a number of examples from canonical literature in which the queer figure “learns his lesson” and succumbs to the call of the Child, most significantly Ebenezer Scrooge’s final acceptance of Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol and Silas Marner’s unequivocal love for Eppie in Silas Marner.

However, according to Edelman, to accept hetero-privileged cultural norms effectively negates the goals of queerness. The sinthome, then, functions as the manifestation of queer resistance to the reproductive futurity paradigm. Although he does not specifically point to homosexuals or homosexual culture, Edelman does maintain that homosexuality has become synonymous with sinthomosexuality for Western culture because
it “figures the availability of an unthinkable jouissance that would put an end to fantasy-and with it, futurity” (op. cit. 39). The sinthome therefore operates as an embodied death drive that heteronormativity cannot acknowledge. For Edelman, this queer embodiment, this crucial incarnation, acts as the key to undoing reproductive futurity and heteronormative privilege. If these are the stakes, then, queerness must:

inhabit the place of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome; to figure an unregenerate, and unregenerating, sexuality whose singular insistence of jouissance, rejecting every constraint imposed by sentimental futurism, exposes aesthetic culture—the culture of forms and their reproduction, the culture of Imaginary lures—as always already a “culture of death” intent on abjecting the forced of a death drive that shatters the tomb we call life (op. cit. 47-48).

This radical queerness, according to Edelman, simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which we create normativity and reveals where it can be unraveled.

In keeping with the parameters of Western culture’s hetero-positive futurity paradigm, the characters of Girls should be doubly dedicated to forging lasting (or lasting long enough) relationships by virtue of their status in heteronormative society. The hetero-centric culture so invested in futurity places a particularly arduous task on the shoulders of the single, reproductively-capable heterosexual woman; she must, after all, act as the vessel in which to bring the Child into the world. Without her body and her continued investment in heterosexual pairing, the Child—and by extension imagined completeness—have no way of being realized for either heterosexual couples or the homosexual couples seeking to assimilate into the lifestyle of the hetero-paradigm.

In order to subsist in marriage-normative culture and maintain hetero-privilege, then, the SWFs of Girls must assent to their positions as receptacles for the Child in order to continue mediating subjectivity. Yet, despite the fact that they are sexually active, physically capable women in their twenties, the girls are not especially devoted to maintaining heterosexual relationships, nor do they seek out men who inspire long-term commitment or are even to discussions regarding the prospect of future progeny.

It is precisely these differences in body, class, mobility, and the desire for long-term romance and family between the girls and the women of SATC which permit Girls a space in which to queer the SWF. According to Edelman (2004, 3), queer is not a divisible, discountable thing; queer is, instead, bound in the normative culture. This is especially true of the four
twenty‑something girls, as they all remain active. “inextricable” beings within their social structures. They do not stand apart as something other, but instead operate unassumingly within a framework which affords them favor due in large part to their assumed heterosexuality.

Despite expectations, however, none of the SWFs in Girls invest in the futurity expected of them as reproductively eligible, single women. While their SATC forbearers worry obsessively about marriage and motherhood, manifested most often in rigid status presentations and serial monogamy, these girls systematically reject or undermine those cultural constructs that bind them to reproductive futurity and thus compulsory subjectivity. Hannah, Marnie, Jessa, and, at times, Shoshanna thus operate as queer figures in their cultural configuration and offer viewers a way to understand SWF-ness in terms of queerness.

**Girls and the Queer Single White Female**

Because Edelman imagines homosexuality as a site of queer resistance, the instances of homoeroticism in Girls function as perhaps the most obvious opposition to the push for the subjectivity ensured by futurity. For instance, in the pilot episode, Marnie and Hannah find themselves bathing together in their apartment’s rather small bathroom. Hannah is completely nude; she sits in the bathtub eating a cupcake while the towel-clad Marnie perches on the edge of the bathtub shaving her legs. The implication of the scene is, of course, that the girls are extremely familiar with one another and comfortable with one another’s nudity. In fact, the nude female body is such a fixture in the girls’ lives that it no longer serves as sexual form; it is, simply, the body of a friend. Yet, the timing of this scene and the subject of the discussion substantially challenge the external display of platonic friendship.

Prior to the bathing scene, Marnie sleeps in Hannah’s bedroom in an effort to evade her visiting boyfriend, Charlie. Indeed, says Hannah pointedly, “You literally slept in my bed to avoid him.” The girls spend the rest of the scene dissecting Marnie’s relationship, and Hannah ultimately advises Marnie to break up with Charlie (Christopher Abbott). Marnie, too, acknowledges her discomfort with the sexual component of the relationship, saying, “His touch now feels like a weird uncle just putting his hand on my knee at Thanksgiving.” This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the ease with which the girls share a highly personal, generally private moment. They are at ease with their corporeality and sharing it with one another. The bathing, then, serves as a space in which Marnie may actively escape her heterosexual bond with Charlie. It is only
through this time spent nude in the company of another woman that
Marnie can admit that she is displeased with the nature of her relationship
and sexually repulsed by the notion of heterosexual sex.

Hannah’s bath with Jessa operates in much the same way. In “It’s a
Shame about Ray” (season 2, episode 4), Hannah sits alone in her bathtub
singing Oasis’ “Wonderwall” to herself when Jessa appears in her
doorway fresh from a fight with her soon-to-be ex-husband and visibly
upset. Hannah offers to end her bath to attend to her, but Jessa tells her to
stay where she is; she then disrobes and joins Hannah. The moment is in
some ways more intimate than Hannah’s previous encounter with Marnie.
Jessa is not a character given to outward displays of emotion, but she
chooses this space, when she is naked with another woman, to finally
allow herself to express her deep dissatisfaction with her marriage.

The scene culminates with the image of Hannah and Jessa holding
hands as “Wonderwall” plays in the background. The song, one of the
most popular alternative love songs of the 1990s, also significantly
underscores the homoerotic implications of the scene. Its repeated refrain,
“I don’t believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now,” marks
Hannah’s effort to comfort Jessa with the proximity of their nude bodies
and thus creates a distinctly homoerotic moment that stands counter to the
bleak sexless-ness of heterosexuality.

In some ways, these two bathing scenes highlight the ways in which
the girls attempt to approximate wholeness outside the heteronormative
paradigm. Both Marnie and Jessa do turn to Hannah in displays of
homoeroticism when their relationships—and the futurity inherent in those
relationships—become burdensome. Marnie and Jessa are certainly more
invested in their respective friendships with Hannah than with romantic
partners. These two baths, however, do not result in a sustainable sense of
wholeness for either Marnie or Hannah. In fact, in “Leave Me Alone”
(season 1, episode 9), Marnie and Hannah engage in an ugly fight which
leaves the girls shouting, “You are the wound!” at one another, ultimately
resulting in the end of their time as roommates.

The awkwardness of the fight plagues them for the rest of the season,
particularly after Marnie begins dating the narcissistic local artist, Booth
Jonathan (Jorma Taccone), and Hannah later hides from Marnie in Season
2’s finale ironically titled “Together.” Even Jessa, who is arguably
Hannah’s closest friend, abandons Hannah in upstate New York after an
unsuccessful trip to visit Jessa’s father. By the end of season 2, Jessa is
completely absent, and, completely frustrated. Hannah leaves her an angry
voicemail, in which she cries, “You’re forgetting about everyone who’s
fucking it up here!” The wholeness—the feeling of totality—the girls seek
in their friendships with one another quickly deteriorates, and with it the girls’ door to subjectivity vanishes.

Hannah and Jessa’s bath is all the more significant in light of the fact that Jessa meets her husband while sharing a night out with Marnie. In “Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too” (season 1, episode 8), Jessa attempts to cheer Marnie up after she ends her relationship with Charlie. The two go out for a night of dinner and drinks, a somewhat typical “girl’s night” trope reminiscent of their SATC forbearers. While out, the girls meet a financier, Thomas-John (Chris O’Dowd), who invites them back to his home. The girls agree, but when they arrive, Thomas-John attempts to initiate a sexual encounter between the three of them. Instead of departing, Marnie utilizes the opportunity to express her homoerotic desire; she pulls Jessa into a kiss that extends into a considerably lengthy petting session. The girls make clear, however, that their foray into lesbianism is not for Thomas-John’s pleasure. When he attempts to insert himself into their coupling, Marnie and Jessa actively refuse him and push him away. Thomas-John is undoubtedly an unwelcome third party.

This scene functions on three levels. First and most obviously, Jessa and Marnie physically enact the homoerotic desire they harbor throughout the course of the series. Secondly, the girls find themselves desiring the physicality of the female body when the veneer of heterosexuality falls away; neither Marnie nor Jessa acts particularly interested or invested in the reality of heterosexual sex. Finally, Jessa later marries Thomas-John on a whim in an effort to prove that she is capable of functioning as an adult in an adult world. The marriage eventually implodes, but it is interesting to note that Jessa foregrounds her marriage in a lesbian encounter with Marnie.

It is important to note here that this desire does not compel either Marnie or Jessa to pursue a romantic engagement with the other. Indeed, for much of season 1, the girls dislike each other because they compete to fulfill the role of Hannah’s best friend. Their homoeroticism is also especially interesting in relation to SATC’s previous depiction of queerness and the SWF. Only Samantha engages openly in a lesbian relationship, much to her friends’ shock; the relationship quickly dissipates, however, and Samantha returns exclusively to heterosexual relationships. In Girls, the heroines actively dismiss all avenues that might produce unmitigated wholeness.

According to Edelman’s structure of heteronormativity, however, the girls should be entirely committed to the notion of heterosexual bonding and the production of children in order to maintain their privilege in heteronormative culture. Yet, the series continually depicts the demise of
heterosexual unions and with them the potential to establish the futurity that legitimizes heteronormative culture.

The relationship between Marnie and Charlie is especially fraught. The first time the two have sex in the course of the show, Charlie says, “Let’s look into each other’s eyes when we come.” Marnie refuses to do so, saying instead, “I’m going to turn around.” Her rejection of Charlie’s attempt to create connection hallmarks her continued refusal of heterosexual intimacy and the subsequent potentiality. Indeed, when Marnie and Charlie finally end their relationship in “Hard Being Easy” (season 1, episode 5), Charlie says, “Look, we’re not grownups. We don’t have kids. We don’t have a house.” They have no investment in the future or in the unified subjectivity necessitated by the trappings of the nuclear family and, as such, Charlie feels their relationship cannot work.

In a moment of panic, Marnie endeavors to change Charlie’s mind, and the two have sex to re-solidify their commitment to one another. It is in this moment when their bodies intersect and they create the picture of figural wholeness that Marnie finally decides she cannot proceed with their union. Charlie is literally still inside of her body, in the thrust of potentiality, when Marnie breaks their bond and with it any attempt to establish a sense of futurity.

If the Child creates an “unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness,” Marnie denies this notion of subjectivity in her rejection of the sex and relationship that could result in a child. This denial is particularly significant given that Marnie is the most “adult” of the girls. Her rejection, then, is perhaps not a total acceptance of the death drive implicit in jouissance, but, in the disavowal of the future, Marnie does create a space in which to experience herself as a queer being.

Hannah, too, casts herself as a sinthome through her relationship arc with Adam (Adam Driver). In “Vagina Panic,” an episode that chronicles the girls’ experiences at a women’s health clinic, viewers first see Hannah having sex with Adam, her romantic interest for the duration of the first season. The scene is unremarkable in its beginnings; the two lay on Adam’s bed in a dark room amid the trappings of a twenty-something apartment. As the scene progresses, however, Adam changes course and commences a role-playing game in which Hannah is a drug-addicted 11-year old girl and turns her face away from his own. Adam’s desire to have sex with a child evokes one of the most prominent taboos in Western sexual consciousness: the Child must be kept pure and decidedly un-sexed. Hannah’s participation in the metaphorical child-fucking is arguably even more detrimental in terms of heteronormative culture. Her body acts as the vessel for the Child and the futurity that implies; to allow Adam to have
sex with her while he pretends she is a child ultimately serves as a way of embodying her resistance to the pressures of delegated subjectivity.

The remainder of the episode also punctuates Hannah’s desire to negate her role in the potentiality of the Child. When Jessa thinks she might be pregnant, Hannah agrees to help her find a clinic and obtain an abortion. Hannah, in her own “vagina panic,” also decides to submit to a gynecological exam and a pregnancy test. Throughout the exam, she continually voices her paranoia about condom failure and the “stuff that gets up around the side of condoms,” which might inadvertently impregnate her and/or transmit diseases.

Hannah’s visible and verbal concern speaks not only to her discomfort with the figural wholeness of heterosexual sex, but also her anxiety about becoming a mother and participating in the futurity motherhood ensures. Indeed, as Adam becomes more comfortable with their union and expresses his desire to move into her apartment, Hannah rejects him and the idea of the nuclear home. She instead decides to share her apartment with a now openly homosexual ex-boyfriend, Elijah (Andrew Rannells). Living with Elijah and creating a queer-positive interior, thus represents Hannah’s negation of the heteronormative structure because Elijah, too, lives as a sinthome in the framework of heteronormativity. His own relationship has collapsed—a fact which is even more significant given that his partner is an older man who is actively seeking a life mate. Elijah, like Marnie and Jessa, does not bend his sexuality to fit the parameters of heteronormative pairing and reproducing; essentially, Elijah fails to “learn his lesson” and insists on existing as a symbol of Edelman’s notion of the cultural remainder.

Jessa’s pregnancy scare in “Vagina Panic” also sheds light on the tension the girls feel between their roles as potential mothers and their desire to avoid motherhood altogether. When Jessa admit to Hannah she is pregnant, Hannah immediately asks her what her intentions are for the fetus. Jessa makes no bones about her decision to acquire an abortion, but angrily tells Hannah, “You know I wanna have children? I really do. I’m gonna be amazing at it. I’m gonna be really good… And I wanna have children with many men of different races.” Jessa further attempts to convince herself and Hannah that motherhood is her ideal when she skips her appointment at the clinic and instead picks up a stranger in a bar. Interestingly, Jessa manages to snare the stranger while drinking a glass of milk and sporting a very obvious milk mustache. Sexualizing the mother’s milk—the sustenance for the Child—initially points to the inevitability of heteronormative pairing. After all, Jessa does leave the bar with the stranger and proceeds to have sex with him.
Despite her talk, however, Jessa does very little to actively engage with the role of motherhood or prepare for its eventuality. When the stranger discovers that Jessa has begun menstruating, he immediately seeks to end their union. For Jessa, however, menstruation becomes a moment of celebration; the threat of motherhood is immediately removed. She subsequently indicates her elation by continuing to have sex with the stranger through the blood of the deteriorated corpus luteum, a very literal picture of the "culture of death." Jessa does not actually make a precise decision regarding the termination of her pregnancy, but, in the moment of death, her body transmutes into a symbol of her opposition to the subjectivity allocated to the Child—and by extension, the mother. It is this continued defiance despite the tension that creates the queer space for Jessa that does not manifest for Miranda in SATC.

In SATC’s “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda” (season 4, episode 11), Miranda acknowledges to the group that she is, in fact, pregnant. Carrie immediately asks her if she plans to tell the father, to which Miranda replies, “Why would I tell him? I’m not having it.” When Miranda and Carrie arrive at the abortion clinic, though, Miranda’s determination begins to wane. She asks Carrie, “What if this is my baby? I mean, what am I waiting for?” Ultimately, she decides not to go through with the abortion, a fact that generates a great deal of pleasure among the four women. Even Charlotte, who is concurrently dealing with her own infertility issues, says through tears, “Oh my God. We’re having a baby!”

Perhaps the most intense form of resistance to the culture of reproductive futurity is seen through Jessa’s job as a nanny. In “All Adventurous Women Do” (season 1, episode 3), Jessa dresses for her first day of work in a floor length sheer dress with hot pink under garments, a wardrobe choice which confounds Shoshanna. Exposing the girls she takes care of to a sexualized body is particularly anti-futurity, especially in light of Edelman’s claim that heteronormative culture insists children be guarded from sexual impropriety. Jessa continues to fail as a guardian, a substitute mother, when she briefly loses the children at a park in “Hannah's Diary” (season 1, episode 4). If children represent Western culture’s access to structural wholeness, losing the children is akin to losing the subjectivity they represent—or, in essence, invalidating the self. Jessa’s ineptitude thus undermines the cultural notion that motherhood is natural for women or even that it should be inscribed to female-bodied people.

Through the girls’ sexual and/or intimate unions with non-normative sex partners, Girls repeatedly emphasizes the ways in which bodies can disorder heteronormative investment in reproductive futurity. In “It’s
About Time” (season 2, episode 1), after her break up with Charlie and her lesbian encounter with Jessa, Marnie also has sex with Elijah. Their union comes on the heels of both Marnie and Elijah squabbling with former and current boyfriends. Their non-normative union thus acts as a subversively embodied stab at the marriage-normative culture that mandates both heterosexual and homosexual couples invest in the notion of long-term coupling for the purposes of child rearing and, eventually, the subjectivity only available through the embodied Child. Neither Marnie nor Elijah intends to pursue or actually pursues a relationship with the other, and their act completely dismantles Elijah’s relationship with his boyfriend. In fact, their sexual union only works to disrupt potential investments in futurity.

Hannah also uses her body to destabilize the notion that heterosexual sex entails subjectivity. In “Bad Friend” (season 2, episode 3), after she finds a job as a blogger for an online magazine, Hannah’s boss advises her to “live life” in order to create stories to write. Hannah agrees and procures cocaine from her downstairs neighbor, the former cocaine addict and dealer Laird (Jon Glaser). After she returns home from her drug-filled rave, Hannah initiates sex with Laird in order to create an appealing ending for her article. Hannah thus utilizes heterosexual sex not as a procreative union or an access point to wholeness, but as inspiration for art. Rather than a means to invest in children, the Child, and the future, sex for Hannah becomes a means to an artistic end. In an echo of Georges Bataille, art replaces sex as the erotic and thus the Child as a product of their union.

### Conclusion

Unlike SATC, Girls rejects the future and the figural Child by simultaneously refusing to produce actual children and upsetting investments in heterosexual, normative relationships. As such, the girls join gays and lesbians as sinthomes in their refusal to ground their subjectivity in futurity. Girls thus enables viewers to refigure the cultural significance of the SWF and her role in the development of the future. If the SWF can be a queer figure, as Girls suggests, what are the implications for heteronormative, marriage-normative, white dominant culture and its access to wholeness?

In a particularly interesting move, Girls also highlights how the characters all exist as children themselves. Though the girls do give life to their parents’ own investments in reproductive futurity, they do not embody the future in the necessary way Miranda’s child does; instead, Girls’ girls occupy the “future” in a child-like state without specific ties to
their own subjectivity or the fantasy of wholeness. The show is called Girls, after all. As fully grown, educated adults, however, the girls should be the future realized. If they aren’t, given all of their privileges, Girls then begs a very important question: is subjectivity a necessity?

The series, in essence, questions our cultural dependence on the notion of wholeness—or at the very least, wholeness which is dependent upon the figural Child. Throughout the show, Hannah, Marnie, Jessa and Shoshanna are able to survive without typical attachments to an identity mediated through wholeness; they even manage small successes. Of course, it is vitally important to remember that the girls are living through life’s most (arguably) definitive decade. The decisions they will make in their mid-twenties will reasonably set in motion a series of results which will affect, if not drastically alter, the remainder of their lives. Twenty-something SWFs, after all, generally begin the process of “settling down,” as our culture would have it. Indeed, in heteronormative, white dominant culture, the SWF’s twenties are largely preoccupied with marrying, childbearing, and establishing careers. That the girls choose instead to deny the subjectivity mandated by coupling, reproducing, and even maintaining stable friendships charts a monumental shift in the social and cultural perception of the SWF.

Girls thus asks its viewers if the notion of wholeness can possibly exist as a guaranteed reality after all. Must we constantly search for wholeness in the promise of the future, or might we embrace the queer space signified by the death drive, the cultural remainder? And if we cannot completely deny the pressures of futurity, might we search for an alternative access point to personal subjectivity? Though the series does not provide definitive answers, Girls does ask us to examine our understanding of identity, wholeness and futurity. Because they exist as children continuously disrupting the promise of the Child, the girls construct a new cultural space in which to reimagine our investment in the Child as a function of futurity and subjectivity through the SWF.

Works Cited


According to Edelman (2004, 35), the sinthome or sinthomosexual is that figure which occupies the queer space beyond the politics of reproductive futurism. The sinthomosexual openly engages with jouissance, or the cultural death drive which denies subjectivity. Indeed, in the context of Edelman’s argument, the sinthome is always understood as “denying the appeal of fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity.” The sinthome, then, is the epitome of queerness. The sinthomosexual, like queer itself, never has a succinct identity or sense of subjectivity; the sinthome only ever disturbs one.

Charlotte York Goldenblatt (Kristen Davis) acts as SATC’s most conventional picture of femininity. She is conservative in both dress and appearance, and she remains obsessed with the idea of finding romance for herself and her friends for the entirety of the show. Even after her divorce from a wealthy doctor, Charlotte remains determined to find a husband. She eventually weds her divorce attorney, Harry (Evan Handler), after converting to Judaism.

Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) is the oldest of the four friends and arguably the most sexually unencumbered. She is opinionated, confident, and honest almost to the point of rudeness. A public relations consultant, Samantha works closely with New York’s upper crust, and she remains especially proud of her high-powered career. Despite her occupation, however, a number of SATC’s story lines center on her sexual dalliances and her willingness to engage in a wide array of sexual practices.

Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) is a New York City-based newspaper columnist with a weekly column baring the show’s namesake. Each episode begins with a brief monologue from Carrie, presumably as she writes the column. Carrie’s ruminations on sex, dating, love, and femininity continually provide fodder for her work, and it is through these musings that Carrie positions herself as an iconic representation of the educated, wealthy, Caucasian female thirty-something. Carrie is thoughtful, intelligent, and highly emotional; she lives in her much-adored apartment, refuses to learn how to cook or use newer technology, and spends much of her salary on high-end couture. Over the course of the show, Carrie commits herself to several monogamous relationships, most notably with Aidan Shaw (John Corbett) and Mr. Big (Chris Noth). Both of these relationships are plagued by break-ups, infidelity, and Carrie’s fear of rejection.

Miranda Hobbes Brady (Cynthia Nixon) is a hard-working goal-oriented lawyer in a male-dominated firm in NYC. Despite her deep skepticism concerning all-things romantic, Miranda continuously functions as SATC’s voice of reason,
particularly for the comically romantic Charlotte and ever-idealistic Carrie. As the series progresses, Miranda meets local bartender, Steve Brady (David Eigenberg); Steve remains her on-off romantic partner for the duration of the show, and later fathers her child. Miranda is constantly forced to reconcile her life as a wife and mother with her desire to succeed as a high-powered attorney. Many of her story lines address her somewhat obsessive need to “do it all.”

6 The fact that the main characters of Girls are millennials, now in their mid-twenties, is yet another marked difference between Dunham’s show and SATC, whose heroines are approximately a decade older; thus, in the eyes of contemporary culture, the push to couple and procreate is much more urgent. However, the age aspect is not particularly germane to the claim I making. The women of SATC still ultimately desire concrete, viable romantic relationships and, for some, children in order to obtain a sense of wholeness. For Charlotte, in particular, this fantasy begins well before she meets the other three women, and, as the series progresses, viewers watch as Miranda, Carrie, and even Samantha increasingly view monogamy as a marker of subjectivity.

7 It is important to note here that Edelman does not specifically negate or undermine the queerness of those who have children and actively identify as queer. Instead, Edelman takes issue with the notion that children and the parent identity somehow permit one access to a completeness denied to those who choose not to or by circumstance are not parents.

8 Although Marnie does go on to engage in a relationship with other man, it ends nearly as disastrously as her relationship with Charlie. Marnie idealizes Booth Jonathan, a local artist whose arrogance the viewers are given to believe overshadows his talent. During their first sexual encounter in “Bad Friend,” Booth places a large doll in the corner of his bedroom which proceeds to “watch” the two. Marnie willingly forgives Booth’s voyeurism by proxy until he informs her that she is not, in fact, his girlfriend; she is yet another pretty person serving his needs. It is only after this final humiliation that Marnie rejects the subjectivity to which she clings in favor of her passion for singing.

9 True to its SATC predecessor, Girls continues to undermine the ease with which Western culture considers heterosexual pairing a natural part of the single woman’s life. In Girls, however, the myth of “finding the one” begins to lose its intrigue. Marnie and Charlie’s relationship is the only true monogamy in the first two seasons which viewers can reasonably expect to result in marriage and children. After its demise, none of the girls attempts to find a mate, with the exception of Jessa. When she does, of course, her relationship ends in disaster. Even Shoshanna, the SATC-obsessed virgin, denies her boyfriend Ray (Alex Karpovsky) access to her apartment after she unwittingly discovers he’s moved in without telling her; eventually, at the end of Season 2, she ends their relationship. Shoshanna actively epitomizes the silly, privileged Caucasian twenty-something concerned primarily with romantic comedies and losing her virginity, a fact acknowledged nearly immediately by Jessa when she moves in. Yet, despite her love of SATC and her announcement that she is “a Carrie at heart,” Shoshanna (and the rest of the girls) make very little effort to actually secure “the one.” Instead,
viewers are led to believe that “the one” might instead be a homeless barista attempting to use his much-younger girlfriend for room and board.
Much has been said regarding sex on HBO’s Girls. The four main characters converse frequently regarding the amount of sex they have (or do not have), pleasure and displeasure, and the complicated nature of being in sexual entanglements. Nudity also pervades the series with characters in various states of undress and with writer/director/creator Lena Dunham often topless, pants-less, or nude. Though critics have praised her bravery in dealing with millennials’ economic frustrations and identity crises, Dunham’s figurative and physical body has been under review and publically dissected. Bodies have become a significant part of the discourse surrounding the program. Dunham’s portrayal of Hannah sparks discussions regarding the body as a container of conflicting emotions, ideas, and expectations. The vulnerability of the body is in itself ironic as its nakedness encloses layers of guarded fears and anxieties attached to its actions.

Dunham forms what Lauren Berlant (2008, 6) considers in The Female Complaint “an intimate public,” a space in which viewers can identify with the actions, as well as the feelings pursued and represented within the narrative. Unlike television programs and films that invite female viewers to identify with the narratives and characters as Berlant describes in her book, Dunham avoids sentimentality in Girls. While sex is regularly presented in popular culture as pleasurable, it is never depicted as so within the series. The characters chase bodily pleasure, but sex is often represented as hollow and unfulfilling. Love is full of angst, friendship resentment, and sex frustration.
Sex in *Girls* is a site of physical convergence and emotional distance. An undercurrent of dissatisfaction underlies the sexual experiences of the female characters, in particular, Hannah. Her sexual relationships, for example, are ones with an imbalance of pleasure. Though she claims to be satisfied, or at least continues to engage in sex with various male characters, none of the relationships are framed as wholly positive. Dunham’s willingness to represent various types of sex, and show female characters aggressively pursuing sexual relationships frames her as sex positive; however, the creator frequently uses sex as a means to communicate anxieties regarding emotional detachments in contemporary culture.

This chapter will primarily examine the ways sex is portrayed between Hannah and two of her partners, Adam (Adam Driver) and Joshua (Patrick Wilson). These encounters provide representations of intercourse, intimacy, and emotional conflict. While Dunham has been both praised and derided for her openness in regards to revealing her body in physical acts, few have discussed what is accomplished through displaying the physical body while denying emotional access. This chapter seeks to explore those gaps and their significance for larger representations of women’s pleasure in media.

**Liquidating Love and Intimacy**

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2005, ii) discusses the fluidity of lived experience, which he terms “liquid life,” an unceasing stream of opened projects and ideas, but with few of those ventures ever concluded. Bauman contends Western society has reached an era in which identities and culture are in fluctuation and social conduct and relationships are ill defined. In *Liquid Life* (2003, vii), Bauman claims that the fragility of contemporary relationships is a result of rapid social changes that leave individuals with a fixed sense of their own identity, therefore making it difficult to shift that identity in order to bond with another with any semblance of permanence. Living in liquid modernity means that relationships will also have some degree of slippage, and that the bonds that exist between people will always be of necessity more flexible and amorphous than once obtained in more traditional situations.

I would argue that the loose quality of social bonds in *Girls* is expressed through romantic relationships. The status of every relationship depicted is uncertain and unstable. At any point couples are likely to break up, and new relationships begin. Due to this lack of stability, each female heroine is unable to express what they want from their partners, and often
they suppress their feelings towards them. For example, in “Hannah’s Diary” (season 1, episode 4), Hannah’s on-again/off-again boyfriend, Adam, asks her what she wants out of the relationship. She replies:

I don’t even want a boyfriend… I just want someone who wants to hang out all of the time, who thinks I’m the best person in the world and wants to have sex with only me. And it makes me feel very stupid to tell you this because it makes me sound like a girl who wants to, like, go to brunch. And I really don’t want to go to brunch, and I don’t want you to sit on the couch while I shop or even meet my friends. I don’t even want that.

The statement is full of contradictions and Dunham performs the speech sheepishly and indecisively. Despite clearly saying she does not want a boyfriend, the content of the speech reflects the desire for intimacy and exclusivity. Hannah does not disassociate herself from wanting someone with the actual “boyfriend” label, but rather the associated expectations and restrictions placed on those within committed relationships. She is concerned with the images associated with “boyfriends” and “girlfriends.” Hannah does not want to feel as if she is confining Adam, but in doing so also refuses to declare what she wants. She would rather leave the relationship in a nebulous state than risk the closure brought forth by rejection. Limbo is a preferable space, because at least there is room to imagine positive outcomes.

Love, desire, and sex are further complicated with the advent of postfeminist culture, which has sought to capitalize on the success of early feminist movements. In “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” Angela McRobbie (2009, 12) articulates this contradiction:

post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.

By claiming feminism is over and activism unnecessary, postfeminism fosters reluctance in young women who are nervous about firmly claiming themselves feminists within the current cultural context. Hannah’s statement regarding what she wants from her relationship highlights the waffling and confusion toward what is and is not empowering, despite the fact that what might be most inspiring would be declaring her desires outright.

The frustrations and complexities of women’s identities as they relate to sex are echoed in the work of sociologist Leslie C. Bell, whose 2013
Hard to Get: Twenty Something Women and the Paradox of Sexual Freedom addresses the issues of sex, gender, and conflicting messages in popular culture. According to Bell (2013, 8), millennial women have benefitted from second-wave feminism, being born during a period where formal discriminations based on sex and gender were outlawed by legislative acts such as Title IX, Johnson’s Executive Order, and the court decision of Roe v. Wade. The expansion of formal freedoms have allowed more women to attend college, have careers, choose the type of relationships they want, with whom they want, and when and if they settle down. There is a range of options available for women, but at the same time pop culture continues to represent traditional conceptions of femininity, such as beauty, domesticity, and passivity. The combination of these realities and fictional representations leaves young women faced with a paradox. On the one hand, they should claim their rights to the same opportunities as men, but on the other, they are faced with circulating ideologies that encourage them to become future wives and mothers.

To compensate for this ambiguity, Bell (2013, 17) posits that women “split” their emotions and thoughts into more manageable either/or categories. The author believes that women essentially carve up the differences in order to cope with the contrasting expectations for them in the larger culture. As Bell (ibid.) explains, these competing options lead young women to assume that they cannot be strong and autonomous when they are interdependent with others, vulnerable, and intimate. Vulnerability, needs, desires, and intimacy, then, often become new taboos for young women - experiences to be avoided rather than embraced.

The popularization of women’s abilities to “have it all” brings about extra pressure to women’s lives. Girls is especially influenced by its HBO predecessor Sex and the City (1998-2004), which presented women’s empowerment, in part, through pleasure. The narrative arcs of the major characters consisted largely of their romantic lives, and sexual encounters. The program was criticized by many feminists, such as McRobbie (2004, 262) for its portrayal of empowerment through consumption, as characters’ fashions became its driving force.

Scholars such as Jane Gerhard (2005, 44), however, have focused criticism on the threads of friendship, personal autonomy, and empowerment that come through in the program. Gerhard (ibid.) points out that the major force of SATC is the queerness of the relationship between the four friends, adding that despite sexual pleasure being the crux of the show, the significance of friendships forms the base, as each week the
women sit and engage in confessional talk. The series does not end with Carrie’s (Sarah Jessica Parker) romantic partnership with Mr. Big (Chris Noth) decided upon, but rather the reunion of Carrie with her core group of friends. According to Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009, 100), *Sex and the City’s* fine line between sovereignty and patriarchal conformity is what makes the series complicated and politically confusing. 

*Sex and the City’s* representations of independent women who are sexually free but romantically disenchanted provide a frame through which *Girls* could be understood. *Girls* presents women who have been influenced by postfeminist media, which advocate sexual independence and freedom, but neglect to highlight continued gender disparities. One of the ways Dunham addresses this lack is through representations of sex and pleasure. The women in *Girls* often feel estranged and alienated when dealing with their personal relationships. Their attempts to conform to certain roles or expectations often lead them to feel dissatisfied, more so with themselves than with the realities of relationships being more complicated than their onscreen representations.

Citing herself as a fan, Dunham (2012) has commented on the aspirational aspect of television programs like *Sex and the City*, which construct fantasies as opposed to representing women’s lived realities. The lives of Carrie, Samantha (Kim Cattrall), Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte (Kristin Davis) were those of upper middle class women with access to spaces and people few are able to obtain. The characters also did not have access to the kinds of technology millennials routinely use in their daily lives. It was not until season four, for example, that Carrie began her foray into e-mail and AOL Instant messenger.

In *Girls*, by contrast, Marnie and Hannah discuss the nuances of the digital communication they use. When Hannah asks about the hierarchy of connecting with others in the *Girls’* pilot, Marnie replies “lowest is Facebook, then Gchat, then texting, then e-mail, then phone. Face to face is of course, ideal, but it’s not of this time.” The rules and expectations between the times in which these two sets of female characters have lived changed; however, *Sex and the City* continues to be a type of model, a fantasy to which the characters in *Girls* aspire. Critics have often compared the two programs and in the *Girls’* pilot, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) matches characters, or parts of characters, with their *Sex and the City* counterparts.

Dunham constantly reminds viewers of the dangers of striving to be part of the intimate publics constructed for them to consume. As Berlant (2005, x) notes, “The works of ‘women’s culture’ enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even
when it is not shared by many or any.” There is a sense of familiarity to the narratives or characters, but the relationship formed between viewer and character is one heavily developed by the former and fostered by the producer. Whereas *Sex and the City* encouraged viewers to see themselves in Carrie’s social circle, *Girls* is less inviting. The program lacks sentimentality. It contains anxiety, uncertainty, emotional labor, toxicity, and characters who lack self-awareness. Dunham represents what she sees or experiences within contemporary living, but maintains a distance between the characters and the viewers. She wants people to identify with the characters’ emotional states, but to also maintain distance enough to evaluate these experiences.

One method of representation and reflection rests in how Dunham, as Hannah, uses her body. Dunham complicates the assumption of sex as physically and emotionally pleasurable. Often, Hannah pursues potential pleasure which she has been told through various representations will be satisfying. In “Vagina Panic” (season 1, episode 2), we see her initiating sex, hurriedly taking off her clothes in anticipation, enjoying the idea of being taken, but it is either made clear she does not have an orgasm or the camera cuts before we actually see her climax. This denial of watching the character have an orgasm, coupled with lines like “I almost came,” deny the viewer visual and auditory access to Hannah’s sexual pleasure. Sex for Hannah is full of hope, anxiety, and distance, often leaving viewers feeling rather confused and uncomfortable. Dunham explores how relationships and meanings have changed when mediated by technology—when sex is informed by online pornography, when text messages becomes a primary source of flirtation, and privacy is always made public through social media. Sexual encounters are idealized as the ultimate form of closeness, synonymous with intimacy. Through representations of sex, Dunham challenges the notion of intercourse as the ultimate form of intimacy and encourages viewers to rethink the nature of closeness and affection.

**The Sexual Exploits of Hannah Horvath**

Sex plays a significant part of each character’s life and forms a large part of their identity in *Girls*. As a collective, the women represent a range of heterosexual activity, from Shoshanna’s virginity to Jessa’s (Jemima Kirke) open promiscuity. As the anchor of the group and narrative, Hannah’s sexual prowess is relatively conflicted. On the one hand, she is open to experimentation, but on the other, she is wracked with anxiety regarding her sexual choices. In describing the character, Dunham (2012) has said, “If there is a right choice and wrong choice, Hannah always
makes the wrong choice.” For this reason, Hannah should be viewed not as a model in the same way we often treat media representations. Instead, Hannah is placed in sexual ethical dilemmas geared toward making the viewers reflect upon their own past and current experiences.

The confessional nature of the show allows women to identify with or find similar experiences in their own lives. They may think of unhealthy relationships, risky sexual decisions, or sexual partners they had in order to stave off loneliness. The “intimate public” created is one that allows viewers to identify and feel commiseration with characters. These points of identification, however, may not be pleasurable. Hannah and her friends struggle with the contradictions of being young women encouraged to explore their sexuality but also pressured to start settling down.

Within the first two seasons, Hannah has one major relationship and four brief ones. The first season primarily focuses on her attempt to form a more meaningful, exclusive bond with Adam. In determining her feelings for him, she also has a one-night stand with a man she knew from high school while visiting her parents. The second season allows Hannah to experiment with being single and available, and she has brief relationships with an African-American Republican, her questionable downstairs neighbor, an older wealthy doctor, and her friend’s younger step-brother. Much like *Sex and the City*, these liaisons are used as a means to explore what makes relationships work or not. Instead of sex being used as a means of empowerment or a source of intimacy, *Girls* represents it as something that has the potential of begetting or accentuating feelings of disconnection and loneliness.

Sex in television and film is often framed as pleasurable through various editing practices, camera angles, movement, acting, and music. It is shown as a means of characters intimately connecting with each other, linking bodies and emotions. On the other hand, sex in *Girls* often underscores the internal conflicts hidden within exposed bodies. The lack of reflection and emotional processing is also bound to frustrate viewers who are not usually confronted with narrators so out of touch with themselves, causing them to make decisions we may consider wrong in the sense that they lead characters to feel even worse than before.

Hannah’s relationship with Adam, for example, provides mixed messages throughout the series. When introduced to him in the pilot, he appears rather distant and flippant towards Hannah, who by contrast has been shown agonizing over the meaning or significance of their relationship. Adam also asks Hannah to do things sexually she does not seem comfortable with and there appears to be a lack of trust. He asks her to lie on her stomach, lies on top of her, and whispers “You modern career
woman. I know what you like. You think you can just come in here and talk all that noise?” Hannah’s response denotes confusion, while her hesitation and tone confirm that while this may be Adam’s version of sex talk, which arouses him, it does not have the same effect on her. During intercourse, she asks him questions concerning her positioning, whether or not it is pleasurable to him, and apologizes for redirecting him from anal sex. The scene is interrupted by a cut back to Hannah’s apartment where Marnie waits for her to return to help prepare for a dinner party. Therefore, the viewers cannot see either character climax and are left to decide whether both, either, or neither had an orgasm. Viewers are left with Hannah’s initial discomfort and her recognizing she is late for her own dinner party.

The second time we witness Adam and Hannah having sex is in “Vagina Panic,” where again Adam indulges in fantasy, dictating that Hannah pretend she is an eleven year old junkie he found on the street with a Cabbage Patch lunch box. The camera tracks slowly back out into the hallway, mimicking the act of backing away from the scene. Adam ejaculates on Hannah, asking her to pleasure herself, but also demanding she ask permission before she orgasms. Hannah is visibly uncomfortable, but acquiesces. Once again, she does not derive pleasure, but accommodates Adam because this type of role-play is what Adam wants, and she would rather comply than not be involved. Hannah continues to follow, appease, and even verbally concedes that the sex was good. However, the viewer is led to believe that she did not enjoy the encounter and is merely accommodating his request.

When asked by Terry Gross of National Public Radio (2012) about Adam and Hannah’s sexual relationship, Dunham explains that the rationale for including these scenes of awkward sex is to show how sex has been mediated by the porn culture, where ideas regarding sex and women’s pleasure serve as bases for experimentation. Dunham questions where some sexual ideas come from, suggesting they are not organic fantasies or something taught by a past lover. Dunham also adds that these sequences can serve as a means to reflect the ways in which women approach sex. The choice between being alone and being with somebody causes women to make compromises, and showing this dynamic between the characters on the show allows the viewer to reflect on this dynamic in their own lives.
“Another Man’s Trash”

The first season ends with each of the female characters in a different state of flux: Hannah is alone on a beach at Coney Island eating a piece of wedding cake after Jessa’s surprise wedding; Shoshanna has her first sexual encounter and relationship; and Marnie drunkenly pursues a stranger initially deemed as “out of her league.” Rather than the sense of collectivity stemming from Girls as a plural noun, the season ends on a note of individuation and alienation. Additionally, the relationship Hannah has pursued with Adam for the majority of the first season has also ended with a heated confrontation, followed by Adam being hit by a van. The second season covers Hannah’s separation and self-exploration as a single woman without a support network, or at least one that is relatively less secure than was portrayed in the first season.

The episode “One Man’s Trash” (season 2, episode 5) is a stark contrast from those that had previously aired. First, it involves Hannah completely removed from the familiar context of hers or Adam’s apartment. Instead of cramped spaces, Hannah is situated in a coveted, spacious brownstone. Second, it is the only episode in which no other “girl” is featured. The plot surrounds Hannah confronting a stranger who complains to her boss that somebody is putting the coffee shop’s trash in his bins. This turns out to be Hannah, who finds a sense of excitement in this mild act of transgression. She decides to confess her actions to the stranger, and follows him home to apologize. Within a few minutes of talking with each other, Hannah kisses him, and then apologizes for violating his personal space only to be kissed back. They begin undressing each other in the kitchen as they introduce themselves. It is spontaneous. It is a whirlwind.

For the remainder of the episode, Hannah’s half or completely nude body is displayed. Both she and Joshua stay in a state of undress, leaving any and all opportunities for sex open. They play table tennis in their underwear and afterward have sex on the table. Throughout the first half of the episode, these instances are framed as lighthearted, free, and easy. Their friendly game of table tennis is edited to show them smiling and laughing with and at each other, in a flirtatious competition. Hannah jokes she is a great athlete as she flubs each serve attempt and Joshua laughs while continuing to play without criticism. In the first half of “Another Man’s Trash,” viewers are allowed, for the first time, to see Hannah as carefree and relaxed. Usually, she overanalyzes and expresses her concerns about each past decision, current moment, and future options.
The mood shifts, however, while both sit on the patio. Joshua reads a newspaper, while Hannah stares at him. Her expression is curious, as it neither betrays pleasure nor dislike. It almost conveys a sense of contentment, but also disbelief. It is as if she does not know what she has done to deserve this moment of silence with a man she genuinely likes and who likes her in return. This is a brief respite from the ongoing drama between her and Adam, conflicts with her friends, and economic pressures associated with making a minimum wage and trying to pay the rent.

The narrative shifts again by the episode’s conclusion. After passing out in Joshua’s steam shower, Hannah comes to and begins confessing how the past two days have made her realize how lonely she has been and her desire to be happy. It is one of the few times Hannah actually confesses her internal conflicts between her need for a more permanent relationship to make her happy, and her performance as a young author who wants to live unconventionally. Up to this point, she has performed what is expected of her as an independent, female author. In actuality, what she wants is to feel emotionally supported, in her words, “I want there to be somebody still around when I’m dead.” Upon recognizing her own vulnerability she becomes defensive, questioning if “happiness” is below her intelligence; Joshua’s psychological state if he thought having her was a good idea, and if both are trying to avoid something they cannot articulate.

Hannah actually confronts herself and questions her everyday motives. She notes to Joshua, “I once asked somebody to punch me in the chest and come on that spot. That was me. That was from my brain. Why did I think I deserved that?” The question is one that opens up larger issues for Hannah and asserts what many viewers consider while watching the show. If the concept of “happiness” is, as Sarah Ahmed (2010, 31) contends, based on how our bodies “turn toward things,” Hannah’s confessional is not simply one of desiring happiness, which can be considered simplistic if taken superficially. Hannah questions why she is physically pulled toward these situations in which she derives little pleasure or lasting happiness. This is more than a moment of reflection, but rather something she must reckon with and evaluate.

Joshua and Hannah sleep together, but she wakes up alone. She stays the morning, but leaves at midday, taking the trash out before returning to her life and responsibilities. The brief interruption now only further accentuates the “what could be.” The time shared with Joshua is the first glimpse of Hannah as a happy young woman. This is one of the few adventures Hannah goes through during which she feels comfortable saying what she wants and obtains what she wants, at least to a point. In
their second sexual encounter of the day, she and Joshua lie on the bed together, undressing. While on top, she moves out of frame while taking off his belt. He asks her to make him come and then makes a face indicating confusion. Hannah moves back into frame and says “No, I want you to make me come,” to which Joshua responds by flipping her on her back in the act of complying. For Hannah to take charge of sex is highly unusual as she is used to obeying commands from Adam or does what she thinks he would like in bed. With Joshua, both her emotional and physical needs are seemingly met.

However, the brief glimpse of what Hannah’s life could be and what she wants proves to be too much within that moment, and reentry into her world acts as a return to the reality of figuring out how to obtain and maintain that level of comfort and stability. At the end of her confession, we see her physically retreat from this fantasy as she verbally pushes Joshua away as she defensively questions his motivations. While her emotions remain below the surface, her tears and frantic speech demonstrate the tangle of sentiments converging and creating confusion. She wants happiness, but is convinced it conflicts with her ideas of what it means to be a reflective essayist. Hannah is interested in living an economically secure life, but this contradicts with her sense of what it means to “pay dues.” She wants to live without anxiety, but also worries this would leave her without an identity.

As Hannah leaves the brownstone, her hair and jumper the same, she holds herself differently than she did when she entered. We come to understand this was not just a brief interlude. There is something different in how she faces and reenters the city. Since the episode there has been no mention of Joshua or her intermittent disappearance. As far as the viewers know, she has told no one of this interaction. We cannot, however, help but consider how this experience and brush with happiness have affected where and how her body draws her forward through the remainder of the series.

**Toxic Life Lessons**

Rather than consider Hannah as a model for behavior, her actions allow viewers to reflect about their own relationships, sexual conquests, and intimacy issues. Hannah chooses toxicity over the possibility of being alone. Michael Cobb (2011, 210) has written about loneliness:

> The absence of connection, the absence of even having a connection with oneself, is the condition of loneliness, which makes one too much of a one, outside of relationships, mistrustful of everyone. And when one is made to
feel lonely, one is prepared to endure a kind of “inner-coercion” by permitting oneself to seek out logic for why the world is barren, for why one has been abandoned.

Sex is just one way in which the fear of being alone is explored throughout the series. We can better understand Hannah’s pull toward Adam or other unsatisfactory conquests because of her attempt to avoid feeling more alone and disparate than she already feels as a young, underemployed, anxious woman. Casual sex fulfills some of her desires, but is not actually fulfilling the complexity of emotions Hannah feels at any given time. Through sex, Hannah is searching to be anything but alone and left behind, and escape feelings of anxiety and isolation. The act of sex is a means to explore the gaps between people by overexposing and exaggerating the significance placed upon the act of intercourse.

Dunham’s confessional approach to writing and filmmaking is aimed at engaging viewers in a type of reflective call and response. For each of her actions, there is a visceral reaction, as evidenced by the continuous stream of critiques directed toward Girls and Dunham herself. For this reason, episodes sometimes take excruciating turns, as exaggerated forms of toxic relationships are fully displayed, reminding viewers of how easy it is to become trapped in unpleasant spaces, bad relationships, unfulfilling dalliances, and emotionally overwhelming territories. Whether people identify with Hannah’s decision-making or vilify her, viewers are still challenged to consider themselves within the framework Dunham provides. By example, Hannah also asks us to consider the differences between expectation and reality. Girls is a mediated reality, but it does not indulge in aspirational narrative story telling so much as it submerges itself and the viewers in uncertainty and anxiety.

The women depicted onscreen are represented as stuck within the postfeminist wave, which encourages pursuing occupational dreams and sexual independence, but neglects to mention the amount of physical and emotional labor, time, and failure necessary in pursuing those goals. In “Leave Me Alone” (season 1, episode 9), Jessa is confronted by her employer, Kathryn (Kathryn Hahn), who caught her in a mild flirtation with her husband. At the end of this conversation centered around a failed marriage and the husband’s immaturity, Kathryn confronts Jessa with a larger truth regarding liquidity and emotional limbo. Kathryn admits:

I bet you get into these dramas all the time, like with Jeff and me. Where you’ve caused all this trouble and you have no idea why. In my opinion, you’re doing it to distract yourself from the person you’re meant to be […] she might not look like what you pictured at age sixteen. Her job might not
be cool. Her hair might not be flowing like a mermaid. And she might be really serious about something or someone and she might be a lot happier than what you are right now.

Although this thread of advice is delivered only to Jessa, it could be directed toward all the women represented on the show as each are regularly confronted with their idealism in opposition to their lived realities. From somebody who has lived through the experience of being young and reflected on its challenges, the older female character confronts the issues Jessa and her friends share between their idealized views of themselves and the real potential of their lives. Escapism through created dramas perpetuates their alienation from themselves and further separates the characters from obtaining what might actually make them happy.

_Girls_ challenges the ways in which women are represented. Bodies, even as they are in the throes of sex, are not sexualized. Instead, they act as sites where contradictions are represented and internal states are revealed. Characters are always posturing and are rarely honest with each other. Their internal states are never fully revealed, but appear momentarily in the midst of these sexual encounters. Dunham challenges viewers’ expectations concerning bodies, intimacy, sex, and women’s perspectives. While not wholly inclusive of all young women’s experiences, she attempts to interrupt standard modes of representation and consider new possibilities of talking about sex and sexuality. Dunham’s portrayal of the complexities of women’s pleasure is one that breaks from conventional means of representation, causes visceral reactions from viewers and critics, and brings forth conversations about gender disparities, privilege, and the current state of feminism.

**Works Cited**


CHAPTER TWELVE

DANCING ON MY OWN:
POPULAR MUSIC AND ISSUES
OF IDENTITY IN GIRLS

CHLOÉ H. JOHNSON

*Girls* has provoked a range of intense mixed reactions across the pop culture spectrum since it first aired on HBO in 2012. Cultural critics are using it as a document to demonstrate everything that is wrong with the millennial generation. Academics are tapping into it as a fountain of unchartered feminist, gender, and socio-cultural issues begging for analysis. Fans are thrilled to be finally engaging with characters who are experiencing the same post-university “what am I going to do with my life?” angst as themselves. Dedicated audiences are finding resonance with what they see as an authentic treatment of life as a twenty-something coming of age in the lingering aftermath of a wrecked economy.

On the surface, *Girls* appears to be mapping out particular emotional trajectories explored through its ensemble cast of characters. Those of us who are also asking “what now?” can intimately relate to the characters’ existential crises that shape the show’s narrative. Lena Dunham has been particularly effective in helping her audience identify with these feelings through her use of particular songs and musical artists. Given the central role music plays not only as a point of identification with audiences, but as a means of reinforcing the narrative themes of the show, I will explore Dunham’s musical choices in the series, which serve both as a portal toward understanding the larger themes of *Girls* as well as a way to reveal more broadly how music can be a powerful way for millennials to construct their own particular identity.
Shared Playlists: Music as Language and Alternative Modes of Communication

I find it curious that similarly handled socio-economic, racial, and gendered hot-topic issues surrounding previous television series seem immune to the kind of negative scrutiny *Girls* has received. These other shows shelter under the guise of fiction to create their own reality insulated from the actual constraints of the world outside the televisual text. There have also been shows that attempted to portray a more vérité representation of youth culture that did not shy away from the truth, no matter how complicated, such as *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000), *My So Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995), *Skins* (E4, 2007-2013), *How to Make It In America* (HBO, 2010-2011), and *Degrassi High* (CBC, 1989-1991). However, the blurred distinction between Dunham’s real life and that of Hannah Horvath, her fictional character she portrays on the show, has lead to some interesting responses that sets *Girls* apart from many television series past or present. Unlike many mainstream shows, *Girls* is created, written, directed, and headlined by a young woman. Dunham, only 25 years old when the show first aired, is an anomaly in the world of television. She is vocal about her feminist values. She is highly visible and accessible via social media (particularly on Twitter and Instagram). Far from the Western ideal of physical perfection, Dunham is unafraid of showing her naked body on screen, which suggests an undertaking to bravely portray the lives of her characters as realistically as possible. While the inability amongst viewers and critics to definitively separate Dunham from Hannah has triggered a significant backlash against the show, it has also simultaneously filled a void in the representation of young women on television.

*Girls* is defining a cultural moment that needs to be captured by mainstream media because it may be the first show in the “coming of age” genre to provide an accurate and grimly fearless antidote to the shiny, happy teen TV world with which we have grown up. The American Dream is getting harder to sell and Dunham seems intent on setting the record straight. The millennials are a generation on a journey through that bravest of new worlds. They are over-qualified and under paid. Their education has left them deep in debt, struggling to get a toe-hold in the property market, and wary of starting a family. Treading water in this morass of uncertainty, millennials have turned inward and rely specifically on a language they have created for themselves. This is a language built on the dissemination of cultural objects (film, television, music, advertisements,
consumer products, etc.) across expansive social networks. Dunham is tapping into this new language to communicate with her viewers.

The most interesting aspect of the viewers’ responses to the show, both positive or negative, is that they are likely driven by the constant blurring of reality between the fictional world of Girls and the lives of the actual women who play Hannah, Jessa (Jemima Kirke), Marnie (Allison Williams), and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet). From Dunham’s many interviews, one can discern a pattern where she falls in and out of character when referring to the similarities and differences that exist between herself and Hannah. In Interview Magazine (2012), fellow actress Claire Danes asks Dunham, “So you’re playing someone in Girls who’s reminiscent of who you are, but she’s still fictionalized. What’s that like?” Dunham explains:

I play these girls who are close to me, but they’re the parts of me that I find the most shameful, or the parts of me that I kind of want to excise. So I sort of distance myself from it. I have the comfort to feel free and un-self-conscious. I sort of go, “These are all the awful parts of me that I don’t get to talk about all day. Here she is.”

On Dunham’s Instagram, followers are afforded a special insight into her daily life. We see photos of her newly decorated Brooklyn apartment, as well as her recently rescued dog, Lamby, sleeping in her bed. There are scenes from a night out with her boyfriend Jack Antonoff (a member of the band Fun whose song “Sight of the Sun” was used in the pilot episode and is included on the first official Girls’ soundtrack released in January 2013). Photos of Dunham hanging out with members of the Girls cast appear regularly, as well as screen shots of text messages from Kirke, who is an old high school friend of Dunham’s. Many captions to these photos of Kirke detail memories from their teen years of growing up in New York City. Despite how seamlessly the fictional world of Girls tends to merge with the real-life events of its creator and star, exploring the use of music in the show speaks directly to the ways in which Dunham hopes to connect with her viewers when it comes to familiar and shared experiences between herself and those watching the show. Watching Girls would surely conjure up for its viewers fond memories of dancing in clubs with friends and singing along to songs together. In relation to the use of music in Girls, we might ask: how do the songs used in the show relate to the visual representation of what it means to be a ‘girl’ in today’s society? How important is it for girls to recognize themselves on screen? What role does the music play in these points of identification? By looking at the ways music is used in Girls, and the musicians that are showcased, we can
see why this show has struck a chord within youth culture today and why the connection with its viewers is so intimate.

*Girls* speaks a specific language based primarily on the uses of current popular cultural objects and social media tools that have come to define the daily activities and everyday practices of the millennial generation. Besides the usual tweeting, Facebooking, blog posting, and texting, the other more affective way the characters bond with one another is through music. Most often, scenes preemptsing a turning point in the show use music to provide a crucial segue from one moment to the next. For example, in “On All Fours” (season 2, episode 9) Marnie sings Kanye West’s “Stronger” (2007) during a party as a way of telling her ex Charlie (Christopher Abbott) that she wants him back. In “Hard Being Easy” (season 1, episode 5), there is a flashback scene that takes us to a party at Oberlin College in 2007 where we see Hannah and Elijah together dancing to Scissor Sisters’ “Take Your Mama” (2004), moments before Marnie and Charlie meet for the first time. Notwithstanding that the millennials are a generation that thrives on the concept of connection, where the roles of mobile device technology and social media have become a type of communicative prosthesis, allowing us to infinitely extend our connective networks, we are still searching for authentic connections with those around us. The girls in the show spend a significant amount of time searching for ‘real’ connections or lamenting the loss of past relationships, or the ability to experience highly personal and meaningful moments with friends and family.

The theme of being a “bad friend” is recurrent. During those moments in which Hannah is in need of reassurance, support, or a sign she is not alone, it is interesting to note that it often happens during a scene when a particular song is highlighted. The song typically speaks directly to the moment, serving an important narrative function to communicate with the viewers when the characters are incapable of or unwilling to do so. There are two particular scenes from both seasons of *Girls* that stand out in relation to this idea of music as a gateway to the interior emotional world of its characters. The first is the final scene in the third episode of season one, entitled “All Adventurous Women Do”. In this scene, Hannah has drinks with her college boyfriend and first love, Elijah (Andrew Rannells), who tells her he’s gay. The conversation begins with Hannah promptly accusing him of giving her an STI and ends with him insulting her outfit and calling her father gay. We then see Hannah back at her apartment, sitting on her bed attempting to write the perfect tweet to sum up her traumatic evening. We view her laptop screen and watch her first attempt appear on her Twitter page. It reads, “You lose some, you lose some,”
which is immediately deleted and replaced with, “My life has been a lie, my ex-boyfriend dates a guy,” which is also erased. The first few bars of Robyn’s song “Dancing on My Own” (2010) slowly start streaming from Hannah’s MacBook as she contemplates her next Tweet. She writes, “All adventurous women do,” and we hear the lyric “Somebody said you’ve got a new friend. Does she love you better than I can?” Hannah presses “Tweet” and publishes her status. There is a cut to Marnie walking down the hallway alone after coming home from a disastrous dinner party with friends, which included her boyfriend and Jessa. We continue to hear the song as Marnie enters and puts her coat and bag down in the kitchen. The volume increases as Marnie leans in Hanna’s doorway and watches her dancing alone as Robyn sings “I’m just gonna dance all night. I’m so messed up I’m outta line.” Hannah tells Marnie about her drinks with Elijah, and then the two friends start dancing together in Hannah’s bedroom. As the credits role, the song continues to play – “I’m giving it my all but I’m not the girl you’re taking home. I keep dancing on my own.”

Another scene that serves a similar, albeit less intimate, function occurs in the third episode in season two, entitled “Bad Friend.” Hannah receives a writing assignment where she’s encouraged to break out of her comfort zone, because, as the editor of the online magazine explains, once she frees herself from the familiar, only then can she experience that place where “the magic happens.” To satisfy this criterion, Hannah decides to take cocaine for the first time and write about her experience. She obtains some from her ex-junkie neighbor, and embarks on a drug-fueled adventure of self-discovery with Elijah. The two end up dancing at a club where iPad DJs Andrew Andrew are spinning. Hannah trades shirts with a random guy and finds herself suddenly resplendent in a 90s rave-inspired bright yellow, see-through mesh tank top and no bra. Hannah yells across the dance floor to Elijah “It’s a Wednesday night baby and I’m alive!” A jump cut finds both characters snorting lines off of a filthy toilet. Electro house, indie pop punk duo from Sweden, Icona Pop’s song “I Love It” (2012) can be heard thumping through the walls – “I got this feeling on the summer day when you were gone. I crashed my car into a bridge. I don’t care!” A shot reverse shot between them as they sing the lyrics to each other whilst jumping up and down. Icona Pop passionately yells/sing the lyrics: “I don’t care! I love it! I don’t care! You’re on a different road, I’m in the Milky Way/You want me down on earth, but I am up in space/You’re so damn hard to please, we gotta kill this switch/
You’re from the 70s, but I’m a 90s bitch. I love it!” The scene ends without dialogue, Hannah and Elijah dancing in a wild ecstasy.

These two particular scenes speak directly to the idea that music, used within the diegesis, functions on a particular level that allows us a more in-depth immersion into the fictional world of the characters. In the two scenes discussed, the viewers are drawn into the diegesis and, hopefully, transported elsewhere on a wave of recognition that provides soundtracks to their own life. A moment of bonding kicks in when we hear a song we know, generating a kindred connection with the character. Music has, traditionally, functioned as a medium from which we can derive a better sense of ourselves as well as others. Through the sharing of music, Michael Bull (2012, 201) argues that audiences listening to songs via various media devices not only become part of this audio-visual world, but they also “become its director” as they “orchestrate meanings” when they encounter other individuals and share their audio-visual world. Therefore, by focusing on song selections within televisual and filmic texts, we can better understand the ways music can act as a relevant cultural signifier within the changing media economy in relation to identity politics and spectatorship.

Music can become an exceptionally affective mode of communication both for the characters within the diegesis and its viewers who, in this case, see the television show as an accurate representation of their lived reality and issues relating specifically to their generation. Kay Dickinson discusses the ways popular music in film interacts with the image and communicates in quite specific ways with its young audience. Dickinson stresses that to certain audiences, popular music amidst a film narrative can “be distinctly more pertinent to their identity formulation than the unobtrusive seduction that a classical score often so relentlessly strives for in an idiom alien to their particular language” (2003: 146).

Dickinson’s analysis is also applicable to current television viewing practices. Popular music is often overlooked as a legitimate area of film and television theory. However, this attitude is changing as we look to popular culture as a way to better understand shifts in identity politics and issues of subjectivity in contemporary culture. Dickinson goes on to say that, “While pop songs may seem transitory, base or mindless to certain [audiences], to a teenage audience they often play a vital role in both self-definition and micro-cultural stratification” (ibid.). The key differences between a specifically composed score and the use of existing popular songs are that the music brings with it its own rich history—not only in more general socio-cultural terms but personally for the audience as well. We are more likely to have encountered popular songs prior to watching a
film or television show and, as a result, popular music is, arguably, more visual than other types of music. The song’s relationship with the larger visual media economy is complex and far reaching. It also has the ability to tap into past experiences beyond the filmic or televisual text for its audience. Popular music actively blurs the distinction between the ‘fictional’ world being watched on screen and the viewers’ ‘real’ world, because the meaning the music creates for the characters on screen becomes intertwined with the viewers’ own personal narrative.

Music has the ability to enhance and intensify the breakdown of the distinction between the diegetic world of the characters and that of its audience. This technique is not a new one and has been utilized in film and television for decades. Since George Lucas’ “coming of age” drama, American Graffiti (released in 1973 but set in the 1950s), the first feature length film to have a soundtrack compiled entirely of popular music (Corey K. Creekmur 2001, 384), we have become accustomed to the inclusion of carefully chosen songs designed to transport us back to moments in our own lives. We use this phenomenon as a way to forge a personal bond with what we are seeing on screen, or to affectively signal a particular socio-historical moment in which the story is taking place. John Hughes used song selection to great effect in his teen dramas from the 1980s to tap into the youth culture zeitgeist and connect with his intended viewers, thus generating a more authentic filmic world in which his characters negotiate the trials of adolescence.

A paradigm of this tendency includes Ducky’s (Jon Cryer) passionate lip-synching performance to Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” (1966) in Pretty in Pink (1986) to get Andie’s (Molly Ringwald) attention. Another is the scene in The Breakfast Club (1985) where all the characters are dancing to Karla DeVito’s “We Are Not Alone” (1985) in the library. The teen film genre in the 1980s relied heavily on their soundtracks, utilizing diegetic music to function as a specific type of language between characters to suggest perhaps a rebellious dynamic or to reveal feelings they are unable to articulate. In Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986), Ferris (Matthew Broderick) lip-synchs to the 1964 Beatles song “Twist and Shout” during a parade downtown as a way of celebrating a day of skipping school. Joel (Tom Cruise) revels in his newfound freedom when his parents leave him home alone for the weekend in Risky Business (1983) by dancing to Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock and Roll” (1976). To tell his girlfriend how he feels about her, Lloyd (John Cusack) holds a boom box up to Diane’s (Ione Skye) window playing Peter Gabriel’s “In Your Eyes” (1986) in Say Anything (1989). The use of music in Girls does not deviate far from these techniques refined during the “coming of age”
Dancing on my Own: Popular Music and Issues of Identity in Girls

genre of the 1970s and 1980s when teen rebellion and the process of finding oneself were the overarching themes.

However, regarding a current show like Girls, it is less about why the music is used and received by its viewers, and more about how. Rather than merely requiring the viewers to identify with the characters, the music in Girls encourages a more direct process of interaction and participation from them. The songs used are often so new it may be the first time many of the viewers have been exposed to them. Girls is not relying on nostalgic connection so important to earlier teen genre films. As a result, audiences are inspired to seek the music out on their own.

On another level, Girls’ use of particular songs invites the viewers into a world that is both familiar in its socio-cultural themes and representation of millennial culture, but also one that is new, cool, and hip. And music, as a signpost to the zeitgeist, operates as a communicative device that affectively functions simultaneously within and outside of the diegesis—where millennials will use information to constantly create alternative spaces where the articulation of self and identity can take place. It is precisely the ways in which millennials interact with what they are seeing and hearing that makes the viewing of a television show today different from what it was in the past. Millennials, more so than any other generation, are collectively connected. The music they listen to becomes shared across multiple media platforms—across an infinite number of users far more engaged with identity forming processes than ever before. Girls understands this. It is nurturing an audience that is both acknowledged and represented within the show and also created outside of it. The music is a nexus—the crucial part of the language that binds the two worlds together.

Lawrence Grossberg (1993, 185-209) discusses at length the influence of the visual media economy on the ways in which popular music functions in more general social and ideological contexts and how the visual elements of rock music specifically shapes the affective relationship between fans and the music. Grossberg (1993, 188) explains that the various images associated with rock, such as live performance, scenes in film and television, record sleeves, magazine covers, fashion, and “images of the sexual body,” expand beyond the sonorous elements and are based on the ideology of authenticity traditionally associated with rock culture. Rock music is commonly categorized as either authentic or inauthentic, but Grossberg makes the point that this is irrelevant—the emphasis should be placed on the fact that to its fans the music communicates an authentic experience based on the audience’s ability to then develop a greater
understanding of their own identity—a process of constructing their subjectivity via popular cultural forms (ibid. 201).

The music on *Girls* spans a variety of genres and many of the bands and artists tend to cross genres with their sound and aesthetic. For example, indie darlings Belle & Sebastian, Fleet Foxes, and The Vaccines are all included on the official *Girls* soundtrack that was released by the indie label, Fueled By Ramen. Swedish singer Robyn’s music is described as pop, electro, and dance, also borrowing from R&B and hip hop. Robyn releases her albums through her own record label, Konichiwa, and the lyrics of her songs often speak directly to issues of female empowerment and independence (Sasha Frere-Jones 2010). Santigold’s sound is considered a mix of pop, 80s synth, “gritty techno, thrash-guitar and indie squalling, soft ballad blues and protest songs” (Lucy Jones 2012). What *Girls*’s music shares with Grossberg writing on rock is the sense of authenticity both trends carry over to their fans.

In today’s culture, that divide between authentic and inauthentic based on consumer practices is less obvious and more convoluted due to new methods of music consumption (iTunes, Amazon, record stores, various online music sharing sites like Soundcloud, as well as social networking sites, such as YouTube and Facebook). Therefore, to follow Grossberg, the authenticity of popular music is now located in a presumed state of inauthenticity. Grossberg (1993, 205) believes the blurring of the visual and aural image in the cultural formation of popular music has generated a new affective logic. It is not about privileging one form of music over another as a way of establishing an ideological hierarchy of authenticity, but rather that once the music matters to an individual regardless of genre, sound, image, or style, that is what makes the music different and sets it apart as authentic. It is the audience as active agent who injects meaning into the music.

Grossberg is not implying that if authenticity itself is just a random construction then everything is inauthentic, but rather a certain thing will always matter to an individual and it does not necessarily matter what form that takes; individuals will forever be making choices and caring about some things over others. As he argues, “You have to construct particular images for yourself and adopt certain identities but, according to the logic of authentic inauthenticity, you must do so reflexively” (1993, 206). This type of image construction has been enhanced today through the ways millennials utilize social networking devices and cultural objects, like sharing songs and music videos, to reflexively create a digital mosaic of their lives to be projected to the world that will inevitably become part of a growing community—a place where personal interests are mirrored.
back at individuals through the shared dissemination of specific information and carefully chosen media.

The song selection in *Girls* is highly strategic. The decision to include, almost exclusively, current alternative music that has been released around the same time as the show functions within these identity forming processes undertaken by its viewers—these songs are new enough to be Tweeted, shared, downloaded, streamed, uploaded, and liked. The songs are an integral component of the show—a conduit establishing a sense of realism and authenticity as the music projects outwards and allows the viewers to take these elements and place them within their own reality. The world of the characters is then transported beyond the diegesis into a shared virtual environment where the experiences of the girls, the actors who play them, and those who are watching all become intertwined.

This is why the music selection in *Girls* really speaks to the current cultural formation of the modes of popular culture that generate and disseminate information and objects. Often, the songs are so new that the images generated are barely formed in the mind of the viewers and, as a result, the context in which the songs are used becomes increasingly relevant. The show creates the context in which these songs are used and becomes the soundtrack to experiences with which the viewers easily relate. Then, the viewers reference these songs in their own everyday realities, and yet the music still remains connected somehow to its original source. For example, rather than use an older song, Dunham personally commissioned indie stars Tegan and Sara to cover the Rolling Stones’ “Fool to Cry” to be used in the first season (Chris Martins 2013). As viewers, we are aware that while we are watching a scene from *Girls*, we are also experiencing a constructed (or for argument’s sake, inauthentic) situation on screen despite being aware of certain cultural signifiers and social tropes that are already familiar to many of us. Yet this does not prevent us from intimately connecting with what we are watching—to experience an emotional moment—a moment that speaks only to me, to you, to us. It is a personal connection with the characters on screen based on a moment of shared recognition (I too have felt disillusioned and disconnected, heartbroken and hopeless, misused and misunderstood, confused and conflicted). And this is precisely the moment of authenticity that viewers are longing for—the authentic is born out of the inauthentic—the transition from the fictional world to the real one via the viewers’ engagement with the show is a movement that has been rendered through music and contextualized in the televisual world of *Girls*.

Grossberg pinpoints one form of authenticity that speaks directly to the way the music functions in *Girls*—how and what the music communicates.
The music in *Girls* functions as an authentic language that speaks beyond the narrative. And this is precisely how rock music can “articulate private but common desires, feelings and experiences into a shared public language. The consumption of rock constructs or expresses a ‘community’” (1993, 202). We can see this function for the *Girls* viewers with the creation of character playlists on Songza, a music streaming site with playlists composed by professional DJs, music critics, musicians, and musicologists. Each character’s page includes songs that have been either used on *Girls* or refers to their identity and personality. Hannah’s playlist includes artists that, according to the Songza write up and profile for Hannah, are voices of many generations, and include Neko Case, Aimee Mann, Camera Obscura, Ryan Adams, Beach House, Kate Bush, and Feist. Marnie’s Songza profile is based on a sleek and sophisticated image. On her playlist you can hear Metric, Lykke Li, Ellie Goulding, Two Door Cinema Club, and MGMT. These Songza playlists are a clear demonstration of the ways music can establish an actual community through a convergence of cultural forms. In this case, this particular community has been inspired by *Girls*. It does not reference the likes and dislikes of Dunham or the other actresses, but focuses specifically on the characters they play in the show.

The creation of and sharing of playlists are common, everyday practices for most individuals, especially under the age of forty today. The social media phenomenon has bred a ‘sharing’ culture amongst millennials. The way music language functions is far more multifaceted than it once was and has generated a much more diverse web of cultural objects and modes of expression to draw from that can ‘speak’ on behalf of those who are sharing music across broad social networks. Diary-like status updates, Facebook walls, Twitter pages, and Instagram accounts have all become carefully curated digital spaces in which individuals make specific choices as to what information they want to project to the world. Music, images, articles, YouTube clips, and Buzzfeed “Best of” lists speak directly to who the users/creators are as people and blend together to create an image they have carefully cultivated for themselves.

Music is a powerful form that has, for generations, functioned as a communicative tool that speaks intimately to its audiences and is commonly shared between people. From the mix tape of the 1990s to shared playlists on iTunes in the 2000s, and then to websites like Soundcloud and Songza today, they all speak to this idea that music is capable of serving a more specific narrative purpose in everyday life. The use of popular music in various creative fields both in everyday practices as well as more specialized artistic realms brings together several entry
points of identification. The music we like, the bands and musicians we identify with, and the ways we listen to them, have an active function in the construction of subjectivity forming processes that are intricately connected to both our internal and external worlds. Dunham understands this and has deployed it to great effect in Girls. The music selection is redolent of the ways in which millennials engage with cultural objects as a means of communicating with one another that is specific to our moment—to who we are—in a language we understand together.

Works Cited


Notes

1 Typically defined as the generation born between the early 1980s to the early 2000s. They are characterized as narcissistic, apathetic, lazy, and delusional. For more, see Joel Stein (2013), and Noreen Malone (2011).

2 There have been others shows based on generally unsympathetic characters. Think Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998) and Curb Your Enthusiasm (HBO, 2000-present). In addition, there have been numerous coming of age shows dealing with issues predominate to do with white adolescence awkwardly morphing into adulthood. A few examples include, Felicity (The WB Television Network, 1998-2002), Gossip Girl (The CW, 2007-2012), 2 Broke Girls (CBS, 2011-present), The O.C. (FOX, 2003-2007), Life as We Know It (ABC, 2004-2005), and Dawson’s Creek (The WB, 1998-2003). Shows based in New York City where the characters are living implausible lifestyles that they realistically could not afford, is a common trope many successful series have used before. However, despite issues of credibility in regards to character lifestyles (including rent, clothing, entertainment, etc.), it did not seem to register negatively with viewers—that disconnect between the characters’ socio-economic status and their fictional lifestyle (Friends (NBC, 1994-2004) and Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) are good examples).

3 Refer to the following interviews with Dunham where she discusses what it means to be a feminist in contemporary culture and how this attitude manifests in Girls; Claire Danes (2012); James Poniewozik (2012); Jane Mulkerrins (2013).

4 Dunham has over 1,144,069 followers on Twitter and Girls has over 233,830.
A recent Saturday Night Live skit that aired on September 29, 2013, parodied Girls by juxtaposing its privileged characters with Tina Fey’s character, Blerta from Albania. The audience was distanced from the original characters through moments of incongruity that highlighted their privileged status; an ongoing critique of the show since its inception. For example, while Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) rambles on about her relationship with Ray (Alex Karpovsky), Blerta slaps her with a rubber hand she received after losing hers to “old cow disease.” Blerta then asks, “I’m very hungry, please, may I eat donut from your head?” referring to Shoshanna’s strange hairstyle.

The parody on SNL revolved around the seeming lack of awareness the characters on Girls have been accused of having around their privileged status since the beginning of the show. At the same time, this criticism echoes a charge that has been leveled against the millennial generation more generally. The millennials, or those who were born between 1980 and 2000, are seemingly unconcerned with making money because they have never had to, by virtue of their parents supporting them. Instead, millennials criticize the very “hand that feeds them,” or the economic system that has provided them with their material well-being, as witnessed by their supposed over-representation during the “Occupy Wall Street” Movement.

While Girls seemingly reflects this bubble of privilege its characters reside in, in reality the shows’ creators Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow deftly craft these characters to exhibit these kinds of attitudes. The realist aesthetic of the show, paired with its problematic characters, creates an artistic space, a distance between the protagonists and the viewers.
Whether the viewers can actively reflect on the characters’ attitudes and behaviors, much less lodge their own critique of the economic system, is questionable.

In fact, it could be argued that HBO’s commitment to Girls ironically highlights the channel’s own privileged status as a network in the subscription cable paradigm, which allows the creative space to create “edgy” shows which are current in reflecting the contemporary political and historical backdrop of the programs. This space, in turn, allows HBO to lodge their own critique of those conservative politicians who would criticize the protestors in the “Occupy” Movement. These critics view millennials as a spoiled bunch of young people who don’t appreciate what they have. Girls, by contrast, reveals the ways in which young people are in fact marginalized, despite their apparent privilege, and the tensions and strains that permeate their lives because they have not been able to attain the traditional markers of adulthood. These markers, which include careers in fields they are interested in, steady sources of income, and more permanent relationships, are almost impossible to attain for not only young people, but older ones as well, in the wake of the Severe Recession. Through a close analysis of the style, millennial themes and industrial privilege of the Girls episode “It’s a Shame About Ray” (season 2, episode 4), this chapter shows how Girls undermines the harmful rhetoric that marginalizes millennial youth and the “Occupy” movement that criticizes privilege, despite HBO’s history as a privileged network.

HBO

HBO’s programming trends towards favoring the upscale white male viewer demographic. HBO has transformed its brand over time, while maintaining many of its signature phrases and logos, such as “It’s not TV, it’s HBO.” The network’s promotions display little continuity besides the limited gender and racial implications of the majority of its programming. Early promotions from the 1997 premiere of the male-centric prison drama Oz focused on sex programming, action movies, and the network’s signature boxing matches. These types of programs appealed primarily to men by favoring sports programs, violent programs, and sexual programs with male leads. Current HBO promotions still highlight moments of violence and the many faces of the network’s generally male protagonists, such as Robb Stark (Richard Madden) from Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-present) or Tom Chadwick (Chris O’Dowd) from Family Tree (HBO, 2013-present), showing how HBO’s brand targets mainly male
The premium paradigm also requires an appeal to upper-class viewers, who programmers and advertisers overwhelmingly view as white. HBO’s premium status also allows the network to risk criticism, like the searing critiques of Girls. Premium networks can create programs with substance and do not need to appeal to a large audience, only a financially privileged audience. Girls’ often unlikeable characters are a virtue for subscription networks that wish to make quality television for a distinct audience. Amanda D. Lotz (2007, 91) indicates that because ratings are less important to subscription cable networks, they tackle taboo subjects to appeal to niche audiences. Lotz (ibid.) states that

the institutional characteristics of subscription networks allow them to create programs with distinctive voices and clearly demarcated “edges,” by which I mean that they do not intend their programs to draw the most viewers or attract a broad audience.

The negative qualities of Girls’ protagonists separate those who relate to the struggles of these girls from those who don’t in order to create edges. The distinctive voice of the programs’ creator, Dunham, as an upper-class, white, female auteur, demarcates potential viewers based on privilege and gender.

Girls incorporates a criticism of the politics of privilege that runs parallel to concerns about millennial youth, the “Occupy” rhetoric. While not all “Occupy” demonstrators are millennials and vice versa, these rhetorical strategies target similar behaviors and definitions of privilege. Many articles describe both millennial youth and “Occupy” protesters as entitled, lazy, and jobless. For instance, Newt Gingrich at a Republican forum told “Occupy” protestors to “‘Go get a job, right after you take a bath,’ […] adding they ‘start with a premise that we all owe them everything’” (Grace Kiser 2011). Rush Limbaugh highlighted the class assumptions about the protestors calling them “bored trust-fund kids” (Andrew Hartman 2011). These conservative voices also represent the major media forces behind increasing criticisms of the millennial generation, typically reported as approximately 15-33 years old (Joel Stein, 2013). Criticisms about this generation closely resemble concerns about the “Occupy” movement.

For instance, Stein’s recent article in Time Magazine calls millennials the “Me, Me, Me” generation. The author confidently asserts, “I am about to do what old people have done throughout history: call those younger than me lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow. But I have studies! I have statistics! I have quotes from respected academics! Unlike my parents, my grandparents and my great-grandparents, I have proof” (2013). The article
subsequently declares that these characteristics describe millennials whether they are poor or rich.

Stein’s statement begs the question of how critics can assume millennial attitudes are tied to “privilege”, when even youth who are struggling financially presumably have the same attitude? As this *Time* article reveals, concerns about millennials’ economic failures also drive criticisms about their character. Essentially, the media blames millennials’ personalities for their economic struggles. *Girls* utilizes both of these rhetorics by focusing on millennial-aged characters attempting to start careers in New York, where the “Occupy” movement began. However, the show refugures this rhetoric by revealing that the character deficiencies of millennials are the result of their economic position, not the other way around. Without HBO’s privileged subscription status, the show would not be able to establish this critique.

HBO’s reputation as a subscription network who invites risk for the sake of increasing viewership, allowed them to mount *Girls* as a liberal antidote to the “Occupy” rhetoric even as the movement was still in its earlier phase. In addition, *Girls* aligns with HBO’s liberal leaning politics by undermining a conservative viewpoint about millennial youth. However, if HBO were not comfortably situated in a subscription cable paradigm, they would have to readjust their agenda to reach a more moderate audience. Politically risky content appeals to networks like HBO who can target a privileged, intellectual audience. Lotz (2007, 91) states that these “[subscription networks] deliberately exclude audience members who will be offended by the normalization of particular stories and depictions.” The republicans who criticize the “Occupy” movement and the millennial generation are excluded from *Girls*’ target audience.

However, HBO’s privileged subscription paradigm may restrict millennials from accessing the show. This incongruity between assumptions about millennials and their economic realities led HBO to launch their online streaming service HBO GO. HBO strategically released *Girls* online (the pilot could be viewed for free), alongside the network’s new streaming technology. This decision may have broadened the program’s audience. Melissa Click (2012) discusses the difficulties of appealing to this disadvantaged audience in her article “Who (does HBO hope) is watching *Girls*?” Click (2012) observes that

media users like Dunham’s character, Hannah Horvath who in the pilot was ‘cut off’ by her parents [Becky Ann Baker and Peter Scolari], likely don’t have the income to subscribe to HBO, and likely wouldn’t subscribe for only one series (though they may use their parents’ HBO GO account to watch subsequent episodes).
Because HBO released their library on the streaming site HBO GO, Girls connected with its primary target audience. However, Click (2012) also raises an important point about older HBO subscribers who may relate to the program, stating “And while most older viewers might agree that they don’t wish to repeat their twenties, HBO is betting that some will want to look back and laugh through the discomfort and embarrassment of their memories.” These older, privileged, female viewers may expand Girls’ audience. However, the so-called “entitled 20-somethings,” using their parent’s HBO GO account do not share the same level of privilege as these older women because they lack the financial ability to subscribe. Subscription cable networks must rely on audiences with more expendable income from privileged backgrounds which may limit millennials’ exposure to Girls. HBO’s limited demographic appeal and situation within the premium cable paradigm that depends on subscribers allows Girls to take political risks, but ignores the irony that a show about underprivileged youth can only exist in a privileged paradigm. This incongruity may explain many of the criticisms of Girls that call the characters “privileged.”

**Girls: “It’s a Shame About Ray”**

“It’s a Shame About Ray” exemplifies the weaknesses of the criticisms of Girls and focuses on the difficulty of the show’s characters to adapt to adulthood. This episode relegates Hannah to the background in favor of a parallel plot about two dinner parties. Hannah throws a party for her friends to feel like a “grown up” and accidentally triggers confrontations between the couples Ray and Shoshanna and Charlie (Christopher Abbott) and Marnie. The parallel dinner party features the newlywed couple, Jessa (Jemima Kirke) and Thomas-John (Chris O’Dowd). In this episode, Jessa meets her in-laws for the first and last time, while the dinner ultimately exposes the farce of her marriage to Thomas John. The episode highlights the sympathetic aspects of these often difficult characters by making them victims of economic insecurity. “It’s a Shame About Ray” defines the political goal of Girls, to address the instability that this generation faces as they transition into adulthood.

The episode uses a parallel narrative structure to examine the relationships between many of the fictional couples. It emphasizes the arrested development of the protagonists and their different experiences with economic privilege. Hannah’s dinner shows the difficulty Ray and Shoshanna have transitioning into adult cohabitation. Jessa and Thomas-John’s dinner with his parents highlights the vast experiential differences
between the characters that prevent them from transitioning to marriage. The couples’ class status characterizes their differences. Ray is homeless and dependent on Shoshanna while Jessa is using Thomas-John for money. While Ray and Shoshanna end the night by confessing their love, Jessa and Thomas-John decide to divorce, which leads to Jessa’s breakdown. The structure of the episode constructs a parallel story. Cuts juxtapose both couples’ late entry to their respective dinner parties, which establishes the focus on them, while the structure and opposing tone of their final scenes dramatize their opposite trajectories. Handheld camera and a shaky, blurry aesthetic characterize Jessa and Thomas-John’s confrontation, which becomes violent when Jessa punches him in the face and destroys an important award he won.

In a jarring contrast, the cut to Ray and Shoshanna sitting in a subway station quietly preludes their first confession of love. The steady camera, which is interrupted by the subway noise as Ray reciprocates Shoshanna’s feelings, underlines the differences between the couples’ encounters; these two couples are a study in contrasts. Ray is cynical and lost but Shoshanna is young and naïve. Jessa is free-spirited and flighty but Thomas-John is grounded and driven. They are opposite pairs who are defined by their relative level of privilege.

Not only does “It’s a Shame About Ray” feature a split-episode structure, it also includes cleverly shot group sequences that emphasize the social awkwardness of each dinner party. Although the majority of the episode is shot with smooth camera work, the group dynamics and strategic shooting of pairs during the dinner sequence, often juxtaposed with off-screen sound, recalls the work of early independent filmmakers, such as Dunham’s inspiration, Woody Allen, or John Cassavetes. Cassavetes often shot complex group scenes to highlight acting and social dynamics, a technique that Dunham employs in this episode. Dunham’s role as an actress in her own work explains her emphasis on social dynamics and acting. Her content also dictates a need to focus on social setting and relationships, because privilege can be aesthetically signaled using setting and behavior.

“It’s a Shame About Ray” functions as two opposing chamber pieces, one set in a shabby twenty-something’s apartment and the other in an upscale, expensive restaurant. Small details like the different drinks served at these gatherings (beer at Hannah’s dinner and wine at the restaurant) underline the different levels of class in these settings. The shot patterns are similar in each setting and they alternate between long shots of the group at the table and pairs of individuals, while they strategically highlight acting as opposed to dialogue. For instance, the conversation
during which Ray reveals his homelessness occurs as the camera shows Charlie and his new girlfriend Audrey (Audrey Gelman). As Charlie gets up to follow his ex-girlfriend Marnie, the camera reveals him shifting in his seat and Audrey’s face, at first offended and then fallen. However, important information about Ray interjects at the level of sound.

The pairs featured in the dinner scene with Jessa change along with the tone of the dinner dynamics. At first, the camera cuts between Jessa and Thomas-John and his parents. However, as Jessa becomes comfortable with Thomas-John’s father and Thomas-John becomes uncomfortable like his mother, the camera rotates to cuts between Jessa and the father and Thomas John and his mother, reflecting each character’s emotional shifts. The camera emphasizes the dynamics of the dinner sequences and the long shots highlight the class differences between the settings of the episode.

HBO’s industrial position allows Dunham’s independent aesthetic to adopt the upscale, refined quality of other HBO programs, which heightens the realism of important emotional moments. The style of Girls primarily emphasizes emotions through camerawork and setting but also through realism. However, HBO’s budget allows this realism to become partially contrived. For instance, the chaotic noise of the subway punctuates Shoshanna and Ray’s quiet conversation. As Ray says “I love you” to Shoshanna, first to himself quietly, the subway rushes into the station, making his declaration more intimate. The realistic assumption that Shoshanna does not hear him allows the repetition of his confession to appear more genuine. However, this use of overwhelming and precisely timed sound was only an option because of the budget HBO allocated to the program. In the “Inside this episode of Girls” segment that plays after each episode, Dunham explains the director’s patience when waiting for the right moment to shoot. She describes shooting the scene, stating, “We spent a lot of time waiting for the subway. Jessie insisted that the subway cross at that very last love moment and I was kind of like ‘come on Jessie we don’t need this’… I’m glad we held out for it.” Working as an independent filmmaker on a tight budget, waiting for this shot would not have been possible because it requires a larger investment of shooting time and film. However, HBO’s privileged system allows Girls to heighten the realism of its aesthetic to create a profound moment that contributes to the opposition between Ray and Shoshanna and Jessa and Thomas-John.

Brechtian Politics and HBO: Occupy Girls

Girls employs the “Occupy” movement and the discourse of privilege during the recent economic collapse as a recurrent subtext. This subtext
uses the character’s deficiencies to comment on the state of youth coping with the effects of economic collapse. The “Occupy” and millennial subtexts surface in objectionable behavior by the characters that use Brechtian distanciation. Marc Silberman (2012, 169) updates traditional interpretations of Brecht in the comedy genre to highlight the political meaning of this work. He states that “[Brecht’s] comic characters were to be the object neither of the audience’s identification nor their scorn but rather to make visible political relations so that they can be evaluated and changed.” The audience is not meant to identify with the negative characteristics and actions of Girls’ protagonists, which explains why critics label them as unlikeable. Instead, this distance causes the audience to ask themselves “what would I do with these limited options?”

For example, in “It’s a Shame About Ray,” Hannah’s background status allows her to comment on her friend Marnie’s inadequacies, but these comments also reflect her own self-centeredness and emotional intensity. Hannah feels angry that Marnie comes to her dinner party in spite of a recent personal slight between the two girls. When Hannah explains this situation to her other guests, her fanaticism becomes the focus of the frame. Hannah approaches Marnie’s ex and tells him she can’t elaborate on her situation with Marnie because “it would really, really hurt you,” as she waves a knife around in the foreground of the frame. Her friends’ faces in the background show alarm at her intense emotional gesticulations. When Charlie insults Marnie later, Hannah puts her negative feelings aside to defend her friend based on the negative experiences Marnie has suffered over the past season. She states “You know the kind of year that she’s had. First you guys break up. Then her dad loses his job. Then she loses her job.” She reiterates afterwards that Marnie is a “jerk,” but despite her personal problems with her, Hannah sympathizes with her friend’s economic and personal predicaments. Although Hannah’s statement places relationship experiences on the same level as financial trouble, which makes the characters seem petty, it also highlights the tension between personal and financial priorities to indicate the instability of the employment environment that this generation faces.

The political context of the recent recession in the U.S. that spawned the “Occupy” movement underlies the characters’ experiences in Girls. The program never directly references the “Occupy” movement, which began on Wall Street in 2011, but Girls’ setting in New York City and its focus on the similarly criticized millennial demographic frames the program using the cultural background of the movement. HBO defines the political subtext of their programs based on contextual cues like locations and demographics. Herman Gray (2012, 271) described this phenomenon...
in *Treme*, stating “HBO’s branding and marketing of quality television, their production of space, and preoccupation with authenticity and the status of the real, and their self-consciousness about the televisual relationship to place appears in the reoccurring tropes at the center of the series.” These comments also reflect the importance of place in *Girls*. During “It’s a Shame About Ray,” viewers admire the panoramic view of New York City outside Thomas-John’s apartment. Yet the episode forces the audience to examine his privileged status as a Wall Street businessman. These contextual features place *Girls* in the temporal, physical, and rhetorical space of the “Occupy” movement.

*Girls*’ protagonists struggle with the economy on a daily basis. As *New York Times* author Teddy Wayne (2013) explains, “20-something(s) […] learn that long hours and low pay go hand in hand in the creative class. The recession has been no friend to entry-level positions, where hundreds of applicants vie for unpaid internships at which they are expected to be on call with iPhone in hand, tweeting for and representing their company at all hours.” Hannah began *Girls* as one such unpaid intern and currently balances her creative pursuits with a service job. Her position as a coffee barista/writer means that she often has unprecedented amounts of free time and little money to spend on leisure activities. In “It’s a Shame About Ray,” Hannah celebrates her first publication with a simple, cheap dinner with friends. Each of the characters’ difficulties transitioning into adulthood stems from the unstable economy and changing expectations of achievement for the millennial generation.

Critics branded the “Occupy” movement and millennials as one and the same because journalistic rhetoric collapsed these categories. The “Occupy” movement was viewed as a collection of college students unwilling to maintain responsibility for their own student debt (Barton A. Hinkle 2011). These college students represent the millennial generation who have also been called irresponsible. However, these critiques assume that college is an option, rather than a necessity, for this generation, even though most careers require, minimally, a bachelor’s degree. One article on the millennial-oriented site *Cracked.com* analyzes the reasons the “Occupy” movement may be understood as the direct effect of parental pressure on millennials. Some of the reasons the article offers include the idea that the middle class somehow has made youth ashamed to take manual labor jobs and reciprocally, that college would guarantee youth a good job (John Cheese 2011).

These tensions define the youth transitions represented in *Girls*. All of the protagonists attended college and none of them found jobs above entry-level positions. These positions do not pay their student debt and
require a large commitment, as Wayne (2013) explains. Most importantly, these economic tensions do not simply effect youth, but also adults who were similarly damaged by the recession. Blaming the character deficiencies of millennials and the “Occupy” movement for their economic position ignores the widespread effects of the recession that separates the privileged from everyone else (the 99%). HBO’s status as a premium cable network excludes millennials in terms of their demographic audience and cost of viewing in much the same way as this rhetoric, and yet Girls remains successful, likely because adults relate to these economic struggles as well.

The marriage plot between Jessa and Thomas-John renders Girls’ criticisms of the U.S. economy visible by pairing an unemployed young woman and a middle-aged financial success. “It’s a Shame About Ray” features one of the few explicit acknowledgements of the economic recession in the U.S. The episode uses Jessa and Thomas-John as symbols of the “Occupy” struggle. Thomas-John represents a world of suits and fancy restaurants. His affluent parents accentuate his own upper class status. Jessa represents millennials who attempt to make their way through unconventional or artistic means. Thomas-John’s mother instigates his skepticism about Jessa’s feelings by interrogating her about her scant employment history and comparing her to the “driven” women Thomas-John dated in the past. She calls the marriage a “successful situation” to imply that Jessa is using her son to maintain her jobless lifestyle. Thomas-John reacts not only to his mother’s criticisms but also to Jessa, who continues to provoke his mother. His final comment, “And this is why we didn’t invite you to the wedding,” verifies the mismatch of the couple. Thomas-John’s insecurity about his mother’s opinion stems from the economic pressure parents place on millennials, the pressure to maintain privilege.

After dinner, Thomas-John confronts Jessa about her reasons for marrying him. He asks her “The money is irrelevant to you? Do you think I think it’s an accident that you ended up with the only fucking finance guy who actually made a profit from the recession? I’m a miracle. I’m a unicorn.” Thomas-John’s success, personified by the sweeping view of New York City from his apartment, stands in stark contrast to the dark and gritty dwellings of Girls’ main protagonists (none of the other characters even have windows in their apartments). This scene also points to the anxiety Thomas-John’s mother triggered in him, as he smokes on screen for the first time and begins to address Jessa using the same presumptions as his mother. He calls Jessa “a whore with no work ethic,” before she punches him. Thomas-John’s criticisms of Jessa’s unemployment echo the
charges against the “Occupy” movement and millennials. He goes on to call her “bored,” much like critics called the “Occupy” rioters who were viewed as bored trust-fund kids. Thomas-John symbolizes the conservative Wall Street rhetoric that marginalized the “Occupy” movement until it became benign. He also echoes the charge that accuses millennials of being incapable of commitment.

Jessa fulfills the negative assumptions that Thomas-John projects onto her actions by punching him, taking $11,500, and breaking his humanitarian award. This reaction could be seen as Jessa revealing her true intentions, to live off of Thomas-John, or it could be seen as her personifying his demeaning opinion of her. She explains her decisions and adventures as an interest in finding experiences, which she prioritizes over money because she finds ways to fulfill them free of the economic constraints that dictate the lives of her friends. As Thomas-John says, Jessa is “resourceful.” However, her dinner with Thomas-John’s parents makes her feel pressured to change her ways. He encourages her to lie to his parents and this comment initially causes the argument to escalate. This argument may be meant to suggest that projecting these negative characterizations onto a generation attempting to find its bearings, can potentially cause a negative shift in their behavior.

While Jessa’s actions indicate she fulfills all the character deficiencies that “Occupy” and millennial rhetoric targets, the final scene of the episode complicates this assumption. The final scene features extensive nudity and uses it to express Jessa’s vulnerability, triggered by Thomas-John’s comments. Jessa intrudes on Hannah’s bath, joins her, and begins to cry with no explanation. Her physical and emotional nudity reveals her vulnerability and shows the lack of boundaries between the two friends, while her openness with Hannah makes her breakdown appear genuine. Despite Jessa’s arguably problematic actions in her marriage, the viewers also see that this experience has emotionally damaged her. The ambiguity of this moment leads the viewers to question Jessa’s happiness as a flighty youth with no goals. In the “previously on” portion of “It’s a Shame About Ray,” Jessa talks about her marriage. She happily states “this is what it feels like when the hunt is over” to Hannah. Besides the fact that Jessa has no reason to lie to Hannah about her marriage, this comment also indicates that she was committed to her relationship, while her breakdown suggests she regrets losing this commitment. The fact that Girls can make a seemingly impervious character sympathetic reveals the show’s attempt to undermine negative characterizations of millennials.
“Choice Biographies” in Girls: Prioritizing in Economic Decline

Girls represents the millenial generation as a group reacting to negative discourses about millennial transitions and the “Occupy” movement. This discourse prioritizes occupational success over personal relationships in a constrained economic climate. Yet the program reflects the shifting priorities of real-life youth to value personal pursuits. Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn (2001, 87) approach these patterns, also called “choice biographies,” objectively and find that youth necessarily redefine the markers of adulthood in response to their economic and educational realities. “It’s a Shame About Ray” addresses these difficulties using Hannah’s, Ray’s, and Marnie’s storylines, which reassess the notions of privilege that are assigned to this generation due to youth’s inability to achieve the previous generation’s markers of adulthood. Discussing the societal perceptions of this generation as privileged, Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 14) explain the “ambition paradox” that researchers use “to define the young people as ‘the ambitious generation’ and to acknowledge the disparity between their heightened aspirations and their likely or eventual achievements.” The authors (ibid.) write that millennials are “‘motivated but directionless’ […] because many of them lack ‘aligned ambitions’; they are ‘drifting dreamers’.”

Girls questions these assumptions by representing a wide array of youth with different goals. Hannah most closely resembles these judgments because she is a writer, which her parents assess as an impractical goal. Ray represents an older adult whose difficulty transitioning into adulthood causes him to bypass major markers of adulthood, like financially supporting himself and completing his education. Marnie represents a young adult overqualified for service positions but unable to find work in her chosen field (curatorial). Marnie possesses the strongest work ethic and chides Hannah for not working hard, yet she becomes the most directionless character during season two. These storylines undermine the negative rhetoric about privilege that masks the economic need for changes in youth transitions to adulthood.

Although Hannah acts as a background character in “It’s a Shame About Ray,” her frantic actions to preserve the adult tone of her dinner party revolve around the insecurities that result from non-traditional transitions of youth in the millennial generation. Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 26) present data on the markers of adulthood as perceived by youth currently growing up. The top three include financial independence, making their own choices, and emotional maturity. Hannah’s comments
are based on these three markers of achievement. The dinner itself is to celebrate her first publication by the online magazine *Jazz Hate*, which represents her first steps towards financial independence. Her progress calls into question assumptions about her laziness and dependence on her parents (her expression of privilege). Hannah ruminates about her choices throughout the episode. Some of her comments, which are interspersed throughout the dinner party, are “I love what I made,” “Excuse me, I am grown up, that’s why I cooked all this food,” and “noodles are so hard to make.” The episode shows that Hannah’s independent decisions do not reflect the adult qualities she hopes to project. None of her friends consume the meal she claims to love and Hannah struggles to cook, which indicates she is not as grown up as she feels or claims to be. Yet the fulfillment Hannah craves from the dinner party acts as an assertion of independence. How can youth be labeled privileged when they desire to succeed at taking care of themselves?

Many of these comments double as responses to what Hannah perceives as Marnie’s emotional immaturity. Hannah criticizes Marnie for her emotional faults. She states that “[Marnie] is too self-involved to commit suicide,” and tells her guests “don’t mind her, she does this all the time,” after Marnie storms out of the party. Although Hannah also fails to be emotionally mature in the episode (she eats an entire Bundt cake off the plate without offering any to her guests while her feet are up at the table), her preoccupation with Marnie’s emotional maturity shows that she considers it a marker of adulthood. Indeed, one of the running jokes in the episode, recurring references to buttholes and butt plugs, reinforces the emotional immaturity of all of the characters.

Perhaps the HBO audience’s perception that these youth represent a privileged population stems from the characters’ lack of self-awareness about whether they are achieving the markers of maturity they place upon themselves. However, calling attention to what adults would deem immature behavior uncovers the societal constructions of adulthood as a loss of the privilege of dependence. Hannah’s inability to act like an adult reveals the inadequacy of the “ambition paradox” that Dwyer and Wyn (2001) reference to explain negative perceptions of the millennial generation. Because youth can no longer achieve these markers, they focus on different ones, like emotional maturity.

Marnie represents a different struggle of the millennial generation, primarily the struggle to reorganize personal priorities in the face of an uncertain job market. Earlier in the season, Marnie loses her job, and at the end of season one, she regrets breaking up with her long-term boyfriend, Charlie. Her problems mirror the troubles youth anticipate upon entering
adulthood. According to Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 108), the top three troubles that make youth feel uncertain about adulthood are jobs, money, and relationships. Marnie battles with Charlie’s new girlfriend, Audrey, at dinner. She jokes about her successful business idea to sell mustard, stating she herself has done “nothing that great, nothing with condiments.” However, this comment is less directed at Charlie and Audrey and more at her own failed goals. Even after Charlie follows her to the roof, Marnie remains upset. She rants, “I don’t know what the next year of my life is going to be like at all. I don’t know what the next week of my life is gonna be like. I don’t even know what I want. Sometimes I just wish someone would just tell me this is how you should spend your days and this is how the rest of your life should look.” Marnie’s speech reveals that her distress over losing her relationship actually reflects her insecurities about not finding the stable career she expected. As a result, season two reinstates her relationship as a main concern, representing how she shifts her priorities to fulfill the markers of her own “choice biography.”

Marnie is portrayed as someone who did everything right, and her competency illuminates the oversimplification of negative discourses about youth privilege. Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 29) state that youth “still maintain an attitude of agency in terms of their own life experiences and their future. At the same time, they had a sense of the degree to which economic constraint affected individual decisions and expectations.” Marnie’s perspective favors a linear perception of adulthood, as shown by her interest in someone laying out a path for her. She uses her agency to make each step towards adulthood count. However, her struggle to maintain this path reveals the constraints of our economic institutions, which do not always reward those who deserve it. Marnie’s hardworking attitude destabilizes the rhetoric of privilege that justifies criticisms of *Girls* and the “Occupy” movement.

If Marnie represents youth who resist negative characterizations, then Ray’s dilemma highlights the importance of education in achieving millennial adulthood. “It’s a Shame About Ray” announces Ray’s importance through the title, and offers the first pieces of information about the character’s history. Later in the season, the questions about Ray’s transition to adulthood raised in this episode are answered. The viewers learn that Ray dropped out of a Ph.D. program and has massive student debt. Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 56) discuss how linear expectations of adulthood affect youth who do not achieve their educational goals. They state that the “outcomes for non-completers tend to be artificially limited by mistaken assumptions about ‘linear pathways’ based on an expectation that young people who are at the same age should all be doing the same
thing.” The tension of “It’s a Shame About Ray” centers on Shoshanna’s expectations for her future and her relationship with Ray. Her much younger age and Ray’s divergent experiences interrupt these expectations and create a conflict about moving in together.

Shoshanna and Ray are an unusual couple because Shoshanna is the youngest and least experienced of the four protagonists, and Ray is one of the oldest and most experienced characters, except in regards to relationships. He later reveals to Adam (Adam Driver) that Shoshanna is his first real relationship. The episode highlights the characters’ dichotomy of experiences throughout. For instance, when they arrive to dinner late, Shoshanna makes an excuse, but Ray states “We’re all adults. We can tell them we had sex.” Shoshanna’s level of discomfort about revealing her sex life indicates she is not an “adult” about sex like the others at the party. The dinner party reiterates their different levels of sexual experience when Shoshanna needs to have the function of a butt plug explained to her. Their different levels of life experience suggest that Ray and Shoshanna are incompatible, but the episode complicates this assumption using “choice biographies.”

After establishing this dichotomy of innocence and experience, the episode emphasizes that these expectations are based on the false linearity of youth transitions. Shoshanna’s innocent realization that Ray has been living with her brings these expectations to the surface. She states “I would’ve liked to have been informed of that fact so I could’ve, like, you know, bought some new sheets or called my aunt for advice about living with a man for the first time.” Shoshanna’s anger stems not from living with Ray, but from her unawareness that she reached an important marker in her adult development. Ray’s own experiences defy this linear pathway, which explains his lack of regard for Shoshanna’s feelings. Ray has not fulfilled two of the markers that appear to be low on this generation’s list of priorities. According to Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 26), youth do not perceive owning a home or completing qualifications as markers of adulthood. However, Shoshanna represents the limiting view of those who follow linear pathways. In the subway station, she states “You’re older than me, you should have your own place. You should have like, more, interests and passions and things you do.” Shoshanna’s response reflects the linear approach to adulthood because she believes someone older should have achieved more than her. Ray’s response, that he is a worthless “loser,” reveals the insecurities that these perceptions of linear adulthood evoke in youth, especially “at-risk” school dropouts.

The couple defines their main priority as love within this sequence. Ray asks her, “What makes me worth anything?” and Shoshanna answers
“I’m falling in love with you.” He asks this question because of his failure to fulfill typical markers of adulthood, like school and finding a home. This episode reveals that although Ray is older and more experienced in adult life than Shoshanna, the couple shares the same level of experience in relationships. Their confession of love for each other signifies their acknowledgement of their similar level of emotional development and shows that linear pathways simplify adult understanding of youth transitions. This couple can prioritize love despite economic disparities between them. Moreover, love can offer Ray the “worth” he craves. These characters also differ on the level of privilege. Shoshanna is a student whose aunt pays for her apartment, and Ray is a barista with so much student debt he must live in his car. The episode exposes their different levels of privilege and the assumptions that place pressure on young adults to reach certain markers of achievement even though they may be constrained by economic circumstances.

*Girls*’ analysis of privilege places certain characteristics of HBO’s typical audience front and center, as the show upends male visions of female sexuality. *Girls* also uses humor to reveal millennial anxieties to adult audiences and a relatable vision of adulthood to millennials. Criticisms about *Girls* reflect its position in the subscription cable paradigm. Without this context, *Girls* could not undermine the conservative political rhetoric of the “Occupy” movement and millennial generation. At the same time, the show creates a tense relationship to millennial privilege because HBO’s limited access and the white-washing of *Girls* and other recent programs suggest that the network upholds privilege.

The criticisms of *Girls* are largely distorted by the structure of HBO in the premium paradigm. The disparity between HBO’s “universal” advertising and the very specific representation of youth in the show creates an opening for discussion about how privilege functions in premium subscriber cable. *Girls* participates in discussions about privilege in many episodes beyond “It’s a Shame About Ray.” After all, *Girls* established its interest in presumptions of millennial privilege in its pilot by “cutting off” Hannah from her privileged financial situation. Everything else in *Girls* stems from this event, showing how millennials struggle with economic instability and the resulting anxieties that accompany their lives and their choices.
Works Cited


http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/fashion/for-20-somethings-ambition-at-a-cost.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&

**Notes**

1 Emanuel Levy (1999, 104) describes Cassavetes style stating, “the duration and complexity of shots supported the double tradition of his work as both theatrical and distinctly cinematic. His best films are intimate chamber pieces, revolving around a small number of characters engaged in seemingly simple domestic stories.”

2 For instance, the opposition between Hannah and Joshua (Patrick Wilson), a man she meets and lives in a lush brownstone, leads Hannah to crave an upscale lifestyle in “One Man’s Trash” (season 2, episode 5).
CONTRIBUTORS

**Chelsea Daggett** is a first year Doctoral Student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She recently received her MFA in Film Studies from Boston University. Chelsea has presented papers on popular culture at several regional conferences, such as NEMLA and NEPCA. Chelsea’s research focuses on adolescents and young adults in media. Her Master’s thesis discusses the U.S. adaptation of the U.K. television series *Skins* and *Broken Britain*. She is currently awaiting publication of a bullying content analysis. Her current research focuses on freedom of speech in higher education and mass shootings in public memory.

**Marcie Bianco**, Queer Public(s) Intellectual, Ph.D., is a columnist and contributing writer at *AfterEllen* and *Lambda Literary*, as well as an adjunct associate professor at John Jay College at Hunter College. She has also contributed to *Curve* Magazine, *Feministing*, *Feministe*, *Velvetpark*, and *The L Stop*, and makes frequent appearances on *Huffington Post Live*. Her current projects include a scholarly manuscript about the anti-humanist, materialist ethics of English Renaissance Drama, and a memoir about lesbian academic affairs. She lives in Brooklyn with her pup, Deleuze.

**Maryann Erigha** is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies the intersections of race, gender, and cultural production. Her dissertation investigates how race and gender inequalities inform the production of culture in major Hollywood studios. Her essays have been published in *The Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, *Films for the Feminist Classroom*, and in edited volumes.

**Nikita T. Hamilton** is a doctoral student at the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism and an alumna of the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include race, gender, film, popular culture, telecommunication policy and media effects. Her primary focus is on the perpetuation of stereotypical roles for black women in film and the effects of those roles not only on black women, but also the global community.

Betty Kaklamanidou is Visiting Research Fellow at the University of East London, UK and Lecturer of Film History and Theory at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. She is the author of Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com (2013), the co-editor of The Millennials on Film and Television (2014) and The 21st Century Superhero (2010), and the author of two Greek books on film adaptation and the Hollywood romantic comedy. In 2011 she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to conduct research in New York. Her fields of study include film and politics, adaptation theory, genre and gender, and contemporary Greek cinema. Dr. Kaklamanidou is currently working on a monograph on the political dimension of Robert Redford’s directorial oeuvre.

Katherine J. Lehman is author of Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture (University Press of Kansas, 2011). She is associate professor of Communications at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, where she also co-directs the Women’s and Gender Studies program. She has published widely on feminism and gender politics in media, including essays on motherhood and postfeminism in primetime television; Glee’s treatment of gay and lesbian themes; and Mad Men’s portrayals of working women.

Melinda M. Lewis is currently a Ph.D. candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. Her dissertation examines the intersections of authorship, humor, and identity in comedy television, maintaining that women who take on the roles of joke tellers are transgressive, and that humor is used to elucidate on women’s experiences that often counter patriarchal assumptions and attitudes regarding gender roles. She is looking forward to her fast approaching dissertation defense and graduation.

Erika M. Nelson is an Associate Professor at Union College in Schenectady, New York, where she teaches all aspects of German Studies. Her doctoral research, completed at the University of Texas at Austin,
focused on issues of identity construction and sound in Rilke’s Orphic poetry and was published as a book entitled *Reading Rilke’s Orphic Identity*. Her second book, entitled *Orphic Echoes* is due out next year. She has published on various transnational poets and filmmakers, including Zafer Şenocak, Andrea Štaka, and Dragica Rajić, as well as spa culture and modern renditions of mythic figures in literature and film.

**Boké Saisi** is a Master’s student at York University specializing in Media and Culture and Politics and Policy. She received a Bachelor of Journalism from Ryerson University with a minor in Sociology. Her research interests include: critical race studies, race, class, and gender representation, social inequality and social justice research, political economy, and international relations in news media. Her current master’s thesis examines the Africanization of poverty within North American news media, interrogating the ways in which blackness and impoverishment are concurrently constructed within the medium.

**Margaret Tally** Margaret Tally is Chair of the Policy Studies Programs and Professor of Social Policy in the School for Graduate Studies at the State University of New York, Empire State College. She is author of *Television Culture and Women’s Lives: “Thirtysomething” and the Contradictions of Gender* (1995); co-editor of *The Millennials on Film and Television* (2014); contributor to collections including *MTV and Teen Pregnancy: Critical Essays on 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom* (2013), *Bound by Love: Familial Bonding in Film and Television Since 1950* (2011) and has written on the marketing of teens in Hollywood, on the representation of middle-aged women’s sexuality in popular culture, and on changing gender roles as portrayed in television series from the 1960s-90s.

**Laura Tansley** graduated with a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow in 2011. Her creative and critical work has appeared in *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice, New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing, Gutter* and *Kenyon Review Online* (with Micaela Maftei). Her research interests include short-short prose, collaborative writing and creative processes in popular culture. She currently works at the University of Glasgow.
Kimberly Turner earned her MA in Literature with a special emphasis in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her work focuses primarily on queer studies, as well as the intersection between queer theory and literature/popular culture. She is currently working to launch an online scholarly journal dedicated to the study of Millennial popular culture and literature. She teaches English at Francis Marion University, her alma mater.

Laura S. Witherington holds a Ph.D. in English Literature and is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith. Her research interests span from nineteenth-century British landscape to the impact of pre-service teachers’ non-academic behaviors on student achievement. She is currently researching the social influence of the founders of the National Trust through their writings on landscape and public space.
INDEX

"All Adventurous Women Do", 18, 103, 108, 110, 113, 117, 119, 147, 166, 189
"Bad Friend", 19, 20, 32, 34, 80, 167, 170, 190
"Boston marriages", 36
"Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda", 166
"Hannah’s Diary", 14, 17, 80, 142, 150, 151, 166, 174
"Hard Being Easy", 17, 80, 164, 189
"I Get Ideas", 20, 50
"It’s a Shame About Ray", 16, 20, 31, 80, 147, 162, 200, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 212, 213, 214
"It’s About Time", 99
"It’s Back", 15
"Leave Me Alone", 22, 32, 46, 82, 97, 144, 162, 183
"On All Fours", 84, 189
"One Man’s Trash", 16, 20, 180, 216
"She Did", 19, 35, 47, 80
"The Return", 20, 143, 145, 146
"Together", 21, 82, 142, 162
"Vagina Panic", 14, 18, 22, 44, 80, 145, 158, 164, 165, 177, 179
"Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too", 16, 142, 163
"Welcome to Bushwick", 19

2

2 Broke Girls, 37, 198
27 Dresses, 155

A

A Christmas Carol, 159
Abbott, Christopher, 16, 30, 45, 80, 108, 125, 143, 161, 189, 203
ABC, 12, 17, 37, 49, 52, 54, 187, 198
Adams, Ryan, 196
adolescence, 11, 30, 38, 39, 40, 192, 198
Adorno, Theodor W., 63, 70
adulthood, 3, 4, 8, 29, 30, 140, 145, 151, 198, 200, 202, 207, 210, 211, 212, 214
aesthetics
satirical aesthetics, 6, 60, 73, 75, 76, 77, 81, 83, 86
Ahmed, Sarah, 75, 87, 181, 184
Alcoff, Linda Martin, 47, 55
Allen, Woody, 33, 68, 204
Ally McBeal, 46, 130
Almost Famous, 155
Alsop, Ron, 151, 152
Alternet, 85, 88
American Graffiti, 192
American History X, 109, 120
Anderson, Benedict R., 61, 70, 153
Andreeva, Nellie, 53, 55
Andrew, Dudley, 101, 102
Andrews, Helena, 51, 55
Aniston, Jennifer, 123
Antonoff, Jack, 188
Anzaldúa, Gloria E., 76, 88
Apatow, Judd, 67, 74, 89, 100, 104, 105, 140, 199
Appleby, Shiri, 19, 135
Arceneaux, Michael, 50, 55
Arfin, Lesley, 67, 112, 113, 116, 117, 120
Aristotle, 76, 87, 89
Arnett, Jeffrey, 29, 41
Aronson, Pamela, 55, 58
Arthurs, Jane, 46, 55
As You Like It, 36
Atwood, Margaret, 120, 121
Austen, Jane, 84
auteur
   auteur theory; auteuse; 6, 92, 93, 94, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 104, 201
Authors, Jane, 58
Ayres-Deets, Andrea, 74, 77, 85, 87

B
Baby Mama, 39
Baggage, 110
Baker, Becky Ann, 127, 202
Baker, Carrie N., 17, 24
Banks, Mark, 147, 152
Banks, Lauren, 30, 41, 100, 105
Baudrillard, Jean, 127, 137, 138, 139
Bauman, Zygmunt, 173, 184
Bazin, André, 107
Beach House, 196
Beaty, Katelyn, 22, 24
Becker, Dana, 132, 133, 137, 152
Bell, Katherine, 74, 78, 87
Bell, Leslie C., 174, 175
Belles & Sebastians, 194
Bergson, Henri, 87, 90
Berland, Jodi, 60, 62, 70
Berlant, Lauren, 81, 82, 86, 87, 172, 176, 184
Berman, Judy, 50, 55, 68, 70
Blair, Elaine, 31, 41
Blauner, Robert, 141, 152
Bodroghkozy, Aniko, 14, 24
Bonner II, Fred A., 150, 152
Brabon, Benjamin, 176, 185
Bride Wars, 39

Bridget Jones’s Diary, 46, 58
Broderick, Matthew, 192
Brody, Richard, 105, 107
Brooklyn, 3, 12, 28, 42, 43, 47, 49, 51, 56, 58, 59, 61, 91, 94, 97, 135, 140, 149, 188
Brown, Helen Gurley, 11, 13, 16, 17, 24, 25
Bruni, Frank, 10, 21, 25
Bruns, Axel, 65, 70
Bull, Michael, 191, 197
Burkett, Elinor, 44, 55
Bush, Kate, 196
Butler, Judith, 83, 84, 87

C
C.K., Louis, 118
Cahiers du Cinéma, 107
Camera Obscura, 196
Caramanica, Jon, 52, 55
Carroll, Diahann, 14, 55, 155
Carroll, Rebecca, 48
Case, Neco, 18, 196, 214
Cassavetes, John, 203, 215
Cattrall, Kim, 46, 169, 176
Caves, Richard E., 152
CBS, 12, 29, 38, 59, 198
Chabrol, Claude, 107
Charlie’s Angels, 17
Chasman, Julia, 85, 87
Cheese, John, 206, 214
Christianity Today, 22, 24
Cicero, 89
Clark, Krissy, 135, 137
class
   social class, 4, 5, 7, 13, 14, 15, 17, 29, 46, 48, 63, 67, 74, 77, 78, 122, 123, 124, 126, 127, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 140, 141, 149, 150, 151, 152, 160, 176, 201, 203, 204, 206, 207
Click, Melissa, 201, 202, 214
Clueless, 28
CNN, 57, 59
Coates, Ta-Nehisi, 50, 51, 55, 59, 70
Cobb, Michael, 182, 185
Community, 60, 153
consumerism, 125, 130
consumption, 123
consumption consumerism, 6, 7, 64, 100, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 131, 132, 133, 135, 136, 137, 138, 175, 194, 196
Cook, John, 11, 25
Coontz, Stephanie, 36, 41
Corrigan, Tim, 101, 105
Cosmopolitan, 11, 26
Creekmur, Corey K., 192, 197
Cruel Optimism, 6, 81, 82, 87
Cruise, Tom, 192
Cryer, Jon, 192
Curb Your Enthusiasm, 72, 198
Currie Jr., Ron, 118, 120
Cusack, John, 192
Daalmans, Serena, 74, 77, 87
Danes, Claire, 188, 197, 198
Davis, Kristin, 46, 169, 176
Dawson’s Creek, 198
Day, Doris, 10
De Hauw, Sara, 143, 153
De Vos, Ans, 143, 153
Dean, Michelle, 8, 9
Dear Diary, 112, 113, 117, 120
DeCarvalho, Lauren J., 74, 77, 87, 89
Degrassi High, 187
Deleuze, Gilles, 76, 77, 87
Dern, Laura, 38
Desperately Seeking Susan, 39
DeVito, Karla, 192
Dickerson, Debra, 52
Dickinson, Kay, 191, 197
Didion, Joan, 120
Douglas, Susan, 21, 24, 25
Driver, Adam, 13, 33, 47, 80, 109, 128, 142, 164, 173, 212
Dunham, Lena, 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 37, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 60, 61, 63, 65, 67, 68, 71, 74, 75, 82, 85, 87, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 111, 112, 118, 119, 120, 122, 136, 140, 149, 152, 153, 155, 156, 157, 170, 172, 173, 174, 176, 177, 179, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 201, 203, 204
Durbin, Karen, 22, 25
Dwyer, Peter, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 215
Dyer, Richard, 49, 56
ecriture collective
collective writing, 92
Edelman, Lee, 156, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163, 165, 166, 168, 169, 170
Eigenberg, David, 170
Elber, Lynn, 49, 56
Emerson, Jim, 105, 107
Enlightened, 9, 38
entitlement, 29, 74, 79, 89, 97
Entourage, 66, 122, 123
Ephron, Nora, 28
Epstein, Molly, 143, 153
Facebook, 1, 6, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 102, 103, 118, 176, 194, 196
Faludi, Susan, 38, 41, 45, 56
Family Tree, 200
Faulkner, Robert R., 152, 153
Feist, 196
Felicity, 198
femininity, 2, 11, 12, 23, 74, 169, 175
feminism
  third wave
    second wave, 2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 55, 73, 74, 75, 76, 79, 85, 87, 89, 156, 174, 175, 184
Ferris Bueller's Day Off, 192
Fey, Tina, 89, 199
Fleet Foxes, 194
Florida, Richard, 145, 146, 153
Forbes, 48, 51, 56
Foster, James E., 133
Foucault, Michel, 76, 77, 133
FOX, 37, 38, 46, 130, 198
Fox Fire, 39
Franco, James, 92, 105
Freaks and Geeks, 100, 187
Freeman, Mark, 118, 120
Frere-Jones, Sasha, 194, 197
Friends, 6, 7, 37, 49, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 130, 135, 137, 138, 198
friendship, 3, 5, 12, 22, 23, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 39, 41, 42, 43, 47, 84, 104, 172, 175
Fry, Richard, 78, 87
futurity, 7, 76, 156, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169
FX, 118
G
Gabriel, John, 60, 61, 70
Gabriel, Peter, 192
Gallagher, Charles A., 51, 56
Game of Thrones, 72, 200
Gelman, Audrey, 129, 205
gender, 2, 3, 4, 11, 22, 29, 44, 45, 46, 54, 61, 75, 85, 175, 176, 184, 186, 200, 201
Genz, Stéphanie, 176, 185
George, Lianne, 63, 70, 143, 153
Gerber, George, 63, 70
Gere, Richard, 18
Gerhard, Jane, 156, 168, 175, 185
Gilliam, Dorothy, 14, 25
Girlfriends, 28
Girls Town, 39
Glaser, Jon, 20, 80, 167
Glover, Donald, 6, 14, 49, 60, 66, 67, 68, 69, 83, 99, 128
Goddard, Jean-Luc, 107
Golden Girls, 37
Google, 6, 93, 94
Goulding, Ellie, 196
Gray, Herman, 205
Grđešić, Masa, 80, 87
Greenfield, Katherine, 12, 27
Greenfield, Patricia, 136, 137
Greer, Christina, 61, 70
Greer, Germaine, 38, 41, 56, 58
Grossberg, Lawrence, 193, 194, 195, 197
Grossman, Lev, 103, 105
Grosz, Elizabeth, 76, 87
Guerrero, Ed, 151, 153
Gurin, Patricia, 56, 58
H
Habermas, Jürgen, 124, 137
Haggins, Bambi, 59, 70
Haitt, Brian, 74, 88
Hall, Stuart, 64, 70, 92
Han, Byung-Chul, 92, 105
Hardt, Michael, 126
Harrington, Stephen, 65, 70
Hartman, Andrew, 201
Hazlitt, William, 110
HBO, 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 27, 28, 29, 38, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 65, 66, 69, 72, 73, 86, 87, 89, 94, 95, 96, 100, 101, 106, 107, 108, 122, 140, 149, 153, 156, 172, 175, 186, 187, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 204, 205, 206, 207, 210, 213
Heckerling, Amy, 28
Hegel, Friedrich, 124, 126
Henderson, Maureen J., 48, 56
HBO’s *Girls*: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst

Henry, Matthew A., 64, 71, 75, 88, 93, 105
Herring, Susan C., 100, 105, 107
heteronormativity, 158, 159, 160, 163, 165
heteronormative, 75, 81, 158, 159, 160, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168
Higgins, Michelle, 51, 56
Highfield, Tim, 65, 70
Hinkle, Barton A., 206, 214
Hollinger, Karen, 39, 41
Holmes, Anna, 35, 36, 41, 59, 70
homoeroticism, 161, 162, 163
homosexuality, 159, 161
Hoover, Eric, 150, 153
*Hot in Cleveland*, 38
*How I Met Your Mother*, 59
*How to Make It in America*, 122, 187
Hudson, Jennifer, 49
Hughey, Matthew W., 49, 56
Hunt, Darnell, 62, 71

**I**
*I Love Lucy*, 29, 37
Instagram, 6, 93, 95, 96, 187, 188, 196
intimacy, 3, 5, 7, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 37, 104, 164, 173, 174, 175, 177, 178, 182, 184
Itzkoff, Dave, 28, 37, 42
Ivala, Eunice, 64, 71

**J**
Jabbar, Kareem Abdul, 68, 71, 92, 105
Jacqueline, Susann, 26
James, Kendra, 61, 71
Jenkins, Henry, 64, 65, 71, 93, 105
Johnson, Barbara, 7, 75, 85, 88
Johnson, Megan, 107
jouissance, 159, 160, 164, 169
*Julia*, 14, 24

**K**
Kael, Pauline, 10, 12, 25
Karpovsky, Alex, 15, 35, 80, 125, 144, 170, 199
Kearney, Mary Celeste, 38, 42
Keaton, Diane, 18
Khakpour, Porochista, 48, 57
Kidder, Jeffrey L., 141, 153
Kim, L. S., 46, 57
King, Joyce E., 51, 57
Kirke, Jemima, 3, 14, 30, 37, 41, 44, 62, 67, 71, 80, 91, 110, 112, 126, 140, 155, 157, 177, 188, 202
Kiser, Grace, 201, 214
Klemensrud, Judy, 15, 18, 25
Klinenberg, Eric, 40, 42
Konner, Jenni, 100, 111
Kudrow, Lisa, 124
Kumarini, Silva, 9

**L**
labor, 6, 123, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 139, 140, 141, 144, 146, 151, 177, 183, 206
Larson, Stephanie Greco, 63, 64, 71
Laurde, Audre, 88
Lazzarato, Maurizio, 126
LeBlanc, Matt, 49, 124
Lehman, Katherine, 12, 14, 16, 25
Leidner, Robin, 141, 153
Levenson, Alec R., 140, 153, 154
Levy, Emanuel, 19, 25, 214, 215
Li, Lykke, 196
*Life as We Know It*, 198
Listi, Brad, 117, 120
*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, 5, 10, 12, 18
Lorde, Audre, 76
Los Angeles, 27, 145, 146, 185
Lotz, Amanda D., 45, 57, 59, 70, 201, 202, 215
Louie, 118
Lucas, George, 192
Luckett, Moya, 11, 26
Lynch, David, 28

M
Macatee, Rebecca, 11, 25
Macnamara, Jim, 66, 71
Madden, Richard, 200
Magical Negro, 49, 56
Maitland, Leslie, 18, 26
Makareshi, Kia, 149
Malone, Noreen, 197, 198
Mamet, David, 155
Mamet, Josia, 3, 13, 36, 44, 78, 91, 110, 128, 140, 155, 157, 176, 188, 199
Manhattan, 47, 49
Mann, Aimee, 196
Marbley, Aretha F., 150, 152
Marcus, Sarah, 11, 26
Marner, Silas, 159
Maron, 118
Maron, Marc, 118
Martins, Chris, 195, 197
Marx, Karl, 124, 131, 132, 137, 138, 141, 153
masculinity, 61
McRobbie, Angela, 38, 42, 45, 46, 57, 174, 175, 185
Mendes, Kaitlynn, 9
Metcalf, 196
Metro, 53, 57, 198
MGMT, 196
millennial, 3, 7, 48, 77, 78, 79, 81, 92, 94, 100, 140, 141, 142, 143, 145, 148, 149, 150, 152, 154, 157, 175, 186, 189, 193, 199, 200, 201, 202, 206, 207, 209, 210, 211, 212, 214
Mills, C. Wright, 141, 143, 154
Moraga, Cherrie, 76, 88
Morley, David, 64
Morris, William, 124
Mulholland Drive, 28
Mulkerrins, Jane, 198
Muñoz, José Esteban, 86, 88
Murray, Georgina, 29, 42, 45, 57
My So Called Life, 187
Myers, Karen K., 140, 148, 154
MySpace, 102, 103

N
NBC, 14, 24, 27, 29, 37, 38, 49, 58, 59, 60, 100, 122, 130, 155, 187, 198
Negri, Antonio, 126
New Girl, 37, 38
New York, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 23, 24, 25, 26, 41, 42, 46, 49, 50, 51, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 63, 66, 67, 73, 78, 100, 111, 118, 123, 125, 126, 128, 137, 142, 145, 146, 149, 156, 157, 162, 169, 188, 198, 201, 205, 206, 207, 214
New York Magazine, 89, 111, 120, 157
New York Post, 106
New York Times, 21, 25, 26, 42, 55, 56, 57, 58, 106, 120, 137, 207, 216
Newsweek, 19, 26
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 76, 137
Nightly News, 155
Nixon, Cynthia, 46, 169, 176
Nussbaum, Emily, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 26, 74, 85, 88, 120 157, 158, 168

O
O’Brien, Soledad, 59
O’Dowd, Chris, 16, 69, 127, 142, 163, 200, 202
Oasis, 162
Obenson, Tambay A., 51, 57
Occupy Wall Street
Occupy Movement, 7, 8, 199, 200, 201, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 211, 213, 214
Ohm, Paul, 71, 72
ethics, 72, 73, 76, 77, 83, 84, 85, 86, 89
Shister, Gall, 49, 58
Silberman, Marc, 205, 214
Sinthome, 160, 164, 165, 169
Sinthomosexual, 159
Sinthomosexuality, 159
Sitney, P. Adams, 98, 106
Skovmand, Michael, 130, 138
Slate, Jenny, 25, 98, 134
Slezak, Michael, 21, 27
Smola, K. W., 143, 154
Solnit, Rebecca, 108, 120
Songza, 196
Spacks, Patricia Meyer, 110, 112, 120
Spinoza, 76, 87
Springer, Jerry, 110
Stadtmiller, Mandy, 88, 90
Stanley, Alessandra, 48, 58, 98, 106
Steel Magnolias, 39
Stoeffel, Kat, 89, 90
Storey, Kate, 96
subjectivity, 2, 7, 158, 159, 160,
161, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167,
168, 169, 170, 191, 194, 197

T
T.R. Baskin, 5, 12
Taccone, Jorma, 16, 109, 127, 148, 162
That Girl, 15, 16
The Atlantic, 50, 55, 59, 68, 70, 71
The Beatles, 192
The Best of Everything, 12, 20, 25
The Breakfast Club, 192
The Craft, 109, 120
The Daily Beast, 48, 55
The Daily Show, 53
The End of Men, 40, 42
The Forty-Year Old Virgin, 100
The Good Wife, 38
The Group, 12, 26
The Huffington Post, 48, 58, 59, 68,
71, 92, 105, 106, 120, 153

The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 12,
13, 21, 23, 29, 31, 37
The Mindy Project, 38
The New Yorker, 9, 26, 35, 41, 88,
105, 168
The O.C., 198
The Omen, 121
The Rolling Stones, 195, 197
The Vaccines, 194
The WB, 198
The Women, 39, 58
Thelma and Louise, 39
This is My Life, 28
Thomas, Marlo, 12, 15
Time, 92, 96, 102, 103, 201
Tiny Furniture, 43, 100
Toffaleti, Zoe, 97, 102, 106
Traister, Rebecca, 36, 42
Trimm, Ryan, 49, 58
Truffaut, François, 93, 106, 107
Turkle, Sherry, 99, 104, 106
TV Land, 38
Twenge, Jean, 136, 137, 148, 154
Twitter, 6, 60, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69,
70, 72, 91, 95, 96, 97, 103, 118,
187, 189, 196, 198
Tyler, Aisha, 49, 56

U
Underwood, Blair, 49
Union, Gabrielle, 49

V
Vallas, Steven, 141, 154
Valley of the Dolls, 12, 20, 26
Veep, 38, 72
Viveiros, Beth Negus, 124, 138

W
Washington, 52
Washington, Kerry, 25, 52, 145
Wayne, Teddy, 42, 206, 207, 215
Weber, Max, 141, 143, 154
West, Alan, 50
West, Kayne, 189
Whelehan, Imelda, 58