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# The Awkward, (Un)Desirable, and Enticing Politics of Sexuality and Reproductive Health in HBO's Girls

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THE AWKWARD, (DIS)PLEASURABLE, AND ENTICING  
POLITICS OF SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH  
ON HBO'S *GIRLS*

An Honors Thesis

Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of American Cultural Studies  
Bates College



In Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

**Rebecca Schwartz**

**Lewiston, Maine**

**March 28, 2016**

**Dedicated to James Jhun**

*An incredible friend, fellow musician, and classmate;  
Whose honest feedback and pure kindness had an amazing influence on my life.*

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# ABSTRACT

In 2012, HBO premiered Lena Dunham's *Girls*. This thirty-minute dramady focuses on the lives of four, white 20somethings living in Brooklyn, New York and has attracted scathing critiques and abundant praise from fans, critics, and academics alike. My thesis aims to bridge the polarized discourse surrounding *Girls* by critically examining the representations of sexuality and reproductive health. I first explore Home Box Office (HBO) as a premium network that provides Dunham with certain freedoms as the author of *Girls*. Drawing on theories of television and film authorship, I argue Dunham occupies a unique position on HBO where she can display her unique feminist voice and artistic vision. I then offer a brief overview of first, second, third, and fourth-wave feminism and argue Dunham strategically integrates ideology of the different waves into her series in attempt to dismantle patriarchy. Using Munford and Waters' theory on the "post-feminist mystique," I examine how *Girls* appropriates tactics typically used to perpetuate misogyny in popular culture for its own political aims, thus moving beyond the "retrograde." *Girls* offers a fresh representation feminism and femininity on television while making sharp critiques about our current cultural climate. I suggest that despite the limitations of *Girls*, this series presents a fresh and new representation of female identity, sexuality, and reproductive health that transcends the current television landscape.

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# INTRODUCTION

I had just finished streaming the *Girls* episode “Close Up” (4.6)<sup>1</sup> in my closet-sized college dorm room on a frigid February day. I didn’t know what to make of a scene that showed a complicated argument between Mimi Rose Howard (Gillian Jacobs) and Adam Sackler (Adam Driver). Mimi Rose explains to Adam that she cannot join him on a run because she had an abortion the previous day. When she tells him he was the biological father, the scene intensifies and Adam throws everything off the dining room table, furious about being excluded from the decision. At the time of my initial viewing, I empathized with Adam more so than Mimi Rose. I had just gotten out of a relationship where lack of communication resulted in our demise, and I strongly identified with components of Adam’s character. But at the same time, I recognized the importance and significance of Mimi Rose’s independent, guilt-free position. Conflicted, I texted my older cousin Jenna, a devoted fan of the show and asked about her reaction to “Close

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<sup>1</sup> *Girls*, “Close Up” (4.6), written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, HBO, February, 2015.

Up.” She responded with blocks of text instantly saying how great and revolutionary the abortion narrative was and that Mimi Rose embodied a powerful and independent female character. Later that evening, I called my mom and asked her if she had seen *Girls*. She had. She thought Mimi Rose was crazy and wrong to leave Adam out of the decision and perceived the whole scene to be “wacky.” Creator Lena Dunham also offered her insight into the abortion narrative during her “A Look Inside the Episode” session featured after each episode. She explained that she wanted to show a female character that had an abortion and was not tortured by her decision in an effort to offer a fresh representation of abortion narratives on television.<sup>2</sup> Every one described above saw the same scene, yet negotiated its messages very differently. Described as everything from “wacky” to “revolutionary,” this scene, much like the entire series, has the power to instigate valuable dialogue about important socio-cultural issues.

*Girls*, created by and starring Lena Dunham, premiered on HBO in 2012 and began its fifth season in February 2016. HBO has signed on for one more season, announcing that season six will be the series’ last.<sup>3</sup> The show features the lives of four, white, well-educated, young women trying to make “it” living in Brooklyn, New York through primarily artistic pursuits. It highlights the financial instability of aspiring essayist Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham), art curator and amateur singer/songwriter Marnie Michaels (Allison Williams), children’s boutique retail clerk Jessa Johansson (Jemina Kirke), and New York University student Shoshanna Shapiro (Zosia Mamet), while also focusing on their constant trials and tribulations with many failing and flailing relationships, both platonic and romantic. *Girls* can be seen as a “coming of age” that hones in on an awkward transition into adulthood, as the characters navigate new

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<sup>2</sup> *Girls*, “Close Up.”

<sup>3</sup> Amanda Michelle Steiner, “Lena Dunham Confirms *Girls* Ending: ‘It Feels Like the Right Time,’ *Entertainment Weekly*, January 6, 2016, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.ew.com/article/2016/01/06/girls-season-6-end-hbo>.

freedoms, independence, and responsibilities two years post-grad. Dunham has explained that she writes on her lived experiences, and these moments (the humorous, the cringe-worthy, the awkward, and the inspirational) play out over the course of the series.<sup>4</sup> Featuring four independent, intelligent female leads, the series incorporates feminist discourse throughout the narratives and reframes traditional depictions of femininity and female identity on television.

*Girls* raises complicated questions about the representation of millennials, feminism, race, class, and sexuality in media. The series has received abundant attention from popular press, scholars, and fans alike who all grapple with the successes and limitations within the show. One of the largest critiques of the program has been its lack of diversity. With a nearly all-white cast in the realistically diverse metropolitan of Brooklyn, the series perpetuates white-washed casting in the entertainment industry. Detractors also condemn the show for its narcissistic, “annoying,” irresponsible characters. Others, however, commend Dunham for her commitment to offer a fresh representation of body politics that contests Hollywood ideals of beauty. *Girls*, as a feminist text, offers a platform from which variety of issues can be considered. The popularity of various media channels like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and blogs has allowed the television audience to openly praise, criticize, and comment on any and every aspect of the program, creating a dynamic community that can converse and debate issues raised within the series in real-time. *Girls* has ignited ample buzz, both positive and negative, that fits into a larger conversation about feminist media studies and the racial politics of media representations.

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<sup>4</sup> Stefania Marghitu, and Conrad Ng, “Body Talk: Reconsidering the Post-Feminist Discourse and Critical Reception of Lena Dunham’s,” *Girls, Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 45 (2013), accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/special-issue-early-career-researchers-i/body-talk-reconsidering-the-post-feminist-discourse-and-critical-reception-of-lena-dunhams-girls/>.

This thesis aims to bridge the polarized discourse provoked by the series and argues that *Girls* presents a fresh and new representation of female identity, sexuality, and reproductive health that transcends the current television landscape. Dunham's demonstrated investment to depict female agency, positive sexual health behaviors, and reproductive health justice marks a shift in popular representations of these issues in film and television. The female characters' autonomy, individuality, and agency with respect to body politics on the show reframes traditional portrayals of women; thus *Girls* serves as an important text that engages different waves of feminist often absent from popular culture. This show offers new and revolutionary representations of gender while making sharp critiques about our current cultural climate. *Girls* incorporates complex socio-political issues into the quirky characters' narratives and raises important questions about economic, political, and social issues.

*Girls* serves as a feminist text that transcends the norms of the current television landscape. Moving beyond the traditional, *Girls* features four independent, young women who value female friendship, hold specific career aspirations, and are agents of their own sexual experiences. Dunham's commitment to represent positive sexual health behaviors and reproductive justice appears throughout the series and challenges conventional depictions of such issues on film and television. While the body politics, particularly the nudity on *Girls*, has been a recurrent topic of discussion amongst scholars, fans, and detractors, I would like to redirect the conversation to consider the unique depiction of sexuality and reproductive health. Both topics are heavily engaged on *Girls* throughout seasons one, two, three, and four. This thesis will critically analyze the show's commitment to sex-positivity and reproductive justice broadly, and

then focus on two episodes, “Vagina Panic” (1.2)<sup>5</sup> and “Close Up” (4.6).<sup>6</sup> These two episodes place sexual health and reproductive justice at the forefront of their narratives and push the boundaries of conventional representations of these issues in media. Some questions I seek to answer include: In what ways does *Girls* surpass the present television landscape, and what strategies does Dunham employ to achieve this successfully? How does the fact that these issues are navigated through an all white female cast limit the conversations about health representations? And how does the representation of these issues on *Girls* challenge the ideas forwarded by prior shows?

With this thesis, I offer a critical analysis of *Girls* as an important cultural artifact that offers an original representation of sexuality and reproductive health, and in doing so, works to shift the portrayal of female characters on television and film. My first chapter provides an overview of Home Box Office (HBO) as a premium channel without the same censorship standards as network television, which serves as an essential foundation for *Girls* to exist in its racy and provocative form. The chapter then provides a brief description of *Sex and the City* as a significant cultural text that paved the way for *Girls* and in many ways transcended the television landscape during its release. Next, the chapter offer an overview of Lena Dunham as a young filmmaker, showrunner, and author who occupies a unique space in the television industry given her age, gender, and limited professional experience. Chapter two looks at scholarly and popular literature that focuses on *Girls* and outlines some of the most prevalent conversations had thus far about the series. Chapter three outlines a brief history of feminisms before drawing upon television and film authorship theories. The chapter then considers Rebecca Munford and

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<sup>5</sup> *Girls*, “Vagina Panic” (1.2), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham April 22, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> *Girls*, “Close Up.”

Melanie Water's theory on the "post-feminist mystique," and I argue Dunham appropriates the tools typically used to perpetuate misogyny for her own political feminist agenda. The analysis chapter then focuses on the portrayal of sexuality and reproductive health politics in *Girls* seasons one through four and investigates the successes of these representations. I conclude my thesis arguing that *Girls* exemplifies a marked difference in the television landscape that reclaims female identity and feminisms. With its graphic nature and new dialogue, *Girls* opens the possibilities of stimulating complicated conversations without offering any clear resolutions.

In a culture where images and media inform one's attitudes, beliefs, and values, it is critical to look at a text like *Girls* as revolutionary for its ability to deviate from the norms presented so often in film and television. *Girls* presents sexual and reproductive health politics in a way that destigmatizes, challenges, and raises questions about culturally normative assumptions about these topics and serves as an important platform from which these issues can be explored and discussed. The shift in representation of sexuality and reproductive health offers media consumers an alternative outlet to negotiate and consider these issues. The experiences *Girls* represents rebel against the experiences shown time and time again in Hollywood, and provide a more positive portrayal of sexual health behaviors and reproductive justice. These deviations from the "norm" not only provide poignant cultural comments, but begin to evolve the television landscape.

# CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY

## **A (BRIEF) HISTORY OF HBO**

A brief history of Home Box Office (HBO) offers insight into the network responsible for distributing both *Sex and the City* and *Girls*. HBO as a subscription network is free of constraints from sponsors and censorships. Less scared of offending, both *Sex and the City* and *Girls* (in different ways) fulfill HBO's brand identity of "Not TV" and offer content not available on other programs. *Girls*, and all its explicit sex scenes, nudity, and controversial subject-material, would not be possible without HBO, which as a channel strives to provoke and push boundaries. Understanding the history of HBO contextualizes the network climate for which *Girls* came to exist.

In 1972, early cable pioneer Charles Dolan planted the seed for what would become Home Box Office (HBO). Revolutionary for its time, HBO offered uncut, commercial-free programming that required cable subscribers to pay extra to have access to the network. HBO was the first ever pay-for-view network, and since its creation, it has continually redefined

television as we know it, offering alternative content and material otherwise not available on network television.<sup>7</sup> With its financially privileged status, HBO has the freedom to integrate “nudity, violence, and vulgarity”<sup>8</sup> into its shows in ways that network channels, due to restrictions from sponsors, cannot. Because of this distinction, HBO strives to offer different yet similar *enough* programming to broadcast networks, hoping to leave its viewers filled with something they recognize but cannot quite receive anywhere else.<sup>9</sup> HBO takes pride in its racy differences and in 1995 adopted the slogan; “It’s Not TV: It’s HBO,” branding itself as a unique, quality network that offers content often excluded from network television.<sup>10</sup> Although HBO escapes restrictions from censors and advertisers, by branding itself as “Not TV,” the channel often engages in controversial content in an effort to live up to its slogan, and this need to present “risk” poses a limitation in itself.

HBO needs to program shows that incentivize its viewers to subscribe to the network each month. Less concerned with how often people actually turn on their channel, HBO is most invested in keeping individual subscriptions on the rise. Scholar Avi Santo cites Eric Kessler, the Executive Vice President of Marketing at HBO, saying, “The consumer makes a purchase decision on our brand every single month, so we need to convince the consumer that our brand is different, and it is worth paying for.”<sup>11</sup> HBO markets itself as offering “quality”<sup>12</sup> programming with “exclusive access,”<sup>13</sup> which implies a discourse of superiority that suggests “quality” as

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Leverett et al., “Introduction,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Mark Leverett et al., (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Avi Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction: The culture of production at HBO,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Mark Leverette et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 25.

<sup>10</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 31.

<sup>11</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 31.

<sup>12</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 31.

<sup>13</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 31.

elitist and establishes a clear classist divide within the television industry. HBO functions as the country club of television networks with its pride in exclusion. The “quality” of HBO appears with its programs edging towards high production values, eliciting authorial style, and enacting creative innovation.<sup>14</sup>

HBO has 30 million television subscribers domestically, trailing behind Netflix’s 40 million US customers,<sup>15</sup> though HBO has five times the profit due to premium pricing.<sup>16</sup> As of 2016, HBO Now and HBO Go charge \$15 for a monthly subscription, almost twice the price of a basic Netflix or Hulu subscription.<sup>17</sup> However, Netflix and Hulu are edging their prices up with the HD Netflix subscription cost projected to increase nearly 25% by the spring or summer of 2016.<sup>18</sup> Hulu also offers a subscription without commercials or advertisements for \$11.99 a month.<sup>19</sup> One can pay for HBO through their television subscription, which includes anytime access and in 2013, this package expanded to include online streaming of HBO shows to its subscribers. Joining the huge phenomenon of cord-cutting,<sup>20</sup> HBO, in April of 2015, became the first major cable network to offer all of its content online. Launching HBO Now, this service allows people to subscribe to HBO without having cable or satellite television.<sup>21</sup> HBO Now serves as a “Standalone Streaming Service” where people can subscribe to HBO via Amazon,

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<sup>14</sup> Santo, “Para-Television and discourses of distinction,” 31.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Epstein, “Analysts: HBO Now already has about a million subscribers,” *Quartz*, July 1, 2015, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://qz.com/441413/analysts-hbo-now-already-has-about-a-million-subscribers/>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Learmonth, “Can HBO Win the War Against Netflix,” *Newsweek*, March 10, 2015, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/03/20/can-hbo-win-war-against-netflix-312562.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Channick, “HBO set to disconnect from cable in 2015,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 2014, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-hbo-streaming-1016-biz-20141015-story.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Stenovec, “Netflix is Going to Cost More For A Lot of People Soon,” *Tech Insider*, January 19, 2016, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.techinsider.io/netflix-price-increase-2016-1>.

<sup>19</sup> “Hulu,” *Hulu*, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.hulu.com/help/articles/52427902>.

<sup>20</sup> Cord-cutting is the practice of forgoing a cable television subscription for an Internet-based or wireless service like Netflix and / or Hulu.

<sup>21</sup> Epstein, “Analysts: HBO Now already has about a million subscribers.”

Android, Apple devices or through a participating provider. HBO Now removes cable and satellite providers from the process of watching HBO shows, thus tapping into a demographic without a television subscription (a marketing choice that competes with services like Netflix and Hulu). As of February 2016, HBO Now has 800,000 subscribers, falling short of Wall Street's expectations for two-million subscribers within the first year of the release.<sup>22</sup> HBO CEO Richard Plepler has said, "We're just getting started, I think we're going to make a lot of progress as we put new content on and get onto new platforms."<sup>23</sup> HBO is working to expand its reach to a new demographic of viewers, and the new programming HBO features will prove key to the service's success. The "new content" Plepler references intends to draw in the growing cord-cutting demographic, which is primarily young adults with less disposable income.<sup>24</sup> While slightly ahead of the service's release, *Girls'* airing (a show that evidently draws in cord-cutters) correlates relatively well with HBO's added option of stand-alone streaming. *Girls'* provides poignant culture commentary and raises questions pertinent to the cord-cutting demographic. This need to appeal to a younger demographic will have implications for the material HBO programs.

The freedom and flexibility HBO holds as a premium network provides it with the ability to address culturally charged issues and engage racy subject matter. In "Television as a Cultural Forum," Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch explore how television functions as a public space where important cultural topics may be considered. They argue it reflects and comments on a culture's hopes, dreams, values, and conflicts, claiming that television does not present firm

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<sup>22</sup> Ben Fox Rubin, "HBO Now: Slow to catch on with 'cord-cutters,'" *CNET*, February 16, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.cnet.com/news/hbo-now-slow-to-catch-on/>.

<sup>23</sup> Rubin, "HBO Now: Slow to catch on with 'cord-cutters.'"

<sup>24</sup> John B. Horrigan and Maeve Duggan, "One in Seven Americans Are Television Cord-Cutters," *Pew Research Center*, December 21, 2015, accessed March 27, 2016, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/21/4-one-in-seven-americans-are-television-cord-cutters/>.

ideological conclusions as much as it raises ideological questions. Issues are presented and the viewer is left to negotiate their own position.<sup>25</sup> Newcomb and Hirsch published their essay during the broadcast era, a time that pre-dates the narrowcasting that exists on television today, despite this, their argument still raises relevant arguments about the function of television as an important cultural and communicative text. Considering Newcomb's and Hirsch's argument in the context of HBO, we can see a relationship between the authors' theory and the decisions HBO makes as a network that highlight ideological issues in contemporary culture.<sup>26</sup> HBO needs to engage its viewers (subscribers), who make a financial decision on the premium channel each month; therefore, HBO programs series that incite its viewers. This commitment to provoke leads HBO to serve as a forum for which complicated questions are raised, thorough reflection is encouraged, and ambiguous answers are provided. Both HBO's *Sex and the City* and *Girls* raise questions about our culture and advance thought and contemplation on personal attitudes, values, and beliefs. Asking its viewers to consider the uncomfortable questions, *Sex and the City* and *Girls* take on issues of abortion, STIs, sexuality, and safer sex. Because of its premium network status, HBO has the flexibility to program shows that raise questions typically avoided on network television. Additionally, priding itself in being a "creator-centric" network, HBO serves as a space where authors can express a personal vision that raises challenging or uncomfortable questions. Creators on premium channels have a great deal of liberty to explore whatever topic they choose.

HBO promotes itself as a "distinct" and "exclusive" channel. Because the network profits from the flat-rate subscription its viewers pay each month, HBO is able to experiment with its programming on television. While the network makes choices for-profit, it is also

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<sup>25</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View* 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 56-74.

<sup>26</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," 56-74.

influenced by cultural values that advance its brand.<sup>27</sup> By this I mean, HBO's different programming strategies are often informed by the cultural climate that seems eager to absorb the vulgarity and controversial content not found on network television. Despite HBO as a premium channel, it still follows the cultural framework Newcomb and Hirsch suggest that television requires a reflection and questioning of our culture, and in many ways, HBO has the freedom to open Newcomb's and Hirsch's argument further, incorporating challenging issues in its series that network televisions often avoid. HBO holds special freedoms as a premium subscription network but also needs to program edgy, racy material and because of this unique duality between freedom and self-imposed restraint, HBO covers content often absent on network television. One show which exemplifies HBO's "brand" is *Sex and the City*, which whether loved or loathed, marked a significant moment in feminist television studies, featuring four independent, sexual, career-driven women. *Sex and the City* and *Girls* have both ignited heated discussion amongst fans, critics, and scholars alike, and HBO served as the foundation for which these shows were able (and required) to push the boundaries of the television landscape.

### **A (BRIEF) HISTORY OF SEX AND THE CITY**

Two men, Darren Star and Michael Patrick King, created *Sex and the City*, a program that ran on HBO for six seasons between 1998 and 2004.<sup>28</sup> ABC Entertainment was originally interested in airing *Sex and the City*, but Star felt HBO was a better network to work with given its brand and his intentions for the show. Star knew HBO prided itself on providing artistic liberty to its shows' authors. When the series was ending, he said, "In terms of creative freedom,

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<sup>27</sup> Santo, "Para-television and discourses of distinction," 24.

<sup>28</sup> Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, "Introduction: Welcome to the age of un-innocence," in *Reading Sex and the City*, ed. Janet McCabe et al. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 1.

HBO is the best place to work on TV.”<sup>29</sup> Prior to *Sex and the City*, Star had created and produced CBS’s unsuccessful *Central Park West* (1995). CBS pressured Star to create a show that would draw in a younger demographic, compromising his artistic vision for a specific network goal. After this unfortunate and unsuccessful experience, he realized “[he’d] rather not work for ten years than write to serve network dictates.”<sup>30</sup> HBO, with its “Not TV” identity, seemed a promising network for which his artistic vision for *Sex and the City* could be explored in a far less compromised way than on network television. While HBO, as cited earlier in the chapter, evades certain forms of censorship and restrictions by which network television must abide, the premium channel remains somewhat restricted, committing itself to offering something beyond network television. This investment in risk, vulgarity, and obscenity acts as its own artistic cage, even if it is one well suited for certain authors. Star’s vision for *Sex and the City* seemed to align with the dictates that the network requires: risk, vulgarity, and nudity. Additionally, *Sex and the City* worked well with HBO’s push for quality programming since the show was shot on film, on-location, with high production values, and high fashion.<sup>31</sup> With this fairly symbiotic relationship, Star was able to create a show with the content he wanted to discuss and with the freedom to discuss it as he wished.

*Girls* is often compared to its predecessor *Sex and the City* since both shows follow four, independent single, white women in the urban New York landscape. Though the basic archetypes of the series are the same, *Sex and the City* offers its viewers a more glamorized representation of life in the city. When it premiered in 1998, *Sex and the City* was a full-fledged phenomenon, and cultural historian Dwight Blocker Bowers wrote, “*Sex and the City* tells us a

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<sup>29</sup> Akass and McCabe, “Introduction, Welcome to the age of un-innocence,” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Akass and McCabe, “Introduction: Welcome to the age of un-innocence,” 3.

<sup>31</sup> Akass and McCabe, “Introduction, Welcome to the age of un-innocence,” 6.

lot about us now and I suspect, when we look back on this generations from now, it will still tell us a lot about how we were.”<sup>32</sup> Bowers’ remarks align with Newcomb and Hirsch’s argument regarding television as a text for which we can reflect upon social and cultural ideology and certain realities. That said, I want to draw attention to Bowers’ use of “us” and “we,” which suggests *Sex and the City* as inclusive of all peoples lived experiences. Who are the “us’s” and the “we’s” Blocker refers to? *Sex and the City* features a narrative within the city— but a narrative that tells the experiences of white, upper-class women in an otherwise diverse metropolitan. Television and film may serve as a revealing text, but the broad use of “us” ignores the demographic specificity of HBO and *Sex and the City*.

*Sex and the City* follows the lives of four single women living in Manhattan: sex columnist Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), public relations businesswoman Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), successful lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), and art dealer Charlotte York (Kristin Davis). The women are shown navigating the trials and tribulations of sex and relationships while balancing their friendships and careers. The show, like *Girls*, takes on issues of safer sex, abortion, sexuality, romance, and career choice, from a third-wave feminist position and often juxtaposes the characters opinions and beliefs. In “Are We Sluts?” (3.6),<sup>33</sup> Carrie ponders what it *means* when her two-week boyfriend Aidan Shaw (John Corbett) wants to wait to have sex, while also contemplating conversations she had earlier with friends: Miranda confessed her insecurities about “her number,” and Charlotte professed her fear of being a “whore” who no man will want to marry. Carrie then drafts a column where she asks, “How many men is too many men? Are we simply romantically challenged, or are we sluts?”<sup>34</sup> By

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<sup>32</sup> Akass and McCabe, “Introduction: Welcome to the age of un-innocence,” 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Sex and the City*, “Are We Sluts?” (3.6), HBO, written by Darren Star et al., directed by Nicole Holofcenter, July 16, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> *Sex and the City*, “Are We Sluts?”

doing this, *Sex and the City* draws attention to the different positions and insecurities of each character in a post-feminist culture, and the narrative raises questions about sexual agency, romance, and “slut shaming.”<sup>35</sup> While *Sex and the City* often celebrates the third-wave, “Are We Sluts?” highlights the challenges of being a “liberated” woman in a culture where retrograde attitudes about gender politics and sexuality persist.

The narratives often focus on Carrie and Charlotte longing for the “right one,” whereas Miranda strives to make partner at the law firm while Samantha embraces the freedom she has as a single woman in the city. These differences in wants and desires regarding independence and the single woman speak to the many factions within the third-wave, which celebrates contradiction and individuality. While the television series does not “solve” the conflicts presented, it offers viewers a way to negotiate the dissonance and creates a space for dialogue on the issues. As Charlotte York says in response to her friends who judge her decision to get married and become a stay-at-home mother: “I choose my choice!”<sup>36</sup> The women on *Sex and the City* celebrate the third-wave and rejoice over the newfound gains of previous women’s movements, and as Samantha says in the Pilot: “This is the first time in Manhattan history that women have as much power and money as men.”<sup>37</sup> Despite this claiming of liberties and agency, the women on *Sex and the City* still are impacted by the patriarchy, internalizing elements of misogynistic judgment. Where the females on *Sex and the City* navigate the tensions between

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<sup>35</sup> The episode “Are We Sluts?” deals directly with many issues I focus on in my *Girls* analysis chapter. While I am not analyzing *Sex and the City* as the primary text, this episode functions as a loaded cultural artifact that raises questions about the construct of ‘whore,’ ‘slut,’ and raises questions about female sexuality and shame. Despite the character’s seeming to have control over their sex lives, each character feels judged for their sexual history and internalizes this shame to a certain extent.

<sup>36</sup> *Sex and the City*, “Time and Punishment” (4.7), HBO, written by Darren Star et al., directed by Michael Engler, July 8, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> *Sex and the City*, “The Pilot” (1.1), HBO, written by Darren Star, directed by Susan Seidelman, June 6, 1998.

the third-wave and post-feminism, *Girls* advances the feminist agenda promoted on *Sex and the City*, by reclaiming autonomy for its female leads who contest and call-out the patriarchy.

### **A (BRIEF) ‘HISTORY’ OF LENA DUNHAM AND HBO’S GIRLS**

Eight years after the *Sex and the City* season finale, HBO aired Lena Dunham’s *Girls* (2012). This show echoes the basic archetype of *Sex in the City* as it features the lives of four college graduates living in Brooklyn while dealing with financial instability, friendship drama, and relationship foes. It incorporates discussions on many socially charged topics and prominently challenges and raises questions about certain cultural issues today without posing any definite answers. HBO, with its flexibility and freedoms as a premium network, provides a space for Dunham to explore certain controversial issues. Scholar Deborah Jermyn describes *Sex and the City* as a milestone in television explaining: “A television milestone should in some sense push or reimagine the boundaries of a medium; that its cultural impact or resonance should go beyond television.”<sup>38</sup> *Girls* then, by Jermyn’s definition, is a milestone that shifts television and the landscape beyond. The discussions viewers have about a show once the episode finishes reveals their subjectivity to the world around them and sparks dialogue that might not otherwise have been able to happen. As will be explored in Chapter Four, *Girls* raises complicated questions about our culture and instead of providing clear answers, leaves the viewer to negotiate the questions in a way that honors the individualized solutions. *Girls* exemplifies the importance of television as a cultural forum from which complicated social issues can be discussed as it incorporates politically charged topics throughout and brings to light several issues with the Hollywood entertainment industry. Whether *Girls* deserves to be commended for its

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<sup>38</sup> Deborah Jermyn, “Introduction: Four Women and a City,” *TV Milestones: Sex and the City* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 15.

desexualization of the female body or chastised for its perpetuation of a white-washed Hollywood—the series and all the controversy it brings, has sparked many conversations that have implications for feminist media studies. Before exploring the cultural complexity and implications of this show, I will briefly offer background on its creator Lena Dunham, who occupies a rare space in the entertainment industry as the young, female showrunner of *Girls*.

Dunham grew up in the Soho neighborhood of New York City with her father Carroll Dunham, a painter; her mother Laurie Simmons, a photographer; and her younger sister Grace. She attended the private arts-orientated Saint Anne’s school in Brooklyn where she met future co-star Jemima Kurke, who plays Jessa on *Girls*.<sup>39</sup> Dunham attended The New School in New York City her first-year of undergraduate and then transferred to Oberlin College, an elite liberal arts school in Ohio, where she graduated with a degree in creative writing.<sup>40</sup> Originally, Dunham aspired to be a poet; however while at Oberlin, she focused her attention towards writing plays and short films and produced three shorts while in college. In an interview with Claire Danes, Dunham explains her transition from playwrights to shorts, “I want[ed] to write things. And I want[ed] more people to see them.”<sup>41</sup> Frustrated with the limited three-day showing window that Oberlin offered for student-created theater productions, she turned to film, a more permanent medium.<sup>42</sup> While in college, Dunham immersed herself in the creative arts, which would then ground her professional career.

After graduation, Dunham moved back home and worked for nine months at an upscale baby-clothing store in Soho with two of her best friends Isabel Halley and Joanna D’Avillez

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<sup>39</sup> Meghan Daum, “Lena Dunham is Not Done Confessing,” *The New York Times Culture Issue*, September 10, 2014, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/lena-dunham.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Lena Dunham, *Not that Kind of Girl* (New York: Random House, 2014), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Claire Danes, “Lena Dunham,” *Interview*, April 11, 2012, accessed October 14, 2015, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/lena-dunham-1/#page2>.

<sup>42</sup> Danes, “Lena Dunham.”

(also aspiring artists).<sup>43</sup> Content with the hazy rhythm of post-graduate life but missing that feeling of creating, Dunham proposed to Halley and D’Avillez that they film a web-series that parodied their efforts to catch a break in the New York art world. In 2009, *Delusional Downtown Divas* premiered and ran for two (ten episode) seasons.<sup>44</sup> Dunham, looking back on the series, admits, “Yes, it was broad, amateurish, a little vulgar. It didn’t have narrative propulsion or cinematic graces,<sup>45</sup> but “people who weren’t my father kind of loved it.”<sup>46</sup> Much to their surprise, Dunham, Halley, and D’Avillez were invited to present *Delusional Downtown Divas* at a local gallery, and following this the “Divas” themselves were invited to host the Guggenheim’s First Annual Art Awards.<sup>47</sup>

After the twenty-episode web-series, Dunham, in 2010, caught her (small) break in the New York City arts scene with her production of the low-budget film *Tiny Furniture*. A ninety-minute comedy-drama, *Tiny Furniture* features the life of post-grad Aura (Lena Dunham) moving back home to her mother’s apartment. Like *Girls*, the film explores the uncertainties of coming-of-age and weaves in discussions about sexuality, friendship, sisterhood, and emerging adulthood in a raw fashion. This low-budget independent production won the best feature film at the South by Southwest Media and Music Conference, providing Dunham with enough recognition to gain the attention of famous Hollywood producer Judd Apatow.<sup>48</sup> Known for his raunchy comedies, [*Pineapple Express* (2008); *Knocked Up* (2007); *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*

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<sup>43</sup> Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl*, 177.

<sup>44</sup> Linda Yablonsky, “The Nifty Fifty, Delusional Downtown Divas,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, accessed October 13, 2015, [http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/the-nifty-50-downtown-delusional-divas/?\\_r=0](http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/the-nifty-50-downtown-delusional-divas/?_r=0).

<sup>45</sup> Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl*, 186.

<sup>46</sup> Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl*, 187.

<sup>47</sup> Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl*, 189.

<sup>48</sup> David Carr, “Young Filmmakers Search for her Worth is Rewarded,” *International New York Times*, March 19, 2010, accessed October 14, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/20/movies/20tiny.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/20/movies/20tiny.html?_r=0).

(2005)], Apatow signed on as the executive producer of Dunham's debut series *Girls*. Dunham's success with her film opened the door for her hit HBO series, where many themes explored in *Tiny Furniture* would continue to develop.

In 2012, the same year that *Girls* piloted, Dunham signed on to a \$3.7 million book deal with Random House to publish a collection of personal essays that chronicle her upbringing and quirky lived experiences. Random House published Dunham's memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* in 2014. This book provides a space where its readers might relate some of their more shameful, proud, awkward, or questionable experiences to Dunham's. She earnestly shares her experiences about friends, family, romance, and sex in an effort to offer alternative representations and discussion on these topics.<sup>49</sup> One essay, "Platonic Bed Sharing: A Great Idea (for People Who Hate Themselves)," describes her sexual (mis)adventures at Oberlin, which stabilize when she decides platonic bed sharing is her solution to ending all the humiliations and unwanted noises that accompany amateur sex. In "My Top Ten Health Concerns," Dunham confesses her deep-rooted fear of everything from cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome, and infertility to lamp dust and her cell phone. These two different chapters unveil the voice Dunham maintains throughout *Not That Kind of Girl*; one that captures the awkward, uncertainty of growing-up and provides room for confessing (some) secrets and insecurities.

The concerns Dunham reveals in her memoir are forwarded across the many cultural spheres she occupies. Her celebrity status, success as an actor and author, and her social-media presence represent Dunham's convergence on multiple public platforms. The issues Dunham endorses in her memoir *Not that Kind of Girl* and on her series *Girls* are advanced on other platforms as well. Dunham's commitment to reproductive justice and women's rights appears on

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<sup>49</sup> Daum, "Lena Dunham is Not Done Confessing."

her Instagram, podcasts, twitter, and Facebook page. Whether posting an Instagram to raise awareness about endometriosis<sup>50</sup> or uploading a photo to advocate for access to safe and legal abortions,<sup>51</sup> Dunham's liveliness on various social media sites opens up the possibility for conversation about these issues between her and viewers.

*Girls* airs in HBO's coveted Sunday night slot and began its fifth season in February 2016. The thirty-minute episodes are a mix of comedy and drama with raw cultural commentary incorporated throughout. Unlike traditional representations of female identity on television, *Girls* offers a progressive feminist voice that explicitly weaves in goals of the third-wave but also exists as a commodity of the unfolding fourth-wave. The waves of feminism engaged in *Girls* are explored further in Chapter Three. *Girls* has been recognized not only by the popular press but film and television critics as well. As of 2016, *Girls* has received sixty nominations, and has won fifteen awards, including Emmys and Golden Globes.<sup>52</sup> In 2012, the year the show debuted, *Girls* won an Emmy for Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series. The same year Dunham was also nominated for Best Actress, Writer & Director and the series was nominated for Outstanding Comedy. In 2013, the show won a Golden Globe for Best Television Series: Comedy or Musical and was nominated for the same award in 2014 and 2015.<sup>53</sup>

Despite its critical acclaim, the show has also been described as "unstoppably irritating"<sup>54</sup> and "unwatchable,"<sup>55</sup> but also has been referred to as a "brilliant gem."<sup>56</sup> Amongst blog posts,

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<sup>50</sup> Lena Dunham, "Light n' flirty beach reading," *Instagram*, December 28, 2015, accessed March 27, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Lena Dunham, "But seriously my photoshopped legs don't matter," *Instagram*, March 1, 2016, accessed March 27, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> "Girls," *IMDb*, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1723816/awards>.

<sup>53</sup> Jef Dinsmore, "HBO's GIRLS Renewed for a Fifth Season," January 5, 2015, accessed October 14 2015, <http://hbowatch.com/hbos-girls-renewed-for-a-fifth-season/>.

<sup>54</sup> Asawin Suebsaeng, "Girls: What the Hell was HBO Thinking?" *Mother Jones*, April 11, 2012, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2012/04/tv-review-girls-hbo-lena-dunham>.

Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, news articles, and interviews, the cultural conversation about *Girls* has been abuzz prior to the Pilot's release. Whether loved or loathed, the show provokes discourse on feminism while raising questions about millennials, Hollywood representations, and American culture. *Girls*, like *Sex and the City*, incorporates different feminist positions throughout the episodes, which then speak critically to a larger conversation about social, political, and economic issues. This dissonance in feminist positions appears in "Vagina Panic" (1.2), when Shoshanna shares with Hannah and Jessa passages from the fictional "self-help" book: *Listen Ladies, A Tough-Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love*. The book describes what women "should" and "should not" do and what they do and do not deserve when it comes to men. While Shoshanna feels this book has some great value, and Hannah eventually admits her appreciation for parts of the book, Jessa argues, "This woman doesn't care about what I want."<sup>57</sup> Disturbed by the book and her friends' loyalty to it, she storms off and says: "I'm offended by all the supposed to's. I don't like women telling other women what to do, how to do it, or when to do it. Every time I have sex it's my choice. And if I wanted to go on some dates I would."<sup>58</sup> Jessa's rejection of this self-help book celebrates the micropolitics and individualistic nature of third-wave feminism as she contests specific social conventions of what a woman "ought" to do or "ought" to want. This commitment to engage the third-wave remains a major underlying theme throughout the series. The controversy and buzz *Girls* has generated may have been exactly the aim of HBO—the network that sells itself as "Not TV"—which thrives on risk, vulgarity, and in fact needs to offer something *different* from network television.

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<sup>55</sup> Suebsaeng, "Girls: What the Hell was HBO Thinking?"

<sup>56</sup> Emily Nussbaum, "It's Different for Girls," *New York TV*, March 25, 2012, accessed October 14, 2015, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/girls-lena-dunham-2012-4/>.

<sup>57</sup> *Girls*, "Vagina Panic."

<sup>58</sup> *Girls*, "Vagina Panic."

HBO, with its distinction as a subscription network, follows parameters and guidelines that differ from broadcast television. With its simplified, new slogan: “It’s HBO,” the channel is required set itself apart from network television and other premium channels, offering high-quality programs that make their monthly subscription worth the cost. Both *Sex and the City* and *Girls* meet HBO’s need to take “risk” and offer content not available on network programs. Whether Samantha is conversing with her friends over brunch about a sexual partner’s “funky tasting spunk”<sup>59</sup> or Dunham is shooting a scene where Hannah watches her quasi-boyfriend Adam (Adam Driver) masturbate in front of her (and us),<sup>60</sup> these shows offer a grimy aesthetic with regards to language and visual choices.

Newcomb and Hirsch suggest that those who create media “are cultural *bricoleurs*, seeking and creating new meaning in the combination of cultural elements with embedded significance. They respond to real events, changes in social structure and organization, and shifts in attitude and value.”<sup>61</sup> *Sex and the City* and *Girls*, created over a decade apart, reflect on changing social structures and gender dynamics and shift the horizon of the television landscape. The feminism incorporated throughout *Sex and the City* reflects on social elements from the turn of the millennium but fluctuates between liberation and hesitation whereas *Girls* posits itself upon the advancements of the women’s movements and engages the third-wave with assertion. While the characters on *Sex and the City* combat societal norms, they are still impacted by them; the females on *Girls*, however, reclaim complete agency and call-out misogyny and judgment rather than internalize it.

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<sup>59</sup> *Sex and the City*, “Easy Come Easy Go” (3.9), HBO, written by Darren Star et al., directed by Charles McDougall, August 6, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> *Girls*, “Hard Being Easy” (1.5), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Jesse Peretz, May 12, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, “*Television as a Cultural Forum*, 563.

HBO distributes programs that feature racy, complex, and controversial material in order to uphold its brand identity. *Sex and the City* addresses mixed feminist perspectives and poses questions to the audience, but does so in a “cleaner” more traditional way than *Girls*, which communicates its messages through graphic dialogue and visuals. Dunham introduces her artistic style early on in the Pilot (1.1),<sup>62</sup> when viewers see Hannah with her sexual partner Adam, who to her surprise and displeasure attempts to try anal sex. Hannah quickly corrects him about “the hole thing” and continues to awkwardly stammer about how maybe they’ll try that another time, but not today, until Adam cuts her off and says, “Let’s play the quiet game.” *Sex and the City*, with its great success very well could have paved the way for *Girls* on HBO. While the basic themes explored on the two shows are similar, but the ways in which issues are addressed differ substantially. HBO as a premium network creates a foundation where shows like *Sex and the City* and *Girls* are possible. Because of its brand identity of “Not TV,” HBO needs the provocative, and both *Sex and the City* and *Girls* meet that demand. Raising questions about uncomfortable topics like sex-positivity, abortion, and reproductive health, *Girls* pushes the boundaries of television as a “forum” for which a range of issues can be explored and disputed.

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<sup>62</sup> *Girls*, “Pilot” (1.1), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, April 15, 2012.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As a cultural artifact, *Girls* has ignited a dynamic discourse about modern feminisms and femininity. The show offers poignant cultural critiques and serves as an important platform from which questions are raised and only ambiguous resolutions are provided. Scholars, fans, and critics alike have engaged in discussion and debate about the significance of *Girls*. Though the academic literature on *Girls* is quite recent and fairly limited in quantity, a few consistencies emerge. One of the primary critiques of *Girls* is its lack of diversity, and while racial representation is not the focus of my thesis, the near-exclusive whiteness of *Girls* merits attention. While some scholars criticize *Girls* for its perpetuation of a white-washed Hollywood, others focus attention towards Dunham's unique position as an author who uses literary strategies to demonstrate feminist resistance on *Girls*. Investigating Dunham as an author, these scholars celebrate the style in which women's issues are explored and valued on the series. Additionally, both popular press and scholarly voices alike have discussed the body politics on the show, most often discussing the representation of nudity and body image as it transcends

Hollywood conventions. I aim to advance this conversation by investigating the representation of sexuality and reproductive health politics on the series, which too, resist the norms on television. In order to understand the ways *Girls* presents new depictions female identity, it is important to know the critical voices speaking about the series thus far. While the literature on *Girls* is very young, I offer an overview of the current discussions about the show and situate my work amongst the current dialogue.

### **RACIAL REPRESENTATION**

Scholars and viewers alike have criticized *Girls* for its lack of diversity, especially given its setting in one of the most statistically diverse cities in the United States, Brooklyn.<sup>63</sup> PhD Student, Boke Saisi in “Just White Girls?: Underrepresentation and Active Audiences in *Girls*” completed a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of audience tweets, looking for anything tagged with “@HBOGirls,” which is directed at HBO producers and searched “#Girls and race” and “#Girls and diversity.” She found four trending conversations. One, viewers recognized the lack of diversity on *Girls* as problematic. Two, viewers commented on the broader social issue of a largely white, male dominated entertainment industry that has a history of exclusionary casting. Three, viewers tweeting from New York City voiced that the whiteness in the show mirrors a certain reality of segregation within the New York boroughs. Lastly, audience members raised a gendered critique stating as a female creator, Dunham was held to a double standard.<sup>64</sup> While these collected tweets offer insight into certain viewers’ interaction with the series, it is important to acknowledge that these tweets come from individual voices

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<sup>63</sup> Boke Saisi, “Just White Girls?: Underrepresentation and Active Audiences in *Girls*,” in *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 61.

<sup>64</sup> Boke Saisi, “Just White Girls?: Underrepresentation and Active Audiences in *Girls*,” 66.

with unique experiences and relationships to and within New York City.<sup>65</sup> This study uses social media to investigate and outline several different arguments scholars are tending to make about the lack of diversity on *Girls*. Additionally, it engages Twitter “participants” to highlight the complex and diverse responses viewers are having to the racial representation and critique of *Girls*.

Saisi’s Twitter content analysis reveals that fans and scholars alike are raising similar questions and having analogous conversations regarding the racial representation on *Girls*. Synthesizing one of Saisi’s findings, scholar Nakita Hamilton asserts that Dunham could diversify her cast, but more forcefully demands that there need to be more platforms for black and female media producers, directors, and actors if we want to see race portrayed in a more realistic and nuanced way.<sup>66</sup> She addresses *Girls* as a text that goes back and forth between feminism and post-feminism and argues *Girls* cannot fairly be expected to represent all women. Outlining the historically white-washed Hollywood entertainment industry, Hamilton argues constructing a black character that appeals to everyone is inherently a politicized act; one that is notoriously criticized for either its overemphasis on color or lack of attention.<sup>67</sup> In other words, if Dunham were to represent minority characters, this too would receive abundant criticism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Stuart Hall’s “Encoding and Decoding” informed my critical analysis of the conclusions drawn from the twitter analysis. Further more, I would be interested in knowing *who* these New York City tweeters were; this would not be to discount their experiences, but rather to deepen my understanding of whose reality *Girls* does seem to capture. [See Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993), 507-517]

<sup>66</sup> Nakita Hamilton, “So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You’re in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That,” *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 51.

<sup>67</sup> Nakita Hamilton, “So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You’re in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That,” 52.

<sup>68</sup> In “It’s About Time” (2.1) and “I Get Ideas” (2.2), Dunham brought in actor Donald Glover (Sandy) to play her fleeting love interest on the show. He was depicted as a well-educated hipster Republican whose narrative arc ended when he and Hannah broke up over an uncomfortable argument

Hamilton gives Dunham credit for her complex, conflicted characters and acknowledges that Dunham writes on her lived experiences, what she knows, and has never claimed otherwise.<sup>69</sup> While Hamilton's assertion about the challenges of representing minority characters proves true, her argument exempts Dunham from her exclusionary series and could be used as an excuse for all of the entertainment industry. I advance, that while Dunham's lived experiences have been nearly all white, including narratives beyond her own would bridge the contradiction between her beliefs and work.

In stark contrast to Hamilton's argument, Elwood Watson in "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism" criticizes *Girls* for its exclusion of non-white characters and asserts Dunham plays into "hipster racism."<sup>70</sup> Watson cites a *Fresh Air* interview in which Dunham said:

This show isn't supposed to feel exclusionary. It's supposed to feel honest, and it's supposed to feel true to many aspects of my experience. But for me to ignore that criticism and not to take it in would really go against my beliefs and my education in so many things. And I think the liberal arts student in me really wants to engage in a dialogue about it, but as I learn about engaging with the media, I realize it's not the same as sitting in a seminar talking things through at Oberlin. Every quote [sic.] is sort of used and misused and placed and misplaced, and I really wanted to make sure I spoke sensitively to this issue.<sup>71</sup>

Watson describes the quotation above as capturing Dunham's "ineptness"<sup>72</sup> and "discomfort"<sup>73</sup> with race and asserts that Dunham borders on defensive and mildly offensive

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about her work as trivial which then escalated to a fight about his political views and Hannah's color-blindness.

<sup>69</sup> Nakita Hamilton, "So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You're in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That," 53.

<sup>70</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," *HBO's GIRLS and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, ed. Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc Edward Shaw (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 153.

<sup>71</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism, 151, citing "Lena Dunham Addresses Criticism Aimed at Girls," *National Public Radio*, May 7, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," 151.

when responding to the racial critiques. While deeply bothered by the lack of diversity on the show, Watson seems most critical of Dunham's responses to the critiques, suggesting that the showrunner exudes a pseudo-care for inclusivity and racial pluralism. Though Watson's position with regards to the problematic exclusivity on *Girls* has definite merit, his suggestions seem fairly totalizing. The idea that Dunham is an unconscious "hipster" racist neglects the attention her Instagram and Women of the Hour Podcast devote to diverse voices, including non-white transgender, or pansexual individuals. Dunham recently posted a selfie appreciating her companionship with close friend Ashley C. Ford who is a black writer, talker, and editor. The *Girls* creator also invites a diverse mix of women onto her podcast series to share their stories about everything from Friendship to Love & Sex.<sup>74</sup> With that said, there is a disconnect at play in terms of Dunham's willingness to invite a diverse range of individuals on her many other media platforms whereas *Girls*, an internationally acclaimed TV series, limit the stories represented to that of white, upper class women. One of Dunham's Instagram photos from February 23, 2016 epitomizes this contradiction.<sup>75</sup> Forwarding the ideas friend and professional comedian Sasheer Zamata raised in a "Lenny Letter,"<sup>76</sup> Dunham posts a drawing of a black mother and daughter watching a black character on television, captioning this photo "[...] the brilliant @thesheertruth<sup>77</sup> gives us a guide (a living document she hopes you'll add to) to tackling

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<sup>73</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," 151.

<sup>74</sup> Lena Dunham, "Love & Sex," *Women of the Hour*, podcast audio, November 18, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Lena Dunham, "Also in this week's @lennyletter, the brilliant @thesheertruth gives us a guide (a living document she hopes you'll add to) to tackling Hollywood's diversity problems," *Instagram*, February 23, 2016, accessed March 26, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> "Lenny Letter" is a feminist webpage run by Lena Dunham and her writing partner Jenni Konner, where Dunham and Konner address everything from friendship, family, and relationships to politics and health. People can subscribe sign up for a bi-weekly "Lenny" newsletters. See [Lenny, accessed March 26, 2016, <http://www.lennyletter.com>.]

<sup>77</sup> @thesheertruth is the Instagram account for professional comedian and actor Sasheer Zamata. In 2014, she joined the cast of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*.

Hollywood's diversity problem."<sup>78</sup> This post has received hundreds of comments, with followers calling Dunham out on her contribution to the problem.

While Hamilton argued Dunham was justified in "writing what she knew,"<sup>79</sup> Watson cites several accounts from African-American contemporaries who find Dunham and *Girls* anywhere from problematic to participating in "white-feminist racism."<sup>80</sup> *The New York Times* cultural critic Jenna Wortham expresses how she identifies with many aspects of the characters: "They are beautiful, they are ballsy, they are trying to figure it out" but that "[she] wish[es] [she] saw a little more of [her]self on the screen, right alongside them."<sup>81</sup> Writer and producer of multiple ABC hit series, Shonda Rhimes, though a self-proclaimed fan of *Girls*, synthesizes Wortham's critique saying, "The idea that [Dunham] felt her experience wasn't relatable to anyone who wasn't white is disturbing."<sup>82</sup> Towards the end of Watson's critique of Dunham, he recognizes that, "Television executives should handle [racial diversity]. The vast majority of television is racially and economically segregated."<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, Dunham perpetuates a chronic issue of exclusivity in the Hollywood entertainment.

These critiques on race and privilege are inextricably linked to the program's representation of sexuality and women's reproductive health. While the body in *flesh*<sup>84</sup> provides

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<sup>78</sup> Lena Dunham, "Also in this week's @lennyletter, the brilliant."

<sup>79</sup> Nakita Hamilton, "So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You're in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That," 54.

<sup>80</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," 148.

<sup>81</sup> Jenna Wortham, "Where (My) Girls At?" *Hairpin*, April 16, 2012, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://thehairpin.com/2012/04/where-my-girls-at/>.

<sup>82</sup> Sarah Springer, "'Grey's Anatomy' Creator, Actress, Discuss Media Diversity," *In America* CNN.com Blogs, May 22, 2012, accessed August 15, 2015, <http://inamerica.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/22/greys-anatomy-creator-and-actress-discuss-media-diversity/>.

<sup>83</sup> Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," 162.

<sup>84</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (2), Johns Hopkins University Press (1987): 65–81, doi:10.2307/464747.

“commonality”<sup>85</sup> amongst most females, the body politics of experience shift depending on one’s race, class, and sexual orientation. For example, while Dunham works to promote safer sex and destigmatize abortion on her show, she consistently neglects issues of access to contraception or clinics. The racial critique of *Girls* is an important one with notable evidence, but this show, despite its limitations does offer insights not available on other programs.

### **FEMINISM(S) AND DUNHAM AS AN ‘AUTEUR’**

A couple of scholars focus their attention at Lena Dunham as an auteur whose “unique brand of feminism”<sup>86</sup> raises questions and comments on culture in a way not traditionally integrated into a series. In her article, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” Marcie Bianco argues that the use of satire in *Girls* is a unique, highly contested brand of feminism that rather than function as politically aggressive serves as more observational and reflexive.<sup>87</sup> Dunham utilizes irony, exaggeration, analogy, and juxtaposition as a tool to make poignant cultural commentary, and these moments are usually quick and rather ambiguous.<sup>88</sup> Bianco intends to “challenge those criticisms of the show that fail to comprehend [*Girls*’s] tenor of satire”<sup>89</sup> and suggests that critics who do not read the show as satire “remain willfully ignorant.”<sup>90</sup> Satire may be a rhetorical tool

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<sup>85</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16-17.

<sup>86</sup> Marcie Bianco, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 72.

<sup>87</sup> Marcie Bianco, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” 73.

<sup>88</sup> Marcie Bianco, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” 75.

<sup>89</sup> Marcie Bianco, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” 73.

<sup>90</sup> Marcie Bianco, “Hannah’s Self Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, and a Poetics of Cruel Optimism,” 74.

used for feminist purposes in *Girls*, but the language Bianco uses dictates how critics *must* read the show homogenizes the audiences' reading of the series.

Bianco's perspective is countered by Stuart Hall's theory of Encoding and Decoding, which proposes three ways one can decode (or interpret) an encoded message.<sup>91</sup> There is the dominant position, the message is decoded as the encoder intended it to be, the negotiated position, with this, the dominant message is acknowledged but some elements of such message are rejected; and the oppositional position where the viewer alters the message to fit their frame of mind. With this model, Hall also proposed that race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other lived experiences impact one's process of decoding, thus providing agency to the viewer. Bianco's suggestion that everyone should read the satirical moments on *Girls* in the same way neglects the individualized readings each viewer may have. Despite the limitations of Bianco's argument, she does direct our attention to Dunham's feminist resistance as an auteur. The attention she brings to Dunham's rhetorical strategies is fundamental to my analysis in Chapter Four, where I focus my attention towards Dunham's use of these tools to incorporate sexual politics and reproductive health in the series.

Scholar Yael Levy celebrates Dunham's choice to focus on issues typically considered "trivial" and (or) "feminine." Arguing femininity and triviality are often congruent in culture, Levy asserts that Dunham's ability to reframe the often marginalized and trivialized serves as a valuable form of feminist resistance.<sup>92</sup> Levy looks at the treatment of death in *Girls* juxtaposes this to the series' treatment of issues like female friendship or intimacy. In "Leave Me Alone,"

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<sup>91</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," 507-517.

<sup>92</sup> Yael Levy, "Girls' Issues: The Feminist Politics of *Girls*'s Celebration of the 'Trivial,'" *HBO's GIRLS and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, ed. Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc Edward Shaw (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 63.

(1.9)<sup>93</sup> Hannah struggles with selecting a writing piece to read at a café and eventually chooses an essay about a hoarder she dated in college. Her “friend” and boss, Ray (Alex Karpovsky) lashes out at her, “What in the world could be more trivial than intimacy? Is there anything *real* you can write about?”<sup>94</sup> He angrily suggests death as the most *real* topic, dismissing the notion that intimacy could be important or worthy of public discussion.

Contextualizing her argument, Levy includes a brilliant passage from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* that points out the sharp juxtapositions about how:

Football and sport[s] are ‘important’; this worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial.” And these values are invariably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the women in a drawing-room.<sup>95</sup>

Levy’s appeal to Woolf as a voice provides an important historical-cultural framework for exploring the idea of triviality. *Girls*, Levy argues, exposes triviality as a gendered construct and calls into question the marginalization of women’s feelings. Her essay looks at the narratives on the show, which offer a new framework for considering women’s feelings and “feminine” issues and brings attention to a broader cultural discourse about the marginalization of “female” matters.

## **BODY POLITICS**

*Girls* has been praised by multiple critics for its representation of the female body. Dunham uses her body as a “feminist political performance”<sup>96</sup> and embraces the viewers’ gaze rather than passively inviting it. Not only does Dunham’s performance contest the male gaze,

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<sup>93</sup> *Girls*, “Leave Me Alone” (1.9), HBO, written by Lena Dunham et al., and directed by Richard Shepard, June 10, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> *Girls*, “Leave Me Alone.”

<sup>95</sup> Yael Levy, “Girls’ Issues: The Feminist Politics of *Girls*’s Celebration of the ‘Trivial,’” 65.

<sup>96</sup> Maria San Filippo, “Owning Her Abjection: Lena Dunham’s Feminist Politics of Embodiment,” in *HBO’s GIRLS and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, ed. Elwood Watson et al., (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 43.

but the nude female body on *Girls* also serves as a catalyst to deepen intimacy between same-sex friendships. The nudity between female friends suggests and builds a bond between them. Dunham's "spectacular self subjugation"<sup>97</sup> refutes objectification and normalizes the body and its functions. Her representation of the white female body challenges some aspects of traditional Hollywood beauty and has received abundant criticisms from those put off by her non-conforming appearance while also receiving abundant praise from those who appreciate her choice to represent the realistic, imperfect person.

Multiple scholars have focused on Dunham's image of the female body as it rebels against media conventions and sparks a broader cultural discussion about constructed ideals of beauty and historically damaging media portrayals. Scholar Jocelyn Bailey uses Bordo's 1993 book *Unbearable Weight* as a framework to suggest that Dunham's willingness to challenge traditional media standards of beauty carries socio-cultural importance.<sup>98</sup> Though written over twenty-five years ago, Bordo's theories are unfortunately painfully current. Bordo's book focuses on how we are a culture that is "mad for thinness"<sup>99</sup> and this has trained women to "be insecure and constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection."<sup>100</sup> Some of the issues Bordo identified over twenty-five years prior still dominate contemporary popular culture. With that said, challenging the restricted ideals of Hollywood beauty, Dunham puts her "imperfect" (and often naked) body on display throughout *Girls*, thus transcending traditional representations of female lead characters to date.

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<sup>97</sup> Maria San Filippo, "Owning Her Abjection: Lena Dunham's Feminist Politics of Embodiment," 43.

<sup>98</sup> Jocelyn L. Bailey, "The Body Police: Lena Dunham, Susan Bordo, and HBO's *Girls*," in *HBO's GIRLS and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, ed. Elwood Watson et al., (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 29.

<sup>99</sup> Jocelyn L. Bailey, "The Body Police: Lena Dunham, Susan Bordo, and HBO's *Girls*," 29.

<sup>100</sup> Jocelyn L. Bailey, "The Body Police: Lena Dunham, Susan Bordo, and HBO's *Girls*," 29.

The choices Dunham has made as an author and performer demonstrate her commitment to body politics. Scholar Maria San Filippo commends Dunham for her devotion to defetishizing the female body and re-envisioning female embodied subjectivity. Drawing on theorist Julia Kristeva's construction of *abjection* as "a hetero patriarchal tool for coercing female bodies into regulated social subjects, alienating women from their bodies and one another."<sup>101</sup> San Filippo explores the body politics on *Girls* as defying conventions traditionally depicted. From her earliest shorts created at Oberlin to her work with *Girls*, Dunham keeps body exhibition at the forefront of her artistic expressions. In her short *The Fountain* (2007), she undresses down to her bikini in front of a college fountain and performs her morning routine until a security guard disrupts her performance.<sup>102</sup> The security guards disruption of her film raises question to how gender norms are enforced in American culture. While San Filippo briefly addresses the episode "Beach House" (3.7), where Hannah performs another prolific act of body abjection when she spends the entire weekend in an ill-fitting green string bikini, walking through the town without any reservation, I would like to advance the discussion to consider the following interaction. Waiting outside a shop, she bumps into her ex-boyfriend and his group who snicker at her beachwear. When Hannah calls them out for "laughing at it," they recoil and claim they were all talking about how much they like her bikini, to which she remarks: "It's a good thing I'm not as susceptible to criticism as I used to be." Hannah calls out and contests the judgment of her frenemies, claiming agency over her body and choice. Again, Dunham challenges certain social conventions while also critiquing the reality of norms imposed in American culture. This type of demonstration occurs in every episode of *Girls*.

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<sup>101</sup> Maria San Filippo, "Owning Her Abjection: Lena Dunham's Feminist Politics of Embodiment," 44.

<sup>102</sup> Maria San Filippo, "Owning Her Abjection: Lena Dunham's Feminist Politics of Embodiment," 46.

The response to Dunham's body performance is quite revealing of certain cultural attitudes about nudity and the female body. San Filippo cites one of the most infamous criticisms against *Girls*, when she quotes *The Wrap's* Tim Malloy. Malloy states the following to Dunham:

I don't get the purpose of all of the nudity on the show. By [Dunham] particularly. 'Nobody complains about the nudity on Game of Thrones,' but I get why they are doing it. They are doing it to be salacious and, you know, titillate people. And [Dunham's] character is often naked just at random times for no reason.<sup>103</sup>

Malloy's statement unfortunately represents a range of people who reject the feminist argument Dunham presents with her nakedness and embody the problematic culture that desires woman as objects to be looked-at. Howard Stern called Dunham "a little fat girl who kind of looks like Jonah Hill," and says, "And it kind of feels like rape [...] I don't want to see that."<sup>104</sup> As disturbing as Stern's remarks are, his comments speak to many detractors of the show and reveal contemporary cultural expectations about bodies on display. *Girls* encourages viewers to be more aware of the "visual pleasure"<sup>105</sup> often expected from television as Dunham reverses notions of women as an object for male gaze and reclaims her body as a subject, agent, and individual.

The nakedness in *Girls* also works as a bonding force between female friendships and shapes their identity, interpersonal relationships, and space within broader culture. *Girls'* early seasons have been praised for its female-centric narratives that value female friendships more so than romantic endeavors and the body acts as a base for this unity. Katherine Lehman in "All

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<sup>103</sup> Maria San Filippo, "Owning Her Abjection: Lena Dunham's Feminist Politics of Embodiment," 48.

<sup>104</sup> Joyce Chen, "Howard Stern Calls Lena Dunham 'Little Fat Girl' and Likens Sex Scenes to Rape," *US Weekly*, Jan 12 2013, accessed Nov 1, 2015 <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/howard-stern-calls-lena-dunham-little-fat-girl-likens-girls-sex-scenes-to-rape-2013121>.

<sup>105</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833-44.

Adventurous Women Do: HBO's *Girls* and the 1960-70s Single Woman" touches on the intimacy of female-friendship by pointing out how the women are shown cuddling in bed or shown sharing a bath, while offering valuable emotional support for each other.<sup>106</sup> Scholar Margaret Tally builds on this argument citing specific moments where nudity bonds the girls in ways that transcend conventional uses of nakedness on television. She argues that nudity is used as a symbol of closeness and trust between the friends on *Girls*. By representing nakedness in this way, *Girls* features the close relationships between young women that places this type of intimacy as important.<sup>107</sup>

This chapter provides an overview of the contemporary discourse surrounding *Girls*. Scholars, fans, and critics alike address the series' perpetuation of feminism through a white, upper to upper-middle class lens, which neglects the diversity within the movements. Others, however, commend Dunham for her unique voice of feminist resistance within the show. Dunham, as a female creator and active feminist offers a fresh representation of female identity on television. Popular press and scholars also consider this feminist resistance in the context of the body politics. The body politics on *Girls* contest traditional representations of the female body repeated time and time again in popular culture. It is important to understand the critiques of the series, but despite the show's limitations, Dunham's position as the author of *Girls* provides her with extensive liberties to promote her feminist agenda, one that challenges the norms of body politics in popular culture. Dunham rebels against media conventions and reclaims issues of sexuality and reproductive health on *Girls*. Committed to women's issues,

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<sup>106</sup> Katherine Lehman, "All Adventurous Women Do: HBO's *Girls* and the 1960-70s Single Woman" *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 23.

<sup>107</sup> Margaret Tally, "Emerging Adulthood and the Exploration of Female Friendships," *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 30.

*Girls* engages the sex-positive movement and takes on issues of STIs, virginity, and abortion, often juxtaposing the second and third wave against one-another and employing a range of literary strategies to level sharp cultural commentaries. Despite the show's limitations, this honest, alternative representation of the female body is important and essential in revolutionizing media's portrayal of women.

## CHAPTER 3: THEORY

In her memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*, Dunham describes her earliest memories of being “born” into feminism. By the age of three, she was accompanying her mother to weekly Women’s Action Coalition meetings, sitting in the back of the room and coloring drawings of Susan B. Anthony while absorbing conversations about the challenges of being a woman in the male-dominated art world, a challenge that would later apply to her own creative career path.<sup>108</sup> Dunham writes, “I understood that feminism was a worthy concept long before I was aware of being female.”<sup>109</sup> Having the advantage of attending forward-thinking private schools from her early years, she received an education that valued learning about women and gender studies as much as math and science. The feminist politics that Dunham forwards in *Girls* are clearly informed by her progressive upbringing. Having received a liberal arts education from pre-

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<sup>108</sup> Lena Dunham, *Not That Kind Of Girl* (New York: Random House, 2014), 41.

<sup>109</sup> Lena Dunham, *Not That Kind Of Girl*, 41.

school to college, Dunham's exposure to feminism is broad and established, and she chooses to voice these different positions of feminist thought as the author of *Girls*.<sup>110</sup>

In order to understand *Girls* as an important feminist text that advocates for sex-positivity and reproductive health justice, it is necessary to trace the history of women's rights and equality. This chapter outlines the different waves of feminism focusing particular attention towards body politics within the movements. The authorship Dunham has on *Girls* provides her with a special kind of artistic freedom to express her unique brand of feminism that serves as a powerful tool of feminist resistance to the patriarchy. Film scholar Janet Staiger and media scholar Jason Mittell outline valuable components of film and television authorship (respectively) that offer insight into Dunham's position and ability to express a "unique brand of feminism."<sup>111</sup> With this role as a female author, Dunham creates a series that challenges traditional depictions of female narratives on television. Scholars Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters analyze these traditional depictions in television and popular culture, asserting that, "Popular culture returns again and again to the same retrograde configurations of female identity."<sup>112</sup> Dunham, as a proud, modern feminist and the author of *Girls* pushes against the conventional representations of female characters and instead demonstrates an innovative and committed approach to depicting sex-positivity and reproductive justice in the series.

Before delving into a brief overview of the history of feminism in the United States, it is important to define "patriarchy" since the patriarchy is systemic inequality that grounds feminist goals and ambitions. Drawing on Allan Johnson's definition from "Patriarchy, the System: An It,

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<sup>110</sup> Lena Dunham, *Not That Kind Of Girl*, 41.

<sup>111</sup> Marcie Bianco, "Hannah's Self-Writing: Satirical Aesthetics, Unfashionable Ethics, And A Poetics of Cruel Optimism" in *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 73.

<sup>112</sup> Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 108.

Not a He, a Them, or an Us,” the patriarchy is primarily male-dominated and male-identified.

He goes on to explain,

It’s about defining women and men as opposites, about the ‘naturalness’ of male aggression, competition, and dominance and of female caring, cooperation, and subordination. It’s about the valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness.<sup>113</sup>

Feminism aims to dismantle the status quo of the patriarchy since this system proves oppressive, marginalizing, and restrictive to women. Early feminist thinkers sought to challenge and resist the “naturalness”<sup>114</sup> of male and female gendered roles. Johnson’s systemic approach to understanding the patriarchy proves useful when considering the complexities of Dunham’s *Girls* as an important cultural text—not without limitations—but as one that boldly reorients male and female norms.

While feminist thought was certainly stirring prior to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>115</sup> I will begin the history of feminism with the “first-wave,” which was most concerned with legal equality and the right to vote in order to challenge structural inequality.<sup>116</sup> First-wave feminism arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and the United States. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 highlights a key moment in early United States feminist history, where 300 men and women rallied together at the nation’s first ever women’s right’s convention. Activist and founding member of the first-wave, Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration: A document that claimed natural equity of women and outlined the political strategy

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<sup>113</sup> Allan G. Johnson, “The Patriarchy, The System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us,” in *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>114</sup> Johnson, “The Patriarchy, The System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us,” 29.

<sup>115</sup> Early feminist thought argued for *more* rights for women but were hesitant to declare the sexes equal, and because of this, would not fall into a “modern” definition of feminism. See [Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Right’s of Woman*, (Boston: Peter Edes, 1792).]

<sup>116</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” in *Gender Communication Theories & Analyses: From Silence to Performance*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 1.

necessary to achieve equal access and opportunity.<sup>117</sup> While the events of Seneca Falls proved a promising start to the first-wave, it took over seventy-two years of relentless work, rallying, and lobbying for Congress to finally pass the Ninetieth Amendment: A women's right to vote.

This first-wave, however, achieved more than a legal advancement for women. Rather, the suffragists challenged the "cult of domesticity"<sup>118</sup> and rejected stereotypes of "proper female behavior."<sup>119</sup> While fighting for the right to vote, women participated in public speaking and local networking, thus breaking out of the confined spheres of home and church. Women were deemed biologically inferior and more fragile and women were instructed to protect their delicate bodies, so as not to compromise their reproductive capabilities.<sup>120</sup> By networking, speaking publicly, and demanding the right to vote, women did more than achieve suffrage but began to reject their restricted cultural role as a housewife and serving mother, thus paving the way for the second-wave of feminism.

Second-wave feminism emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. While the first-wave's primary concern was suffrage (though with this wave came a multitude of new public and private duties and roles for women), second wavers expanded their feminist agenda to involve a diverse range of issues. From the workplace to the doctor's office, women were advocating for equality in all aspects of life. This movement was broad, vast, and conflicted, addressing issues of intersectionality amongst race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>121</sup> However, since this

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<sup>117</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, "Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls," 3.

<sup>118</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, "Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls," 5.

<sup>119</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, "Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls," 5.

<sup>120</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, "Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls," 5.

<sup>121</sup> Heather Savigny and Helen Warner, "Introduction," in *Politics of Being a Woman*, ed. by Heather Savigny and Helen Warner, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 14-15.

thesis focuses on the depiction of sexuality and reproductive health in *Girls*, I will direct attention towards how second-wave addressed body politics—one of its core issues. The movement gained abundant media attention in 1968 and 1969 when protestors stormed the Miss America Pageant with posters reading: “Cattle Parades are Degrading to Human Beings,” “Boring Job: Women Wanted.”<sup>122</sup> These protestors argued that pageant contestants were victims of a commercialized, oppressive beauty culture.<sup>123</sup> The protests represented an important moment of some women resisting the objectification of other women who perpetuated unrealistic culturally constructed ideals of beauty. This moment brings to light an important and defining attribute of the second-wave: Certain women telling other women what they should or should not do in an effort to achieve specific feminist aims of equality. The pageant serves as a prime example of second-wave values as female protestors condemn not only the institution of pageants but disregard any and all agency of the participants. The protestors made clear that pageant models had “sold out” to an oppressive culture, perpetuated unrealistic ideals, and thus did not endorse the second-wave agenda. While the second-wave strove for a united, specific personal and political agenda, this limited strategy has been highly contested (and rejected) amongst the third-wave, which prides itself on embracing contradiction, freedom, and individuality.

In 1963, Betty Friedan published her hit book *Feminist Mystique*, which resonated strongly with primarily white, middle-class women throughout the United States. This work questioned the dull, repressed expectations and representations of women in popular culture and reality alike. She asserted that women suffer under an oppressive system of delusions under

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<sup>122</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 8.

<sup>123</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 8.

which they are to find personal fulfillment, even identity, through their husband and children. Friedan raised questions about womanhood and identity and challenged the “domestic routine of the housewife.”<sup>124</sup> “We can no longer ignore the voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband, my children, and my home,’”<sup>125</sup> she wrote. Her rejection of the “happy housewife heroine”<sup>126</sup> contextualizes the second wave’s push for reproductive control; this adamancy for reproductive control granted agency to females that had often been denied to that point.

While Friedan’s *Feminist Mystique* focused on white-narratives and second-wave goals, feminist bell hooks argued that black women have different needs and demands. In *Aint I A Woman*, hooks identifies that different lived experience influence one’s feminist agenda. She focused on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as an important and central feature to feminism. hooks identifies the difference in body politics between African women and white women. She asserts black women were sexually exploited during slavery and afterward; therefore, the efforts black women made with respect to sexual agency and autonomy were compromised time and time again, emphasizing “black women are perceived by whites as available sex objects, as prostitutes.”<sup>127</sup> The intersectionality of race, class, and gender proves inextricably linked to a woman’s sexuality and right to her body, as different bodies absorb different assumptions and implications.

In 1969, Kate Millett explores issues of sexuality and agency in her book *Sexual Politics*, which insisted on a women’s right to her own body and sexuality, one that may be removed from

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<sup>124</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 30.

<sup>125</sup> Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique*, 32.

<sup>126</sup> Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique*.

<sup>127</sup> bell hooks, *Aint I a Woman*, (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 58.

that of marriage and motherhood.<sup>128</sup> During this era, the slogan: “The personal is political”<sup>129</sup> arose and encompassed the feminist agenda, which showed social, sexual, and personal struggles as inextricably linked to one’s autonomy. In 1973, the Supreme Court came to the controversial decision on *Roe v. Wade* (1973). This ruling deemed state bans on abortion unconstitutional.<sup>130</sup> Despite this triumph, over forty years later women continue to face obstacles obtaining safe abortions since certain states relentlessly undermine the decision of *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>131</sup> With access in some states extremely limited or having requirements such as partner / parental consent (for minors), statewide legislation weakens the very core of women’s choice and control.<sup>132</sup>

Third-wave feminism has the social, political, and economic gains of the first and second waves that came before it. Before I proceed, I must acknowledge that to define the third-wave goes against the principle of the very movement. Beginning in the 90s and continuing through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, third-wave feminism encompasses the philosophy of individuality and freedom of choice and “often take[s] cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice.”<sup>133</sup> Third-wavers resist the notion of universal womanhood and instead embrace ambiguity over certainty, accept

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<sup>128</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 10.

<sup>129</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 7.

<sup>130</sup> Katie L. Gibson, “The Rhetoric of *Roe v Wade*: When the (Male) Doctor Knows Best,” *Southern Communication Journal* 73 (4) (2008): 312, accessed March 20, 2016, doi:10.1080/10417940802418825.

<sup>131</sup> Between 1995 and 2015 states enacted 876 anti-choice legislative measures. In 2015, there are 29 anti-choice governors who attempt to restrict access to abortion. Additionally, 33 states have laws that require women seeking abortion to biased-counseling or mandatory delays. These are just a few of hundreds of measures that work to restrict a woman’s right to choose. For more information, see: [*Who Decides: The Status of Women’s Reproductive Rights in the United States*, January 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/assets/download-files/2016-wd-report.pdf>].

<sup>132</sup> Alexi A. Wright M.D. and Ingrid T. Katz, “*Roe* versus Reality—Abortion and Women’s Health,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 355 (2006): 1-9, accessed October 8, 2015, DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp068083.

<sup>133</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *The Wave Feminist and Television: Jane Puts it in a Box*, ed. Merri Lisa Johnson, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), ix.

contradiction, and engage in multiple positions.<sup>134</sup> This movement is motivated by the need to develop feminist theories that honor contradictory experiences that embrace a feminism of “not one, but many”<sup>135</sup> and deconstruct categorical thinking. Though multi-faceted and latent with contradictions and divides, the third-wave also places women’s reproductive rights at the forefront of its feminist argument. With choice so engrained in the identity of the movement, third-wavers advocate that access to contraception and abortion are within women’s reproductive rights. The fight to strengthen the Roe versus Wade decision continues in 2016 as a woman’s right to choose and access remains a highly contested issue in the United States.

A fourth-wave of feminism seems to be emerging, though few are able to agree on what its goals may be. Writer, documentary-producer, and professor Jennifer Baumgardner claims that fourth-wave feminism began in approximately 2008 and is still unfolding today; this is a feminism influenced and characterized by the internet since blogs, twitter, and online media function as a space for females to share experiences and stories.<sup>136</sup> The podcast series “4<sup>th</sup> Wave Feminism” asserts that the fourth-wave seems to exist with fewer factions and celebrates a more united, racially and economically inclusive political agenda.<sup>137</sup> Despite its newness and uncertainty, technology seems to serve as a tool by which woman are able to create a strong, reactive movement online.<sup>138</sup> It is also suggested that the internet-based component of the fourth

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<sup>134</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 17.

<sup>135</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 17.

<sup>136</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner, *Fem: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2011), <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Sara and Jason, “Gender Equal or Gender Neutral,” *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Feminism*, April 26, 2015, accessed March 22, 2016, Podcast.

<sup>138</sup> Kira Cochrane, “The fourth wave of feminism: meet the rebel women,” *the guardian*, 10 December, 2010, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/fourth-wave-feminism-rebel-women>.

wave encourages a “call out” culture whereby sexism and misogyny are recognized and challenged.<sup>139</sup> While the fourth-wave has yet to be critically examined by academics, several sources suggest a new moment in feminism occurring through the means of technology. Media channels function as a space for which women can exchange ideas, debate, and dialogue about a range of feminist issues. This discourse offers valuable networking and communication that builds momentum towards feminist goals.

This technology-based feminism proves particularly captivating in regards to Dunham’s *Girls*, which serves as a cultural artifact that seems to embody the fourth wave inside and outside of the show. Not only do the characters on *Girls* acknowledge the importance of media as “a place where feminist can go to support one another, which we need in this modern world of slut-shaming,”<sup>140</sup> but outside the show, viewers use *Girls* as a catalyst for their own feminist discussions. An article titled: “What Kind of Guy Does a Girl Who Looks Like Lena Dunham ‘Deserve’?”<sup>141</sup> contested popular press that mocked Hannah’s unexpected romantic weekend with Joshua (Patrick Wilson) on “One Man’s Trash”(2.5),<sup>142</sup> asserting that it could only have been a “dream.”<sup>143</sup> The comment board for this piece includes 1925 responses that react to the questions this episode raised about romance, body image, and intimacy. Dunham’s Instagram posts also provide a channel whereby her subscribers openly debate different feminist issues

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<sup>139</sup> Ealasaid Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?” *Political Studies Association*, accessed March 23, 2016, <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

<sup>140</sup> *Girls*, “Dead Inside” (3.4), HBO, written by Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow, directed by Jesse Peretz, January 24, 2014.

<sup>141</sup> Tracy Egan Morrissey, “What Kind of Guy Does a Girl Who Looks Like Lena Dunham ‘Deserve’?” *Jezebel*, February 11, 2013, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://jezebel.com/5983437/what-kind-of-guy-does-a-girl-who-looks-like-lena-dunham-deserve>.

<sup>142</sup> *Girls*, “One Man’s Trash” (2.5), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Richard Shepard, February 10, 2015.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Martin, “The Girls Recap for Men: Self Indulgent Dreaming,” *Esquire*, February 10, 2013, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a19304/girls-season-2-episode-5-recap/>.

Dunham forwards. Whether or not Dunham recognizes the unfolding fourth-wave, *Girls* may be one of the first notable cultural texts that borders on the edge of third and fourth-wave.

This abridged history of feminism contextualizes the feminist discourse that surrounds the body politics discussed in *Girls*. While these waves are distinct with their specific strategies and agendas, choice and agency exist at the core of each movement. This commitment to agency, whether it be political, social, physical, or economic, allows for continuity between movements, one that supports an overarching goal of equality. Understanding the waves of feminism (and their points of intersection and difference) offers important background for decoding feminism (or lack there of) in contemporary popular culture. Not only do the stances build upon each other, but they also conflict at certain points, and Dunham uses these contradictions as an axis where she develops her feminist voice. Dunham identifies publicly as a modern feminist but also plays with the different waves of feminisms in *Girls*. The contradictory representations speak to a certain reality of living as a feminist in American culture while also raising questions about one's personal values and broader cultural attitudes.

Lena Dunham, as the author of *Girls*, holds a unique position in the (HBO) television landscape and incorporates components of film authorship into the series to achieve her feminist goals. Narrative television, according to Mittell, is a “highly collaborative medium”<sup>144</sup> that makes identifying the author a “difficult process.”<sup>145</sup> However, Dunham as the creator, head writer, lead actor, executive productive, and showrunner of *Girls* has a clear authorial role on the series. Dunham's position on *Girls* is unique compared to a majority of television production. As the showrunner, Dunham is involved in everything from work done in the writer's room to

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<sup>144</sup> Jason Mittell, “Authorship,” in *The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling*, May 4, 2015, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://mcpres.media-commons.org/complextelevision/authorship/>, 6.

<sup>145</sup> Jason Mittell, “Authorship,” 6.

deciding the last edits for the final cut. Mittell explains that sometimes writers with less leadership experience will partner with a seasoned showrunner to share creative and managerial duties. Dunham had only produced and directed one independent film (*Tiny Furniture*) prior to *Girls*, and Judd Apatow chose to sign on as the Co-Executive Producer. During the “A Look Inside the Episode” segments, Dunham mentions when she co-writes the episode with Apatow and offers insight on the collaborative creative process.<sup>146</sup> More removed from the production of *Girls*, Apatow has offered his creative voice only several times and he seems to serve more as a mentor. Apatow’s hands-off co-running of *Girls* provides the young Dunham with a unique opportunity to be the head showrunner of *Girls*.

In *Authorship and Film*, Janet Staiger broadly defines the author to be the “causality of the film.”<sup>147</sup> She asserts the importance of authorship for those in non-dominant positions as it challenges the “naturalized privileges of normativity.”<sup>148</sup> She then elaborates on several features that further define auteurism: authorship via the director, attention to mise-en-scene, stylistic repetition from film to film, a “unified personal vision,”<sup>149</sup> and a commitment to difference against conventions.<sup>150</sup> Dunham’s ability to express her “unified personal vision”<sup>151</sup> as well as her commitment to resist some “privileges of normativity” prove particularly important when considering the artistic voice she employs to resist misogynistic ideology about female identity.<sup>152</sup> *Girls* challenges traditional representations of sexuality and reproductive health so often repeated in popular culture, and because of this, functions as an important feminist text.

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<sup>146</sup> Apatow co-wrote seven episodes of *Girls* from season one through four.

<sup>147</sup> Janet Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” in *Authorship and Film*, ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 30.

<sup>148</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 28.

<sup>149</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 37.

<sup>150</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 37.

<sup>151</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 37.

<sup>152</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 37.

Staiger states that the matter of *who* the author is proves particularly important when dealing with non-dominant groups. With only 24% of shows in Hollywood created by women, Dunham's position as the author of *Girls* at the age of twenty-six proves quite remarkable.<sup>153</sup> While 24% is still fairly low, the authorial female voices in film are just 9% as of 2015, revealing an even larger gender-gap in the entertainment industry.<sup>154</sup> The power Dunham holds as an author provides her with a unique sense of freedom to forward specific feminist goals, and working as an author on HBO, with its "creator-centered"<sup>155</sup> mantra, allows Dunham to maximize producing that messages she seeks to communicate.

Dunham's unique and powerful position as the author of *Girls* provides her with the ability to convey her "artistic vision"—a vision that offers a fresh representation of female identity, sexuality, and reproductive health on television. Munford and Waters' *Feminism & Popular Culture: Investigating The Postfeminist Mystique* argues that despite the victories of the first and second wave, popular culture continues to represent "retrograde" representations of feminism and femininity, thus undermining social and political progress.<sup>156</sup> Through traditional tactics like humor, wit, satire, heterosexual romance, and fashion, popular culture remains latent with anachronistic representations of men and women, calling to question the real-life progress

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<sup>153</sup> Maureen Ryan, "Who Creates Drama at HBO? Very Few Women or People of Color," *HuffPost TV*, March 24, 2014, accessed October 23, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/06/hbo-diversity\\_n\\_4899679.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/06/hbo-diversity_n_4899679.html).

<sup>154</sup> Martha M. Laurzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind the Scenes Employment of Women on top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2015," *Celluloid Ceiling*, January 2016, accessed March 20, 2016, [http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2015\\_Celluloid\\_Ceiling\\_Report.pdf](http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2015_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf).

<sup>155</sup> Akass and McCabe, "Introduction, Welcome to the age of un-innocence," 6.

<sup>156</sup> Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2014), 10-12.

of gender equality.<sup>157</sup> Drawing on French philosopher Jaques Derrida’s “theory of hauntology,”

Munford and Waters coin the concept of the “hauntology of feminism,” stating:

If feminism is an ontology, a way of being, then it is also a hauntology in the Derridean sense—a way of being that is shaped by anxieties about the past, concern for the future, and an overarching uncertainty about its own status and ability to effect in a world where its necessity is perpetually cast into doubt.<sup>158</sup>

The concept of “hauntology of feminism” offers a valuable framework for reading *Girls* as a text that invites and engages some of the feminist ghosts, but may still feel haunted by others, shaped by uncertainty amongst the history of feminisms and the unfolding fourth-wave in post-feminist popular culture. Munford and Waters describe the “ghosting” in popular culture as recurring conservative in its political implications and usually appearing through a combination of fashion, wit, irony, and heterosexual romance. Through these tactics, the majority of popular culture values a past where men and women were not equal, which raises questions about the progress of feminism.<sup>159</sup> *Girls*, however, serves as a feminist text that breaks the parameters of anachronistic representations of femininity and feminism. Dunham appropriates the tactics used again and again in popular culture as a tool of feminist resistance to call out misogyny, structural inequality, and prejudice.

Dunham sharply includes this style of feminist resistance in “Truth or Dare” (3.2)<sup>160</sup> when Adam, Hannah, and Shoshanna take a road trip to upstate New York to pick up their friend Jessa from rehab. Adam makes a snide remark about female friendships as latent with guilt and jealousy, thus compromising a woman’s judgment of the situation. Hannah counters his

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<sup>157</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 12.

<sup>158</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 20.

<sup>159</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 12.

<sup>160</sup> *Girls*, “Truth or Dare” (3.2), HBO, written by Jennifer Konner and Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, January 12, 2014.

statement saying, “Ok, now you sound like one of those guys who thinks a woman should never be President because her menstruation will cloud her judgment.” The hyper-anxious, insecure Shoshanna immediately chimes in stammering: “But they shouldn’t be President... because it could... their judgment.” Hannah calls out and ridicules ideology that asserts menstruation and reproductive capabilities, weaken a female’s judgment, strength, and capabilities. This scene calls out sexist attitudes about women as “hysterical”<sup>161</sup> and draws our attention to social and political inequality of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This brief dialogue amongst the three main characters represents Dunham’s voice as an author as she critiques the patriarchy and anachronistic ideology about woman through her interplay of feminisms, post-feminism and irony.

Part of the reason *Girls* deserves celebration is because Dunham’s strength as an author allows her to engage feminist issues and express a unique vision that challenges conventions on television. Instead of reproducing “highly stylized images of traditional femininity,”<sup>162</sup> *Girls*, with its unromanticized body politics and its willingness to call-out misogyny occupies a new sphere of feminist progress in popular culture. Instead of perpetuating unrealistic ideals of the female body, *Girls* takes on body politics for what they often are—awkward, confusing, and slightly more uncertain than desired. In the episode “Vagina Panic”(1.2),<sup>163</sup> Hannah spends a great deal of time obsessed with “the stuff that gets up on the side of the condoms,” asking friends, quasi-boyfriend, Google, and gynecologist, all of whom seem unsure what Hannah means. Hannah’s open fixation with this “stuff” certainly rejects traditional representations of

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<sup>161</sup> I use the word “hysterical” here since it suggests historically sexist ideas about women. Hysterical comes from the Greek word *hysterikos* meaning “pertaining to the womb.” [Edward B. Dietrich and Carol Cohan, “Women and Heart Disease,” (Times Books, Random House, Inc.: New York), 1992].

<sup>162</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 10.

<sup>163</sup> *Girls*, “Vagina Panic.”

femininity in popular culture and instead offers us the first of many unromanticized discussions of sexual and reproductive health to come.

The rejection of highly stylized images of female identity should also be considered when looking at the character's career and life choices as their bodies move beyond a site of biologic reproduction and instead occupy a space of creative production. As French cultural theorist Simone de Beauvoir's argues, "It should be possible for women to lead the kind of life men do [...] specifically by not allowing their social ambitions to be smothered by motherhood."<sup>164</sup> The four female leads all aspire to lead creative careers in traditionally male-dominated fields refuting "Othering" in a patriarchal society. Dunham engages the structural and social limitations of being an aspiring female artist in her episode "Female Author" (4.3).<sup>165</sup> Hannah writes a piece about a blowjob, which her classmates in the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop deem very "50 Shades." They proceed to explain some stories with blow jobs have merit, listing several male authors, to which Hannah refutes: "Hah, you only named authors with a penis. [...]" "It's the same patriarchal bullshit female authors have been dealing with for centuries, and you're part of it." This scene highlights the historical socio-cultural trivialization of female authors and endorses a "call-out" culture whereby females resist misogyny and the role as the "Second Sex."<sup>166</sup> Following their ambitions, the lead female characters reject ideas about motherhood at this stage in their life and instead attempt to advance their professional goals and come into an identity that exists independent of male relationships or hypothetical children. To borrow Munford and Waters' use of Derrida's theory, *Girls* serves as a "hauntology" in the ways that it calls on the ghosts of Stanton, Friedan, de Beauvoir, demonstrating resistance to "proper

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<sup>164</sup> Rosemarie Buikema, *Women Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik, (London: Zed Books, 1995), 6.

<sup>165</sup> *Girls*, "Female Author" (4.3) HBO, written by Sarah Heyward and Lena Dunham, directed by Jesse Peretz, January 25, 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage House, 1949).

female behavior”<sup>167</sup> and a marginalizing “Othering.”<sup>168</sup> It invites the agendas of Stanton, de Beauvoir, and Friedan into the series to contest popular culture’s complicit participation in feminism.

*Girls* welcomes some of the ghosts of feminist past, contesting the patriarchy in popular culture. Munford and Waters assert, “Popular culture returns again and again to the same retrograde configurations of female identity,”<sup>169</sup> but *Girls* challenges this notion by offering something other than the “retrograde.”<sup>170</sup> Dunham’s smart rhetorical strategies make relevant and real feminist arguments and move television in a new direction. Instead of perpetuating misogyny in her show, she invites the ghosts (and their political agendas) into *Girls*, rather than passively letting them haunt the program. Opposed to showing feminism as static or dead, she engages with conflicted feminist issues throughout the series, which exists as a fourth-wave text that engages both the second and the third-wave. One particularly powerful feminist moment occurs in “Video Games”(2.7)<sup>171</sup> when Jessa finds a *Penthouse* magazine from 1979 in her father’s house in upstate New York. Jessa remarks to Hannah, “These women should be really proud, because in a way, it is the most noble thing you can do, to help a boy find his sexuality, help a boy become a man, you know?” To which Hannah responds slowly, “Probably the most noble, aside from being like a doctor, or a fire fighter.” Jessa then holds up a full-frontal nude of the woman and asks, “Who says she is not a doctor?” Jessa’s question touches on classic third-wave ideology that a woman can be agents of their own sexuality and pursue rigorous

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<sup>167</sup> Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” 5.

<sup>168</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>169</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 103.

<sup>170</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 103.

<sup>171</sup> *Girls*, “Video Games” (2.7), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, Bruce Eric Kaplan et al., directed by Richard Shepard, February 24, 2014.

professional careers. For with the third-wave, sexual freedoms and professional aspirations were not mutually exclusive. This scene captures the juxtapositions between second and third wave feminism and promotes third-wave ideals about individuality and freedom of choice. Again, Dunham invites the ghosts of the second and third waves into the conversations and has explicit discussions about different feminist values.

The theories outlined throughout this chapter contextualize *Girls* as a significant cultural artifact that pushes back against the patriarchy and challenges traditional representations of female identity in popular culture. The overview of feminisms provides the historio-cultural climate of women's rights and body politics. Dunham often draws on and juxtaposes ideology from the different waves, serving as a forum that advances a feminist agenda of choice, autonomy, and confidence. As the author of *Girls*, Dunham holds a great deal of power to demonstrate female identity as she wishes and reclaims agency and individuality to the female characters. Because of her power as the author, Dunham is able to push back against traditional images of woman in popular culture. Munford and Waters' theory exposes the antiquated representations of female identity in popular culture, from which *Girls* rebels. Dunham takes on issues of safer sex, consent, STIs, abortion, virginity in ways that transcend existing representations in popular culture. *Girls* incorporates women's reproductive health into its narratives drawing largely on rhetorical tactics of humor, wit, irony, and satire that ultimately criticize patriarchy and sexism, which so often haunt popular culture.

## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Whether it be a strained back from middle-aged, passionate shower sex, a loud snap of a condom's removal, or misplaced fingers (and other parts), *Girls* engages issues of sex-positivity and reproductive health in an unromantic and raw way that challenges conventional depictions of these issues on television. While the lack of racial diversity on the show perpetuates serious limitations within the television and film industry, Dunham incorporates topics of abortion, STIs, and positive sexual health into *Girls* and offers an alternative voice on these issues that attempt to question, challenge, reject, and support contemporary social attitudes and beliefs. Dunham appropriates tools typically used to perpetuate misogyny in popular culture for her own political agenda. Focusing on seasons one through four, this chapter analyzes this series broadly and considers the recurrent themes that appear with respect to sexual and reproductive health politics. Following this, a micro-analysis will consider episodes "Vagina Panic" (1.2)<sup>172</sup> and "Close Up"

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<sup>172</sup> *Girls*, "Vagina Panic."

(4.6),<sup>173</sup> both of which provide narratives centered on sexual health and reproductive justice. The material incorporated throughout the series demonstrates Dunham's commitment to portray sexuality and reproductive health politics in a way that deviates from the norms of television. Dunham's steadfast dedication to represent autonomy, agency, choice, and individuality within the characters invites the feminist ghosts of the second and third-wave in order to offer a fresh representation of female identity. *Girls* functions as a unique feminist space on television and draws attention to the marginalization and objectification of women in Hollywood, and in doing so serves as an important cultural artifact representative of something lacking in the entertainment industry.

Dunham weaves commentary on sexual experiences and reproductive politics throughout seasons one, two, three, and four of *Girls* and offers an alternative depiction of these topics through subtle (and not-so-subtle) narrative strategies. Her commitment to depicting sex-positivity should be praised as she consistently addresses issues of safer-sex and consent, thus challenging traditional representations of sexual experiences on television. Within the first fifteen minutes of The Pilot (1.1),<sup>174</sup> viewers see an awkward, uncomfortable sex scene between Hannah (Dunham) and Adam (Driver). The scene takes place in Adam's (Hannah's not-boyfriend-but-seemingly-exclusive-hook-up) industrial Brooklyn apartment and involves a playful make-out. After some awkward small talk about Hannah's failing quest to find a job, Adam instructs her to lie on her stomach and grab her legs. The mise-en-scene of this long shot highlights the weirdness of this scene as Hannah lies face down on a mustard-yellow velvet upholstered couch. The low-key lighting of the scene dims the apartment making the time of day ambiguous; several bicycles lean against the far wall as does a wooden ladder while a lone light

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<sup>173</sup> *Girls*, "Close Up."

<sup>174</sup> *Girls*, "Pilot."

bulb stands without a shade. Adam then says, “Ok, this is good—I’m gonna go grab some lube.” She calls to Adam and asks if he will grab a condom to which he responds with dragged announcement, “I’ll consider it.” Hannah struggles to take off her leggings facedown on the couch, slowly fumbling to move the pants to her ankles. When he gets behind her, she asks about a condom and says, “When you said that thing about the lube I was worried you were going to try to have... Do that. Please don’t do that. That feels awful.” Adam listens to Hannah’s request. Caught off-guard and uncomfortable, she continues to talk about the “wrong hole thing” until Adam says: “Let’s play the quiet game.” This scene is latent with awkward discomfort but also addresses condom-use, safer sex, and consent; topics often omitted on television’s traditional representations of sexual encounters. Utilizing humor, irony, and heterosexual romance, Dunham pushes against the “anachronistic” representations of femininity and female identity by showing a character, who despite uncertainty reclaims agency within the sexual experience. The duality this scene holds by endorsing sex-positivity in an unglamorized fashion offers an alternative depiction of sexual experiences and encourages reflection and raises questions without judgment.

*Girls* also incorporates the positive sexual health movement throughout the entire series. The World Health Organization outlines five guiding principles as consistent with positive sexual health: consent, non-exploitive (power balance), protected from HIV/STIs (safe sex), honest, mutual pleasure, and shared values.<sup>175</sup> The series’ consistent exploration of these principles represents a marked shift in television. While other premium shows like *The Affair* (2014-) and *Californication* (2007-2014), occasionally show a condom wrapper or include conversation about pleasure, *Girls* addresses positive sexual health holistically and

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<sup>175</sup> “Sexual and Reproductive Health,” *World Health Organization*, 2016, accessed March 27, 2016, [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual\\_health/sh\\_definitions/en/](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/).

unromantically with a majority of the sexual intercourse scenes incorporating explicit discussion of consent and condom use or birth control. Unlike romanticized Hollywood sex-scenes where the heteronormative glamorous couple achieves simultaneous climax without any interruption from dialogue about contraception, consent, or desire, *Girls* serves as the antithesis in many ways to conventional representations of sex in Hollywood. This constant graphic dialogue about safer sex marks a monumental shift in otherwise popular conversations on these issues. In “Hard Being Easy”(1.5)<sup>176</sup>, *Girls* flashes back to the characters at a “Galactic Safe Sex Ball” at Oberlin College, which not only explicitly advocates for safer sex but draws on elements from real campus-wide movements that promote ideas like ‘Party with Consent.’<sup>177</sup> Though brief and inconsequential to the overall narrative structure, Dunham’s choice to set the college party as a safe sex ball draws on an important intersection between her political agenda and a current national movement occurring across colleges and universities.

*Girls* taps into another dimension of sex-positivity often neglected on television, which is that of the characters expressing clarity with regards to needs and wants from one another, thus centralizing consent as part of sexual experiences. The series challenges romanticized ideals of sexual encounters typically perpetuated on television by welcoming clear conversations before, during, and after sex as opposed to increasing the non-diegetic music in the scene and keeping the characters relatively silent. Instead, Dunham contests Hollywood’s typical portrayal, and in fact, she approaches these issues from a completely new angle, honing in on elements of

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<sup>176</sup> *Girls*, “Hard Being Easy” (1.5), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Jesse Peretz, May 13, 2012.

<sup>177</sup> Jessica Bennett, “Campus Sex... With a Syllabus,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2016, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/fashion/sexual-consent-assault-college-campuses.html>. ‘Party with Consent’ is a real movement, founded by 24-year-old Jonathan Kalin. The movement aims to create open dialogue about consent and safer sex. At a time when many colleges are integrating campus consent talks into their curriculum, Dunham’s willingness to engage this discourse on *Girls* proves noteworthy as she endorses a growing movement.

awkward uncertainty between these young-adult partners. *Girls* often includes explicit conversations about characters' sexual pleasures and dislikes, further advancing discussions on consent. The issue of consent and transparent communication proves central to the narrative in "On All Fours" (2.9).<sup>178</sup> Adam's girlfriend Natalia (Shiri Appleby) tells Adam that she is ready to have sex. Quickly after they begin kissing in bed, Natalia says, "I'm on the pill, but will you cum outside of me just in case. And I don't like to be on top that much or soft touching because it tickles me and takes me out of the moment. But everything else is ok. I just want to take things kind of slow." Though this interaction omits the awkwardness and discomfort that laces many other sexual encounters, this scene demonstrates a commitment to consent and choice, and it provides greater agency to women, which is often absent in traditional sex scenes.

Later in the episode, however, Adam and Natalia have sex again, which in many ways represents the antithesis of their previous sexual experience. Adam accompanied Natalia to her friend's engagement party, where he appeared socially uncomfortable and after seven years of sobriety fell off the wagon. He brings Natalia back to his industrial Brooklyn apartment. Natalia circles around the half-crafted boat in his living room, arms crossed and offers to organize Adam's place, telling him, "It's depressing, [...] it's darker than who you are." When she affirms his dark 'space' does not change her feelings towards him, he instructs her to: "Get on all fours." She looks at him doe-eyed and confused, but moves to the ground upon his second request. Crawling to the bedroom, she mumbles to herself about the disgusting condition of the floor. Adam follows behind her and then quickly picks her up and puts her in his bed. He tells her, "I want to fuck you from behind, hit the walls with you," to which she hesitantly responds: "Ok." He pulls up her dress and starts to go down on her, when she says, "No. Look, I didn't take a

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<sup>178</sup> *Girls*, "On All Fours" (2.9), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, March 10, 2013.

shower today so.” The close-up shot features Natalia’s dissatisfied, tense expression with her eyes furrowed and mouth frowning under the low-key dim lighting. As he continues to have sex with her from behind, the camera shows a close-up shot of Natalia’s expression, which reveals her anxiety and discomfort before cutting to a medium-long shot that shows the portrait of Adam behind Natalia in his dark, industrial bedroom. Adam pulls out and prepares to cum on her chest and Natalia screams, “No, no, not on my dress!” and manages to take her dress off before Adam finishes. Again, the camera offers a close-up shot of Natalia’s pained and uncomfortable expression in the shadowy frame. Natalia puts her dress back on, sits up and says: “I don’t think I liked that. I like, really, didn’t like that.” More than clearly depict transparent consent, mutual pleasure, shared values, and power balance, this scene treads an ambiguous territory of sexual assault.

The mise-en-scene and editing in this scene focuses on Natalia’s displeasure and encourages the audience to view her as an object acted upon by Adam who never catches her face. The sexual agency of woman (even her previously) typically celebrated in *Girls* is void in this scene. The scene does not endorse Adam’s position, nor does it frame Natalia clearly as the victim of rape or assault. Rather, this sexual encounter features the consequences of poor sexual health behaviors, where transparency in communication and desires was absent. Though Natalia technically verbally consented to Adam’s desire to: “Fuck her from behind,” her body language to the audience suggested confusion and fear. This scene does more than show *bad* sex, which *Girls* is famous for, but instead wades in a darker territory of a sexual experience that went too wrong. Without clearly identifying what that “wrong” may be, this scene raises complicated questions about consent, date rape, and sexual assault but does not offer clear solutions.

While this specific scene illustrates Natalia's confused and lacking sexual agency, *Girls* often depicts its lead female characters as autonomous sexual beings. The sex scene between Hannah and Adam described earlier in the chapter draws on important elements of agency and subject-object dynamics during sexual experiences within *Girls*. Hannah's willingness to vocalize her (dis)comfort and desire proves significant as she acts as a subject rather than a sexual object, thus exhibiting her agency within the sexual experience. Dunham demonstrates a commitment to female autonomy within sexual experiences—thus making the characters subjects of their experiences as opposed to *objects* being acted upon. As Jessa boasts after sleeping with her ex, who claimed to be in a committed relationship: “That was me showing I cannot be smoted. I am unsmotable.”<sup>179</sup> The subjugation versus objectification within the series is a result of Dunham's commitment to consent, expression of desire, and autonomy. Dunham's declaration of female agency reclaims the objectified body repeated so often in popular culture.

Viewers see the object-subject paradigm prominently featured in “Role-Play” (3.10)<sup>180</sup> when Hannah complains about her dulling sex life with Adam to her ex-boyfriend-gay-best friend Elijah (Andrew Rannells). “He's treating me like an ottoman with a vagina,” she bemoans. Dunham uses exaggeration and simile to address Hannah's extreme dissatisfaction with sex that makes her feel *object*-like. Hannah then makes it her mission for the remainder of the episode to have “sex like they used to”—which erred on the side of kinky-role-play. Hannah commits herself to a performance of “role-play,” surprising Adam at a local bar wearing a short platinum-blond wig, dressed in an ill-fitting tweed skirt and turtleneck. She fabricates an elaborate narrative about being the unhappy wife of a cheating businessman. Adam hesitantly goes along

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<sup>179</sup> *Girls*, “Hard Being Easy.”

<sup>180</sup> *Girls*, “Role-Play” (3.10), written by Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow, directed by Jesse Peretz, HBO, March 9, 2014.

with her performance as they make it back to Marnie's apartment (which serves as the "set" in Hannah's fantasy). Hannah undresses, revealing her intricate, complicated black undergarment-lingerie piece that intersects over her torso in multiple places. "You look like a freaking Christmas tree," Adam remarks. During foreplay, Hannah dramatically shifts the role-play story to that of a schoolgirl and teacher, put off by the lack of "narrative sense," Adam jumps out of bed and asks Hannah why she is doing all of this and expresses his disgust for her preemptive sexual agenda. "It's like you were outside of yourself, watching the whole thing happen," he yells; to which Hannah responds, "What do you care if I'm in my body? You can't be, like, the body police." This narrative arc draws on several elements of object-subject dynamics as Hannah attempts to establish herself as a sexual subject, but aims to do so through an elaborate performance as an "other" constructed identity. When Adam rejects her performance, she contests him for being "the body police," fighting for her individuality, choice, and freedom of desire. Adam, too, demonstrates his sexual agency—rejecting the "part" Hannah seems to have cast him thus playing against traditional notions of masculinity and male sexual desire. This scene highlights the complicated issues of mutual consent between established partner and sexual politics.

The subjugation of the *self* also appears with the representation of masturbation on *Girls*. To explicitly discuss and show masturbation demonstrates the characters agency of self-pleasure. Premium cable channels rarely depict female masturbation, but *Girls* challenges this convention and boldly provides a public representation for a private act. By including masturbation scenes throughout the series, Dunham attempts to not only represent the underrepresented, but also to show female pleasure as empowering as opposed to shameful and embarrassing. In "Ask Me My

Name”(4.7),<sup>181</sup> Hannah tells Elijah before a first date, “I’m still a sexual, viable woman. Now get out of here cause I have to masturbate.”<sup>182</sup> Elijah pauses from sipping his wine, wrinkles his nose and says, “You’re so loud when you do it,” but then shifts his tone enthusiastically stating, “I’ll do it too!” The *performance* of masturbation, though not nearly as frequent as sex scenes, offers a unique portrayal of sexual agency and liberty within the girls that transcends “retrograde” representations of female identity on television and film. Dunham takes on issues so often marginalized from media and offers poignant cultural critiques thus encouraging conversations that otherwise might be absent.

The sexual politics on *Girls* not only focus on sex as often awkward, confusing, and (un)pleasurable, but also show (some) of the consequences of less positive sexual health behaviors. Dunham weaves sex-positivity throughout as highlighted above; however, two specific episodes incorporate a committed narrative-focus on these issues. Dunham introduces reproductive health in “Vagina Panic”(1.2)<sup>183</sup> and the STI narrative continues through “All Adventurous Women Do”(1.3).<sup>184</sup> She then addresses abortion towards the end of season four in “Close Up” (4.7).<sup>185</sup> Dunham provides an abortion-plot line that challenges a majority of the representations on film and television in an effort to use *Girls* as a platform from which conversations about reproductive justice can be explored.

Dunham places issues of abortion, STIs, and safer sex as central to the narrative in “Vagina Panic”(1.2). In this episode, while Jessa’s choice to have the abortion certainly occupies the limelight of reproductive health commentary, each of the girls’ own concerns

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<sup>181</sup> *Girls*, “Ask Me My Name” (4.7), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, Murray Miller, and Jason Kim, directed by Tricia Brock, March 1, 2015.

<sup>182</sup> *Girls*, “Ask Me My Name.”

<sup>183</sup> *Girls*, “Vagina Panic.”

<sup>184</sup> *Girls*, “All Adventurous Women Do,” written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, April 29, 2012.

<sup>185</sup> *Girls*, “Close Up.”

regarding sex and reproductive health also materialize. Not only do we see each friend's response to Jessa's choice, but Dunham also exposes each character's deep-rooted personal fears about sexuality and reproductive health, thus opening up conversations on issues typically neglected on broadcast networks and premium channels. This episode transcends beyond "retrograde"<sup>186</sup> representations of feminism and female identity and advances important conversations regarding sexual health in an unromanticized, sharp manner.

The plot line of Jessa's scheduled abortion—a procedure that in fact does *not* happen because Jessa miscarries at the same time she skips her appointment—serves as a catalyst for the main characters to openly express their own sexual concerns. While Dunham's choice to write a narrative that does not follow-through with the abortion perpetuates network television depictions, Jessa's autonomy prior to the procedure and the surrounding positive sexual health narratives offer a thorough inclusion of reproductive health justice. Dunham juxtaposes Hannah, Shoshanna, and Marnie's response to the abortion and offers diverse perspectives that ironically play off of each other and embody different definitions of reproductive health. While Shoshanna tells Jessa: "You're my cousin and my friend, and I could not be more proud you for getting this abortion," Hannah treats the abortion casually telling Adam: "I mean I feel like people say that it's a huge deal but how big a deal are these things actually, I don't know." This scene neither endorses nor dismisses Hannah's position and instead raises questions with complicated and nuanced answers. Marnie serves as the antithesis to Hannah's position, however, telling Hannah: "An abortion is the most traumatic thing that can ever happen to a woman. I'm telling you [Hannah], I don't know why you're being so casual about this. I was getting really worked up on the train on the way here." Whether emoting pride, indifference, or anxiety—the three

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<sup>186</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 103.

characters support Jessa's choice by showing up at the clinic, offering emotion support, and omitting any form of coercion. While abortion narratives on television often show the pregnant character receiving abundant input on what she "should" do,<sup>187</sup> Dunham features three different characters' opinions without ever depicting their opinions as deeply judgmental or disapproving, and also never shows the characters imposing their beliefs upon Jessa, thus displaying a narrative that provides the female with complete autonomy over her choice.

The *mise-en-scene* of Shoshanna's excited arrival to the clinic captures her character's position of proud support that satirically "celebrates" the procedure. As Shoshanna runs into the clinic, we hear the patter of her shoes echo in the waiting room as does her energized voice which stammers: "Hi, hi, so sorry I'm late. I stopped at Dylan's and got some snacks because I don't know how long these things take, but when my sister had a baby it was like hours, and I was starving so...". This medium-shot frames the frenetic Shoshanna in front of a dull-gray wall with two photos of bare female torsos. She clutches the Dylan's Candy Bag horizontally, providing this prop with high visibility. The *mise-en-scene* in this shot encourages the viewer to read Shoshanna as unaware and excited as she blurs the event of childbirth and the procedure of abortion, rather than recognizing they are two markedly different experiences. To have her character appear so off base not only serves as comic relief but also serves as a caricature of ignorance. Shoshanna conflates childbirth and abortion in a naïve way, which embodies the antithesis to most television character's response to abortion. Though Shoshanna's position is humorous, out of touch with reality, and not totally endorsed (as Hannah and Marnie whisper sternly to her: "Sit down!"), she offers a new, unconventional, and unconditional support Jessa's decision.

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<sup>187</sup> Rebecca Schwartz et al., "[Mis]Representation: Depictions of Abortion on Network Television, 1972-2015," Unpublished manuscript, Bates College, December 12, 2015.

In her memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl*, Dunham briefly offers some insight into the writers' room for *Girls*. She explains that often times the writers will come together and try to lace humor in to the most unexpected places, and while it is not my aim to speculate on the intention of this particular moment, considering the mantra of "humor in unexpected places" may offer insight throughout the series as humor and wit are tools commonly used as a means of satirical commentary and social resistance.

This episode is titled "Vagina Panic," alluding to the four girls' different fears with respect to reproductive health. The abortion plot line serves as a catalyst for the "girls" to reflect on and react to their own sexual concerns. Hannah confesses her fear of STIs and an extreme close-up shows her Googling: "diseases that come from no condom for one second." The close-up shot, fluorescent computer lighting, and clunky phrase highlight Hannah's paranoia about STIs and sexual health. The language she types into the Google search engine encapsulates uncertainty regarding sexual experiences and their consequences on one's health. Worrying about her health and confessing her obsessive fear of "HIV that turns into AIDs," Hannah continues to voice her reproductive health fears in her gynecology appointment. When the doctor inquires more about her concern, Hannah responds saying: "It's more of a Forrest Gump based fear." Confessing a film-induced terror of HIV/AIDs, Dunham subtly uses irony here, commenting on the potential film and television has to invite fear and knowledge.

In the following episode "All Adventurous Women Do" (1.3)<sup>188</sup>, the narrative arc of Hannah's concerns about having contracted an STI continue when the gynecologist calls to inform her she has HPV. Hannah shares the news with her closest friends while also attempting to identify who "infected" her. When she accuses her boyfriend Adam, he defensively tells her

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<sup>188</sup> *Girls*, "All Adventurous Women Do."

he just got tested a few weeks ago and “[he doesn’t] have that shit.” Hannah then confides the news in her closest friend Marnie. Dressed in all black and wearing heavy black eye-makeup, Hannah calls Marnie at work and says: “It appears I have H...PV.” With the long pause on H and the black-wardrobe, the viewer is encouraged to see Hannah’s reaction to this news as dramatic, blown out of proportion, and humorous. When Hannah tells Shoshanna about having HPV, Shoshanna tells her Jessa does too and says, “All adventurous women do.” This line—also the title of the episode—attempts to destigmatize discourse on STIs. Shoshanna then informs Hannah that, “In the STD world it’s kind of courteous to tell people you slept with you have an STD.” Hannah then reaches out to ex-boyfriend Elijah (her only other previous sexual partner) who rejects her accusation and asserts there is no way to test HPV in men, and flippantly says, “Adam would know that if he even took an introduction to human sexuality workshop.” While Dunham is committed to promoting safer sex throughout *Girls*, “Vagina Panic” (1.2) and “All Adventurous Women” (1.3) acknowledge the realities of contracting an STI while navigating the “polite” way to handle the news in addition to promoting educational conversations about issues typically neglected in television. These two episodes work to clear up misinformation about STIs and offer a socially appropriate way to deal with the news of diagnosis. Dunham uses *Girls* to raise awareness about sexual health and its importance while framing these topics in a way that creates new kinds of discussions.

In “Vagina Panic” (1.2) Marnie confesses her fears of infertility, telling Hannah she has been sexually irresponsible enough times in her life that she should have gotten pregnant by now. We see a close-up shot of Marnie’s distressed face and worried eyes as she tells Hannah, “I need to become a mom. I was put on this planet to become a mother.” Instead of dismissing her concerns, Hannah assures Marnie that she is not barren and long-term boyfriend Charlie

(Christopher Abbott) probably has a low sperm-count, thus redirecting the prospect of infertility to the male partner. Of the four characters, Marnie often holds more traditional values with respect to relationships and families, so for her reproductive health concern to be the possibility of infertility exposes her character's values. Using each character as a different pivot point for a voice of reproductive health, Marnie expresses concerns over fertility that reveal more about her character while also providing a space to consider fertility and reproductive health.

Shoshanna serves as the show's focus for exploring the construct of virginity. Dunham incorporates commentary on virginity when Shoshanna anxiously confesses to Marnie that she is almost twenty-two and still a virgin. Embarrassed by her lack of experience, Shoshanna yelps: "Everyone and their mother has had sex." Shoshanna's "vagina panic" emerges from her lack of experience and the isolating loneliness she appears to have because of this. Dunham plays with the construct of virginity throughout this season, often making satirical commentary on myths and stigmas attached to virginity. The conversation about virginity began in "Vagina Panic," but Dunham's satirical commentary on the construct appears most prominently in "Hannah's Diary" (1.4).<sup>189</sup> When Shoshanna informs her partner she has never had sex before, he stops all intimacy, and says to her he doesn't *do* virgins. He tells her, "Virgins get attached. They bleed. You get attached when you bleed." To which Shoshanna replies, "I so don't get attached when I bleed. It's like amazing. I'm totally not an attached bleeder." But the guy has made his decision and tells Shoshanna once she isn't a "virgin" he will sleep with her. By saying, "I'm totally not an attached bleeder," Shoshanna attempts to separate herself from the social construction of female virginity. The repetition of the words "bleed" and "attach(ment)" calls-out this construct in a humorous and accurate way that encourages viewers to reflect on the construct of virginity.

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<sup>189</sup> *Girls*, "Hannah's Diary" (1.4), HBO, written by Lena Dunham, directed by Lena Dunham, May 6, 2012.

This scene draws on certain myths and stigmas attached to the construct of virginity, most prominently the meaning of bleeding and attachment. Mutual consent between partners is indefinitely suspended until Shoshanna sleeps with someone else. Shoshanna's own virginity proves the blockade to her agency, and she is rejected as the subject of her own sexual choice.

“Vagina Panic” (1.2) appeared very early in the series and offered insight into each character's personal sexual health concerns. The seeds planted from this early episode recur often and in different ways throughout the series, developing not only the characters' identities, but also the conversations on the topics. While there is undeniable value in Dunham's persistent choices to represent sexual experiences in an unromantic style, her decision to also feature full-narratives that address sexual health showcase her commitment to these topics. We see this pledge to reproductive health justice prominently featured in “Close Up” (4.6), which comes three years after “Vagina Panic” (1.2), finishing off season four with another strong push for reproductive health politics.

“Close Up” deals directly with the issue of abortion and a women's right to choose. Dunham's incorporation of the abortion plot line offers a revolutionary representation of abortion on television that raises controversial questions with ambiguous solutions. The issue of abortion comes to fruition when Mimi-Rose Howard (Gillian Jacobs) tells Adam that she cannot join him for a jog for about a week because she had an abortion the previous day. She elaborates: “I can't go for a run, I can't take a bath or use a tampon, or have intercourse for like a week.” Adam lets out a stuttering grunt-laugh, seeming to interpret this as a bad joke. Mimi-Rose responds to his uncertain laughter with a sweet giggle and looks at him with a tiny and hopeful smile. Adam's confusion and disbelief continues throughout the scene, as he begins to process the news. Mimi-Rose maintains a calm composition and relaxed and even tone as Adam begins to aggressively

interrogate her about her decision. His belligerence becomes physical when he turns his back to Mimi-Rose and powerfully throws his arm across the kitchen table, thrusting all papers, glasses, and binders to the floor. Mimi-Rose perks up briefly and then recedes back into the couch maintaining a deadpan gaze at Adam.

The next shot shows Mimi-Rose standing with her back to Adam as she cuts vegetables in her beautifully furnished flat. The aesthetically pleasing mise-en-scene of this shot, the robin's egg blue pajamas of Mimi-Rose matching the color of Adam's button down shirt, which complements the door and various accents of the apartment, stands in stark contrast to the intense "fight" between Mimi-Rose and Adam. I place "fight" in quotation marks because to call this a fight suggests both sides are engaging in some reciprocal argument, where I read this scene as Mimi-Rose calmly communicating with Adam, who lashes out at her both verbally and physically. The contrast between Mimi-Rose and Adam's behavior creates a complicated scene where one character's position is not necessarily endorsed over the others'. This scene brings in issues of consent and agency for both parties. Where Mimi-Rose argues she left Adam out of the decision to assure her personal autonomy, Adam asserts he was neglected from the opportunity to consent. While Mimi-Rose's steadfast, unforgiving stance on her abortion should be celebrated in many respects, Adam's argument and victimization during the scene adds complexity to the debate. Adam is a developed character who the audience has known since the pilot, whereas Mimi-Rose's character was introduced in just the previous episode and her only narrative significance thus far has been as an artsy hipster whom Adam fell for when Hannah left for graduate school. Despite being an underdeveloped character and the complex character dynamics, Mimi-Rose's claiming of agency with her own abortion offers a fresh representation of a woman who has choice.

Throughout several scenes in this episode Adam expresses his disdain for Mimi-Rose and her excluding him from her decision to have this abortion. When she mocks the fantasy of having kept the baby, he responds saying, “Crazier things have happened, people do crazy things.” Mimi-Rose, however, reminds him: they have only been dating for seven weeks, he does not know her middle name, and they could not provide proper food or shelter. Through wit and hyperbole, she identifies several factors as to why she made her decision. Adam dismisses her rational and spews: “I don’t understand how you could do something like this without talking to me first. That... that’s evil.” To which Mimi-Rose nods and says, “No, you don’t understand.” Again, this debate between characters raises complex questions about consent and communication with respect to abortion. The narrative ultimately resolves in the final scene with Mimi-Rose and Adam having a composed conversation about their needs from the relationship. While Adam still feels hints of betrayal, Mimi-Rose reminds him that she did not lie; she just waited to share information with him until it was too late for him to chime in.

This abortion-narrative is complicated, rich, and nuanced and certainly transcends traditional representations of female abortion narratives in television and film, where women are often depicted as “tortured” by their choice and receive abundant input from friends and partners alike— from which Mimi-Rose rebels. Coercion and unwarranted input from family, friends, and partners is often featured during unplanned pregnancy plot lines on television shows, like in *Maude* (1972-1978),<sup>190</sup> *The Facts of Life* (1979-1988)<sup>191</sup> *Degrassi High* (1989-1991),<sup>192</sup> and *Jane*

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<sup>190</sup> *Maude*, “Maude’s Dilemma” (1.10), CBS, written by Norman Lear et al., directed by Bill Hobin, November 21, 1972.

<sup>191</sup> *The Facts of Life*, “A New Life” (7.6), Embassy Television, written by Linda Elstad, directed by John Bowab, October 16, 1986.

<sup>192</sup> *Degrassi High*, “A New Start” (4.1), CBC, written by Yan Moore, directed by Kit Hood, November 6, 1989.

*the Virgin* (2014- )<sup>193</sup>—thus undermining the women’s agency through coercive tactics like anger, guilt, and pleading.<sup>194</sup> The narratives of women who ultimately decide against having an abortion are “valorized” for their decision,<sup>195</sup> often times glamorizing their life-choice or highlighting a joyful reconciliation with their significant other and loved ones. This happens with Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), Monica Warner (Marj Dusay) in *The Facts of Life* (1979-1988), and Jane Villaneuva (Gina Rodriguez) in *Jane the Virgin* (2014- ).<sup>196</sup> Choice often appears in television and film as often a collaborative decision, with the woman’s personal autonomy influenced by others. When a woman chooses (fairly) independently to have an abortion, like Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) on *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-) or Lori Grimes (Sarah Wayne Callies) on *The Walking Dead* (2010- ), the series highlights the detrimental impact her decision has on her romantic relationship.<sup>197</sup> This trope of “choice with consequence” in some ways reappears in “Close Up” during the couple’s fight; however, they ultimately come to reconciliation without Mimi-Rose once apologizing for her choice. The agency Mimi-Rose demonstrates pushes against the “retrograde configurations of female identity”<sup>198</sup> that Munford and Waters outline, thus reclaiming the “original political import”<sup>199</sup> of the pro-choice campaign of the second and third-wave.

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<sup>193</sup> *Jane the Virgin*, “Chapter One” (1.1), The CW, written by Jennie Synder Urman, directed by Brad Silberling, October 13, 2014.

<sup>194</sup> Rebecca Schwartz et al., “[Mis]Representations: Depictions of Abortion on Network Television, 1972- 2015,” Unpublished manuscript, Bates College, December 12, 2015.

<sup>195</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminist & Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 150.

<sup>196</sup> Rebecca Schwartz et al., “[Mis]Representations: Depictions of Abortion on Network Television, 1972- 2015.”

<sup>197</sup> Rebecca Schwartz et al., “[Mis]Representations: Depictions of Abortion on Network Television, 1972- 2015.”

<sup>198</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminist & Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*, 103.

<sup>199</sup> Munford and Waters, *Feminist & Popular Culture: Investigating the Post-Feminist Mystique*,

The Mimi-Rose abortion narrative is provocative, rich, and complex, and as cited in the introduction of this thesis, each person I initially spoke to about this particular episode had a considerably different reading of the text. Even my own reading of this text has changed drastically from watching the episode for pleasure to critically examining it. While initially my empathy aligned closer to Adam's character, critically analyzing this scene in contrast to other abortion plot lines on television has provided me with a deeper appreciation for Mimi-Rose's position. Dunham seemed to have anticipated this range of readings, since her "A Look Inside The Episode" offers a fairly thorough explanation for her decision to represent Mimi-Rose as she did. She explains how when we see a woman choosing to terminate a pregnancy on television it comes with so much angst and pain, and she wanted to show a character who goes so far the other direction that "it's almost confusing for the audience."<sup>200</sup> Describing how we have been "taught" by media to react one way to abortion, she wanted to create a story that challenged this stigmatized construct. In an effort to dismantle the "shoulds" and "supposed tos" of our culture, Dunham creates a character that challenges many of the "shoulds" and "supposed tos" of socially antiquated television. In many ways, the character of Mimi-Rose successfully embodies a woman who chose to have an abortion without seeming guilt-ridden and tortured by her decision—but at the same time, this episode raises new questions about partner consent and depicts the negative impact Mimi-Rose's choice has on her and Adam's relationship.

Dunham's "A Look Inside the Episode" provides a space where she can encourage her suggested reading of the text while also voicing her personal social and political beliefs. In the case of "Close Up," Dunham recognizes that this text is in some ways "confusing."<sup>201</sup> But what

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<sup>200</sup> *Girls*, "Close Up."

<sup>201</sup> *Girls*, "Close Up."

proves important here, is Dunham's willingness to create a character where the audience is shown a female character who chose to get an abortion who did not seem "tortured" by the choice, maintained her confidence seemingly before and certainly after the procedure, and did not feel compelled to apologize to her partner. This episode, more than any other, has been a popular point of discussion with numerous friends, professors, and family members since before my thesis proposal even took form. From my experiences, the debate introduced between Mimi-Rose and Adam lasts well beyond the final scene of the episode and it is the debates that happen after the show that validate the importance of *Girls* as a platform for which important and controversial social and political issues are explored.

Throughout seasons one through four, Dunham demonstrates a commitment to promoting positive sexual health behaviors and reproductive health justice. She incorporates sexuality and reproductive health throughout the series in a raw and unaesthetic fashion, challenging traditional representations of these issues in popular culture. Using humor, irony, satire, and wit, Dunham provides poignant culturally commentary and raises complicated questions about sexuality and reproductive health. Dunham's commitment to these issues works to destigmatize and eliminate the socially constructed taboo surrounding issues of sexuality and reproductive health both in television and film and in contemporary American culture. She creates female characters who demonstrate agency, autonomy, and individuality thus offering a fresh presentation of female identity, sexuality, and reproductive health.

# CONCLUSION

On March 18, 2016, Lena Dunham posted a photograph on Instagram of a folded graphic t-shirt that read: “Sex, Politics & TV.” She captioned the photo: “A pretty amazing group of writers and showrunners got together last night to discuss how we can support the essential work of @planned parenthood and combat misinformation about sexual health and reproductive rights through the art we make.”<sup>202</sup> This photo reveals the current collaborative efforts to improve the representation of sexual health and reproductive rights in the entertainment industry and exposes the pertinence of these issues. Supporting Planned Parenthood’s agenda, Dunham’s *Girls* is leading a movement that rebels against antiquated euphemisms, aesthetic misinformation, and contorted portrayals of reproductive health and sexuality in television and film and instead includes these issues in her series in a fresh and innovative way.

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<sup>202</sup> Lena Dunham, “A pretty amazing group of writers[...]”, *Instagram*, March 18, 2016, accessed March 26, 2016.

HBO's *Girls* features four millennials navigating young adulthood while aspiring for purposeful careers, friendships, and romance. The female leads celebrate agency, autonomy, and individuality, asserting their different feminist positions throughout the series. The narratives centralize on often-trivialized material deemed "feminine" and offer an innovative approach to depicting sexuality and reproductive health on television. Given the current television landscape, *Girls* presents an alternative portrayal of feminisms, sexuality, and reproductive health and serves as a platform for which complicated questions are raised and solutions are left to be navigated by the viewers. While the lack of diversity on *Girls* is integral to understanding the limitations within the program, *Girls* creates a feminist space for conversations often marginalized, trivialized, or neglected on television. Dunham's *Girls* opens up complicated discussions about safer sex, STIs, sex-positivity, and abortion so often kept invisible in media. The unglamorized, raw depiction of sexuality and reproductive health encourages a dialogue about these issues that continue long after the show ends.

The freedom Dunham has as the author of *Girls* on HBO, a subscription network that prides itself in risk, allows her to promote a feminist agenda that pushes against conventional portrayals of sexuality and reproductive health in popular culture. Dunham's unique role as the author on a premium network provides her the freedom and independence to explore issues of sex-positivity and reproductive health in a raw and provocative way. With these freedoms, Dunham presents a fresh representation of female identity and feminism throughout the series, pushing against the anachronistic portrayals of female identity that Munford and Waters assert, "haunt" culture. A critical analysis of seasons one, two, three, and four with specific attention to "Vagina Panic" and "Close Up" reveals Dunham's commitment to portray sex-positivity and reproductive health justice in an unconventional, innovative, and complex way.

I have had countless conversations with friends and family about the depiction of abortion in “Close Up” or the representation of sexuality and nudity in *Girls*. I have challenged their views just as often as they have challenged mine. I have talked about sex positivity at breakfast, lunch, and dinner with friends more times than I ever anticipated. The active dialogue I have experienced during this writing process appears on multiple media platforms, thus affirming my argument that *Girls* serves as an important text for which controversial issues can be discussed, debated, and explored. Whether it be Twitter responses, blog posts, podcast replies, or Facebook comments, the multitude of interactive social media responding to *Girls* keeps the conversation alive and enables the private act of reception to become a negotiated public one with Dunham’s active web presence fueling a new dimension of author-fan dialogue. The political agenda Dunham promotes on *Girls* is endorsed on her various media platforms as she advocates for reproductive health justice in her memoir, Instagram, podcasts, and Facebook page.

The convergence of media platforms surrounding Dunham and *Girls* highlights a defining moment in both media studies and feminism. *Girls* clearly engages the second and third-wave and incorporates elements of the fourth-wave throughout the series, but exists itself as an artifact of the emerging fourth-wave, which is rooted in this “call-out” culture often catalyzed by conversations happening through technology and media channels. The multiplicity of feminisms within *Girls* makes studying it as a fourth-wave artifact that much more dynamic. Dunham often pins second and third-wave feminism against one another, thus considering this show as part of the fourth-wave commenting on the second and third introduces a new level of revolution to its cultural importance.

While *Girls* is not a perfect television show, its representation of sexuality and reproductive health goes beyond what we typically see in television, and the show navigates

challenging and controversial issues and encourages viewers to negotiate these tough topics. In an industry where female voices are so often marginalized or excluded, Dunham maintains a powerful position as the creator, showrunner, and star of *Girls* and this series offers the audience something different from what is usually seen on television. *Girls* begins to present a new generation of feminism that positions itself on top of the social and political victories of the previous waves and confronts misogyny head on. The quick third-wave wit, fourth-wave confidence, female-centric narratives, and graphic navigation of sexuality and reproductive health provide a voice to topics so often ignored on television. Dunham opens a dialogue about positive sexual behaviors and reproductive health justice without judgment and gives multiple perspectives on issues traditionally shown as one-dimensional or completely absent from television and film. *Girls* begins to present a new generation of feminism that opens the possibilities for new dialogues, ideas, and declarations to be explored.

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