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Situation comedies and the single woman on television

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SITUATION COMEDIES AND THE SINGLE WOMAN ON TELEVISION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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Dedication

To my mother and father:

If this doesn't make me the favorite, I don't know what will.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the support of my teachers, friends, and family, and I am eternally grateful to them all for the support and encouragement over the past two years of this process.

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Abstract

Through an historical overview of the never-married female character in twentieth century situation comedies and an in-depth analysis of three twenty-first century American sitcoms, this dissertation investigates how television creators, writers, producers, and actors have interpreted the figure of the single woman and attempted to make her appealing and acceptable to a broad viewing audience. Because of its traditionally family-friendly offerings and preponderance of female characters in comparison to other popular culture genres, the situation comedy presents a significant case study for the analysis of female representations on television. Through its encouraged identification with characters and portrayals of issues that face not only the character, but also the viewer, television opens the door for discussing and confronting deeply-held beliefs about the role of women in society. In order to understand the current situation of women, particularly those women who grew up with the medium, one must investigate what television has “taught” its viewers about the place of women in contemporary society. Drawing on feminist and television critical theories as well as more mainstream discussion and analyses, my focus on the single woman in the series *Sex and the City*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Ugly Betty* illuminates how the life and desires of the single woman has been presented in sitcoms. These characterizations are negotiated with the prevailing cultural views about heteronormativity, motherhood, and feminism in ways that reveal changes in our cultural ideas about the single woman.

Introduction

Through an historical overview of the never-married female character in twentieth century sitcoms and an in-depth analysis of three twenty-first century American sitcoms, this dissertation investigates how television creators, writers, producers, and actors have interpreted the figure of the single woman and attempted to make her appealing and acceptable to a broad viewing audience. Because of its traditionally family-friendly offerings and preponderance of female characters in comparison to other popular culture genres, the situation comedy presents a significant case study for the analysis of female representations on television. Like other fictional genres, the situation comedy genre is not intended as wholly realistic or representative view on the cultural status of women in our society. However, through its encouraged identification with characters and portrayals of issues that face not only the character, but also the viewer, the genre does present a significant case study for discussing and confronting deeply-held beliefs about the role of women in society. Through an analysis of the representations and characteristics of the single female character, we can better understand how our culture interprets womanhood outside of the confines of marriage and motherhood. My focus on the single woman illuminates how the life and desires of the single woman have been presented in sitcoms and how these characterizations are negotiated with the prevailing cultural views about heteronormativity, motherhood, and beauty in ways that reveal changes in our cultural ideas about the single woman.

For the past fifty years, television has been the most pervasive form of mass media in the United States. Because of its intimate placement within the home and its persistence in telling stories around the clock, television has become, in the words of George Gerbner, the apparatus which "tells most of the stories to most of the people, most of the time" (14). According to the

2009 Nielsen “Three Screen Report,” the average American watches 153 hours of television every month. While the way in which we view television is no longer confined to gathering around the family set in the living room, the proliferation of boxed DVD sets of series as varied as *The Sopranos* and *Full House*, digital video recorders (DVRs), special series “extras” available for viewing on one’s mobile phone, and online viewing portals such as Hulu and Netflix have dramatically changed the ways in which we consume and converse about the medium. Through this multitude of platforms, television is able to “tell” us stories virtually anywhere, extending its influence beyond a fixed time and place. Because of its wide reach, “the pervasiveness and persuasiveness—implicit as well as explicit—of the medium make critical and historical analyses of television programming, its various meanings for audiences, and the industry that produces these cultural artifacts an enterprise of considerable relevance and importance” (Dalton and Linder 1).

While television does not create social norms, it does re-create them and stream them into our living rooms by utilizing the social norms of the period to create characters and tell stories. In *Reading Television*, John Fiske and John Hartley assert that television as a medium “presents us with a continuous stream of images *almost all* of which are deeply familiar in structure and form. It uses codes which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself. It appears to be the natural way of seeing the world. It shows us not our names but our collective selves” (17). Because of the episodic nature of television, even in shows that do not place much value on continuity, television differs from other mass mediums such as film and literature in that viewers watch these characters from week-to-week, usually within the intimate setting of the home. As a result of its positioning as a domestic and advertiser-driven form, television can, on the surface, appear insignificant as a cultural artform. Fiske and Hartley contend:

[E]verybody *knows* what it is like to watch television. Certainly; and it is television's familiarity, its centrality to our culture, that makes it so important, so fascinating, and so difficult to analyse. It is rather like the language we speak: taken for granted, but both complex and vital to an understanding of the way human beings have created their world. (3-4)

In the twenty-first century, the majority of television viewers have grown up with this technology, and television often goes unquestioned because of that sense of familiarity, even as its content shapes our understanding of the world around us.

The continuous flow of television affects the ways in which we consume and interpret it. In *Understanding Television Texts*, Phil Wickham asserts that “[c]hoosing to be a regular viewer of a show creates a developing relationship between you and the text. We build up knowledge of the events within it, both depicted and implied, and, of course, get to know the characters or format” (56). Fans of certain series are encouraged to identify with and emulate their favorite characters. Internet polls encourage viewers to find out whether they are a Carrie or Samantha, a Buffy or Willow. Part of television's pleasure, according to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, is “based on the creation of a televisually specific ‘subject-effect’ in which both primary and secondary identifications are reorganized, multiplied, and intensified” (168). While the audience knows that what is happening on the screen is not “reality,” through repeated weekly exposure, the viewer starts to “know” the characters and can anticipate what the character's reaction will be to any given situation. Wickham writes, “we bring ourselves to the text—not just our own lives, identities, and feelings from outside the text but also our own experiences of the text. We come to know the characters, for instance, and have our expectations of the way in which they are likely to act in specific situations” (56). This sense of “knowing” is amplified in situation

comedies, because the humor arises from placing established characters in humorous situations and letting them react. Wickham contends that, in sitcoms, “the comedy flows from an established situation. [. . .The] sitcom works best by building up a long-term relationship with viewers. The lines become funnier when we get to know the people saying them and understand the position they are in” (114).

This sense of “knowing” a sitcom character also allows the genre more freedom than many other forms of televisual texts in exploring social issues and cultural shifts. Amanda Dyanne Lotz writes,

Throughout U.S. television history, comedy has been the narrative form to first offer representations of those aspects of society outside of the hegemonic norm. Situation comedies offered some of the first portrayals of working women, gay and lesbian characters, and non-White characters, because sitcoms could both introduce and contain content and ideas within their twenty-three minutes of narrative time and because laughter softens difficult issues. (“Segregated Sitcoms” 139)

Because of its seemingly light-hearted premise and promise to contain and solve any conflicts within its twenty-three minute structure, situation comedies set up audiences to be more willing to accept portrayals of social conflict because the audience knows they will be resolved. Bonnie Dow asserts, “the portrayal of social conflicts and their resolutions through comedy can lend guidance to a culture that faces adjustment to social change [. . .] when sitcoms bring social issues into the family, it personalizes them, making them the problems of individual characters rather than tying them to structural and political circumstances” (*Prime-time Feminism* 37). Issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are often presented as an individual problem,

such as one racist character, one mother struggling to find a work/family balance, or one gay man trying to come out to his family. By containing these social issues with humor and resolving them as if they are individual problems, sitcoms are able to sidestep the less-soluble institutional roots of these “individual” problems.

Positive representations of oppressed and/or underrepresented groups can have a positive effect on audiences and mainstream opinions. Edward Schiappa, author of *Beyond Representational Correctness: Rethinking Criticism of Popular Media*, investigated the power of parasocial contact in reducing sexual prejudice with the show *Will & Grace*, particularly among groups who do not have regular “real-life” contact with gay men. Schiappa first gauged the participants’ level of prejudice towards gay men by having them complete a version of Gregory Herek’s Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men scale, as well as asking the participants about their exposure to the series (79). Sixty percent of those who had watched the show at least “every once in a while” agreed with the survey statement that *Will & Grace* “has encouraged me to think positively about homosexuals” (80). Schiappa discovered that:

“The more often viewers watched *Will & Grace*, the lower they scored on the sexual prejudice scale toward gay men [. . .]. Furthermore, the more frequently they watched the show, the less likely they were to agree with the statement on heteronormativity [. . .]. With respect to the heteronormativity item, 71% of *Will & Grace* viewers disagreed (from slightly to strongly) to the statement that heterosexual relationships are the only normal sexual relationships, compared to 45% of nonviewers. (80-1)

Schiappa found that the strongest correlation between viewing frequency and lower levels of prejudice was among viewers who had no gay acquaintances in real life, while, for viewers who

reported having at least three gay friends, there was “no significant relationship between levels of prejudice and their exposure to the show” (81). He admits that some scholars could read these findings and conclude that viewers of *Will & Grace* watch and enjoy the show because they enter into the viewing experience already having a reduced level of prejudice toward gay people.

However, he asserts,

[T]here are reasons to doubt that most or all variation is due to self-selection. To be sure, viewers with strongly held attitudes about homosexuals are unlikely to watch *Will & Grace*, just as they are unlikely to seek out interpersonal contact with homosexuals. Thus, a model that assumes a *reciprocal* relationship between television contact and reduced sexual prejudice is more plausible than a “one-way” model that attempts to explain all the variance implied with either viewing or preexisting attitudes by themselves. (81)

For those viewers “without ‘real-life’ opportunity to interact with gay men,” *Will & Grace* reduced their level of sexual prejudice through parasocial contact.

Sociologists Richard Wohl and Donald Horton introduced the notion of “para-social interaction” in 1956, asserting that, “One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of [a] face-to-face relationship with the performer” (215). Viewers tend to react to television characters in ways similar to how they react to people in reality, because the human brain processes the two experiences similarly. In his article “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” Schiappa, along with his co-authors Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes, contends that, because of the media-rich environment in which we live, most people “come to ‘know’ more people parasocially than directly through interpersonal contact. [. . .] Obviously human beings are *capable* of making a

distinction between a fictional character on a television program and people we know in the real world; however, most of the time while watching a television or a movie we do not make the effort to do so” (95). As an experience, parasocial contact “can reduce prejudice, particularly if a majority group member has limited opportunity for interpersonal contact with minority group members” (97).

Parasocial contact also has the power to change a viewer’s perspective on his or her own life. Schiappa asserts, “Mass-media representations are important because they do ‘category work.’ That is, they play an important socialization role in teaching us about the categories of men and women, masculinity and femininity” (*Beyond Representational Correctness* 18). He cites research has found that “young viewers exposed to counterstereotypical sex role portrayals are more likely to change their beliefs about available career choices than those who are not” (20). Allison Klein explores this possibility in her book *What Would Murphy Brown Do? How the Women of Prime Time Changed Our Lives*, writing, “Television certainly helped make me a feminist. How could anyone watch programs like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Sex and the City* without noticing that over the past fifty years or so, television has presented us with increasingly varied images of women who are not just wives and mothers, but single mothers and working girls and divorcées and women over fifty?” (9).

Over the course of my research, I have also recognized the impact television has had on my understanding of gender roles and feminism. As a girl growing up in a conservative Christian household in the 1980s, the messages I received at home and church were a hodge-podge of traditionalism and watered-down liberal feminism. My parents and other “real-life” adult role models instilled me in the idea that I would go to college and find a career but,

ultimately, my most important job would be as a wife and mother. However, mixed in with these real-life experiences was my weekly viewing of shows such as *Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, and *Murphy Brown*. These characters were my first exposure to the notions that a woman could be single and happy and that one's profession can provide personal fulfillment. As a child growing up in a community where most women's jobs, if they had one at all, took second place to their husbands' careers, the experiences of these characters provided me with the realization that there were other options for my life. I did not have much real-life contact with professional, independent women, but, through the power of parasocial contact, I received some of my earliest feminist training watching Dorothy Zbornak, Julia Sugarbaker, and Murphy Brown from the safety of my parents' living room couch.

Much has been written about the positioning of television within the home. The introduction and quick popularity of the television between 1948 and 1960 coincided with a "more general obsession with the reconstruction of family life and domestic ideals" in post-World War II America (Spigel, *Make Room for TV* 2). In her book *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel analyzed another form of popular media, women's magazines, from the period and found that "television was depicted as a panacea for the broken homes and hearts of wartime life; not only was it shown to restore faith in family togetherness, but as the most sought-after appliance for sale in postwar America, it also renewed faith in the splendors of consumer capitalism" (2-3). However, there were also fears that this new entertainment appliance might distract housewives from their other domestic appliances. Much like radio broadcasters before them, television executives were reluctant at first to produce daytime programming, worrying that their shows "might require the housewife's complete attention and thus disrupt her work in the home" (76). But, like their radio

counterparts, they quickly relented. One New York television affiliate was the first to implement daytime programming, in an attempt to off-set their primetime costs. By 1951, all three national networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) had instituted a daytime schedule, specifically designed to coordinate with, rather than interrupt, the housewife's daily schedule. Programs such as Detroit's WXYX's *Pat 'n' Johnny* were plotted so that viewers could come in and out of the action. Host Johnny Slagle instructed his viewers, "Don't stop whatever you're doing. When we think we have something interesting, I'll blow this whistle or Pat will ring her bell" (qtd. on Spigel 78). Soap operas, which were already popular on radio, made their shift to television during this period, because "with their minimum of action and visual interest, [they] allowed housewives to listen to dialogue while working in another room. Moreover, their segmented storylines (usually two a day), as well as their repetition and constant explanation of previous plots, allowed women to divide their attention between viewing and household work" (78). While many of the longest-running soap operas have been cancelled in the last decade, including *Guiding Light* and *As the World Turns*, the format remains a dominant force on daytime television.

Variety shows, modeled on the conventions of women's magazines, were also introduced in the early years of television. These programs served a double purpose—allowing the housewife to tune in and out of the action without "disorientation" and providing an easy way for the networks to incorporate corporate sponsors. Spigel contends that

The magazine format was perfect for this because each discrete narrative segment could portray an integrated sales message: Hollywood gossip columns gave way to motion picture endorsements; cooking segments sold sleek new ranges; fashion shows promoted Macy's finest evening wear. By integrating the sales message

with advice on housekeeping and luxury lifestyles, the magazine format skillfully suggested to housewives that their time spent viewing television was indeed part of their work time. In other words, the programs promised viewers not just entertainment, but also lessons on how to make consumer choices for their families. (*Make Room for TV* 83)

While the tv-addicted housewife became a stock character on many drama and comedy shows during this time, the major networks tried to counter this notion by presenting programming that could be considered “educational” for the stay-at-home wife and mother.

However, these programs were based on an idealized image of the housewife and her needs. Spigel writes, “These ideals weren’t always commensurate with the heterogeneous experiences and situations of real women and, for this reason, industrial strategies didn’t always form a perfect fit with the audience’s needs and desires” (*Make Room for TV* 86). Despite this disconnect, these shows presented a view of the American housewife that was prevalent in post-World War II America and helped form cultural attitudes of what a woman “should” be. In her book *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*, Andrea Press asserts that “[t]elevision representations of 1950s women as invisible housewives were market driven; they were reactive to social trends because advertisers valued women as *family* consumers” (218). Throughout the history of television, representations of women are based on a combination of factors, from cultural stereotypes and political trends to the beliefs of those behind the camera, but chief among these concerns has often been who is paying for the program and what the sponsors think their customers want to see. As cultural attitudes regarding gender have shifted, television executives have found themselves in a

programming bind as they try to appeal to female viewers while appeasing advertisers. Faludi summarizes their conundrum:

The message advertisers want the networks to promote appeals least to modern women. Female viewers consistently give their highest ratings to nontraditional female characters such as leaders, heroines, and comedians. But TV's biggest advertisers, packaged-foods and household-goods manufacturers, want traditional "family" shows that fit a sales pitch virtually unchanged in two decades. (Faludi 147-48)

This marketing ideology has changed somewhat in the two decades since the publication of Faludi's *Backlash*, particularly with the increasing recognition of the single (affluent) mother's consumer potential.¹ However, many advertising strategies still target the housewife because "she is perceived as a more passive and willing consumer, because she is more likely to have children, and because they [advertisers] are simply used to this arrangement" (148). While the husband may still be assumed to be the head of the household in a heteronormative, nuclear family arrangement, the wife is assumed to be the one with the purchasing power, making her the most appealing advertising demographic.

Because of its typically family-friendly status and the high percentage of female characters in comparison to other popular culture genres, the situation comedy presents a significant case study for the analysis of female representations on television. While the purpose of this genre is not to present wholly realistic picture of the cultural status of women in our society, the sitcom does provide a space for discussing and confronting deeply-held beliefs about the role of women in society. In her essay "Feminist Theory and Television Studies," Laura

¹ This will be discussed in more detail in chapter three, "Finding One's Own Avocado Tree: Single Motherhood and Sexuality on *Gilmore Girls*."

Stempel Mumford argues, “feminist critics and theorists agree that television, like other forms of mass or popular culture, plays a significant role in teaching and maintaining the political and social status quo. There is substantial disagreement about just how powerful that role is, and exactly how free viewers are to reject or resist TV’s ideas about gender, sexuality identity, and other issues” (117). By analyzing situation comedies that center upon a single female character or group of women characters and the cultural context in which they were created, I analyze how the single female character elicits attraction to her and her lifestyle as well as pity for her perceived inability to meet the cultural mandate of marriage and motherhood. Like the culture within which they are created, sitcoms in the last fifty years have shifted back and forth between the attraction to and pity for the single woman in attempts to please a nation divided on issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Because of the seemingly light-hearted genre in which they reside, sitcom women have often been allowed more freedom in their behavior than their counterparts in film and other television genres (Rowe 69). Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* contends that, as a mass medium, television has been friendlier in its representations of women:

[T]elevision might well be considered the quintessential postmodern medium, emerging in a time of crisis about male authority and the erosion of models of narrative, spectatorship, and subjectivity associated with classical Hollywood cinema. Television’s “flow,” in contrast to the tight causal logic and textual “integrity” of narrative film, releases women from the confines of the Oedipal plot and her positioning within a heterosexual couple into the more loosely constructed image of the sitcom family. This image, while appearing to uphold

the authority of patriarchy, might in fact be seen as masking the crumbling of its power. (80)

The central conflict of each episode is played for laughs and (traditionally) solved within half an hour. However, through repeated representations of the underlying problem behind the conflict, either women's dissatisfaction with patriarchal norms becomes apparent or the show's demonization of women who attempt to escape these traditional definitions is revealed. Rowe defines the tradition of women's comedy as a "less aggressive" form of Freud's definition of humor, which protects the ego through the denial or transformation of threatening or painful emotions such as anger. Because anger is considered a socially unacceptable emotion for women, it "provides fertile ground for being reworked into humor [. . .], aptly described as domestic humor [. . .] or matriarchal laughter" (69). This genre, then, can serve as an expression of accommodation and resignation, allowing the woman to express but mask her anger in wit. While this female anger filtered through "matriarchal laughter" is allowed to be more explicit in its representation over the decades, the source of this anger is safely located within the individual, placing responsibility for change on the character rather than a patriarchal society that needs its gendered expectations completely overhauled.

In recent decades, many situation comedies have moved away from the traditional thirty-minute self-contained episode format in favor of storylines that extend over several episodes or even an entire season, allowing for a more extensive exploration of the conflicts on display. While this not does not always result in making explicit the connection between individual problems and the institutional roots of those issues, it does provide the opportunity for these series to give a more nuanced presentation of the issue and the outcomes and potential

consequences of the character's actions and decisions. The emergence of the "dramedy" series, a genre hybrid of comedy and drama, is one example of this shift in tone.

The dramedy first entered the television lexicon in the 1987-88 season, with the premiere of series such as *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, *Frank's Place*, *The Slap Maxwell Story*, and *Hooperman* (Sewell 235). However, the genre can be traced back to earlier shows such as *The Rockford Files* and *Moonlighting*, the latter of which made history by being nominated for both Best Comedy and Best Drama by the Directors Guild of America in 1985. This new genre was heralded by television critics and network executives as a sign of television's maturity, different from more traditional situation comedies in terms of "visual style, realistic sound, and subject matter" (236). The new dramedies were supposed to represent a shift to more "quality" television, employing characteristics such as complexity, literacy, realism, and single authorship and eschewing more traditional properties such as the laugh track. While the majority of the 1987-88 season dramedies did not last more than that one season, they did pave the way for later shows such as *Gilmore Girls* and *Ugly Betty*. Like their predecessors, these series do not easily fit into one single genre, but their cultural literacy (in the case of *Gilmore Girls*) and highly stylized look (in the case of *Ugly Betty*) appealed to critics and audiences alike. Their one-hour running time and use of multi-episode or even season-long story arcs also allowed for more complexity in the exploration of issues facing unmarried women in the twenty-first century, rather than neatly introducing and concluding any conflicts within the more traditional thirty-minute format.

Through an analysis of three contemporary American sitcoms, I investigate how television producers have interpreted the figure of the single woman and attempted to make her appealing and acceptable to a broad viewing audience. I begin with an historical overview of

single woman-centered sitcoms from its earliest incarnations in series such *Our Miss Brooks* and *Private Secretary* through late twentieth-century shows such as *Living Single*, *Friends*, and *Ellen*, analyzing how television producers have adapted to shifting cultural norms, negotiated deviations from the white, heterosexual “norm,” and established a blueprint for safely presenting feminist characters.

My second chapter, “‘And I Started Wondering. . .’: Voiceover and Conversation in *Sex and the City*,” investigates the use of narration and the gap between female-to-female conversation versus female-to-male conversation in HBO’s *Sex and the City*. Drawing on Kaja Silverman’s discussion of narration in *The Acoustic Mirror*, I assert that the use of voiceover, provided by the main character of Carrie Bradshaw, makes public what we often keep private, particularly in regards to female sexuality and sexual desire. Because the voiceover is firmly embodied in Carrie and oftentimes voiced directly to the audience, a feeling of intimacy and honesty is established between the viewer and the main character. Her narration also serves a purpose in presentations of female-male conversation, as she functions as an interpreter and fills in the “gaps” between what is spoken and what is actually meant between men and women. These cross-gender interactions stand in contrast to the mostly narration-free conversations between the four main female characters, in which there is a sense of mutual self-disclosure and honesty and therefore no need for an interpretation. The works of Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates inform my reading of this important television series. By applying Tannen’s analysis of the different “genderlects” used by men and women and Coates’s discussion of the importance of sharing stories in female friendships, I reveal how conversation and self-disclosure serve to strengthen the bonds of female friendship among the characters on the show and how they serve to make the viewer feel as though she is part of this sisterhood of friends.

In chapter three, “Finding One’s Own Avocado Tree: Single Motherhood and Sexuality on *Gilmore Girls*,” I explore how the traditionally maligned teenaged single mother is presented as a role model in *Gilmore Girls*. In order to make Lorelai Gilmore, a woman who gave birth to her daughter Rory at sixteen and ran away from her upper-class home shortly afterwards, an “acceptable” single female character, the series drew the character of Lorelai as a precarious balancing act. She must model self-sufficiency while also being humble enough to ask for help, look attractive but in a suitably middle-class fashion, and have an active sexual and romantic life without setting a “bad example” that might lead to Rory repeating her mother’s “mistakes.” Drawing on Jane Juffer’s text *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*, I assert that the writers and producers of the series present Lorelai as a super-single-mom without addressing the characteristics that make her success possible, namely, her race, social status, and the supportive, idyllic community in which she resides. Despite this unaddressed advantage, the character nevertheless provides an alternative vision of single motherhood as opposed to earlier representations of it on television.

In my fourth chapter, “‘It Looks Like Queens Threw Up’: Beauty as Social Construction on *Ugly Betty*,” I analyze the American adaptation of a Columbian telenovela that tells the story of Betty Suarez, a young Latina working at a high-fashion magazine in New York City. *Ugly Betty* differs from many of its predecessors, including *Sex and the City* and *Gilmore Girls*, in that its main character is appealing not because of her looks, fashion savvy, or romantic and sexual prowess, but rather for her professional abilities and ambitions. However, because of her “Other-ness” in the world of high fashion, the series presents the opportunity to dissect how notions of beauty are colored by the norm of whiteness in our culture. Using theorists such as Naomi Wolf, Michel Foucault, and Susan Bordo, I analyze our cultural notions of beauty and

ugliness through the lens of race, class, and gender and investigate why Betty is viewed as a heroine by the audience despite her perceived “ugliness.”

Because of its pervasive nature, television’s presentation of gender roles warrants investigation and examination. In order to understand the current situation of women, particularly those women who grew up with the medium, one must investigate what television has “taught” its viewers about the place of women in contemporary society. Drawing on various feminist and television critical theories as well as more mainstream discussion and analyses, my focus on the single woman illuminates how the life and desires of the single woman has been presented in sitcoms.

From Girl Fridays to *Friends*: A History of Single Woman Sitcoms

From its earliest incarnations in series such as *My Little Margie* and *Private Secretary*, the American television situation comedy has provided a space in which traditional notions of womanhood can be explored, affirmed, and challenged through the character of the unmarried woman. As cultural notions of the single woman have shifted, television has had to adapt. Throughout its sixty years of dominance in the American household, television has reacted and adapted to the changing cultural status of women while also trying to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This tension between representation and viewer appeal has often resulted in television producers creating characters that conform to the default “norm” in our culture: a white, middle-class, traditionally attractive, heterosexual woman searching for a husband. Bonnie Dow contends, “a key part of television’s hegemonic function is limiting the menu of what we are encouraged to think about to those ideas that television can represent easily and well” (*Prime-time Feminism* 82). While the single woman appears as a recurrent figure in television, this figure has been shaped by compulsory heterosexuality. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich examines heterosexuality as a “political institution which disempowers women” (“Foreword” 227). Within our patriarchal culture, there are a “cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives” (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 234). These characters may be allowed to remain single for the run of their shows, but their actions and desires are often presented through the prism of marriage, and marriage or engagement often becomes the “big event” in season or series finales. When characters do stray from traditional feminine gender roles, they must be confined in other ways, such as through cultural standards of beauty or erasure of racial identity.

A brief overview of single woman sitcoms suggests that it is a mostly white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual televisual landscape, an assumption that is largely true, particularly when analyzing the content of the “Big Three” networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), but there is more to these homogenous representations than just racist intentions and assumptions on the part of television producers. Fiske and Hartley assert:

The world of television is clearly different from our real social world, but just as clearly related to it in some way. We might clarify this relationship by saying that television does not represent the manifest actuality of our society, but rather reflects, symbolically, the structure of values and relationships beneath the surface. So the high proportion of middle-class occupations is not a distortion of social fact, but rather an accurate symbolic representation of the esteem with which a society like ours regards such positions and the people who hold them.

(24)

Because of its positioning as an advertiser-driven medium with a multiplicity of “authors,” the characters and plots of television series are often directed to a middle-brow viewers, those who have a passing knowledge of culture but often lack the education or desire to understand “higher” art forms. In his book *“Honey, I’m Home” Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream*, Gerard Jones describes the American sitcom as “a foggy mirror [. . .] that misses a lot of our blemishes and care lines, a mirror with a rosy glow and a limited range; but one of its functions has always been to show the American family to itself, to open an alternate living room within our own, to let us stop and check ourselves over before we step back outside into the winds of change” (5). While there is no clear-cut indoctrination project on the part of television producers, there is an attempt to “read popular sentiment and [tailor] their schedules toward what

they think the cardboard people they've conjured up want to see and hear. [. . .] If this is cultural tyranny, it is a soft tyranny, operating through stripped-down formulas that the networks selectively abstract, via other media, from mass sentiments [. . .which] are already heavily shaped, of course, by the immense weight of mass culture's formulas as they have accumulated over the years" (Gitlin 203). Network executives produce shows that they believe will be successful and renew those that are, oftentimes resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy of gauging what audiences want based on a limited sample of offerings. While this does not justify the oftentimes-narrow representations of women and minority groups on television, it does provide an explanation for why they endure.

Nicholas Johnson, commissioner for the Federal Communications Commission from 1966-1973, once said, "All television is educational television. The only question is, what is it teaching?" While television often attempts to mirror social reality, it also reinforces the normative ideals of that reality by presenting them twenty-four hours a day. In a 1964 article for *TV Guide*, Betty Friedan questioned the consequences of these representations, asking,

What does such a denigrating image of real women do to young women watching, who are no longer sure who they are, or to girls who don't even know who they can be? What does it do to women or girls—or the boys and men whose love they want—to see no image at all of a self-respecting woman who thinks or does or aims or dreams large dreams or is capable of taking even small actions to shape her own life or her future or her society? (66)

While the characterizations of women on television have evolved past the sad housewife representation Friedan is critiquing, television still influences the way its viewers view themselves and others. As Aletha C. Huston, Edward Donnerstein, and Halford Fairchild assert

in the introduction to their book *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*, “Even when [television] is not intentionally designed to teach, it carries messages about social interactions and about the nature and value of groups in the society that can influence attitudes, values, and actions among its viewers” (6). Because of its pervasive nature, television’s presentation of gender roles warrants investigation and examination. In order to understand the current situation of women, particularly women who grew up with the medium, feminist critics especially must investigate what television has “taught” its viewers about the place of women in contemporary society. My focus on the single woman illuminates how television producers have interpreted the life and desires of a woman alone. The figure of the single woman in literature has been examined by scholars such as Nina Auerbach in her book *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, but, until now, there has been no extensive study of the single woman on television.

The current situation of single woman characters on television must be placed in the context of the changing status of American single women in the twentieth century. Beginning with the New Woman at the turn of the century and her flapper daughter in the 1920s, single women appear in mass culture as a source of curiosity and consternation throughout the twentieth century. Cultural attitudes shifted in fits and starts; less than a decade after one home economics textbook informed female students that “[e]xcept for the sick, the badly crippled, the deformed, the emotionally warped and mentally defective, almost every girl has the opportunity to marry,” Betty Friedan and Helen Gurley Brown questioned the assumption that every woman wants that opportunity (qtd. in Israel 134). Betsy Israel, in *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the 20th Century* (2002), asserts that “by the mid-1970s, [. . .] single women would emerge as among the most economically and socially significant of all the onetime

shadow population groups. Being single, like being openly gay, would finally lose any lingering taint of ugly character weakness, any hint of pathology, and come to seem an entirely viable way to live” (208).

However, as Susan Faludi and others have documented, after the successes of the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, a backlash emerged in the 1980s against women who attempted to create a life outside of the role of wife and mother, and this backlash was especially critical of unmarried women. Within the media culture, scare tactics were used to reassert the importance of patriarchal definitions of womanhood through news stories designed to warn women of the dangers of postponing marriage and motherhood and the recasting of unmarried women as either masculinized career women or neurotic husband-hunters in television and film. By the late 1990s, however, the swinging single was back as the primary representative of the unattached woman in popular culture, portraying the single female character as financially and sexually independent with a social support system of like-minded friends as family. Israel describes her:

The premiere single archetype of the new century is someone who [. . .] probably assumed in college she'd get married, then had a serious career, then had relationships, then. . .well, it gets hard to say, exactly, in day-to-day recounting, but one *can* say life seemed to get very busy. Many boyfriends. Many major projects. Many drinks and events [. . .] she's a cleverly scripted fictional single who, an amalgam of many real thirtyish never-weds, stands as the latest in singular icons. (256)

While the single woman in American culture, and on television in particular, is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, it is necessary to look at her foremothers to understand how she has reached this point.

The early years of broadcast television presented viewers with a plethora of single woman sitcoms, albeit limited to never-married white women. Owing in part to the popularity of *I Love Lucy*, TV executives scrambled to try and replicate the success of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, producing several series featuring what Jones refers to as “cute but dizzy women” (79). S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, authors of *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture*, claim that Ball had a sustained influence on television through “the many characters modeled on Lucy lines, defined largely by their frantic efforts to manipulate husbands, boyfriends, bosses, or other figures of male authority” (112). However, these shows replicated only the character traits and ignored the more complex, if subtle, war of the sexes on display in *I Love Lucy*. Lucy’s attempts to steal the spotlight from her band-leader husband Ricky is a coping mechanism, a way of enduring “marriage and housewifery by transforming them into vaudeville: costumed performances and rehearsals which made staying home frustrating, yet tolerable” (Mellencamp 67). Even though her attempts always fail, she succeeded in escaping the tedium of, if not her life as a whole, at least that particular day in her domestic existence, providing a thirty-minute vicarious escape for housewives who identified with her desire for something more than cookbooks, shopping, and leaky faucets.

However, because they did not feature women already confined by matrimony, single woman series such as *Private Secretary* and *My Little Margie* centered on the ditzy antics of their main characters, who were always accidentally causing problems for the patriachs in their lives. Jones contends:

Perhaps producers and writers were afraid to attempt the delicate, potentially explosive tension of *I Love Lucy*. Or perhaps they just missed the point, as imitators so often do. Nearly every one of these new sitcom women caused trouble only inadvertently in trying to safeguard her male superior's best interests. [. . .] These sitcoms thus backed away from the sexual conflict that energized *Lucy*, retreating instead to the level of wish fulfillment, comforting to female viewers who wanted to see themselves as helpful handmaidens and male viewers who wanted to view their women as exasperating but never threatening. (Jones 79)

By depriving these female characters of any power in their humorous portrayals, the producers reduced these women to a stereotype in their attempts to make them acceptable to a broad viewing audience. Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman in their book *A History of Women in America* contend that single women in the first half of the twentieth century “did not take themselves seriously as workers but thought of themselves as potential wives and mothers. They felt no urgency to acquire job experience and advance to more responsible, better-paid positions, as younger men did. Finding a husband was more important. [. . .] Most single women saw marriage as an answer to all their problems in the workforce. They were certain that once they married, they would stay at home”(321-2). Television series of the 1950s accepted this cultural assumption and repeated it over and over again, creating a parodic view of the single woman as a crazed husband-hunter.

Television also seemed to punish single women for remaining unmarried, regardless of whether or not her single status was the result of choice or circumstance. In her discussion about

the gendered condition of women working outside the home on television in this period, Judy Kutulas writes,

[Their experience], unlike men's, was an either-or proposition, jobs or families, but not both. Their jobs, moreover, were not glamorous; they were teachers or secretaries, echoing the reality of a gender-segregated workplace that limited real women's employment possibilities. Consequently, they were denied access to the consumer pleasures television housewives had. They lived in small apartments, wore tweedy skirts, sensible shoes, and, sometimes, black framed glasses; they did not have handsome husbands or cute kids. (218)

The life of a single woman was presented as if something was missing. If the ultimate goal for women was marriage and motherhood, then single womanhood was not something to be celebrated but, rather, simply endured, a waiting period before a woman's real purpose in life began.

Mary M. Dalton, however, contends that at least one of these "cute but dizzy" woman-centered sitcoms, *Our Miss Brooks*, starring Eve Arden and premiering on television in 1952,² presented a more nuanced view of womanhood, "putting one over on viewers," as Dalton describes it. The character of Connie Brooks was a high school English teacher, and much of the series focused on her efforts to win the affections of fellow teacher, Mr. Boynton. Dalton writes that, while the idea of a "work" family as a substitute for a biological one is not presented as clearly and openly as it would be in later shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the series has an "undercurrent [. . .] of Miss Brooks's strength, independence, and individuality—traits that would later be associated with happily single Mary—that belies what is presented as

² Like many popular television series of the period, *Our Miss Brooks* started on radio in 1948 and continued airing episodes on that medium throughout the run of the TV series.

Connie's single-minded focus on matrimony. This is reinforced by the fact that the man she pursues shows so little interest in her that viewers might elect to never take their supposed courtship seriously" (106). Connie is a "female trickster," as Lori Landay defines the term in her book *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. Landay asserts that, because women are "encouraged to manipulate their appearance and sublimate assertive impulses behind a mask of feminine behavior, [. . .] the only way for women to survive given their subordinate position and limited opportunities for exercising overt power, is to use the covert power of female trickery" (172-3). When viewed through this lens, Miss Brooks is only "pretending to be the unwilling spinster while living a life of relative independence that would not be available to her if she were, in fact, married to Mr. Boynton" (Dalton 107). Much like their real-life counterparts, some of television's women managed to subvert the rules of traditional femininity while appearing to live their lives by them.

While the first decade of television featured several series with single women as major characters, almost every one had been cancelled by the mid-1950s. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi writes that, after this banishment, "the unwed heroine would remain out of sight throughout the early and mid-1960s, appearing only as an incidental characters, a reminder to female viewers of the woes of unwed life" (156). For example, *The Dick Van Dyke Show's* Sally Rogers, co-worker of Van Dyke's Rob Petrie and played by Rose Marie, "served to throw into relief the good fortunes and greater femininity of Van Dyke's doted-upon housewife," Laura Petrie, who was played by Mary Tyler Moore in an ironic bit of foreshadowing and fore-casting (Faludi 156).

One sitcom single woman managed to break out of the unmarried secondary character role through the power of magic and television's tendency to rip-off successful formulas. The

“fantastic family sitcoms” of the 1960s incorporated a variety of non-traditional family structures, such as the unmarried Jeannie and Major Tony Nelson on *I Dream of Jeannie* and extended families on *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*. These shows were a clear departure from the suburban family sitcom that preceded them; instead, they were genre hybrids, “parodic in nature because they retained the conventions of the previous form, but they made these conventions strange by mismatching form and content” (Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* 119).

Because it was situated firmly in a fantasy space, *I Dream of Jeannie* was able to “poke fun at narrative conventions of the sitcom form and engage viewers in a popular dialogue through which they might reconsider social ideals [. . .and provide] a cultural space in which anxieties about everyday life could be addressed, albeit through a series of displacements and distortions” without offending its more traditional viewers (*Welcome to the Dreamhouse* 117).

Susan Douglas analyzes this shift in tone:

If we put these TV shows and the impulses behind them on the shrink’s couch for a minute, we see that a significant portion of the pop culture moguls were trying to acknowledge the impending release of female sexual and political energy, while keeping it all safely in a straightjacket [. . .] Sensing they were playing with fire, they tried to contain it technologically, through images of levitation, twitching noses, and poofs of fake smoke. (126)

Like the masking of Lucy’s attempts to escape her housewife role as humorous failures, Jeannie and *Bewitched*’s Samantha were a way of exploring the real problem of women’s emerging freedom in the private and public spheres through the decidedly un-real, impossible world of witches and genies. With this construct, *Jeannie* and *Bewitched* presented a fantasy view of

female empowerment. However, because of Samantha's safely married (and, therefore, "contained") status, as opposed to the unmarried Jeannie, *Bewitched* portrayed Samantha's magical powers as a potentially positive trait, as long as it was used for "good" reasons and always for the benefit of her husband. Her powers as a witch presented a potential source of empowerment and encouragement for female viewers, but within a character "who trie[s] to efface [her] potential in return for the 'rewards' of family life," a comforting notion for viewers who remained within a patriarchal mindset (Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* 128).

I Dream of Jeannie, which premiered the year after *Bewitched* and sought to capitalize on its predecessor's success, downplayed the notion of superpowers as metaphor for untapped female potential. Douglas contends that "[i]n *Bewitched*, female power could be accommodated; in *Jeannie*, it could not" (134). Because she was not constrained by the cultural restraints of marriage and children (like Samantha), her containment had to be actively represented through the symbol of Jeannie's bottle, and her hyperfeminized, jealous, and possessive persona made her powers seem even more dangerous than those of the more conservative, logical Samantha. Magic was no longer just an escape from dishwashing or an aid in helping a husband save an important client; instead, "the ante was upped: now, magic inspired by female desire, jealousy, and possessiveness threatened to disrupt the crowning achievements of 1960s male technocracy, the U.S. space program" (136). Jeannie's power, symbolized as exceptionally feminine in its inspirations and executions, is represented as detrimental both to her as a woman and her potential as a "normal" wife, so Tony's continued refusal to marry her is presented as justified because of the lack of control over her behavior, a result of both her lack of self-control and his inability to assert his patriarchal authority over her.

The fantastical metaphor of magic allowed the producers of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* the freedom to explore the changing cultural ideas about women's place in both the private and public spheres, most notably seen in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published the year before the premiere of *Bewitched*. By situating Samantha and Jeannie's desires firmly within the private sphere (both women want nothing more than to be a helpmate to their husbands, like "normal" women), both series presented their female leads as "super-powerful women who tried to efface their potential in return for the 'rewards' of family life" (Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* 128). While both women are "stronger" than their male counterparts—Major Tony Nelson and the rest of NASA must use all of their scientific knowledge to make it to the moon, while all Jeannie has to do is blink her eyes to get herself (or someone else)³ there—the two series employed "exaggerated forms of self-containment" in order to tame Samantha and Jeannie's powers (128). Both women were presented as ultra-feminine in their appearances with Jeannie's pink harem apparel and Samantha's mini-skirts and aprons. Jeannie was even literally confined to her bottle at times, which served both to contain her powers and to appease network censors' concerns about portraying an unmarried couple living in the same house, and referred to Tony as "Master," reaffirming patriarchal authority. These shows allowed for multiple readings—male viewers could be content in their knowledge that while these characters were powerful, all they wanted was a home and husband, while also allowing female viewers "a respite from, as well as critique of, male domination. [. . . and offering] a woman's dream and a man's nightmare" (Douglas 127). This schizophrenic approach

³ In the third season finale "Haven't I Seen Me Somewhere Before?", Jeannie grants a wish to Roger, one of Tony's fellow astronauts, and transports him to the moon, where Tony has just landed.

appealed to a broad audience by reassuring viewers on both sides of the cultural debate regarding women's place in society that their beliefs were "right" and being borne out on the small screen.

The single career woman returned to the small screen with a starring role in a more realistic setting in 1966 with *That Girl*, starring Marlo Thomas as Ann Marie, an aspiring actress trying to make it in New York City. Ann Marie was in the mold of the "cute but dizzy" girl, as she bounced from one odd job to another as she waited for her big break, and "the scripts mostly ignored the potential for portraying a determined working woman, concentrating instead on physical humor and Ann Marie's Lucy-like lovable dizziness" (Lichter, et al 124). But while Ann was cast in the "cute but dizzy" mold, there was at least one force behind the show trying to subvert this characterization. Ann dated magazine writer Ted Bessel for much of the series' run and even got engaged to him in the final season. However, in a DVD commentary on the series finale, Thomas discusses her insistence that the series not end with a marriage (or continue as a married-life sitcom) because she did not want to give her female viewers the idea that marriage was the only path to happiness for women.

While this analysis thus far may seem to indicate that the single woman sitcom sisterhood was lily-white and heterosexual, some shows have attempted to portray the experiences of single female minorities in the United States. *Julia*, which ran from 1968 to 1971 on NBC, was the first series to feature an African-American single female character as the lead. Played by Diahann Carroll, Julia is a nurse and single mother, widowed after her husband's fighter jet was shot down in Vietnam. While the show was the first sitcom in fifteen years to feature an African-American in a starring role,⁴ it was also criticized for its (non-)portrayal of African-

⁴ Prior to the premiere of *Julia*, the last shows starring African-Americans, *Amos 'n' Andy*, which drew on minstrel and vaudeville traditions, and *Beulah*, featuring a "mammy"-type character,

American life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, Herman Gray contends that shows like *Julia* and *I Spy* “integrated individual black characters into hegemonic white world void of any hint of African-American traditions, social struggles, racial conflicts, and cultural differences” (85). Aniko Bodroghkozy sums up the reasoning behind this white-washing, contending that “[w]hile hostilities and racial tensions brewed, and the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders described an America fast becoming two nations separate and unequal, tolerance and colorblindness prevailed on *Julia*” (“Is This What You Mean By Color TV?” 144). Much like they would do with feminism, sitcoms in the late 1960s and early 1970s only felt comfortable acknowledging racial issues in a watered-down fashion.

One reason for this reluctance was television’s need to appeal to a broad audience, which was still considered primarily white by television producers at this time. Hal Kanter, creator of *Julia*, decided to develop a show starring an African-American woman after attending a fundraiser in 1967 at which Roy Wilkins, an African-American civil rights advocate and director of the NAACP, spoke about civil rights and the “crisis in the cities” to a room of film and television executives (Acham 114). However, despite this source of inspiration, Kanter insisted that *Julia* was “not a civil rights show. . . What we’re driving at is escapist entertainment, not a sociological document. . . I’m not writing for a Negro audience or a white audience, only the largest possible audience” (qtd. in Acham 116). While Kanter may have been partly motivated by a desire to present a more “positive” view of African-American life, he also wanted to create a show that would be profitable. In order to appeal to “the largest possible audience,” Kanter’s solution was to write Julia Baker in the least “offensive” way possible, creating a

had been off the air for fifteen years. The NAACP criticized both series for their racist characterizations of African Americans, leading to their eventual cancellations.

characterization that seemed to suggest that, if only African-Americans would work hard enough, “integrating into mainstream society is unproblematic” (116). In his book *Blacks and White TV*, Fred MacDonald labels Julia as “the most assimilated black character to ever appear in the American mass media” (115). He continues,

Beyond the stereotyped mammies and maids of early TV, Julia was everything that Beulah, Sapphire Stevens, Madame Queen, and Oriole were not. She was middle class and beautiful. She spoke English perfectly. She was a liberated woman, a self-supporting professional nurse living in a racially integrated apartment building. As a war widow, moreover, she was responsibly raising a wholesome, ‘little man’ son in a homey environment. (115)

In creating *Julia*, Kanter used white cultural notions of what was considered “acceptable” and placed them onto an African-American character.

While this tactic was successful in terms of audience numbers overall (the show ended its first season at number seven in the Nielsen ratings), many African-Americans felt that the character of Julia was, in the words of Diahann Carroll herself, simply a “white Negro” (qtd. in Acham 117). In her article “‘Is This What You Mean By Color TV?’: Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC’s *Julia*,” Aniko Bodroghkozy analyzed the 151 viewer letters filed in the Hal Kanter Papers, which are housed at the Wisconsin Center Historical Archives. She found that many white letter-writers (who often racially self-identified themselves in their letters) felt that the show was a positive step forward in race relations. One letter writer discussed how she hoped “this program helps all of us to understand each other. [. . .] I know this program will help my two sons so when they grow up they won’t be so prejudice[d]” (qtd. in Bodroghkozy 149). Another writer, who described herself as “a white middle class Jewish teacher,” praised

the show, writing, “[i]t is finally a pleasure to turn on the T.V. and see contemporary issues treated with honesty, humor, and sensitivity” (qtd. in 148). Yet another viewer wrote to Kanter, telling him that *Julia* will help “the world [. . .] realize that the Negro is just like everyone else, with feelings and habits as the Whites have” (qtd. in 150). This sense that *Julia* was “just like everyone else,” i.e. “white” people, was amplified by the show’s lack of African-American culturally specific contexts, such as its generic theme music, lack of African-American decorative touches in *Julia*’s apartment, and even *Julia*’s physical appearance⁵ and speech, which was “completely uninflected.” *Julia* seemed like (the white) “everyone else” because she was created according to white norms, and her character reinforced the notion, in the minds of white, non-overtly-racist viewers, that peaceful integration would be possible if only African Americans would play by the (white) rules.

Many African-American critics and viewers, however, criticized the show for not “telling it like it is” (Bodroghkozy 150). *Time* magazine castigated the series for presenting a fantasy view of black life in America: “She [*Julia*] would not recognize the ghetto if she stumbled into it, and she is, in every respect save color, a figure in a white milieu” (“Wonderful World of Color”). Because of the lack of African-American characters in television and film, coupled with the racial tension documented on the nightly news, writers and producers had to walk a fine line when presenting African-American characters. MacDonald asserts, “In effect, in the late 1960s, whenever a black entertainer appeared, he or she was expected to represent all Afro-Americans, embodying the panorama of black life from slum to suburb” (115). In their attempts to create a positive representation of African-American life, Kanter and his staff on *Julia* created a female version of the “Super Negro” archetype, a “representation of blackness that was so superior and

⁵ In later seasons, Diahann Carroll did insist that her character wear her hair naturally in order to “address the changing views on black pride” (Acham 117).

so accomplished that it could not possibly offend anyone—except diehard racists, who the networks and their advertisers were less and less concerned about placating” (Bodroghkozy, “Television and the Civil Rights Era” 152-3).⁶ However, the “Super Negro” archetype was cast in the mold of white culture and assimilated to white norms.

This presentation of the “Super Negro” on *Julia*, combined with the lack of a father figure, angered many African-American viewers and critics. In addition to the perceived “whiteness” of Julia Baker, some black critics suggested that Julia’s lack of a husband “contributed to the castration theme prevalent in Hollywood’s customary depiction of the American Negro male” (Lewis 27). The family unit of the widowed Julia and her son Corey, while presented as firmly middle-class and assimilated into white society, still mirrored the stereotype of the matriarchal black family, which had been roundly criticized in the Moynihan Report. The report, which had been published by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1965, combined racist politics with 1950s nuclear family ideals and described African-American families as caught within a “tangle of pathology,” one characteristic of which was the “supposed preponderance of female-headed black households in comparison to white households” (Bodroghkozy, “Is This What You Mean By Color TV?” 163). The family unit on *Julia* seemed a contradiction in many ways:

On the one hand, the Baker family seemed the epitome of an upwardly mobile black family. Julia, as a nurse, was a professional who had joined the middle class. [. . .] On the other hand, this assimilated, middle-class black family had no male head. Like lower-class and ghettoized black families, a woman took sole

⁶ Other examples of this archetype from the time period include Bill Cosby’s character Alexander Scott, a tennis trainer/undercover spy, on *I Spy* and many of the film characters played by Sidney Poitier.

responsibility for running the family. [. . .] The Bakers collapsed the distinctions between the upwardly mobile middle-class family predicated on patriarchy and the impoverished and dysfunctional lower-class family predicated on matriarchy. (163)

The lack of a strong African-American male character on the series divided even the show's creator and its star. In a 1968 *TV Guide* article entitled "The Importance of Being Julia," Kanter defended his choice to make Julia widowed: "In every other TV situation comedy, Dad is a bumbling idiot [. . .] Is it better to have a stupid, fumbling father with a matriarch who really runs everything or to have, in absentia, a man of heroic proportions whom you can allude to and talk about?" (Lewis 27-28). In the same article, Carroll asserted, "To remove the father image, the strong center of the family, is a very damaging thing to do to black children." While Kanter's reasons for writing Julia as a widow, beyond his explanation to *TV Guide*, are unclear, one possible reason for his decision could be that it was easier to imagine an African-American woman assimilated into white culture than to imagine (or for the audience to believe) an assimilated African-American man, given the racial unrest in the country at the time.

The series also struggled with its depiction of single motherhood, but this issue received less critical attention at the time, as "[t]he show and its creators seemed as blithely unconscious of their portrayal of women as they were self-conscious in their portrayal of blacks" (Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean By Color TV?" 146). In the pilot episode, Julia is forced to leave the seven-year-old Corey home alone because she has a job interview and no one to watch him ("Mama's Man").⁷ When she returns, she finds Corey at the apartment next door. He had invited the neighbor boy Earl to come in and play, but Earl accidentally cut himself with

⁷ Because *Julia* is unavailable on DVD or in syndication, all episode information and dialogue have been taken from Acham and Bodroghkozy.

a knife. While Earl's mother is initially angry at Julia, she quickly forgives her and offers to babysit Corey in the future. This scene presents an "unproblematic transition into the integrated world," but it also sidesteps the issue of childcare for the single working mother by neatly resolving the problem before going to commercial break. Sexism in general often went unaddressed in the series as well. In the second part of the two-part pilot, Julia is interviewed by her future boss, Dr. Chegley, who asks her to identify a chest x-ray and sexually harasses her in the process:

CHEGLEY: You have a healthy looking chest. . .I believe you're here to beg me for a job.

JULIA: I'm here at your invitation, Doctor, to be interviewed for a position as a nurse.

CHEGLEY: I'll keep that in mind. Walk around.

JULIA: Beg your pardon?

CHEGLEY: You just said that you don't beg for anything.

JULIA: That's just a figure of speech.

CHEGLEY: I'm interested in your figure without the speech. Move. Let me see if you can walk.

JULIA: I can. [Walking] I come from a long line of pedestrians.

CHEGLEY: Turn around. You have a very well-formed fantail. That's Navy terminology. I spent thirty years in uniform. Do you wear a girdle?

JULIA: No, sir.

CHEGLEY: I do. I have a bad back. Now you can sit down.

Even though Chegley chastises one of his nurses for a racist remark during the interview process (which is later explained away as a misunderstanding), the sexism on display in this scene goes unchallenged, and Julia accepts his job offer. While *Julia* only lasted three seasons (with ratings decreasing with each subsequent season), it sparked a cultural conversation about representations of African-American life in popular culture that continues today. It also paved the way for a new period in situation comedies—television’s experimentation with “relevancy programming” during the 1970s.

During the late 1960s, a divide developed between shows that were popular with urban versus rural audiences, and network executives and advertisers were desperate to capture the interest of the newly-recognized “quality viewer,” a younger, urban dweller who made more, spent more, and was usually more socially liberal than his or her lower-income, rural counterpart (Gitlin 208). At the time, the prime-time schedule at CBS was packed with rural, family sitcoms such as *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a strategy that put the network in first place among viewers generally but not in terms of “preferred” homes with “quality” viewers specifically (211). In an attempt to correct this, CBS began developing more socially progressive and provocative programming. While the dramas created under this model flopped, the network’s new sitcoms, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970), *All in the Family* (1971), and *M*A*S*H* (1972), became huge successes and paved the way for more socially relevant programming on television, reaffirming the notion that audiences are more comfortable with presentations of social change when they are infused with humor, which softens the blow, so to speak. This new breed of show “depicted younger people bearing ‘sixties’ values—anti-authoritarianism and the desire for the authentic—while trying to get on with their lives under rules imposed by arbitrary authority,” bringing the radicalism of the 1960s into the 1970s, which

by that time seemed a little outdated and, therefore, safer (211). The theme and characters were not necessarily new, but now, there was no blind acquiescence to the unassailable authority of the husband/father, and “less soluble generational conflicts moved to the center of the show,” making them “bearable” through the genre’s humorous framing of the conflicts (211).

The Mary Tyler Moore Show premiered on September 19, 1970, less than a month after the August 1970 “Women Strike for Equality” demonstration. Women across the country marched in what Betty Friedan called “a twenty-four hour general strike, a resistance both passive and active, of all women in America against the concrete conditions of their oppression” (Friedan 182). The march received extensive media coverage in outlets ranging from *The New York Times* to *Life* magazine, creating the perfect cultural moment for CBS to premiere the first show in their “relevant” television experiment. While it was not the first sitcom centered around a single working woman, it was “the first to assert that work was not just a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men,” contrasting sharply with the single working girl shows of the 1950s (Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 24). One writer on the show recalled, “Mary represented a new attitude, that you could be single and still be a whole person, that you didn’t need to be married to have a complete life” (qtd. in Dow 25). The series would provide a working blueprint for the working-woman shows that followed. Lauren Rabinovitz asserts that the show was the first “to draw upon feminist consciousness raising as a contextual frame,” and its success established the working-woman sitcom as “the preferred fictional site for a ‘feminist’ subject position” (3).

The original plan for the character of Mary Richards was to cast her as a divorced woman starting over, but CBS feared that viewers would conflate her with her previous role as Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and think that she had divorced Rob (played by Dick Van

Dyke), illustrating that one type of single life was still taboo, at least for a beloved actress and her characters. The story was changed so that Mary moved to Minneapolis after breaking off her engagement to her boyfriend of two years. Beyond its judgment on divorce (and the intelligence of the audience), this change also indicates a new way of thinking about unmarried women beyond the sad spinster stereotype. Susan Faludi asserts, “Moore’s Mary Richards was not only unwed, she was more than thirty years old. Marriage panic did not afflict her. She had real male and female friends, enjoyed a healthy sex life, turned down men who didn’t appeal to her, and even took the pill—without winding up on a hospital bed in the final scene” (156).

For the first time, a character’s single status did not relegate her to a pitiable or villainous role, but her lack of a wedding ring did not free Mary from the gendered roles she was expected to play in her make-shift workplace family. Gitlin maintains that WJM-TV was “a quasi-family, really, with Lou Grant as the gruff, sentimental father and Mary as the good daughter, a woman independent enough to have her own life and thus appeal to younger women, but sufficiently pliant to entice and not threaten the males and housewives who stayed home Saturday night” (187). While it was successful in appealing to viewers, both male and female, single and married, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* did not alter the genre’s adherence to gendered male/female roles, offering “a comforting vision of *adjustment* without *change*” (Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 44).

In her assessment of the series, Bonnie Dow describes *Mary Tyler Moore* as “a historically situated collection of rhetorical choices that attempted to combine the marketability of single womanhood with the timeliness of feminism” (*Prime-time Feminism* 51). While the producers wanted to capitalize on relevance of the feminist movement, they also wanted to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, so the narrative of the show did not explicitly

challenge the patriarchal separation of the public and private spheres, presenting a view of feminism as “an individualistic lifestyle choice [that] offers a parallel, but not competing, world to domesticity” (53). The success of the show was due to its ability to straddle the traditional and the progressive, the feminist and the patriarchal. Viewers could read Mary as an empowered vision of the professional potential of women, as a woman who had chosen to work but also to maintain her femininity and respect for the hierarchy of gender, or any reading in between, creating a base-line model for single woman sitcoms to come. Dow contends,

Mary Tyler Moore created important parameters for future television discourse representing feminism, parameters that include a focus on working women (and a concomitant avoidance of a critique of the traditional patriarchal family), the depiction of women’s lives without male romantic partners, the enactment of a ‘feminist lifestyle’ by young, attractive, white, heterosexual, female characters, and a reliance on the tenets of second-wave liberal or equity feminism. (26)

The show was careful to present an image of liberal feminism, which believed that gender equality could be achieved without altering existing social structures, as opposed to radical feminism, which espoused that a total uprooting and reorganization of social structures was necessary in order to achieve gender equality. By firmly situating itself on the “safer” end of the women’s liberation movement, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was able to present elements of feminism and its effects on the workplace, beginning with the pilot episode. Mary arrives at the offices of WJM-TV to apply for a secretarial job, a nod to her single female TV precursors, but is instead offered the job of associate producer for the six o’clock news. As her future boss, Lou Grant, interviews her for the position, he asks her about her religious affiliation. Mary informs him (and the audience, by extension) that a potential employer is “not allowed to ask that when

someone's applying for a job." He then asks, "Would I be violating your civil rights if I asked you if you were married?" to which Mary blurts out, "Presbyterian." She accepts the associate producer job, even though it pays ten dollars less a week than the secretarial position for which she originally applied. When she wonders why she was hired for the position despite her lack of experience, one of her co-workers makes no qualms about informing her that she is the "token woman."

Mary earns the respect of her male co-workers not only by performing her job well, but also through her embodiment of the "good wife," resituated in the workplace as a "modern" twist. She "becomes the 'career True Woman' as a television producer who nonetheless retains the equable charm and mediating skills of the well-brought-up girl," a nearly-impossible combination for real women to pull off in life, but which made her characterization "very satisfying—for men as well as women—to see on the small screen" (Taylor 125). In her analysis of female viewers' responses to shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* and *That Girl*, Andrea Press found that middle-class women in particular identified with Mary Richards and Ann Marie. She contends,

The popularly "feminist" qualities of the leading characters in these shows, which include the facts that they work (actually, pursue careers), live alone, feel free to pursue relationships with men, and are seemingly independent in certain respects, captured middle-class women's imaginations at the time these shows were on, particularly for young women imagining and making plans for their future lives, or for women planning out the relationship between work and family. (77)

Presenting Mary as a liberated woman, without going so far as to make her a radical feminist, allowed CBS to acknowledge a more progressive social perspective on women's roles while at

the same time catering to the patriarchal desire that women remain "feminine." Paying lip-service to the growing acceptance of feminism allowed the series to portray women expanding their role in the workplace while at the same time maintaining the status quo, thus appealing to a broader audience. This successful formula would be repeated for years to come.

Because of the success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and CBS's experiment in relevancy television in general, the TV landscape became more accepting of single women, particularly in the workplace, for the decade following *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* premiere. Shows such as *Rhoda*, a spin-off of *MTM*, and *One Day at a Time*, featuring Bonnie Franklin as Ann Romano, a divorced mother of two teenagers, flourished in the ratings. Both series also broke the divorce taboo in situation comedies and bluntly illustrated that marriage is not the ultimate solution to single women's problems. For example, *Rhoda*, after moving from Minneapolis to New York City, meets a young divorcé and marries him halfway through the first season. However, the marriage does not last, and the rest of the series deals with Rhoda's life post-divorce. On *One Day at a Time*, Ann Romano begins the series as a newly-divorced woman trying to find herself outside of the role of someone's wife. During the first season, she finds a boyfriend, who proposes to her at the beginning of the second season. She turns him down, and, even though she does date men afterwards, she remains unmarried over the course of the series. By presenting marriage as an institution with its own set of problems and implying that having no husband is better than living with the wrong husband, *Rhoda* and *One Day at a Time* took the idea illustrated in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*—being single as an acceptable life choice—and took it one step further by presenting single life as sometimes even preferable to marriage.

While these 1970s shows were successful in illustrating that women did not have to be married to be satisfied and happy and, in fact, that marriage can be a detriment to personal fulfillment, these shows did not succeed in demystifying a more systematic approach to feminism and the status of women. Viewers interpreted these series in accordance with their own beliefs. Studies on the controversial *All in the Family* have shown that “although Archie may have lost the arguments, viewers took away whatever attitudes they brought to the show; racists felt confirmed in their racism, liberals in their broad-mindedness and sense of superiority” (Gitlin 213). Similarly, viewers sympathetic or supportive of the women’s liberation movement could interpret *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as evidence that women could “make it after all” in the professional world, while viewers with more traditional beliefs concerning women’s roles liked Mary for being “good girl” who maintained her femininity even though she found herself in a “man’s world.” While the shows in the relevancy television experiment were more diverse in their depictions of the womanhood than their predecessors, the producers of these shows were most interested in appealing to as broad an audience as possible, an appeal based less on “mirroring statistical reality than [on] evoking and satisfying plausible desire” (215). However, by the turn of the decade, even this casual acceptance of single womanhood as an empowering choice for some women disappeared from the small screen.

As they did in the early 1960s, television producers depopulated the television medium of women, and single and/or independent women more specifically, throughout the 1980s. In her discussion of this cultural backlash against feminist advances for women, Faludi contends, “[t]his process worked its way through television entertainment in two stages. First, in the early ’80s, it banished feminist issues. Then, in the mid-’80s, it reconstructed a ‘traditional’ female hierarchy, placing suburban homemakers on the top, career women on the lower rungs, and

single women at the very bottom” (148). While women in dramas suffered the most,⁸ the backlash also affected women’s positioning on sitcoms, as “in a resurgence on the old ‘Odd Couple’ format, bachelor buddies took up house together without adult women in one out of five new sitcoms” in the 1987-88 season (142-3). An article in *New York Woman* from February 1988 sums up the problem: “This season’s it’s especially clear that TV writers are uncomfortable with the concept of working mothers” (Gordon 80). This new trend of “single dad” shows was a subtle way of depicting the rising trend of working mothers as a literal “absence” in the family, as the trend was not reflected in society as a whole—fathers raising children alone accounted for two-thirds of all single-parent series in the 1987-88 season, as opposed to eleven percent of single-parent-headed households in the United States at the time. As the politics of American culture moved to the right, popular culture tried to remain relevant by either punishing or banishing women who challenged the status quo. While some series featuring single and/or working women did manage to flourish during this time, such as *L.A. Law*, *Golden Girls*, and *Designing Women* (which survived only because of audience protests to save it from cancellation), for the most part, television “succeeded in depopulating TV of its healthy independent women and replacing them with nostalgia-glazed portraits of apolitical ‘family’ women” (Faludi 148).

After the disastrous 1987-88 season, in which the audience for network television dropped by more than 25%, with the decline among female viewers two to three times steeper than that of male viewers, television executives backed away slightly from the backlash mania and created two of the most popular television series of the late 1980s and 1990s (Faludi 147).

⁸ For the 1987-88 season, only three new dramas (out of a total of twenty-two) featured female leads. Only two of these three featured women over the age of consent—one sorority girl and one “nubile private eye who spent much of her time posing and complaining about the dating scene” in a show titled *Leg Work* (Faludi 142).

Premiering less than a month apart, *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown* became instant ratings hits, but the presence of two strong women on television was seen as two too many by some in the media. *Newsweek* featured a cover story on the “phenomenon” in March of 1989, claiming that “[i]n the eyes of more than a few female viewers, the video pendulum has swung too far from the blissfully domestic supermoms who once armed the electronic hearth,” using a quote from Barbara Billingley, a.k.a. June Cleaver of *Leave It to Beaver*, decrying how Roseanne Arnold “says terrible things to her kids” and calling Murphy Brown “hard-hearted,” as evidence of female viewers’ distaste for these new shows (Waters and Huck).

While *Murphy Brown* was heralded upon its premiere in the press as an updated version of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the show was much more cautious in representing Murphy’s unmarried status as a choice with negative consequences. Candice Bergen, who played the eponymous character, commented in a 1989 *Playboy* interview, “Murphy is at the top of her profession. . .but she is, in a very realistic way, paying the price for it,” while Diane English, co-creator, described the series as “a sort of cautionary tale about getting what you wished for” (qtd. in Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 138). Through her career and successes, Murphy has been defeminized, becoming what one critic referred to as “a male persona in a female body” (Japp 71). The message of the series about the balance between work and family could be summed up as “a woman cannot both be professionally successful and retain traditional qualities of femininity. Murphy is rich and famous but not a ‘real’ woman in personality or personal relationships” (Dow 146-47). Her lack of luck with love is presented as a consequence of her personal choices rather than of cultural contradictions between personal and professional success for women. This message that professional ambitions are not conducive to lasting personal relationships is also played out with Murphy’s co-worker, Corky. Despite her traditionally

feminine appearance and expectations, Corky's marriage to a man from hometown ultimately falls apart because of jealousy over her success as a journalist (147). There is a "doubleness" both within the series and the media discussion surrounding it; it is seen both "as an affirmation of women's progress and as a reminder of the problems such progress has created" (139).

While the notion of coworkers-as-family plays a large part in the show, Murphy is not portrayed as "the classic 'goodwife' in a new location" in the same way Mary Richards was (Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 50). She was often seen undercutting her co-workers professionally and unwilling to play the role of listener and therapist to their personal problems. In its attempts to balance the views of a diverse audience, *Murphy Brown* was informed by a postfeminist understanding of gender politics; while women are free to advance as far as they want professionally, that success can only be achieved at the cost of one's personal happiness (as defined by a woman's relationship to her family).

The introduction of an unplanned pregnancy storyline in the 1991-92 season only emphasized the conflicted nature of both the show and the country as a whole. Despite a narrative establishing that "Murphy is not promiscuous, that the child has an aura of legitimacy derived from the fact that Murphy was once married to the father, that the father is deserting her through his own choice, and that Murphy will not abort the pregnancy simply to avoid the inconvenience of single motherhood," the pregnancy was criticized and dissected by the public, including Vice President Dan Quayle and many other public figures (Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 151). During the 1992 presidential campaign, Quayle gave a speech criticizing Murphy Brown, claiming that as "a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional woman," she was "mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another 'life-style' choice" (qtd. in "Dan Quayle vs. Murphy Brown"). Quayle used

his critiques of Murphy Brown as a jumping-off point for an “attack on poor, inner-city (read black) unmarried mothers who were responsible for the ‘lawless anarchy’ and ‘lack of structure in our inner cities,’” essentially blaming the 1992 Los Angeles riots⁹ on the rise in single mothers and the breakdown of traditional families and marriage. The show directly confronted the vice president’s criticisms and even used footage from his speech in the fifth season premiere episode “You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato,” blurring the distinctions between the fictional and the real, much as Quayle seemed to do in his speech. In response, Murphy organizes a special segment on *FYI* featuring different kinds of families (and played by real-life families), providing a counter-point to Quayle’s claims that the only healthy families are those with a mother and father living together in matrimony.

The show did not, however, use the storyline “to further essentialist ideas about the effect of maternity on women’s thinking and/or behavior,” illustrating that careerism and motherhood are not incompatible, but only giving the viewer rare glances into the character’s attempt to reconcile the two. An episode that follows Murphy’s almost-marriage to a co-worker ends with her dancing around with Avery singing “You’re All I Need to Get By.” While this scene tries to claim that Murphy can find happiness in motherhood even without a husband, it “does little but reinforce the general message of the series that a successful career cannot be the basis for a satisfying life for a woman” (Dow, *Prime-time Feminism* 159). *Murphy Brown*, while representing the fulfillment of some feminist goals, backtracks from even its predecessor *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in its assertion that while a career may bring some fulfillment for a

⁹ Following the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers in the (videotaped) beating of Rodney King, thousands of angry residents took to the streets and rioted for six days in late April and early May of 1992. Fifty-three people were killed, thousands were injured, and property damage was estimated at over one billion dollars.

woman, professional success is not enough in and of itself. *Murphy Brown* suggests that, while a woman may not need to be a wife to be a happy, she does need to be a mother.

While Murphy and Roseanne were ruling the airwaves on the Big Three networks, a newly created fourth network began catering to another audience. In 1985, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation bought six independent television stations and began broadcasting as the Fox Television Stations group the following year. While the first series produced for the network was a late-night talk show starring Joan Rivers, the fledgling network quickly recognized a gap in audience programming. In the 1980s, with the new availability of cable television and VCRs, middle-class white audience numbers were down at the three major networks. Fox responded by "narrowcasting"—creating shows specifically geared towards an African-American "urban" audience (Zook 4). By 1993, the new network was airing the largest number of series ever produced by African-American creators, and by 1995, black Americans made up twenty-five percent of all Fox viewers. With the success of series such as the sketch comedy show *In Living Color* and the sitcom *Martin*, the road was paved at Fox for the first series developed and produced by an African-American woman.

Living Single, which aired from 1993 to 1998, was created by Yvette Lee Bowser, previously best known for her work on *The Cosby Show* spin-off, *A Different World*. While the series is often compared to *Designing Women* or *Friends* (which would premiere a year later), *Living Single* did not attempt to white-wash its characters in the way *Julia* did twenty-five years earlier. In her book *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television*, Beretta E. Smith-Shomade contends that, in the series,

Middle-class success is already solidified. Touted by some as "the first voice of the self-sufficient Black woman," *Living Single* centered on the lives of four

Black, single, young, urban women. [. . .] All were professional, confident, attractive, and in American capitalistic terms, successful. [. . .] These black women offered a unique twist to Generation X, Black America by introducing the commodified hip-hop aesthetic but grounded in the vernacular and style of a gendered, mainstream African-America” (43).

The set dressings for the series expressed a sense of racial pride through the placement of African statues, kente fabrics draped on a coat rack, books celebrating African-American pride on the coffee table, and Negro League baseball caps (Zook 71). While Bowser was successful in presenting a vision of pride in one’s racial identity, she battled with the network over her desire to present a “slice-of-life comedy about girlfriends” as opposed Fox’s desire to present story about single women searching for a husband. The first battle over premise occurred before the series even hit the air. Bowser wanted to title her show *My Girls*, but the network worried that such a title would alienate male viewers and changed it to *Living Single*. Several of the episodes in the first season focused on finding a man, which Bowser contends was a result of Fox’s belief that those episodes were “stronger” (qtd. in Zook 68).

Despite the success of the show among African-American audiences, ranking in the top five shows in black households for the entirety of its run, the series was plagued by network interference and expectations about how women should act. Kristal Brent Zook contends that three contradictory ideological forces were at play in the show—the “desperation theme,” based on the “market-driven theory” that African-American audiences prefer regressive representations of women based on the success of Terry McMillian’s novel *Waiting to Exhale*, the “moderate” feminist, autobiographical vision Bowser had for the show, and the “radical womanism” of star Queen Latifah, both in her role as Khadijah James and her persona off-screen (65-6). This

struggle between the Bowser and the network is representative of the struggle between depicting the diversity of the lives of single women and the assumption that, at their core, all women still have the same heteronormative, marriage-minded goals.

The pilot episode of the series, “Judging by the Cover (AKA My Girls)” is a perfect example of this struggle. The episode opens in the offices of *Flavor* magazine, which Khadijah, editor and publisher of the magazine, describes as “an urban everything-you-need-to-know from a woman’s point of view.” Regine, Khadijah’s best friend and roommate and played by Kim Fields, stops by to brag about the afternoon she spent in a limousine with her new boyfriend, Brad. Regine is excited about her new relationship and claims, “Brad could be the one—he’s fine, educated, wealthy, and has a butt that’s dented on the sides with the promise of power.” Khadijah attempts to bring her back to reality, contending, “Men dump you like Eddie Murphy albums. You need to start looking beyond a man’s wallet.” The notion of a woman creating a life for herself, even without a romantic and financial relationship with a man, is extended throughout the episode, but not before making it clear that all four of the female characters, including Khadijah, find Brad, a sophisticated restaurateur and chef, attractive and appealing. When Brad knocks on the door, picking Regine up for a date, she tells the group, “On the other side of this door stands Michelangelo’s *David*, my Brad.” Khadijah attempts a comeback, telling her, “On this side of the door stands a woman who could give a . . .,” only to end with an enthusiastic and appreciative “Damn!” when Brad walks in the door.

Regine’s fantasy view of Brad as a potential husband is shattered, however, when the women discover that he already has a wife. Regine initially forces herself to believe his claims that his marriage is over and they can be together, only to be disappointed when he doesn’t show up for their next date. The episode briefly indulges in a typical sitcom trope of the heartbroken

woman gorging herself on food but quickly shifts to a discussion of women creating their own lives.

REGINE: I want a man who knows that fine wine doesn't come with a twist-off cap.

KHADIJAH: I don't know how you got so snotty. You ain't but one generation out the projects, your damn self.

REGINE: So what—I'm not supposed to want more?

MAX [lawyer and friend]: Of course—you get it on your own. You can do anything. You're a woman.

[. . .]

KHADIJAH: Regine, it's simple. You gotta start taking care of yourself. Put Regine first. Do what you need to do for you.

After this feminist-tinged conversation, the women engage in a little good-natured “male-bashing,” comparing men to speed bumps and cheap pantyhose. This scene encompasses all three of the components Zook identifies in the series: the network's desire for a “desperation theme” (Regine sitting at a coffee table covered with junk food and pining over her married ex-lover), Bowser's moderate feminist, autobiographical vision (the consensus that women should be creating their own happiness), and Latifah's more radical womanism (Khadijah's assertion that a world without men would consist of “a bunch of fat, happy women and no crime”).

While *Living Single* has occasionally been referred to as a black version of *Friends*, the actual series *Friends* did not premiere until September of 1994, a year after *Living Single* came on the air. In her article “I'll Be There For You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families,” Jillian Sandell situates the series as part of the 1990s trend of “alternative family”

shows, or “pal-coms,” further extending the definition of “family” in sitcoms beyond the biological family as well as the notion of a “work family” seen in series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown* (144). Shows such as *The Drew Carey Show*, *Seinfeld*, and *Living Single* “focus primarily on home life, but with home life now often being defined as a chosen kinship network made up of friends (and sometimes co-workers) rather than a biological family” (144). As young adults became more likely to postpone marriage while establishing a career, this move often required a literal move away from one’s biological family. While the biological families of the main characters are involved in their lives, it is the core group of six friends that provides the emotional center (and drama) of *Friends*. Sandell contends,

[T]he primary focus of the show is the relationship between these men and women who are not only each other’s best friends but also each other’s real ‘family.’ *Friends* thus captures and romanticizes the formation of alternative kinship networks made up of friends and neighbors, while also self-consciously citing and reworking sitcoms from the past and featuring characters who rely heavily on humor, and particularly irony, to survive. (145)

While other series such as *Living Single* had posited this idea before, *Friends* became a cultural phenomenon and spawned dozens of series that would repeat the formula throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

One way in which *Friends* did challenge the stereotype regarding single female characters was giving pregnancy storylines to two of the three main actresses over the course of the series. In season four, Phoebe Buffay, played by Lisa Kudrow and written as the “wackiest” of the three women, agrees to be a surrogate mother for her brother Frank and his menopausal wife, becoming pregnant with triplets. This storyline was played to humorous effect, such in the

episode “The One Hundreth (The One with the Triplets).” Phoebe arrives at the hospital after going into labor, and, when the nurse asks about the father, she delights in telling her, “The father is my brother.” After seeing the nurse’s confused expression, Rachel tells Phoebe, “I’m so gonna miss watching you freak people out like that!” While Phoebe is firmly coded as merely the incubator for the triplets, as she prepares to give birth, she decides she wants to “keep” one of the babies for herself.

PHOEBE: Can I tell you a little secret?

RACHEL: Yeah!

PHOEBE: I want to keep one. (Giggles in excitement.)

RACHEL: Ohh, I'm gonna be on the news! Okay, Phoebe, honey, you gotta be kidding. I mean, you know you cannot keep one of these babies!

PHOEBE: Why not?! Maybe I can, you don't know!

RACHEL: Yes! Yes! Yes, I do! I do know! Frank and Alice are gonna want to keep all of their children!

PHOEBE: Maybe not! Y'know? Seriously, three babies are a handful maybe they're y'know, looking for a chance to unload one of them. Listen, I-I hate to miss an opportunity just because I didn't ask! Y'know?

RACHEL: Phoebe, no! This is, this is insane.

The episode leaves ambiguous the reason for Phoebe’s desire, leaving it open for the viewer to decide whether this is merely temporary hormonal insanity, maternal longing (in general), or the result of having spent nine months carrying these particular babies. Once she realizes that Frank and Alice do “wanna keep all their children,” she asks for a moment alone with the newborns and tells them, “So, here you are. It seems like yesterday I was talking to you in that little Petri

dish. Everyone said labor was the hardest thing I'd ever have to do, but they were wrong; this is. Oh, I had the most fun with you guys! I wish I could take you home and see you everyday. Okay, I'll settle for being your favorite aunt. I know Alice's sister has a pool, but you lived in me. Okay, so we're cool. Yeah, we're gonna be great. Little high fives!" Pregnancy and childbirth function in this storyline as a sacrifice, but, ultimately, not a life-changing event, as Phoebe does not show any lingering desire to be a mother afterwards.

The main storyline of the eighth season of the series centered on the pregnancy of the character Rachel Green, played by Jennifer Aniston. The series was one of the most-watched shows that year, winning Emmys for Best Comedy and Best Lead Actress and bringing back many viewers who had abandoned the program. Many critics and fans commented on the evolution of Rachel's character "from a young woman dependent on her father for support to a person able to care for a child on her own" (Spangler 220). However, despite this seeming maturation, Rachel is still coded, particularly during her pregnancy, as somewhat unprepared and possibly even unfit for motherhood. In "The One with the Baby Shower," she becomes panicked after misidentifying the first gift (a breast pump) as a "baby beer bong" and assuming that a Diaper Genie dispensed clean diapers. She begins to worry her friends and mother when her solution to the smell of a dirty diaper is to leave the baby on the changing table while she takes the diaper out to the dumpster. She explains her lack of knowledge by saying, "Oh mom, I swear I'm not an idiot. I've read all kinds of books on pregnancy and giving birth, but I-I just didn't think to read the part about what to do when the baby comes. And-and then guess what? The baby's coming, and I don't know what to do! Oh, can I throw up in my diaper genie?" Her status as non-mother is affirmed by all those around her who seem to know more than she does. At first, she appeals to her mother for help, who offers to move in with her, until Ross, the father of

the baby, steps in, proffering his own experience as a father in order to decline Rachel's mother's offer. He tells them, "Well uh, y'know what? Even if she doesn't know anything, I do! I have a son. And his mother and I didn't live together, and whenever he was with me I took care of him all the time, by myself." While it is acknowledged both by the other characters and the series itself that Rachel is not ready to be a single mother on her own, her situation is made acceptable because of the family of friends she has available to help her along the way.

Despite this extended family arrangement, there is still much discussion on why Rachel needs a partner, preferably the father. David Crane, Marta Kauffman, and Kevin S. Bright, executive producers of the series, confess that, since it was unknown for the first half of the season whether it would be their last, they "had to leave open the possibility they could end up together at the end of the season," ultimately admitting that Ross and Rachel would be together by the end of the series, whenever that might be ("Commentary on '[. . .]Where Rachel Tells'"). It is ambiguous whether this was an already decided upon point before Rachel's pregnancy due to the audience's fascination with and love of the pairing, or if it was related specifically to the fact that they would have a child together. Either way, the producers and writers of the show were writing Rachel's "single mother" storyline with an expiration date, reinforcing the notion that single womanhood, and single motherhood in particular, should be a temporary state rather than a permanent life choice.

Another show premiering in the 1994-95 season questioned the validity of a woman choosing the single life. While *Ellen*, starring stand-up comic Ellen DeGeneres and airing on ABC, started out as another "pal-com," chronicling Ellen and her group of friends, the show made television history in its fourth season (1996-97), by featuring both Ellen Morgan the

character and Ellen DeGeneres the actress coming out as gay. Anna McCarthy, in her article “*Ellen: Making Queer Television History*,” describes the event as

A largely ceremonial first, an occasion we were all supposed to remember as the moment when queer lives finally became part of mainstream television. In other words, the event was a *formal* one, in both the textual and ritualistic sense of the word, within television as an institution. Queer fictions and characters could now permanently and officially shape the structure of the American sitcom narrative (as opposed to haunting its edges conspicuously, as Tony Randall’s Sidney did in *Love Sidney*, or lasting only temporarily, as [Billy] Crystal’s character [Jodie Dallas] on *Soap* did).” (594)

In the 1970s and 80s, gay characters on sitcoms had usually been reduced to one-time appearances in which their sexuality presents the “problem of the week,” a problem that was “depicted largely in terms of its effects on heterosexuals” (Dow, “*Ellen*” 129). While, by the 1990s, several series such as *Spin City* and *Friends* featured recurring gay or lesbian characters, *Ellen* was a trailblazer in terms of its potential to present a leading female character who just happened to be gay.

The “coming out” episodes of *Ellen* treated its main character’s attempts to come to terms with her lesbianism as an almost purely personal issue rather than one that is also colored by political and social notions, such as heterosexism and homophobia. In an interview about coming out, both as an actress and a character, DeGeneres said, “I didn’t do it to make a political statement. I did it selfishly for myself and because I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view” (Handy 86). Despite DeGeneres’s attempts to depoliticize the event, the show lost two major advertisers and was attacked by many right-wing

critics, including the Reverend Jerry Falwell who referred to the comedian as “Ellen DeGenerate.” The final day of shooting for the episode in which Ellen comes out was disrupted when a bomb threat was called in (Hubert 31). However, the audience for the episode was the third largest for a single episode of a series in the history of television at the time and earned the show an Emmy for best comedy writing. This range of reactions indicates that homosexuality evoked both fear and curiosity in the American public. DeGeneres herself acknowledged her potentially precarious position in an interview with Diane Sawyer on the prime-time news show *20/20*, telling Sawyer that she was worried “if they found out I was gay, maybe they wouldn’t applaud, maybe they wouldn’t laugh, maybe they wouldn’t like me if they knew that I was gay” (qtd. in Dow, “*Ellen*” 127).

Despite these external disruptions, the three episode arc of Ellen accepting her lesbianism and coming out to her friends and family focused on the personal aspects of coming out without acknowledging the political and cultural contexts that made her process difficult. The popular culture narrative conflated DeGeneres and her character, and DeGeneres and ABC appeared complicit with this, given the three interviews DeGeneres granted to major media outlets (*Time* magazine, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the aforementioned *20/20*). In addition to being granted an interview, Winfrey also guest-starred as Ellen’s therapist in the episode, a savvy casting decision given Winfrey’s mainstream appeal. In one of the scenes between DeGeneres as Morgan and Winfrey as therapist, there is the potential for a more politicized discussion. Ellen brings up the possibility of facing homophobia if she comes out of the closet, asking, “Do you think I want people calling me names to my face?” Winfrey (whose character is not named in the episode) replies, “To have people commit hate crimes against you just because you’re not like them? To have to use separate bathrooms and separate water fountains? Sit in the back of

the bus?” Ellen undercuts the political potential with humor, replying, “Oh, man, we have to use separate water fountains?” In her article “*Ellen*, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility,” Bonnie Dow criticizes the episode for not going farther in making the connection between discrimination of African Americans and gays and lesbians: “the point that is not made in this scene is that the kinds of discrimination that were once legal against African Americans are still legal, in most states, against gays and lesbians. There is no federal civil rights law protecting the rights of gays and lesbians. Unlike African Americans, they have not yet been designated a protected class. In 39 states, it is legal to discriminate against gays and lesbians in employment” (133). Even by hinting at a connection, however, the series challenged the traditional belief that one “chooses” to be gay. Sexual orientation is presented as a fact of one’s existence, like skin color, and therefore should not be something that opens one up to discrimination, whether institutional or personal.

Ellen does find herself facing homophobia in the third and final episode of the coming-out arc (“Moving On”). When she comes out to Ed, her boss at the bookstore, he reacts negatively. However, his reaction is not to fire her, which would open up a possible discussion on workplace discrimination; instead, his reaction is personal as he tells her that he does not want Ellen to babysit his children anymore. When Ellen asks if he thinks of her as “so evil that you’ve got to keep your children away from me?” Ed does not have an answer other than he has to do what he thinks is right. Ellen quits her job, telling him that she cannot work with a person who feels that way about her. In her discussion of this episode, Dow writes, “Ellen is not fired, a move that would be legal in many states; rather, she makes the decision to quit, turning the issue (again) into one of her own personal integrity. Moreover, it is obvious that she is most disturbed by the breakdown of her relationship with her boss and his family rather than by the effect of his

homophobia on her workplace environment” (“*Ellen*” 133). This reversal of the personal for the political is more problematic than Ellen’s scenes with Winfrey as therapist. Homophobia is presented as simply a personal preference on the part of some people. Ed does not fire her from her job for her sexual orientation, a move that would affect Ellen professionally and financially; instead, he makes a personal decision based on what he thinks is best for his own family. By having Ellen quit of her own accord, the potential for exploring the effects of coming out on one’s professional life is capped.

Despite the historic audience numbers for this story arc, viewership dropped dramatically in the show’s fifth and final season. ABC canceled the show that season, a result of network and producer confusion and reticence about how “gay” the show should be as well as a continued organized backlash from conservative religious organizations. While *Ellen*’s success as the first network prime-time show featuring a lesbian title character was short-lived, it opened the door for other series featuring gay main characters, such as *Will and Grace*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *The L Word*.

Despite this tendency to water down cultural conflicts, some television series featuring single women do manage to present a viewpoint outside of the mainstream. When that viewpoint challenges ideas of gender, these series most often use a tactic perfected on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*—providing a little feminine “sugar” to help the feminist “medicine” go down. Each of the three series I investigate in the following chapters present a lead single female character whose life and career were made possible by the feminist movement. Their storylines—the romantic and professional experiences of Carrie Bradshaw, a sex columnist, in *Sex and the City*, Lorelai Gilmore, a single mother who had her child at sixteen on *Gilmore*

Girls, and Betty Suarez, a Latina working her way up at a fashion magazine in *Ugly Betty*—would have been impossible to imagine on television just a decade earlier.

However, because of these seemingly “modern” characterizations, it was necessary to make these characters traditionally “feminine” in some way as well. As television has done since its inception, Carrie, Lorelai, and Betty are allowed a certain amount of freedom as women—the freedom to write about one’s sexual experiences, to have a child out of wedlock, and to advance at a fashion magazine even as an “ugly” woman—but, in exchange for that freedom, they are confined by other traditional notions of womanhood and feminine desire. Carrie may be the poster girl for sexual liberation, but she also worries that she will never find a man with whom to share the rest of her life. Lorelai can be a successful businesswoman and single mother, but she also has to struggle with the balance between being a good role model for her daughter and her own sexual needs and desires. Betty finds a job at an elite fashion magazine, only to discover that she was hired because of her supposed lack of sexual attractiveness. While these women, like the women watching them, are more liberated than their foremothers, society still finds a way to subtly control them and their actions.

“And I Started Wondering. . .”: Voiceover and Conversation in *Sex and the City*

Premiering on HBO on June 6, 1998, *Sex and the City* was an instant cultural touchstone. The series was the highest-rated cable comedy series for two years in a row, and its four female stars appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline “Who Needs a Husband?” (Akass and McCabe 2). While the series sparked multiple fashion trends and copycat columns, it was its frank discussion of female sexuality that intrigued and angered critics and audiences alike. While the format and structure of the series harkens back to many of its female-centered sitcom foremothers, the no-holds-barred style of conversation and narration opens a space for discussion and introspection about the place of the contemporary single woman in our society, both among the characters and for the audience. In their introduction to *Reading Sex and the City*, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe contend that

Sex and the City references a classical Hollywood tradition of screwball as well as innovative TV sitcoms about single girls in the city, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [. . .] and *Rhoda* [. . .]. Carrie is cut from the same mold as her screwball predecessors with her sharp witty dialogue and pratfalls. Just as she is aware of how the representation works, the series rearranges and adds to the conventions of these changing generic expectations. (12)

The humor on *Sex and the City* is firmly grounded in the series’s romantic entanglements rather than in the more general experiences of a single woman making her way in the world, however. When the humor does not come from the man of the week, it arises from Carrie or one of the other women’s embarrassment over something that happened with a man. For instance, in the first season episode “The Drought,” Carrie is finally settling into a relationship with the glamorous Mr. Big when she accidentally passes gas while in bed with him. While Big laughs it

off, and her friends sympathize but still make fun of her, Carrie becomes convinced that this momentary “unladylike” lapse has broken her sexual mystique for him. This fear that men will no longer find a woman attractive if she reveals her true self stands in contrast to the relationships among the four main female characters, who consistently reveal their secrets and insecurities to each other. While many of the show’s storylines reinforce traditional notions of heterosexual romance, the conversations both among the women and between men and women, as well as Carrie’s voiceover, opens a space for analysis on why these heterosexist ideas persist even among educated, feminist-minded women.

The use of voiceover makes public what we often keep private, particularly in regards to female sexuality and sexual desire. Because the voiceover is firmly embodied in Carrie and oftentimes voiced directly to the audience, a feeling of intimacy and honesty is established between the viewer and the main character. Her narration also serves a purpose in presentations of female-male conversation, as she functions as an interpreter and fills in the “gaps” between what is spoken and what is actually meant between men and women. These cross-gender interactions stand in contrast to the mostly narration-free conversations between the four main female characters, in which there is a sense of mutual self-disclosure and honesty and therefore no need for an interpretation. Because the viewer is privy to these instances of “girl talk” as well as Carrie’s narration, a feeling of closeness is established between Carrie and the viewer, in spite of the glamorous upper-class lifestyle on presentation in the series.

Like many of its urban-setting sitcom peers, the notion of family in *Sex and the City* is based not on biological ties but instead on the bonds of community and friendship. In fact, the bonds of friendship often appear to supplant the bonds of family, as the women reiterate time and again how lucky they are to have each other since they will always be there for one another in

ways that men and relationships can't be. Carrie explains, "The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't. But, in the end, they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself" ("Take Me Out to the Ballgame"). In her essay "Women's Friendships, Women's Talk," Jennifer Coates claims that while friendships differ in role and purpose in various cultures, anthropologists "have demonstrated the key role female friendship plays in women's lives, whether on Crete, where the harshness of women's circumscribed lives is made bearable by friendship with other women, or in central Australia, where solidarity and mutual support are vital in the maintenance of aboriginal women's traditional practices" (246). Women's friendships are uniquely gendered, characterized by intimacy, mutual self-disclosure, and a focus on talk, while friendships among men tend to be built upon sociability and a focus on activity and lack the self-disclosure typical in women's friendships (245).

This sense of "mutual self-disclosure" is displayed throughout the series. In her discussion of this female tendency to share, Coates writes, "stories are an intrinsic part of the talk of women friends. Telling stories fulfills women friends' need to keep in touch with each other's lives; moreover hearing about others' experience helps to place our own experience in an explanatory framework" (247). Deborah Tannen also explores this female tendency in her book

You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. She contends that, for women,

Telling about a problem is a bid for an expression of understanding ("I know how you feel") or a similar complaint ("I felt the same way when something similar happened to me"). In other words, troubles talk is intended to reinforce rapport by sending the metamessage "We're the same; you're not alone. [. . .]"

Furthermore, mutual understanding is symmetrical, and this symmetry contributes to a sense of community. (53)

By situating one character's problem as issue familiar to all the characters, the series exposes how social constructions of gender affect women's everyday lives and establishes a sense of intimacy with the audience, a conversational style Tannen describes as conveying a sense of "we're close and the same" (28).

Sex and the City explores this intimacy through the characters' interactions as well as extending an invitation to the audience to do the same, as the female viewer is able to compare her own experiences to the relationship problem of the week. Coates contends that this intimate story-telling provides a "very particular sort of pleasure," and through its transmission to audiences, the series both illustrates and provides this type of pleasure. However, according to Tannen, this type of intimacy can only be accomplished when there is symmetry across the troubles under discussion. In the fourth season episode, "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," Charlotte arrives for brunch upset and wanting to discuss her problems conceiving. Miranda remains silent during the conversation, and Charlotte asks, "What's with the eyes? You're just sitting there. You haven't said a word and you're making 'the eyes.'" When Miranda confesses that she is pregnant and planning to have an abortion, an asymmetry of fertility and maternal desire is established between the characters. Charlotte recognizes that Miranda's unplanned pregnancy, as opposed to her own fertility problems, is the more likely thread of commonality among the women, and says, "I'll leave. You can just sit here and have your abortion talk." Charlotte is correct in her assumption, as the remaining three women participate in a story round, with Carrie and Samantha telling the stories of their own abortion experiences in an attempt to reassure Miranda that she is not alone in her predicament. When Miranda decides against going through with the

abortion, symmetry is reestablished between her and Charlotte. Charlotte arrives with flowers, a nervous offering to “do whatever it is flowers are supposed to do in a situation like this.”

Miranda tells her that she has decided to keep the baby, and this shared sense of maternal desire (albeit in different degrees) heals the asymmetry of fertility between them.

The power and pleasure of female friendship conversations can be seen in the use of Carrie’s voiceover in the show. Very rarely does her voiceover interrupt a conversation between the four women, indicating the “no-holds-barred” type of female friendship Coates describes. In contrast to the all-female scenes, Carrie’s voiceover usually begins, ends, and often interrupts scenes between male and female characters, signifying that male-female communication is not as straight-forwardly honest as female-female interactions. Tannen describes this difference in *You Just Don’t Understand*:

Women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, [so] communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said that they speak different genderlects. (42)

Tannen asserts that men and women learn these different styles beginning in childhood because “[e]ven if they grow up in the same neighborhood, on the same block, or in the same house, girls and boys grow up in different worlds of words” (43). Carrie as narrator and columnist functions as researcher and interpreter, for herself and the audiences of her column and the series, in these male-female interactions. Tannen writes that “Much—even most—meaning in conversation does not reside in the words spoken at all, but is filled in by the person listening” (37). Carrie as

narrator fills in these gaps, serving as an intermediary between the character speaking and the audience listening.

The voiceovers are another example of the intimacy between the women, as the information and insight provided by Carrie's narration comes from her conversations with the other women. For instance, in the season two episode "They Shoot Single People, Don't They?" Carrie narrates the evolution of a date between Samantha and William, a salsa bar owner. We see William tempt Samantha with his frequent and early use of "we" in making plans for the future. Carrie tells the viewer, "At first Samantha listened, fascinated, detached. It was rare to hear a man use the 'we' word, so comfortably so early on. [. . .] Pretty soon she gave in. She lay back, opened up, and let the 'we' wash over her." The scene then immediately cuts to Samantha describing her date to Carrie in a morning-after phone call that mirrors Carrie's narration. She recounts the events from her date, providing ample evidence that she has "let the 'we' wash over her" as she fantasizes about what her summer in the Hamptons with William will be like, rehashing much of the same information we saw in the previous scene. While it could be argued that Carrie as narrator is omniscient and a separate character from Carrie Bradshaw, an alternate source of her power as narrator could be the information gleaned from her friendships with the other women, given how her column often intersects with her narration.

In her book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Kaja Silverman defines the disembodied voiceover in film as "a 'voice on high,' like that of the angel Joseph in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself 'on top' of the diegesis. To the degree that the voiceover preserves its integrity, it also becomes an exclusively male voice" (Silverman 48). Silverman asserts that in order for a voiceover to have authority within the text for the audience,

it must remain apart from the characters and action of the story: “the voiceover is privileged to the degree that *it transcends the body*. Conversely, it loses power and authority with every corporeal encroachment, from a regional accent or idiosyncratic ‘grain’ to definitive localization in the image. Synchronization marks the final moment in any such localization, the point of full and complete ‘embodiment’” (49). The less visible and more anonymous the body behind the voiceover, the more reliable it is believed to be, as well as being more likely to be male.

In her research, Silverman only found one example of a disembodied female voiceover in Hollywood cinema, 1949’s *Letter to Three Wives*, which is markedly different from any of its male counterparts. Silverman writes,

Although it “hovers” above the image track, in an invisible spatial register, it occupies the same temporal register as the other characters, and often comments upon events as they occur. Moreover, although the “owner” escapes the viewer’s gaze, her appearance is a frequent topic of conversation. [. . .] The disembodied voiceover [. . .] is thus curiously both corporealized and diegeticized. (48-9)

In the cinematic texts Silverman discusses, the female cannot escape corporealization.

But what about television? The CW series *Gossip Girl* has a female narrator who is anonymous, but guessing her identity becomes a regular game for both the characters on the show and the audience watching it. *Sex and the City*, on the other hand, places narrative powers squarely on the shoulders of the main character, even going so far as to have Carrie narrate directly into the camera in early episodes. Despite this definitive embodiment, however, her voice functions as an omniscient authority in the text; even in scenes in which Carrie the character is not present, Carrie the narrator hovers above the action, summarizing and theorizing. Because her voiceover often converges with her column, her narration becomes the impartial

journalistic gaze, even when that gaze is focused on herself. She is both inside and outside of the plot, subverting the traditional Hollywood formula of what constitutes integrity in voiceover. Silverman contends that embodied voiceover “functions almost like a searchlight suddenly turned upon a character’s thoughts; it makes audible what is ostensibly inaudible, transforming the private into the public” (53). However, in classic film, this searchlight is only turned upon the character embodying the voiceover. Carrie turns this searchlight upon all of the characters, turning not only her own body “inside out” but also those of her female friends. This making public of the private occurs on multiple levels, as Carrie’s narration exposes the women’s innermost thoughts and fears not only to the outside world of the viewer but also to the inside world of the show itself through Carrie’s column.

In *Sex and the City*, Carrie’s voiceover functions as part of the larger project of the series to give voice and visibility to women’s issues that have traditionally been considered private, such as female sexual desire, by eschewing the traditionally disembodied male voiceover and giving viewers access to Carrie’s audible and thoroughly embodied narration. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe assert that the show “challenges prohibitions and breaks the silence, so that women can begin to tell their stories and speak about sex differently” (196). In early episodes, characters confess their feelings about sex and relationships directly into the camera, presumably prompted and encouraged by Carrie. Even though this style of directly addressing the camera was phased out, it can be assumed that Carrie’s research methods did not change and that the knowledge she shares in her column and narration comes from frank discussions with friends and acquaintances. These conversations, whether they take place over drinks with all the women on a Friday night or in an early morning phone call, are part of a long tradition of “girl talk”¹⁰ as

¹⁰ See Coates

well as the more specific consciousness-raising tactics of the second-wave women's movement. While the characters are rarely driven to take public, political action about these issues, the honesty makes the personal political¹¹ by allowing the women, as well as female viewers, to recognize the commonality and gender-specific nature of their problems.

In *Sex and the City*, Carrie's narration through the voice of her column provides a device through which to talk about the relationship problem of the week. Carrie's career provides a central organizational structure for the plot. The thesis question of her column appears as voiceover narration as well as being shown to the viewer visually as Carrie types it on her laptop or jots it down on a cocktail napkin. Unlike *Ally McBeal*, which uses voiceover to emphasize "the direct contrast between Ally's private speech and her public actions" (Smith 64), voiceover in *Sex and the City* functions first as an indirect revelation (when only the viewer is privy to her words) and later a public one (when her column is published) of the emotions and fears women are reluctant to reveal, with Carrie and her friends standing in as the Everywoman.

In his essay "Sex, Confession, and Witness," Jonathan Bignell writes that *Sex and the City* "establishes a 'structure of feeling' in which the TV audience is invited to participate" by drawing on "modes of confession found in talk shows in which individuals perform their identity by means of confessional discourse, and by bearing witness to the tribulations of others" (Bignell 167). The first season of the series featured on-the-street interviews, as well as scenes where Carrie spoke the audience in asides. Both of these devices featured the character speaking directly into the camera, emphasizing the confessional style of *Sex and the City*, both the column and the series.

¹¹ "The personal is the political" is a term popularized by the radical feminist group the Redstockings in the 1970s and became a mantra of the second-wave feminist movement (Willis 118).

In the first season episode “Secret Sex,” the confessional tone is multi-layered, presenting a contrast between public words and private actions. For her first date with Mr. Big, Carrie decides to wear the “naked dress” from her recent promotional photo shoot. Charlotte interprets her wardrobe choice as a sign that she plans to have sex with Big, but Miranda backs up Carrie’s denials with the clarification that “she’s not going to have sex, she’s just gonna look like sex.” In the conversation that follows, the four characters discuss how to navigate the double bind of female sexuality faced by women in the post-sexual revolution world of the show. The women’s viewpoints range from keeping a guy in a “holding pattern” for five dates to “just don’t screw on the first date and you’ll be fine” to “a guy can just as easily dump you if you screw on the first date or if you wait until the tenth.” Carrie leaves the conversation when her date arrives, and we follow her into the hallway, where she directly addresses the camera, “The truth is, I was dying to sleep with him. But isn’t delayed gratification the definition of maturity?” With this final confession before her date, Carrie illustrates the divide between what a woman wants and what she thinks is appropriate, a divide that can be particularly deep when it comes to sexuality. By situating her admission in the context of a “private” confessional, the insinuation is that there are still some emotions (namely, lust) to which one should not admit in public settings. However, the insinuation is subverted through the voicing of these desires through the main character of the show.

In her discussion of *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, Amanda Lotz asserts that

[These shows] use first-person narration, characters’ conversations with themselves and imaginary people, and fantasy sequences to create rich character development through conventional narrative structures. These techniques exhibit

the rich inner lives of the characters and effectively strip a layer of surface to reveal their uncertainties and flaws to a degree that is less evident in other dramatic narrative types. The nakedness of the characters' innermost thoughts, fears, and desires creates an intimate relationship between audience and character.

(Redesigning Women 90-1)

Through confessing her desire to sleep with this mysterious new man in her life, Carrie gives voice to her own sexual needs and desires, and by addressing this confession directly to the camera, she establishes a relationship with the audience, encouraging them to find their own sexual voice.

While the ending of the episode bears out this subversion, Carrie's reaction to having slept with Big on the first date indicates that she still somewhat believes that she can ruin the possibility of a real relationship by giving in to her desires. The show moves from the two kissing in the limo almost immediately upon entering it to a shot of a bed with rumpled sheets, with Carrie and Big wrapped in blankets on the floor below. In voiceover, she tries to reassure herself, "I can't be hemmed in by rules; I go with my emotions. I mean some of the greatest romances of all time began with sex on the first date. . . I bet." She continues, vowing, "I will not be the first one to speak, and, if he never calls me again, I'll think of him fondly—as an asshole." Immediately after this promise, however, she breaks the silence. "That was really and completely. . . on the first date. I mean, I didn't plan that you know. What do you think?" Several emotions are conveyed through this utterance. She is reluctant to define the experience, as she trails off before providing an adjective to the adverbs "really and completely." She then switches to denial, wanting him to know that she is not the "type" of woman who normally has sex on the first date. Finally, unable to read his reaction in the first two attempts, she asks for reassurance:

“What do you think?” She is trying to establish an emotional intimacy, allowing him the space to explain his own feelings about the physical intimacy that has occurred between them. He pauses to move his arm from under Carrie before answering, “I thought it was really pretty great but what do I know. You feel like having some Szechwan?” Big is focusing on the message level of talk, answering Carrie’s immediate question and offering up an activity to extend their time together. Carrie, however, focuses on the metamessage level of the conversation and wonders if there is a deeper meaning to his words, asking in voiceover, “Has Mr. Big discovered my weakness for great sex & greasy Chinese, or was going out to dinner merely a diversionary tactic to keep me from spending the night?” This voiceover is representative of the overlying problem of the episode—Carrie’s tendency to question the metamessage behind Big’s message-focused conversational style. Her voiceover functions as a nagging voice in her head, undercutting unmediated female sexual desire.

While elements of direct address to the audience and the (wo)man-on-the-street interviews were quickly phased out of the show, the confessional tone remains with the use of Carrie’s voiceover and scenes of the women discussing their lives in the bedroom and in the office. In their essay “Ms. Parker and the Vicious Circle: Female Narrative and Humour in *Sex and the City*,” Kim Akass and Janet McCabe write that Carrie’s voiceovers adopt “the language associated with fairy tales, movie romance, or other feminine fictions, her commentaries set up expectations that offer a playful perspective on what we see” (185). While her pun-filled narration creates a playful tone, it also gives a voice to the usually unspoken fears of women. By overlaying humor over the discussion of these difficult issues, *Sex and the City* provides a space for the dissection of patriarchal norms surrounding romance and mixes the ironic with the earnest as the characters make fun of each other for their devotion to their quest to find the perfect man.

While the series does place an emphasis on the importance of finding the perfect man, it does not assert that female (hetero)sexual desire is linked to attraction to a particular man; instead, it illustrates that sexual desire is a fact of life for both women and men. The season one episode “The Turtle and the Hare” explores the notion of “settling,” whether it be settling for a man or for battery-powered orgasms. The episode opens with Carrie’s narration setting up a sort of modern-day fairy tale: “In a city of perfect people, no one was more perfect than Brooke. She was an interior designer who only dated A-list guys. For Brooke, every Saturday night was like the senior prom. So, when she got married, we were all dying to see which one had made the cut.” The “once upon a time” style narration is undercut, however, when Miranda asks, “Was I the only one who remembered that Brooke once described this man as more boring than exposed brick?” As the girls make their good-byes to the newly married couple, Brooke whispers to Carrie, “It’s always better to marry someone who loves you more than you love them,” solidifying the idea that this is no fairy-tale ending but rather a rational, if somewhat emotionless, decision made after weighing all the options and possible outcomes. As she later tells Carrie, “We think we’re Carolyn Bessette. One day John-John’s out of the picture, and we’re happy just to have some guy who can throw around a Frisbee.”

Over brunch the next morning, the women discuss the wedding and resulting conversation between Carrie and Big, in which he calmly told her that he did not plan to ever getting married again. As the women disagree about whether or not Carrie should be upset and what she should do, if anything, Miranda asserts, “What’s the big deal? In fifty years, men are gonna be obsolete anyway. I mean, already you can’t talk to them, you don’t need them to have kids with, you don’t even need them to have sex with anymore, as I’ve just very pleasantly discovered” (“The Turtle and the Hare”). Sex is divorced from emotion here, as sexual

satisfaction is acknowledged as something that can be bought rather than waiting for it to find you. Charlotte is at first unable to accept this possibility, protesting, “A vibrator does not call you on your birthday. A vibrator doesn't send you flowers the next day, and you cannot take a vibrator home to meet your mother.” Miranda ends the conversation, at least for the viewers, by simply retorting, “I know where my next orgasm is coming from. Who here can say as much?”

Miranda's retort was apparently enough for the women as well, as Charlotte, Carrie, and Miranda head out in search of appliance-aided sexual fulfillment. While Carrie is initially shocked at the price, Charlotte, at first, continues to protest the whole notion, claiming, “I have no intention of using that. I'm saving sex for someone I love” (“The Turtle and the Hare”). She quickly relents, however, when she sees how “cute” the product is: “Look! Oh, it's so cute. I thought it would be all scary and weird, but it isn't. It's pink! Look, the little bunny has a little face like Peter Rabbit!” Sharon Marie Ross asserts in her essay “Talking Sex: Comparison Shopping through Female Conversation in HBO's *Sex and the City*,” “Through the discussion of sexual choices, gender role options, and literal material goods, the women of *Sex and the City* incorporate personal sexual desire into a consumerist framework that allows them to manage their own sexuality” (112). Charlotte is at first able to accept the idea of a vibrator as a (temporary) sexual aid but quickly begins to worry about its effect on her and future relationships:

CHARLOTTE: I think I broke my vagina. [. . .] Metaphorically, I mean. With the Rabbit.

CARRIE: So you've been using it!

CHARLOTTE: Yes. I'm scared if I keep using it, I won't be able to enjoy sex with a man again.

CARRIE: Why?

CHARLOTTE: Have you ever been with a man, you know, and he's like, he's doing everything and it feels good, but somehow you just can't manage to. . .

CARRIE: Come?

CHARLOTTE: Yeah. Well, it's weird, 'cause with the Rabbit it's like every time, boom! And one time, I came for like five minutes.

CARRIE: It's not illegal.

CHARLOTTE: Yeah, but no man ever did that. I'm scared. What am I gonna do?

CARRIE: Well, you know. You could still enjoy sex with a man and the Rabbit.

CHARLOTTE: No, no. I'm done with it. That's it. I'm never going to touch that thing again.

Despite her claims, Charlotte is unable to give up on the easiness of the Rabbit, canceling on Carrie twice before Carrie decides an intervention is in order. She tries to protest at first, telling the women, “It’s a vibrator. It’s not like it’s crack” and hiding the toy behind another kind of toy rabbit, a stuffed one. However, when she actually voices her true feelings on the matter, telling Carrie and Miranda, “I’d just rather stay home with the Rabbit than go out with men,” she quickly relents and agrees to get dressed and ready to go out. A vibrator is shown here to be an acceptable accessory to sexual desire but unacceptable by itself. Just as Carrie would never go out in just a pair of heels, no matter how fabulous they may be, the view presented here is that a sex toy is an accessory to sexuality rather than a full outfit of sexual desire.

The idea of “settling” is also explored in more direct ways, as Carrie contemplates what taking marriage off the table means for her relationship with Big. She briefly considers marrying

Stanford, her best friend who is unable to collect his inheritance, given to those in his family upon marriage, because he is a gay man. Stanford promises her everything but sexual intimacy (with him): “We're best friends. We make each other laugh. We both sleep with men. This is not a bad idea at all. [. . .] Think about it. Who else would keep you in expensive shoes and encourage you to cheat?” (“The Turtle and the Hare”). After considering the other options around her—marriage to a man “who loves you more than you love [him],” a sexual relationship with a battery-operated appliance, or a marriage-less future with Big—the notion of marrying a good friend and finding sexual satisfaction on the side starts to seem like the best option. And while this option is eventually shown to not really be an option, as Stanford’s grandmother/keeper of the inheritance reveals to Carrie that she knows Stanford is gay and not willing to part with her money for a “sham” marriage, the time Carrie spends considering her options forces her to be honest with Big about her feelings. As Big prepares dinner for them, she bluntly tells him, “I do want to get married someday. Maybe not today, but I don’t want. . . I can’t date somebody that won’t. What’s the point?” Big indirectly addresses her concerns with a brief cooking lesson: “Definitely too much salt. I mean, it's all in the timing. You gotta brown the garlic before you put in the onions, know what I mean?” While his language is guarded in a stereotypically masculine fashion, Carrie understands him, and the metaphorical assurance that marriage is not completely off the table is enough to make her want to continue the relationship for the moment.

Much like it does with marriage and female sexuality, *Sex and the City* also confronts, if not directly challenges, cultural notions of motherhood. In the episode “The Baby Shower,” the four women prepare to attend a baby shower for their formerly wild friend Laney, who is now safely installed in Connecticut with an investment banker husband and baby on the way. In

addition to the usual narrative explanation from Carrie, viewers are also treated to a flashback to show them just how wild Laney used to be, as if any story told without a visual aid would just seem like an exaggeration. Carrie informs the audience, “Laney Berlin. You can’t really describe her. You just had to know her. Chances are, eight years ago, you probably did,” and the scene rewinds back eight years to a party at Samantha’s house. Carrie, Miranda, and Samantha watch from the edges of the party with Laney as the center of all the men’s attention. Samantha sulks, commenting, “So help me, she fucks on my couch, she buys it,” as someone yells for Laney to “show us your tits!” At first, Laney demurs in a not-so-demure fashion, claiming, “Give it a rest! You guys have seen enough of my tits,” but quickly concedes as the demands continue. The three friends remain on the outskirts, commenting, “Those things make so many public appearances, they need a booking agent,” and making assumptions about Laney’s self-esteem. This flashback opens up two areas of inquiry for the audience. First, who is this woman and why does she have this effect on our heroines? Also, how did she change from party girl to expectant mother, and, if it’s possible for Laney, is it also a possibility for Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte?

The episode then returns to the present-day, and the women debate whether or not they should attend the upcoming shower. Miranda describes motherhood as a cult: “They all think the same, dress the same and sacrifice themselves to the same cause—babies” (“The Baby Shower”). As the women contemplate motherhood and their own futures, Carrie begins to worry that her “future” is going to appear early, due to the fact that her period is late. She shares this information first through narration: “As I penciled in the date [of the baby shower], I noticed something missing. In between the Versace show and dinner at Moomba, there it wasn’t—my period, four days late.” By having Carrie tell the viewer before she tells her friends or Mr. Big,

the series reaffirms the sense of intimacy between Carrie and the audience. Everything that happens with Laney, a minor character who only appears in one episode, is now colored by the possibility of a pregnant Carrie. This gives any scenes or discussions regarding motherhood an added weight, as evidenced by Carrie's introduction to the scene with the women leaving for the baby shower: "That Saturday, also known as seven days late. . ."

As they enter the suburbs, Carrie narrates, "As I turned the midsize coupe onto Hollyhock Lane, I was struck by how a place so filled with nature could look so unnatural." While this comment on the surface references the overly manicured lawns, invisible dog fences, and oversized houses of the neighborhood, it also refers to the notion of motherhood in general in the world of *Sex and the City*. In many ways, motherhood is still seen as the most natural of life events. Much of American culture assumes that all women want to be mothers, even if they don't want to be mothers "right now." However, for many women, particularly professional women, motherhood is viewed as something that must be scheduled into one's life calendar, from scheduling a c-section delivery to reserving a spot in the perfect elementary school before the baby is even out of diapers. This balancing equation is further complicated when considering the intersection of motherhood and career. Judith Warner in *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* explores this predicament when she writes, "As young women, we had choices—endless choices. But motherhood made it often impossible to act on our choices. Or gave us choices on the order of: You can continue to pursue your dreams at the cost of abandoning your children to long hours of inadequate childcare. These were choices that didn't feel like choices at all" (52). For Carrie, this problem is multiplied both because of her profession as a "sex columnist" and because of her (non-)discussion about marriage with Big in the previous episode ("The Turtle and the Hare").

This conflict between motherhood and choosing childlessness is only amplified when the women arrive at the shower. This dichotomy is most evident between Samantha and Laney, two women who used to be similar but now are seemingly existing on opposite ends of the Madonna/Whore cultural spectrum of womanhood. When they arrive at Laney's house, Samantha exclaims in a self-satisfied manner, "Look at you! You're huge!" ("The Baby Shower"). Laney, equally smug, responds, "I know! Isn't it great? I can eat anything I want. Jealous?" However, all four of our single city girls are forced to confront their own ideas about motherhood as they observe the women who are already mothers around them. Carrie's fears about her missing period emerge in her narration as she looks at a picture of a nude, pregnant Laney on display in the bathroom, "The party had turned into a preview, a preview of a life I didn't know if I was ready for. Even seven months pregnant, Laney couldn't keep her clothes on. Clearly, a part of the old Laney had survived. But I wondered, what was still buried deep inside the mummies downstairs?" The scene then cuts to quick interview segments with the mothers at the shower:

WOMAN #1: Before I married my husband, I slept around with everybody. Now I have an internet lover. No one knows.

WOMAN #2: When I was senior vice president, 212 people reported to me on a daily basis. Now I just yell at the gardener who doesn't understand a single word.

WOMAN #3: I'm exactly the same. I love my life. But every now and then, I can't help but think about Lisa.

WOMAN #4: Sometimes I climb up into the kids' tree house with my Walkman, light up a joint, and listen to Peter Frampton.

Motherhood, when viewed through the lens of these four mothers, is an event that necessitates changing one's behavior, even if it doesn't change one's desires. Sharon Marie Ross contends that, by including these stories, the episode "highlight[s] the double bind still at work in American culture and society that often makes motherhood, career, and sexual agency mutually exclusive, even as they also highlight the legitimacy of women wanting children" (116).

After they leave the shower, Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha stop at a dive bar on their way back into the city. Charlotte is upset because Laney has "stolen" her intended baby name, Shayla, and her anger over this slight is magnified by the combination of fears regarding her single status and age. The other women try to reassure her, but their platitudes fall on deaf ears and Charlotte goes to the bathroom. The three remaining women continue their discussion about what one has to give up in order to be a mother.

MIRANDA: I spoke to a woman with a master's in finance. All she wanted to talk about was her Diaper Genie.

CARRIE: Oh, come on, guys. It doesn't have to be like that. You don't have to lose yourself to have a kid. I know plenty of cool, hip mothers who live in the city and still have great careers and stuff.

MIRANDA: Who? ("The Baby Shower")

As Miranda calls her on her bluff, Carrie finally confides in Miranda and Samantha. When she tells them that she is seven days late, the other two women try to reassure her, but this time the reassurance is about the lack of a baby. Samantha contends that being a week late is "a grey area. True, you're in front of the firing squad, but you haven't been shot." Carrie resolves to not tell Big until she actually has something to tell him, "I am not going to tell him until I know what

I—till I know how I—what—No, I am not going to tell him until I know how to finish this sentence.”

The conversation quickly ends when Charlotte returns from the bathroom. Much like the asymmetry of fertility seen in the fourth season episode “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda,” here there is an asymmetry of maternal desire between Charlotte and the other three women. Carrie does not feel comfortable confiding in Charlotte because, on the surface, Carrie has what Charlotte wants: a man who appears to be perfect (with the exception of his issues with commitment) and a potential pregnancy. However, Carrie is unsure what she wants, both with Big and the possibility of motherhood, and that sense of confusion would upset Charlotte. This asymmetry is amplified with the next scene. There is no dialogue; instead, Carrie narrates over Charlotte’s actions: “That night, Charlotte got out her wish box where she kept reminders of all the things she hoped for in life—a gift for Shayla, a town house in the city, a beach house in East Hampton, her dream man, her backup dream man. It’s very strange when the life you never had flashes before your eyes.” This one small kink in her life plan, the theft of the name Shayla, comes to represent the theft of her dream life, as Charlotte rips up the pictures representing the promise of that life. Carrie’s narration is almost superfluous here; even without dialogue, Charlotte’s actions speak louder than any words could. Instead of providing context and translation, as her voice-over normally does, here Carrie’s narration reduces the awkward intimacy of the scene through the assumption that Charlotte told Carrie what she did.

All the fears of the five women, including Laney, come to a head at Samantha’s “I’m not having a baby shower.” Carrie’s narration takes on a somewhat judgmental tone when describing the purpose of the party: “Faced with her own inadequacies, Samantha did something only Samantha could do. She threw an I-don’t-have-a-baby shower to let everyone know she

was fabulous” (“The Baby Shower”). Other than her taunting of Laney at the shower, which could just as easily be interpreted as the result of a years-long rivalry between two alpha females, there are no signs in the episode signaling any sadness on Samantha’s part regarding the emptiness of her womb. Instead, this “explanation” can be read as part of a broader cultural assumption that all women want to be mothers, an assumption that is undercut by Carrie’s uncertainty about her own possibly impending motherhood.

Laney’s behavior also signals an ambivalence about her future as a mother. She bursts into the party and promises the crowd, “Hey, you guys, the entertainment has arrived!” (“The Baby Shower”). While Laney desperately tries to recapture her previous self, she exposes her fears (as opposed to her breasts) when confronted by Charlotte:

CHARLOTTE: What are you doing here? What is she doing here?

LANEY: I missed you guys.

CHARLOTTE: Us? The pathetic, live-for-the-moment New York single girls who think that life is a Jacqueline Susann novel?

LANEY: Look, I’m sure you get asked this all the time, but what is your problem?

CHARLOTTE: My problem? Just that I had a dream and you killed it, in a nutshell.

LANEY: Really? You’re lucky, because at least you know what happened to your dream. I have absolutely no idea what happened to mine.

Laney has achieved the female “dream,” only to discover that it may not be all she had wanted. She continues to try to slip back into her former identity, even going so far as to ask, “Hey, you fuckers! Who wants to see my tits?” As one guy tries to take her up on her offer, she quickly realizes that she is no longer that same woman. As Carrie escorts her out of the party, she tells

us in voice-over, “Despite her best efforts to run free, it appeared that Laney Berlin's invisible electric fence stretched all the way to Manhattan.” Laney’s comments to Carrie further explain her feelings: “I didn't know that was gonna happen. Nobody told me that was gonna happen. I mean, somebody should warn you. [. . .] One day you're gonna wake up, and you're not gonna recognize yourself.” Laney’s display reiterates Carrie’s fears about the seemingly inevitable changes motherhood brings to a woman’s life.

After putting Laney in a cab and instructing the driver to “take her to Connecticut” (and her new life), the episode cuts to the next morning. We see Carrie in a park as her voice-over records her contemplation about the possibility of a new life of her own: “I spent the entire next day sitting on a park bench watching children play. If I had to, could I do this? Would I be any good? Would I somehow manage to stay me?” (“The Baby Shower”). Her narrative questioning of herself is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a little girl in front of her. The exchange between her, the girl, and the child’s mother is short and seemingly uneventful, and the episode ends with Carrie informing the audience in voice-over, “On the way home, I got my period.” This brief ending leaves the main questions of the episode unresolved. First, does Carrie want children, and, if so, when? Do all women want to be mothers (at least someday)? And finally, does having children really change a woman and her core identity or does it (merely) require the sublimation of a woman’s desires?

The series investigates this notion of female desire and how women mediate their own personal longings and aspirations in a culture that often places contradictory expectations upon them. While these four main characters are presented in an upper-middle class, heterosexual, urban fantasy of sorts, the core issue at the heart of the show—that relationships, both romantic and platonic, provide a refuge from the confusion of modern-day life—is applicable across lines

of class, race, and sexuality. And while it celebrates the restorative power of human interaction, it also recognizes the complexities of communication, particularly between a woman and a man.

The difficulty of cross-gendered communication is reaffirmed in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” from season three. At the wedding rehearsal dinner for Charlotte and Trey, Miranda tells the others about her speed dating experience, which was only successful when she lied and said she was a stewardess instead of a lawyer. Carrie’s (new) boyfriend Aidan joins in, trading quips and barbs with the women as easily as they do with each other. However, when he jokingly calls Miranda a liar for her deception, Carrie’s voiceover interrupts the casual ease of the scene as she contemplates her recent infidelity. “I was the liar. I’d finally ended my affair with Big, but the guilt of lying to Aidan was like a hangover I couldn’t sleep off,” she tells the audience. Here, as throughout the episode, Carrie’s voiceover gives the confession she is desperate to give to Aidan.

The problem of communication across genders is most obviously symbolized through Samantha’s romantic encounters with Trey’s heavily accented Scottish cousin in the episode, but Carrie as narrator links Samantha’s problems to her own when she says, “Samantha wasn’t the only one feeling lost.” As usual in the show, each woman has a different perspective on the situation, and Carrie considers each viewpoint (with the exception of Charlotte’s opinion that she should tell him, just not right now during Charlotte’s wedding “week”). Carrie’s voiceover leads the viewer into the next scene, while, dressed in a devil t-shirt, Carrie ponders honesty and relationships:

I started thinking about honesty. Maybe the whole idea was overrated. Maybe coming clean is the ultimate selfish act, a way to absolve yourself by hurting someone who doesn't deserve to be hurt. I cheated on a test in the fifth grade with

two friends. They confessed, got grounded, and failed the class. I never told anyone, and it never mattered. In a relationship, is honesty really the best policy? However, honesty is not the only issue at work here. As we hear her thoughts through her voiceover, we see that she is torturing herself for her actions; because she is unable to forgive herself, she can not imagine Aidan forgiving her either. Tannen contends that, “to most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs,” and Carrie’s fear that this conflict would permanently sever her connection with Aidan illustrates this idea (150).

In each scene with Aidan, she finds a moment to tell him, but she cannot move the words from her head (voiceover) to her mouth (actual dialogue). In another scene where she stops short of telling him, she tells the audience, “I could feel the words bubbling inside me. But if I told him, could he still love me? I wasn't ready to find out.” The words continue to “bubble” with more frequency the longer she waits. When Aidan catches her smoking at three a.m., he tells her that he can accept this “flaw,” further cementing his characterization as the understanding boyfriend and displaying the male tendency to focus on problem-solving in communication.¹² Carrie’s voiceover is frequently inserted into their conversation about flaws until she finally says that she needs to tell him something, but she finishes the thought as narrator instead: “But suddenly I couldn't tell him. I was afraid if I did, he'd never look at me that way again. So I didn't.” Despite his assurances that he loves her, that “flaws are the best part,” she is unable to tell him.

In the scene in which she finally does confess, there is no voiceover narration. In an uncharacteristic move for the show, the episode shifts directly from Miranda ending her relationship with her speed date to Aidan showing up at Carrie’s apartment before Charlotte’s

¹² See Tannen, pages 51-2

wedding without Carrie providing a connective thread between scenes. She is frazzled, both from running late and from the strain of her secret. Aidan has wrapped a picture of the loveseat he has built for Charlotte and Trey as a wedding gift and tells Carrie, “I thought maybe one day I’d build us a love seat.” Earlier in the episode, he explained how the loveseat was a metaphor for two people coming together, flaws and all, and making each person stronger in the process. Carrie is unable to think about a future with Aidan, and she avoids his attempts to hold her, reflecting how she has withdrawn both physically and emotionally throughout the episode. He finally confronts her non-verbal communication, and she explains what she has been only been expressing in voiceover throughout the episode. There is no internal dialogue through narration here; she has to release the words without thinking about them first. He reacts exactly as she had feared, telling her to go to the wedding on her own. With her infidelity, Carrie has upset the balance of the relationship, and now that Aidan is aware of this asymmetry, he cannot continue the conversation.

As one of the few examples of a male-female conversation without a voiceover to summarize and analyze the action, this scene stands in stark contrast to the conversations between the four women, the more typical voiceover-less type of scene. In the brunch-style scenes, voiceover is unnecessary; because of the extent of self-disclosure on display, there is no need for Carrie to fill in the gaps between what one says and what one means. Aidan had proven himself capable of casually participating in this more feminine style of communication with Carrie’s friends, but when he is one-on-one with Carrie and confronted with a more unpleasant topic of conversation, he reverts back to the stereotypically masculine lack of self-disclosure. There is no need for Carrie to narrate her own thoughts and motivations because she has revealed all of them to him, and she is unable to narrate for Aidan, because he has not exposed anything to

her. When he does finally reappear after the ceremony, he does not reveal any more about his feelings other than “I just know myself. This is not the kind of thing I can get over. I just need to be on my own for a while. Me on my own. I really loved you.” The use of the past tense is significant here because it does reveal that Carrie’s affair has changed how he feels about her, that this is one flaw that is not the best part. As Carrie walks away from her past with Aidan, she returns back to the present-tense love of her family of friends. In voiceover, Carrie sums up the connection between her and her friends and their ability to communicate with and understand one another no matter the circumstances. “It’s hard to find people who will love you no matter what,” she tells the viewer, “I was lucky enough to find three of them.” While the overt message in her parting words is the contrast between romantic and platonic love, her claim could also be made about finding someone who will understand you no matter what, something Tannen would contend is much harder to find across gender lines.

While the focus in both Carrie’s column and, subsequently, her career is on modern sexual relationships, this focus shifts somewhat in the fifth season, when Carrie finds herself in a romantic dry spell after ending her relationship with Aidan. While her romantic life is at a low point, her professional life is better than ever; despite her fears that her lack of a dating life is negatively affecting her as a writer, she is offered a publishing deal for a collection of her columns. The opening narration of “Plus One is the Loneliest Number” presents a non-traditional idea of female success and happiness through the traditional imagery of a wedding. The episode opens on a display of white roses and orchestral music plays before panning to Carrie standing at the top of a staircase. In voiceover, Carrie tells the viewer, “There is one day even the most cynical New York woman dreams of all her life,” as the shot opens up to reveal Samantha and Anthony, a character best known as Charlotte’s wedding planner. He informs

Carrie, “It will be fabulous. Everything white: white flowers, white tablecloths, white food. W.H.I.T.E. White.” Carrie’s voiceover resumes: “She imagines what she’ll wear. The photographers. The toasts. Everybody celebrating the fact that she has finally found. . .” Her narration pauses as the camera focuses in on an invitation for a book release party, giving us a visual cue that this is a different kind of fairy tale, before Carrie finishes her thought. “A publisher. It is her book release party.”

While this voiceover explicitly indicates that female fulfillment can be found through professional success, the rest of the episode tears down this premise, as Carrie struggles with the knowledge that her new crush, novelist Jack Berger, has a girlfriend. The title of the episode, “Plus One is the Loneliest Number,” encapsulates the conflict of the week, as Carrie and the other women try to find dates, in spite of obstacles such as newborns and new divorces. When Carrie first meets Jack, her publisher tells her, “Jack wrote a comic novel that speaks to men the way your column speaks to women.” This statement reiterates the feminine confessional tone of the series, as well as the notion that men and women are intrinsically different in their methods of relating and communicating with one another. The difference between the fiction of Jack’s “comic novel” and the non-fiction of Carrie’s intensely personal columns reflects Coates’s description of the way men and women relate in same-sex friendships. The emotion in Jack’s work is guarded with humor and fiction, which Carrie soon discovers is a trait not only of his fiction but also of his relationship with others. This style is a stark contrast to Carrie’s honest, “warts and all” take on her column and her relationships with her friends.

On their publisher’s suggestion, Carrie and Jack go out for lunch, a meeting which Carrie describes in voiceover during the scene as “one of those great first dates you can only have when it’s not an actual date.” When Carrie acts on this thought, however, and asks him to

be her “plus one” for the party, Jack declines, nonchalantly telling her that he can’t because his girlfriend’s parents are visiting and staying with them. The episode quickly cuts to the coffee shop, where Carrie is describing her faux date. She tells the other women, “It was like a bomb that kept exploding. I have a girlfriend. We live together. This whole flirtation’s in your head.” Carrie’s confession continues in the same self-deprecating manner, but when she declares that maybe “I was so hungry for a spark, I hallucinated a man,” Samantha intervenes. She tries to cheer her up by telling her, “A little perspective. You have a fun, exciting, intellectually stimulating career. There’s about to be a huge soiree in your honor.” Carrie tries to continue her pity party by reminding Samantha, “I’ll be without a plus one,” but Samantha refuses to let her feel bad about herself while she’s experiencing such professional success and promises to be her date for the party. In this instance, Samantha emerges as the therapist to Carrie, a playing-out of roles that are constantly alternating between the women. The message behind this therapy session is that Carrie should be proud of her success, and not worry about her momentary lack of a boyfriend, particularly when she is “the toast of the town.”

Despite Samantha’s promises that one can have it all, Carrie’s sense of doubt is further conveyed through voiceover as she writes her column. She contemplates, “In New York, you’re always looking for a job, a boyfriend or an apartment. Let’s say you have two out of three and they’re fabulous. Why do we let the thing we don’t have affect how we feel about all the things we do have?” The central question of the episode emerges, as she types on her computer and asks the viewer, “Why does one minus a plus one feel like it adds up to zero?” She lists the three requirements for “having it all” as a single woman in New York—a job, a boyfriend, and an apartment—but she ends the thought by zeroing in on the element she’s lacking. As women who grew up in the 1970s with second-wave feminism and came of age in the 1980s with the

backlash against those feminist ideals, these characters subscribe both to the feminism that taught them that they are equal to men but also to many of the traditional ideas about love and marriage. However, as Carrie watches the pieces of her professional life finally fall into place, she begins to question the feasibility of having it all.

During an accidental lunch date with her *Vogue* editor Enid, Carrie gets one perspective on this problem. When Enid reveals that she has a boyfriend, Carrie responds, “That's great. You have a successful career and a relationship. I was worried women only get one or the other, but you have it all.” Enid quickly corrects her, “To speak in magazine copy, I have it all. On the East Side. He has someone else on the West Side. The park provides a buffer.” The intimacy of this confessional moment is quickly broken by Enid’s rational justification for her unconventional relationship. She tells Carrie, “I don't have time for a full-time man. I have a full-time job. That's the key. Stop expecting it to look like what you thought. That's true of the fall lines and true of relationships.”

The impact of the character Enid and her unique perspective on balancing career and relationships is magnified because of the actress portraying her. To most of the audience, Candice Bergen, best known for playing the character Murphy Brown for ten years, brings with her a bundle of preconceived notions about women, work, and feminism, a point which was surely not missed by *Sex and the City*'s producers when they were casting the role of Enid. While it's doubtful that viewers subsumed the two characters into one, because of the similarities between the characters, as well as the cultural stereotype of the career woman, there is a degree of character slippage between Murphy and Enid. Enid's advice to “stop expecting it to look like what you thought” is all the more poignant in light of this creative casting—if Murphy figured it out, maybe Enid has, too.

This character association adds to the humor of Enid's climax in the episode. She attends Carrie's book launch party, only to find her part-time boyfriend in attendance, along with his "West Side" girlfriend. Enid is visibly flustered, and the limbo-like nature of her relationship is represented through the geographical confusion of lower Manhattan. When Carrie asks whether they're in Enid's or the West Side girlfriend's part of town, Enid replies, "We're below Houston. East Side, West Side, who knows down here?" She then confesses, "I am so angry." Because of the limits of the boss-employee relationship and Enid's usually strict professionalism, there is not much Carrie can say in response, so instead, she draws her conclusion in voiceover: "Even the most together women can't keep it together when it comes to love." Enid quickly leaves, and when Charlotte asks who Enid was, Carrie simply replies, "My role model." Her voiceover resumes, and she tells the audience, "Just below the surface, we are all raw and exposed." The antecedent for the pronoun "we" is ambiguous here—is it "we" in the universal sense or does it refer back more specifically to "even the most together women" of the previous voiceover? While it refers back to Enid either way, it leaves open the question of whether or not this precarious balancing act between the personal and the professional is unique to women or simply a fact of human existence, regardless of gender. The character of Enid, boosted by the casting of Candice Bergen in the part, serves as a cautionary tale for both Carrie and the audience that a fulfilling career is not a replacement for (full-time) romantic companionship.

Carrie's own confession to Charlotte that that immediately precedes Enid's breakdown foregrounds this idea. When she asks Charlotte for affirmation that she "had to let [Jack Berger] go," Charlotte replies, "The thing is. . . there are some things people don't admit because they don't like the way it sounds. Like, 'I'm getting divorced.'" Carrie follows up Charlotte's admission with one of her own: "I'm lonely. I am. The loneliness is palpable." By admitting

this in the middle of a party honoring her professional success, Carrie reveals how singleness is still not considered a sustainable permanent life choice for women, even for a sex columnist or an editor at *Vogue*.

While *Sex and the City* did not change the reality of life for single women, the series did open popular culture's eyes to the reality of female sexual desire. Akass and McCabe assert, "while the women are still attracted to patriarchal stories of happy ever after and fairy-tale romance, women talking about sex, creating humour and sharing laughter are changing the script" (13). Through its exploration of the battle of the sexes and the conversations between the female friends that try to make sense of that battlefield, the series provides an opening for female viewers to continue their own conversations about sexuality and relationships in the twenty-first century.

Sex and the City has now become a cultural short-hand for situations in which women bluntly discuss sexual issues, as well as for women's friendships in general. For instance, a recent episode of CBS's *How I Met Your Mother* featured a storyline in which Marshall is upset to learn that his wife, Lily, discusses their sex life with her best friend, Robin ("Architect of Construction"). Mid-coitus, he has a hallucination in which Lily and Robin are sitting in the corner critiquing his performance. The title *Sex and the City* is never directly mentioned, but the series is indirectly yet obviously referenced by merely having Lily and Robin holding two martini glasses filled with a pink liquid, presumably Cosmopolitians, the drink that became a trademark of *Sex and the City*. The scene is memorable not for the discussion between the women, which, considering the restraints of network television, is not particularly frank or explicit, but rather for what it exposes about male sexual insecurity in a post-*Sex and the City* world.

Beyond references to it in popular culture, *Sex and the City* has become a cultural phenomenon in and of itself, even after the end of its original series run. The show now runs in syndication on cable station TBS and local affiliates, albeit in a heavily edited form that often results in confusing and unresolved plot points. The series has also spawned two successful film spin-offs. However, in an illustration in the differences between the genres of film and television, the two movie versions have emphasized the lives of these women in couples, rather than continuing to explore the lives of women alone. While the series has left an indelible mark on popular culture, exploring the reality of female (hetero)sexual desire as well as women's desire to talk about that sexuality, the life of the series post-HBO exposes the limitations of presenting women's sexuality in the more conservative forums of film and network and basic cable television.

Finding One's Own Avocado Tree: Single Motherhood and Sexuality on *Gilmore Girls*

While the world of single women on *Sex and the City* is presented as a glamorous fantasy world to which viewers, through the series' use of narration, are granted intimate access, *Gilmore Girls*, which premiered in the fall of 2000, focuses on the seemingly much more mundane premise of a single mother raising her teenaged daughter in a small New England town. However, the two shows have much more in common than their settings would suggest. As single female protagonists, Carrie Bradshaw and Lorelai Gilmore both have successful careers and are traditionally attractive, firmly heterosexual, and searching for Mr. Right. Lorelai Gilmore's positioning as a single mother complicates the representation of the single woman. In order to be seen as a "good" single mother, Lorelai must model self-sufficiency while also being humble enough to ask for help, look attractive but in a suitably middle-class fashion, and have an active sexual and romantic life without setting a "bad example" that might lead to Rory repeating her mother's mistakes. The title of the series reinforces the notion that Lorelai is a work-in-progress, as it is not the "Gilmore family" or the "Gilmore women" but instead the Gilmore "girls."

Gilmore Girls achieved widespread acceptance and popularity with audiences and critics throughout its seven-year run, including funding from the Family Friendly Programming Forum, a conservative consortium of major advertisers. Its premise, an hour-long situation comedy about a single mother who had her daughter at sixteen, seems an unlikely project to find such funding. Upon its organization in 1998, the FFPF established a development fund to finance pilots for new "family-friendly" series that portray "a responsible resolution of issues," and the first show they ushered to the airwaves was *Gilmore Girls* (Weiner). Series creator Amy Sherman-Palladino, previously best-known for writing the Emmy-nominated birth control episode of

Roseanne, managed to appeal and appease many “right-skewing media watchdogs” and “notoriously left-of-center” critics, both of whom recommended it to their respective and very different audiences (Weiner). The show managed to appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers in my own group of family and friends—my socially conservative, traditionally Christian father and stepmother and my Christian but pop culture obsessed teenage sister, as well as a large portion of my socially liberal and feminist friends, both male and female, all regularly watched the series.

Premiering less than a decade after the very public debate about single motherhood between then-Vice President Dan Quayle and Murphy Brown (both the character and the series), how did this show about the adventures in life and love of an unabashedly non-traditional mother and her well-adjusted-despite-the-absence-of-a-father teenage daughter attract such a wide variety of viewers? *Gilmore Girls* reflects a cultural shift, both economic and generational, in the debate about single motherhood, as well as a depoliticization of the realities of single motherhood.¹³ The series presents a best-case scenario of life after giving birth as a teenager and raising a child alone. While the series ignores many of the racial and socio-economic roots of Lorelai’s “success” as a single mother, the show’s popularity, particularly among female viewers, and its specific idealization of the single mother deserves study. Through the creation of a beloved main character out of the political straw-woman of the teenaged single mother, *Gilmore Girls* provides a portrait of the criticism a single mother faces in twenty-first century America. It also illustrates the higher standard, particularly in terms of the American ideal, she must uphold in order to be considered a “good mother.”

¹³ For this purposes of this chapter, I focus on the first three seasons of the show, which chronicle Rory’s years in high school. While the job of being a parent obviously does not stop when one’s child reaches eighteen, these first three seasons depict the day-to-day active parenting of a teenager.

While discussing her group's approval and financing of *Gilmore Girls*, FFPP co-chair Andrea Alstrup admits, "There were discussions about that [Lorelai as an "unwed mother"], but we didn't feel that was a critical part of the story" (qtd. in Weiner). Jordan Levin, who served as the president of WB Entertainment during the development of the series, provides a more telling explanation, "Single-parent households represent half the households in this country. *Gilmore Girls* is just as much an American nuclear family as the one portrayed in *7th Heaven*" (qtd. in Weiner). Single mothers are valuable for their power as consumers; Jane Juffer asserts that they "may even be more attractive than single women without kids or married women: they have kids to support but they don't have to run any purchases by a husband" (46). This newfound recognition of single mothers as a desirable demographic can be partially explained by the increase in single mothers over the last three decades. Births to unmarried women accounted for 34 percent of all births in 2002, up from 18 percent in 1980. Two-thirds of those births in 2002 were to women over the age of twenty, and fifteen percent of unmarried new mothers were aged thirty to thirty-four. It is estimated that about seventy percent¹⁴ of all children in the United States will spend some time in a single-parent family before they reach the age of eighteen (Trimberger 169). Levin's response about the Gilmores being just as much an American family as the Camdens on *7th Heaven* shows that television executives are beginning to view the single mother as a desirable demographic. Post-*Gilmore Girls*, the ratings success of MTV's *16 and Pregnant* and its spin-off *Teen Mom* illustrate television producers' newfound awareness of viewers' desire to see the "reality" of the experiences of the single mother.

Gilmore Girls' positioning of Lorelai as a young single mother is indicative of the change in attitude towards pregnant teenagers, particularly white girls in middle and upper-class

¹⁴ This figure includes divorced, separated, and widowed single parents as well those never married.

families, during the 1970s and 80s. In the years after World War II and before the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, pregnant and unmarried young women were “a particularly vulnerable class [. . .] they were defined as deviants threatening to the social order. Single, pregnant girls and women of whatever race shared the debased status of illegitimate mother: a mother with no rights, or a female who had, according to the dominant culture, no right to be a mother” (Solinger 3). Because of her parents’ wealth and social standing,¹⁵ if Lorelai had been pregnant in 1964 rather than 1984, she most likely would have been shipped off to one of the over two hundred “maternity homes” in the United States, where she would have been forced to quietly give birth to and then give up her child. In *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*, Rickie Solinger describes the phenomenon of maternity homes and the “baby scoop” era:

The white girl, single and pregnant, led by her parents, turned to the maternity home because it offered secrecy and protection. It also promised something new: personal revelation and transformation. [. . .] In the past, a broadly middle-class, unmarried, pregnant girl would have been permanently marked by the illegitimate pregnancy. Now, unwed mothers could find a repaired or reconstructed identity through the program of the maternity home. The psychological assumptions governing these programs promised to provide a girl with the opportunity ‘to find herself’ there. (105)

Finding oneself in these homes meant denying (and hopefully forgetting) the pregnancy and resulting child, while also being trained to be a “proper” wife and mother. These homes were “designed to pull a girl off the wrong branch of the road, to correct her course toward femininity

¹⁵ In the episode “But I’m a Gilmore!”, the viewer learns that Lorelai and Rory’s ancestors “came over on the Mayflower.”

and motherhood,” in order to restore these mostly white, middle-class girls to their proper and expected positions as future wives and mothers (Solinger 105-6).

While these maternity homes had mostly fallen out of fashion by the time Lorelai became pregnant in the mid-1980s, the notion that she was “ruined” by her sexual exploits and is in need of “saving” still remains sixteen years after the birth of her child Rory. A series of flashbacks in the episode “Dear Emily and Richard” provide the backstory of how Lorelai, Christopher, and their parents (Emily/Richard and Francine/Straub respectively) handled the news of Lorelai’s pregnancy. As the soon-to-be parents watch from the staircase, the “adults” discuss what should be done. Francine asks, “Aren’t there places that take girls like that?”, invoking the idea of a maternity home without daring to speak its name. Emily defends Lorelai, angrily asking Francine, “Girls like what?” and reminds everyone that “Christopher is just as much to blame as Lorelai is. [. . .] They are in this together.” Emily becomes even more outraged when Christopher’s father suggests that Lorelai “get rid of it,” refusing to even consider abortion as an option “because I say so.” She is trapped between the old and new methods of handling teenage pregnancy, unsure of what to do and unwilling to consider her daughter’s own wishes, until Richard suggests an even more traditional plan. “They will get married, they will live here, and Christopher will go to work at my company. That is the solution. Now, we have a plan so we can all stop talking about it,” he tells them before making a hasty exit. Richard is assuming complete parental authority over Lorelai, attempting to control and manage her future as a woman, mother, and wife in order to maintain his own social and patriarchal standing. Solinger’s description of parental reactions to increasingly legal and cultural autonomy of the pregnant teenager perfectly encapsulates the mindset of the elder Gilmores and Haydens: “Parents were in shock over public evidence of their daughter’s sex lives. They were horrified to realize that unmarried daughters

were making their own sexual and reproductive decisions. They were mortified to realize that parental rules about sex and its consequences didn't seem to matter anymore" (238). Even though cultural attitudes toward young pregnant women at the time had shifted somewhat in favor of the mother, especially within the white middle and upper classes, Lorelai's pregnancy represents a challenge both to her social standing and that of her parents.

Luckily for her, and, perhaps, unluckily for her parents, Lorelai became pregnant during a period of shifting social norms regarding pregnant teenagers, particularly white pregnant teenagers. In the 1970s, political action, in the form of legislation such as Title IX and Title X and legal decisions such as *Ordway v. Hargraves* and *Roe v. Wade*, and cultural changes, resulting from the sexual revolution, created a shift in thinking regarding teen pregnancy, particularly for the pregnant teens themselves. Solinger contends that

The trend that lifted white unwed mothers out of the slough of psychiatric diagnoses and allied them with a social movement—the sexual revolution—had a substantial effect on the prevailing assumption that white unwed mothers were not mothers. If unwed mothers were rebels sexually, perhaps they were rebels maternally. If unwed mothers had exercised rights to their own sexuality, perhaps they could exercise rights to their own illegitimate children. (223)

These options were available to Lorelai because of her privileged racial and economic status.

This newfound freedom for young (white) single mothers did not necessarily extend across racial and class lines. Another kind of teenage mother, usually portrayed as poor, black, and on welfare, entered the public consciousness in the late 1970s and became a full-fledged political and cultural straw-woman by the 1980s. In their book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, Susan J. Douglas and

Meredith W. Michaels describe the typical characterization: “the unwed teenager who, whoops, had a baby and then, whoops, had another and made the decent taxpayers of America pay through the schnozz forever for her seconds of unprotected, thoughtless pleasure with some irresponsible, layabout black boy, himself increasingly stereotyped on reality shows like *COPS* and *911* as a drug-dealing criminal” (190). By the early 1990s, the story had shifted from portraying these girls as “accidentally” becoming pregnant to depicting teenaged mothers who supposedly got pregnant in order to receive more welfare money. Douglas and Michaels write that the new cultural story described a poor, usually African-American young woman who “saw the fabulous financial benefits of welfare and deliberately got pregnant so that she, too, could become one of those jackpot-winning welfare moms [. . .], suggest[ing] they were deliberately *choosing* to go on welfare rather than do anything else” (192). While teen pregnancy was considered problematic across all racial and socio-economic lines,¹⁶ it was these stories of teen “welfare moms” that were presented as a threat to American cultural and moral standards. As Solinger theorizes in *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America*, “In the minds of many Americans, legitimate pregnancy now has less to do with having a husband and more to do with having ‘enough money.’ In the minds of many people, legitimate pregnancy has now become a class privilege reserved for women with resources. Other women—those without resources—who get pregnant and stay pregnant are often regarded as making bad choices” (217). While Lorelai does not fit this definition of having “enough money” on her own, her ability to draw on her parents’ resources provides her with a safety net.

¹⁶ Stories about middle-class pregnant teenagers who “dumped” their babies into trashcans at proms or other types of parties also captured the American media imagination at this time. These tales were more often characterized by hand-wringing, such as CBS news anchor Dan Rather’s observation on one such story that this “wasn’t supposed to happen to these kids, college kids from wealthy New Jersey communities,” rather than asking why these girls felt that “throwing away” their babies seemed like the only viable option (Douglas and Michael 169-70).

Because Lorelai was lucky enough to be born white, rich, and on the cusp of the Baby Boomer/Generation X generational divide, she had options available to her. And despite her parents' desires that she concede to the most traditional of those options—marriage to the child's father and following in her parents' footsteps (despite this one misstep), she instead decides to leave the economic security of her childhood home in order to create a new and entirely different life for her and Rory. This desire for self-sufficiency is one of the key reasons why she is seen, both by the fictional characters populating the series and the viewers watching her, as an acceptable single mother. Juffer writes that “single mothers in the United States at the turn of the century all live with the imperative to demonstrate self-sufficiency. With that demonstration comes an erasure of the stigma that as historically marked single mothers in this country and even the recognition that single mothers don't always have to be self-sacrificing in order to qualify as good mothers” (3). Because Lorelai chose to keep her baby, even though abortion or adoption might have been the “easier” choice, and she also decides to do it alone, even though her situation would have been financially easier had she stayed with her parents. Because of these factors, Lorelai is painted as a self-sufficient woman willing to take responsibility for her actions and “mistakes.”

The present-day Lorelai of the series is a homeowner and manager of a successful inn,¹⁷ comfortably middle-class, but the show is constantly reminding viewers that she worked her way up from being a maid who lived with her young child in a repurposed gardening shed behind the inn. Lorelai's move from riches to rags to (relative) riches is illustrative of Juffer's claim that “the single mother is represented [in popular culture] as the Horatio Alger of the new millennium” (46). She is proud of her ability to provide for herself and Rory without the help or

¹⁷ In the first three seasons, Lorelai runs the (appropriately named) Independence Inn, while the last four seasons show her opening and running her own business, the Dragonfly Inn.

influence of her parents, but she is still willing to swallow her pride and ask them for money for Rory's private school tuition ("Pilot"). Even after her reconciliation with her parents, prompted by her request for help and somewhat forced by her mother's insistence on weekly family dinners, she still refuses their offer of financial aid in situations she feels she can handle on her own. It is her desire for self-sufficiency, even when relying on the Gilmore wealth would be easier, that makes her appealing as a character within the context of the American celebration of individualism and self-sufficiency. In their essay on the series, Tiffany Aldrich MacBain and Mita Mahato explain that "[w]e viewers, like the townspeople of Stars Hollow, are drawn to Lorelai precisely because of her distinctive ability to marry responsible motherhood to gratifying womanhood" (97).

Lorelai becomes a liberal fantasy of what single mothers could be like if given the freedom to do and be what they want—if given the chance, all single mothers could pull themselves up by their bootstraps and live the American dream. As Robin Silbergleid, in her essay "Hip Mamas: *Gilmore Girls* and Ariel Gore," even more bluntly asserts, Lorelai "is not the culturally deplored 'welfare mom'—widely, if incorrectly, assumed to be young, African American, and lazy—but an illustration that desire and hard work bring happiness and success, arguably, the very principles that undergird the American dream." *Gilmore Girls* provides a fantasy vision of single motherhood by depoliticizing it. While issues of class are occasionally confronted through conflicts between Lorelai and her parents, the notion that Lorelai's success, both maternal and professional, is largely linked to the fact that she was born white and rich is never confronted. Silbergleid contends:

The show is the ultimate presentation of the American dream, single mom style, even as it elides the class and racial realities that make Lorelai's success possible

in the first place. [. . .] [I]f Lorelai demonstrates that it is entirely possible for a young woman to be successful, both personally and professionally, despite (because of?) teen pregnancy, the show also implies that the reasons for such success, and Lorelai's social acceptance, are largely based on socio-economic status and race. (99)

The series makes Lorelai's life choices acceptable by presenting a best-case scenario of teenaged pregnancy and motherhood, particularly through its characterization of Rory as a preternaturally mature, almost perfect daughter and the choice to set the show sixteen years into Lorelai's adventures in single motherhood.

The show presents itself as a mostly realistic, if humorous, take on single motherhood. Much of the humor in the series is based on popular culture references, which serve to further codify Lorelai as a "hip" mom. The humor is balanced by several idealistic elements that make Lorelai's experience as a single mother character possible. Chief among these is the setting of the fictional town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut. Presented as a utopian idyll full of eccentric, but loving and lovable, characters, the town "adopts" Lorelai and baby Rory when the teenaged mother runs away from her parents and life in Hartford. In their essay "Welcome to Stars Hollow: *Gilmore Girls*, Utopia, and the Hyperreal," Erin K. Johns and Kristin L. Smith label the series "utopian ideals entertainment," as defined by Richard Dyer in "Entertainment and Utopia" (23). Dyer contends that "[e]ntertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (273). Stars Hollow, with its history dating back to the Revolutionary War and revolving schedule of festivals and commemorations, rivals

the world of the elder Gilmores in terms of tradition and history but provides Lorelai with a sense of belonging and community that she never felt in her parents' realm. Silbergleid asserts that "with its fictional history dating back to the Revolutionary War, Stars Hollow itself is synecdochic for American ideals more broadly, setting up a symbolic equation between Lorelai's flight from the Gilmores and the colonization of the 'New World'" (95). In her interview with Amy Sherman-Palladino for the *Village Voice*, Joy Press evokes this sense of utopia when describing the show and its setting, commenting that the creator "has carved out her own wishful-thinking world that closely resembles our own, only smarter, gentler, and funnier." Sherman-Palladino further extends the idea of *Gilmore Girls* as a liberal fantasy with her contention that "[i]n Stars Hollow, Al Gore is president" (Press, "The Sunshine Girls").

The look of the set used for the town of Stars Hollow also evokes a sense of utopia and nostalgia. The façades of the town's buildings were originally built on the Warner Brothers lot in the 1940s and were used on shows such as *The Waltons* and *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Johns and Smith link the series's use of these mid-20th century sets to Dyer's contention that utopian entertainment calls back to a more "free-and-easy stage in American development" (27). However, in addition to the sense of nostalgia evoked by the scenery, Stars Hollow and the show as a whole is firmly planted in the twenty-first century with its plethora of pop culture references and consistent presence of technology, such as Rory's gift of a Macintosh laptop in the episode "Rory's Birthday Parties." Johns and Smith contend that "[i]t is this connection of the past and the present, offering the best of both, that help solidify the utopia" (27).

Politics and history aside, however, Stars Hollow is a utopia primarily because of the people populating it and their willingness to help Lorelai, both when she first arrived in town and in the present-day of the series. Mia, the owner of the Independence Inn, gives the young Lorelai

a job, a place to live, and, most importantly, the opportunity to advance professionally. Sixteen years later, in the episode, “The Ins and Outs of Inns,” Mia explains her reasoning to Emily, “When Lorelai showed up on my porch that day with a tiny baby in her arms, I thought to myself, what if this were my daughter, and she was cold and scared and needed a place to live? What would I want for her? And then I thought, I'd want her to find somebody to take her in and make her safe and help her find her way,” an explanation that seems to apply to the town as a whole. Stars Hollow embodies the idea that “it takes a village to raise a child”¹⁸ and takes this responsibility seriously when it comes to the Gilmore “girls,” whether that be by Mia taking them in, the owner of the local bakery giving a baby Rory cookies, or even Miss Patty, the owner of the town’s dance studio, invoking her maternal influence on Rory when flirting with Rory’s father Christopher. Without the support of this homey, accepting village, it is doubtful that Lorelai would have been able to evolve into the mother portrayed on the series.

The character of Liz Danes provides an interesting point of comparison for Lorelai. Her brother Luke, owner of the town diner and one of Lorelai’s closest friends, quickly summarizes her life story: “The minute she graduated high school, she was outta here. Didn't matter that my dad was sick, didn't matter that the store was failing, she just took off. Married the hot dog king, had a kid, he left, now here we are” (“Nick & Nora/Sid & Nancy”). Liz has sent her son Jess to live with Luke, in the hopes that Luke can “straighten him out.” Throughout the conversation, Luke places the blame for Jess’s behavior squarely on Liz, commenting that “All he needs is a change of pace, a new crowd, and to get away from the nutjob that, unfortunately, is my sister,” “his mom’s a flake,” and “all he needs is to be around someone who's not a selfish basketcase,

¹⁸ This phrase, adapted from an African proverb, entered the U.S. popular vernacular after then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote a book entitled *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* in 1996 outlining her vision for American children.

who will give him a little space, who will treat him like a man.” Luke’s contention that all Jess needs is a strong male role model and distance from his “nutjob” mother is proven wrong, however, as Jess continues to struggle in school and life, even with the “good influence” that is Rory, with whom he eventually becomes romantically involved. At the end of the third season, Jess leaves town after learning that he will have to repeat his senior year and heads to California to find his father. While Jess does eventually find his place in the world, becoming a published author and working for a small, independent publishing company in Philadelphia, he initially functions as an example of the consequences of bad (single) parenting. Liz, however, is redeemed when she returns to the utopian Stars Hollow, marries her boyfriend, and has a baby, providing her with a “second chance” to be a good mother.

Even though Lorelai does not have many of the typical characteristics of a “good” mother—she prides herself on her takeout-ordering skills rather than her culinary talents and has passed on her coffee addiction to Rory, she is consistently portrayed as a caring, concerned, involved mother. In the second episode of the series, Rory insists that Lorelai take her to her first day of school at Chilton, an exclusive private school and meet the headmaster with her (“The Lorelais’ First Day at Chilton”). Because she forgot to pick up her dry cleaning, Lorelai is forced by circumstances to wear an outfit involving a tie-dyed t-shirt, cut-off denim shorts, and a pair of cowboy boots. The outfit is ridiculous, and everyone who sees her criticizes her for it. While the episode employs the outfit for comic effect, the situation also functions as a symbol for how Lorelai is willing to do anything for her daughter, even if it means humiliating herself in the process. When her mother questions her judgment about her clothing choices, we as viewers side with Lorelai, the result of the show’s quick establishment in the first two episodes of Emily as cold and uncaring and the “snobbish” reception she receives from both her mother and the

headmaster. Her decision to put her daughter's needs above her own appearance is presented as further proof of her successful mothering, an assessment that results from the humor of the scene. While the viewer is supposed to laugh at Lorelai for her goofy ensemble, the fact that she is willing to present herself in a lower-class manner in an upper-class institution serves as an example of "good" mothering in that she is willing to put her daughter's future ahead of her own present comfort.

In their attempts to "marry responsible motherhood to gratifying single womanhood," the producers of the show incorporate and then subvert popular culture stereotypes about single womanhood as well as motherhood. Lorelai is portrayed as just as fashion-conscious as Carrie Bradshaw but with a budget-conscious side. Articles of clothing are repeated and reinterpreted in different outfits (a rare occurrence in television fashion) and shared between Lorelai and Rory,¹⁹ mirroring the reality of a budget-limited wardrobe as well as reinforcing the closeness of the bond between mother and daughter. Lorelai's fashion ingenuity and fiscal responsibility is also seen through her sewing. In the pilot episode, Lorelai offers to hem Rory's skirt for her school uniform, but the resulting argument over how to short it should be is the opposite of what one would normally expect of a mother-daughter fashion conflict, with Lorelai wanting to "hem it a lot" while Rory worries about it being too short. This reversal of the typical mother-daughter interaction serves to codify Lorelai as a "hip" mom, while also indicating Rory's more conservative sense of style, reassuring viewers that Lorelai is not raising Rory to follow in her pregnant teenaged footsteps.

¹⁹ One blue sweater is seen over the course of several seasons, worn not only by Lorelai and Rory, but also Rory's best friend, Lane, and even appeared in the promotional photos on one season's DVD set.

Lorelai also makes Rory's dress for a school dance ("Rory's Dance"). Emily protests, first offering to pay for a dress and then insulting Lorelai, asking her, "You're not using the curtains, are you?", referencing Scarlett O'Hara's fashion frugality in *Gone with the Wind*. Emily assumes that Lorelai's decision to make a dress rather than buy one is born out of the same fiscal desperation experienced by Scarlett instead of being freely chosen by Lorelai and approved by Rory. Emily's referencing of the classic film is intended as witty comeback but also as a not-so-subtle jab at Lorelai's decision to abandon the Gilmore family fortune in favor of creating an independent life for her and her daughter. The resulting dress is beautiful, prompting Emily to assume that the dress was store-bought and inviting compliments from Rory's (very rich and label-conscious) classmates. When Rory proudly tells them that her mother made it, the girls are impressed, and one of them can't stop negatively comparing her own mother to Lorelai, mumbling throughout the conversation, "My mom can't make anything." Rather than devolving into a kind of Dolly Parton "Coat of Many Colors"-esque story of the girl who doesn't fit in because of her home-sewn attire, Rory is envied because of her mother's fashion creativity, even among her wealthy classmates. Through the series' valorization of a traditionally feminine task, it is acknowledging Lorelai's creativity as a legitimate, if necessary, art form and positioning her within a twenty-first century do-it-yourself (DIY) culture.

While her sewing of Rory's dress can be seen as an expression of Lorelai's creativity and Rory's individualism, Lorelai's sewing is grounded in her desire for self-sufficiency. When her friend Sookie is pregnant, Lorelai shows her Rory's "baby box," which includes a jumper Lorelai made for the infant Rory out of one of her old t-shirts. She tells Sookie, "It was the first thing I ever made her—ever made, ever. It was post-Gilmore economy" ("The Festival of Living Art"). She was forced by necessity to learn how to sew, but through that necessity she discovered a new

talent. Her life as a new mother would have been financially easier if she had not left her parents' home, but she also probably would have never discovered this ability had she not been forced to by her circumstances. This is emblematic of how leaving the ease of her previous life behind allowed her to "find herself." While the maternity homes of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s promised to help young expectant mothers to find their purpose through the sacrifice of giving up one's child, Lorelai accomplished this by doing the exact opposite—keeping her daughter and raising her on her own.

While Lorelai's skill with a sewing machine is presented as a necessary fiscal responsibility in her "post-Gilmore economy," it also signifies a shift in generational attitudes surrounding crafting and do-it-yourself culture. In her article "Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts a Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action?" Beth Ann Pentney writes, "The Riot Grrrl movement, which emerged out of the punk scene in the United States in the early 1990s and influenced the trajectory of third-wave feminist politics, aesthetics, music, and engagement with popular culture, has also left its mark on contemporary DIY culture, and the effects can be seen in contemporary knitting culture as well." Pentney singles out knitting in particular in her article, but these effects can also be seen in other traditionally female art forms such as needlework, quilting, and sewing. *Bust* magazine co-founder and author of *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitters' Handbook* Debbie Stoller explains some of the reasons women in recent years have become interested in knitting (again, an explanation that can be extended across various types of crafts), writing, "Some 'crafty' feminists, like myself, are reclaiming what have been called the 'lost domestic arts,' realizing the importance of giving women's crafts their due. Others are more interested in freeing themselves from a dependence on what they see to be an exploitative corporate culture. Still others, such as those with Emporio Armani taste but

Salvation Army budgets, figure they can learn to make fashionable items more cheaply than they can buy them” (Stoller 10).

While there have always been women (and men) who have made their own clothes or knit their own scarves, whether out of necessity or choice, crafting has achieved a certain third-wave feminist (and, one might say, even bourgeois) cachet over the past fifteen years. Celebrities such as Julia Roberts, Sarah Jessica Parker, and even Madonna talk about how they love to knit during their downtime on movie sets (Jury). In the pilot episode of the NBC sitcom *30 Rock*, network executive Jack Donaghey describes Liz Lemon, a character loosely based on Tina Fey, the creator and star of the show who has become a feminist pop culture icon over the past decade, as "New York third-wave feminist, college-educated, single-and-pretending-to-be-happy-about-it, overscheduled, undersexed, you buy any magazine that says 'healthy body image' on the cover and every two years you take up knitting for. . .a week." Lorelai's sewing functions as a signifier for her self-sufficiency and ability to adapt to her (chosen) middle-class lifestyle, as well as situating her as both traditionally feminine and culturally "cool."

In addition to her talent as a seamstress, Lorelai is also portrayed as having a knack for and love of shopping, fitting in nicely with television executives and marketers' newfound interest in the single mother demographic. While she doesn't name-check expensive designer brands like her counterparts on *Sex and the City*, her dialogue is peppered with mentions of Sephora, *Jane* magazine, and Maybelline mascara, coding her consumerism as firmly middle-class and creating another stark contrast between her and her upper-class parents. During a funeral procession around the town square for a deceased Stars Hollow resident, Lorelai jokes that she is going to steal the idea and request that her coffin be walked around a Benefit make-up counter ("Say Goodnight, Gracie"). As is customary for the series, the humor here underscores a

more serious point. This contrast between a local landmark and department store beauty counter is especially revealing given the situating of Stars Hollow as a town of locally-owned small businesses rather than national chains. Lorelai simultaneously exists both within and outside of the isolated utopia of her chosen hometown. She sews costumes for the local elementary school production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and manages (and later owns) small businesses of her own, but she chooses to shop and send her daughter to school in nearby Hartford (where she grew up and where her parents still reside), rather than relying on the limited options available in Stars Hollow. Through this double construction of her character, she becomes a role model displaying the “value” of both community and consumerism, encapsulating both self-sufficiency, which makes her appealing to viewers, and materialism, which makes her appealing to advertisers looking to capitalize on the single mother demographic.

The class differences between Lorelai and Emily are illustrated in stark contrast in the fourth season episode “Scene in a Mall.” After investing most of her savings in the purchase and on-going renovation of the Dragonfly Inn, Lorelai is experiencing some financial strain.²⁰ During their Friday night family dinner, Emily comments on Lorelai’s outfit, telling her, “It’s not appropriate to go out in. [. . .] I’ve seen that on you a dozen times. You really should update your wardrobe. [. . .] The summer lines are coming out. You should hit a store.” For Emily, as a woman who has always been wealthy, Lorelai’s wardrobe reruns signals a lack of taste (and, subsequently, class) rather than a frugal necessity. Richard enters the scene and chastises Emily, “No need for you to hit any more stores, Emily. You’ve done enough shopping for a lifetime. For

²⁰ In a previous episode, Lorelai asks Rory, “[W]ould you be horrified if I started clipping coupons again?”, referencing both her previous and current financial struggles (“The Festival of Living Art”). Rory is shocked, not only by the revelation that Lorelai is presently considering it, but also at the fact that she has done so in the past, indicating that Lorelai tried to hide their earlier economic hardships (and succeeded).

Methuselah's lifetime.” Lorelai ends the argument between her parents before it begins, telling Richard, “Really Dad, don't read more into this than what it is—just humiliating me,” but, over the course of the episode, the viewer learns that there is more to be read into this disagreement between the elder Gilmores.

Lorelai does take Emily's not-so-subtle suggestion, but she adapts it to fit her and Rory's current situation. During a phone call in which mother and daughter lament the lack of time spent together, Lorelai suggests that they “play hooky” and spend the following day window-shopping together at the mall. “It'll be like we're in an old movie, y'know? Walking around, window-shopping like Roz Russell and Ava Gardner on Fifth Avenue,” she promises Rory, attempting to inject a bit of glamour into their thrifty plan. The thrill quickly wears off, however, as being surrounded by items they want but cannot buy only serves to remind them of their lack of money. “Look at all these haughty people with their bags, just rubbing our faces in it,” Lorelai angrily remarks. They are reduced to mere voyeurs of consumerism, rather than active participants in it. The difference between voyeur and participant is contrasted when they encounter Emily. Emily immediately dismisses their plan for window-shopping and orders them to follow her as she buys everything in sight, encouraging Lorelai and Rory to do the same as “it's on your father.” The scene is presented in a humorous fashion, with Emily buying her daughter and granddaughter everything from a tiara to a wedding dress, but the humor is there only to soften the realization, both for the Gilmore girls and the viewers, that the elder Gilmores' marriage has reached a point of crisis.

During their whirlwind shopping spree, she exposes the real reason behind her excessive display of consumerism. She is frustrated with Richard, who has been preoccupied with his new

company and Jason, his new partner.²¹ Emily has always served as the helpmate for Richard's career,²² but a few episodes prior, Richard, prompted by Jason, called off the company launch party Emily had been planning in favor of a weekend getaway to Atlantic City for their clients ("An Affair to Remember"). Emily tries to be supportive, telling Lorelai, "[T]imes change, Lorelai. Things that were once considered proper and elegant are now considered stuffy and out-of-date. [. . .] I do this for your father. I have done this for your father for the last thirty-six years. If he thinks that Jason's right, then it's fine with me. And after all, now I don't have to worry about a party. I can just relax and 'hang out.'" However, despite her claims to the contrary, it is not fine with her. Lorelai calls Jason and chastises him, "[M]y mother is a corporate wife. Her job is putting these parties on, and you put her out of work. [. . .] You embarrassed my mother and made her feel small." Despite her distaste for her mother's chosen lifestyle, most obviously seen, at least by Emily, by Lorelai's choice to not follow in her mother's footsteps, Lorelai does recognize the hard work Emily has put in during her forty years as a "corporate wife," even though she is not compensated for it with a paycheck. During her shopping spree with her daughter and granddaughter, Emily vocalizes her feelings of marginalization in the middle of the department store, screaming,

²¹ In the second season, Richard was forced into early retirement from the insurance firm where he worked for his entire adult life ("Presenting Lorelai Gilmore," "The Bracebridge Dinner"). He begins his own consulting firm ("Help Wanted") and eventually brings on Jason "Digger" Stiles, the son of his former employer, as his partner.

²² Emily describes their relationship and her expectations for it: "Sure, I went to Smith, and I was a history major, but I never had any plans to be an historian. I was always going to be a wife. I mean, the way I saw it, a woman's job was to run a home, organize the social life of a family, and bolster her husband while he earned a living. It was a good system, and it was working very well all these years." ("I'm a Kayak, Hear Me Roar"). Emily's age is never revealed, but based on Lorelai's age, it can be assumed that she was in college and making the "choice" to be a wife and mother rather than a historian around the time of the release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

That stupid moustache is crazy! That's what's crazy! Your father's job is crazy! That's what's crazy! He was supposed to be slowing down, and now he's club-hopping with Jason and hanging out with Moby and having secret lunches with women and lying about it! [. . .] Why do I need to slow down? This is what I do, according to Richard. And he's not slowing down. He's got a whole new life. He's got Pennilyn Lott,²³ he's got Digger; he's got a moustache! He's got all that and what do I have? Maybe I should get a job so I can have my own life.

During this melodramatically funny outburst, it becomes obvious that shopping and spending money has become Emily's only means of exerting control. She feels that her husband and his unmarried business partner have rendered her role as the supportive corporate wife unnecessary, and because of that, she has lost her sense of identity. Through her purchase of unnecessary material objects, she is acting out the stereotype of the pampered rich wife with nothing better to do than spend her days shopping and lunching, protesting Richard's rejection of her as a full partner in his career by adopting the role he and Jason assume she holds.

Lorelai and Rory manage to calm Emily down in an unexpectedly middle-class way—lunch in the mall food court, which Emily did not even know existed. She intently watches Lorelai take a phone call about an unacceptable advertisement for the Dragonfly Inn and compliments her on her “forceful” way of handling it. Lorelai returns the compliment, telling her she “learned from the best.” With the exception of a few moments over the course of the series, Emily, with her cold, upper-class air of privilege, has been constructed as the opposite of Lorelai, who rejected her mother's way of life in favor self-sufficiency and worked her way up

²³ Pennilyn was Richard's college sweetheart, and it was recently exposed that the two of them have been secretly having lunch together once a year, apparently for the entirety of Richard and Emily's marriage (“Ted Koppel's Big Night Out”).

from a self-imposed poverty to a comfortably middle-class life. Through Emily's recognition of Lorelai's business acumen, she is acknowledging that her daughter has created a successful life for herself and by herself, even if it wasn't the life Emily had wanted for her. This sense of pride is stated even more clearly when Rory returns to the table and asks, "What'd I miss?" Emily responds, "I was just admiring your mother's life," to which Rory remarks, "Oh, I do that daily." Because of what she views as Richard's rejection of their marriage agreement, Emily views Lorelai's choices, particularly Lorelai's choice to not live her life as Emily has and expected her daughter to do as well, in a different light.

The episode ends with two scenes contrasting Lorelai and Emily's respective life choices. Lorelai and Rory have returned to Stars Hollow, where they try to coordinate their schedules over pie at Luke's Diner. They are struggling to find time for one another, and when they are unable to plan for a date in the future, they decide to make the most of the present and stay up late that night to be with one another. The episode then cuts to the elder Gilmores' dining room. Richard and Emily are seated at opposite ends of the table, and, for a few moments, the only sound is that of a loudly ticking clock. Richard breaks the silence by asking Emily if she handled "that business with the gardeners" and then casually mentions that he will be spending the next few days in Manhattan with Jason. Emily responds simply with a "That's fine" and then asks Richard what he thinks of the golden apples, one of her purchases from her earlier shopping spree, which she has arranged as the table's centerpiece. Richard quickly glances at them and tells her, "Oh, I've always liked those." The scene ends as it began, with the clock ticking away. He has taken away her sense of purpose in their relationship and is uninterested in what she has left to offer. While Lorelai and Rory struggle to find time for their relationship, trying to carve out time for each other in their increasingly busy and separate lives, Richard is increasingly,

albeit it perhaps unintentionally, isolating Emily away from his life outside the shared mansion of their relationship. As they both saw with Lorelai, providing the material means for essentials and luxuries is not enough to sustain a relationship.²⁴

During the show's seventh and final season, the CW²⁵ began airing a series of 30-second commercial spots featuring the "aerie girls" in partnership with clothing retailer American Eagle Outfitters, which was promoting "aerie," their new line of "intimates and dormwear" targeted to young women aged 15 to 25 ("American Eagle Outfitters and The CW Television Network Announce Groundbreaking Partnership for Tuesday Nights"). The series featured "real-life" American Eagle Outfitters customers who would "take inspiration from the shows' themes, and discuss how they relate to and impact their own lives." The spots were roundly panned; one television blogger complained, "[t]hese girls don't represent the far more sophisticated (and college-educated) audience that watches the show, they represent what the CW considers to be the target audience: women who have no idea what's happening in their lives" (Chan 2). While the marketing ploy failed and disappeared after a few episodes, the fact that it was conceived, executed, and approved by executives at two different corporations signals a liberalization in attitudes towards single mothers in popular culture. Lorelai is portrayed as a role model for these "real-life" girls, and it is considered to perfectly acceptable for them to discuss her romantic pursuits, all while advertising a mall chain line of sleepwear. And although CW executives may have misjudged the show's primary audience, this series of integrated advertisements shows that

²⁴ Emily and Richard separate later in the season. While Emily is not forced to be self-sufficient financially, it does allow them both to re-evaluate what they want from their marriage and, when they eventually reconcile, to reestablish their relationship on a more emotionally equal footing.

²⁵ In September 2006, the WB and UPN merged to form the CW, a joint venture between CBS and Warner Brothers. The network describes itself as "the only network targeting young adults aged 18-34" ("American Eagle Outfitters and The CW Television Network Announce Groundbreaking Partnership for Tuesday Nights").

they were trying, at least in part, to brand the series as a “teen” show, despite some of the more mature storylines and characterizations.

The construction of Lorelai as a single female character falls between the characterizations of single women on contemporary shows such as *Sex and the City* and even earlier ones such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. She is portrayed as vaguely feminist but still traditionally feminine, lovable but unlucky in love, desiring a partner but waiting for the right one. However, her status as a never-married mother of a teenage daughter presents an additional set of cultural assumptions that must be balanced and observed. As a single mother, she is open to more judgment of her romantic choices from other people, as well as those of her daughter. Bella DePaulo, author of *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, asserts that “[i]n the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the shaming of single parents and their children made a comeback” (170). Kate O’Beirne, Washington editor for the conservative *National Review*, wrote in 2002 that our society should “stigmatize unmarried sex and the irresponsibility of single mothers who risk damaging their children by failing to marry before birth. [. . .] If single mothers bore the social stigma of smokers, children would be far better off.” These “traditional family” activists claim to have statistics to back up their prejudices. Mike McManus, founder and president of an organization called Marriage Savers, asserts that children of divorce or children of never-married parents are “twice as likely to drop out of school” and “three times as likely to get pregnant themselves as teenagers” (qtd. in DePaulo 171). DePaulo rebukes these claims, contending that it is not a matter of how many biological parents are present in the household, but rather a problem of economic inequality:

When studies find that children of single-parent households do worse in some way or another than children of married parents, there is often a critical difference in the two kinds of households: the single-family households have less income, less in savings, and fewer assets. That means that the married parents are more likely to be able to afford health insurance, safe neighborhoods, and SAT prep courses for their kids. The issue, in short, is not (just) having too few parents, it is having too little money (180).

By presenting Rory as the “perfect” daughter, particularly in the early seasons of the series when she was still in high school, the show subverts the notion that the offspring of single parents are doomed to repeat their “mistakes,” framing Lorelai as a successfully “good” mother in the process. However, because of her parents’ wealth and the utopian community of Stars Hollow, Lorelai better fits DePaulo’s description of married parents. The fact that she lives in the “safe neighborhood” of Stars Hollow and is able to afford “SAT prep courses” and tuition at Chilton, which is portrayed as one of the most elite private schools in the country, had at least some bearing on her success in rearing Rory.

Beginning with the first season, the series creates a parallel between Rory’s burgeoning sexuality and Lorelai’s isolated, but not repressed, sexuality. When Lorelai hesitates before inviting her date Max in to her (Rory-less) house, she tells him, “I’ve dated, and you know, *dated*, but I’ve just never dated, here in our house” (“Love and War and Snow”). The series firmly establishes that Lorelai has shielded her daughter from her romantic encounters. In “Paris Is Burning,” Rory struggles to get out of the house before Max, who, in addition to being Lorelai’s romantic interest, is also Rory’s teacher, arrives to pick up Lorelai. Rory tells her mother, “I’m not even supposed to be here! That’s the first rule of the ‘Gilmore Dating

Handbook.’ Daughter shall be nowhere near house when said man materializes. It's a good rule, it's been working!” Lorelai later tells Max, “She's never really referred to anyone I've dated by their first name before. I always kept her out of that part of my life, so it was like ‘the mustache guy,’ ‘the earring guy,’ ‘the peg leg guy.’” Through Lorelai’s description of her previous paramours, it becomes obvious that these relationships were not significant for the actual relationships but rather for the funny stories that came out of these (assumedly brief) relationships, providing another level of shared experience between mother and daughter.

However, as Rory matures, both as an adult and a sexual being, mother and daughter are forced to reassess their “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to Lorelai’s love life. Rory tells her mother, “You know what, maybe it was a good idea that you hid your personal life from me when I was a kid but I'm not a kid anymore. [. . .] You made up these stupid rules years ago about the way the Gilmore women would run their lives, and now you're sticking to them even though they're crazy!” (“Paris Is Burning”). Rory’s use of the term “women” is telling here, a significant departure from the usual terminology of “Gilmore girls,” used both in the title and in dialogue from various characters throughout the series. The world Lorelai has created for herself and her daughter is, on the surface, not a typical “adult” world. Their home appears not as a space for a parent-child hierarchy but rather a never-ending slumber party, accessorized with bad television and junk food. By labeling them as the Gilmore “women,” Rory is letting her mother know that she can serve as her confidante in romantic issues as well, despite sixteen years of that being the one topic that is off-limits. Her speech also points out a flaw in Lorelai’s plan—Rory will (and has already started) maturing, which signals an inevitable end to Lorelai’s “no boys allowed” (or at least no boys acknowledged) world.

Despite Rory's assurances, Lorelai recognizes the effects that her dating could potentially have on her daughter. E. Kay Trimberger, author of *The New Single Woman*, cites research claiming that "children in families with a stepfather do worse than those living with only their mother. The stepfather may bring his own children with him, and even if he doesn't, he now takes some of the mother's emotional and physical energy. Researchers document that a man's contribution to running the household is about equal to the extra work he creates" (188). Lorelai does not deny herself sexual pleasure, as we learn from both the scenes in which she is shown in pre-coital anticipation and post-coital bliss, but she does try to avoid entangling Rory in her romantic life. Discussing the possibility of a relationship with Max, she tells him, "She likes you. She likes us. So my mind instantly went to 'Oh my God, what if we break up, she'll be crushed,' and then my next thought was 'Oh my God, what if we break up, I'll be crushed'" ("Paris Is Burning"). In her essay, "Drats! Foiled Again: A Contrast in Definitions," Anne K. Burke Erickson contends,

Lorelai's rejection of suitors to serve as fathers is both sign and symptom of her relationship failures. Lorelai's rules of dating prohibit date-child interfacing [. . .] Her central inadequacy in relationships is a result of her inability to share her life. She uses Rory as an excuse to distance herself from potential suitors and to avoid realizing her 'inability to commit.'" (77)

Lorelai's confidantes, such as her friend Sookie and, to a certain extent, Rory, both vocalize their beliefs in the first and second seasons that Lorelai has commitment issues. When Lorelai first considers ending her relationship with Max, Sookie reacts, "This is about the time you start doing you little getaway dance. Two months right on the nose—you're good" ("Paris Is Burning"). Similarly, after Lorelai later breaks off her engagement to Max right before their

wedding, Rory tells her, “I think you love him, and you got scared and you ran, but you're really going to regret it. And soon!” (“Road Trip to Harvard”). However, Rory gets older and Lorelai becomes more comfortable with sharing the details of her love life with her, she becomes less afraid of commitment. As she becomes more and more assured of the fact that she did right by Rory, she is able to relax and think about her own long-term needs.

Part of Lorelai’s assurance that she did a good job of raising Rory is Rory’s own ability to navigate relationships. While it comes as somewhat of a shock early in the first season when she discovers Rory is interested in boys, and one boy named Dean in particular, Lorelai supports Rory and encourages her to have typical teenaged experiences. She trusts Rory to make the right decisions and has no problem informing Rory’s boyfriends of her expectations. Erickson writes, “Lorelai has not been alone in parenting Rory; the whole town of Stars Hollow has pitched in. Lorelai tells Dean that Rory is much beloved, clearly signaling that the town had much to do with raising her. [. . .] Indeed, Rory’s upbringing seems to have been a testament to Hillary Clinton’s child-rearing model [of ‘it takes a village’]” (75). Lorelai’s comment that Rory is much beloved also serves as a warning to Dean. She tells him, “Sweetheart, the whole town is watching you. That girl in there is beloved around here. You hurt her, there's not a safe place within a hundred miles for you to hide. This is a very small, weird place you've moved to. [. . .] So just know all eyes are on you” (“Kiss and Tell”).

Lorelai’s claim that Rory has a village behind her is driven home after Rory and Dean fall asleep in Miss Patty’s dance studio after a school dance. Playing out like the classic pre-marital sex song “Wake Up Little Susie” (minus the sex), when Miss Patty and her early morning yoga class discover the (still fully clothed) young couple, one of the women exclaims, “Oh my goodness! It’s Lorelai’s girl!” (“Rory’s Dance”). Everyone is shocked that she has even

accidentally stayed out all night, including Rory, Lorelai, and Emily. Emily has spent the night at Lorelai's and begins to attack her as soon as they discover that Rory is gone. Emily lectures,

Lorelai Gilmore, I've watched you do a lot of stupid things in your life and I have held my tongue, but I will not stand by and let you allow that girl to ruin her life. [. . .] She spent the night out with that boy, the one you let her run off to that dance with. [. . .] She's doing the same thing you did. She's going to get pregnant. She's gonna ruin everything just like you did. What kind of mother are you to allow this to happen to her? [. . .] You're going to lose her. You're going to lose her just like I lost you.

Emily is echoing the cultural assumptions made about the children of single mothers.

Trimberger writes, "Starting with the famous Moynihan Report of 1965, a pathology of matriarchy thesis gradually became pervasive in the United States both in social science and in popular discourse. This theory, first applied to only poor and black single mothers but later extended to everyone, argues that 'the absence of a father is destructive to children, particularly boys, because it means that the children lack the economic resources, role model, discipline, structure and guidance that a father provides'" (185-6). The until-now unspoken fear is that Rory will repeat what many of the characters view as her mother's mistakes.

Lorelai defends herself and her daughter to her mother, telling Emily, "You will not come into my house and tell me I threw my life away [. . .] if I hadn't gotten pregnant I wouldn't have Rory. Maybe I was some horrible uncontrollable child like you say, but Rory isn't. She's smart and careful and I trust her and she's gonna be fine and if you can't accept that or believe it, then I don't want you in this house!" While she is defensive to her mother, she becomes combative and scared when Rory returns. She does not allow Rory the space to explain before she launches into

an attack of her own. Lorelai angrily says to Rory, “It’s about the feeling of complete terror when your kid isn’t in her bed in the morning. And then it’s about a whole different kind of terror when you find out that she spent the night with some guy. [. . .] You are going on the pill. You’re not getting pregnant.” She is so determined to make sure that Rory has all the opportunities she missed out on that, in her fear, she is repeating her own mother’s mistake of not listening to her daughter.

Despite Emily and Lorelai’s fears about Rory’s emerging sexuality, the series depicts Rory, particularly in her high school years, as aware of the potential consequences of sex. Abstinence is not presented as the only alternative to getting pregnant at sixteen. Instead, the underlying message, as seen through mother-daughter talks and Rory’s own actions, is sex positive—that sexual desire is natural, but a person should wait until s/he is mature enough to handle the responsibility and is comfortable with the partner and situation. In the third season, Rory is initially reluctant to discuss with her mother the possibility of sex with Jess, who is portrayed as her “bad boy” boyfriend. When Lorelai expresses concern over leaving her daughter home alone for a weekend, Rory tells her, “The boy is different, but I’m still me. That hasn’t changed. [. . .] I have so much on my mind, so many things going on in my life, that I don’t ever have time to think about that” (“Swan Song”). The word “sex” is never used; in its place, Lorelai vaguely references “boy/girl stuff.” This awkwardness does not seem to be because of the topic of sex itself—the scene begins with Rory helping Lorelai pack for an overnight trip with her boyfriend when she suggests Lorelai pack her Moonlight Bunny Ranch t-shirt for the perfect combination of “comfort and raunch.” Instead, it is the notion of Rory having sex that makes both mother and daughter uncomfortable. *New York Times* writer Ginia Bellafante describes the younger Gilmore as “a daughter who is morally upright though hardly a

stuffed shirt—a self-possessed girl of 18 who has thus far preserved her chastity. She is every grown-up's dream child” (“Teenagers and Parents”). Mother and daughter are both unsure how to reconcile their understanding of Rory as the model daughter and straight-A student with the notion that she is becoming a sexual being as well. The shared bond between them prevails by the end of the episode, however, with Lorelai telling Rory that she can tell her anything and Rory promising to inform her mother when she decides to have sex. The honesty and trust between the two serves to situate Lorelai once again as a “good” pop culture mother, illustrating Bellafante’s observation that parents in television and film are now expected to “not only understand their children, but serve as their co-conspirators and strongest allies against the perils of adolescence.”

While the series generally presents the town of Stars Hollow as a utopian idyll where everyone is welcoming and accepting of Lorelai and Rory as a family unit, in the third season episode “One Has Class and the Other One Dyes,” Lorelai is forced to confront a group of more “traditional” mothers who believe that Lorelai’s example is a bad influence on their children. One of the mothers asks Lorelai to come speak to the students of Stars Hollow High School as part of a PTA presentation on successful business people in the town. Lorelai comes prepared to talk about her career as the manager of the Independence Inn, but the talk quickly shifts to her experience as a young single mother as the students (former classmates of Rory) ask her more and more personal questions. Lorelai is unsure how to handle their questions but tries to give honest answers. When a student asks if she dropped out of school after getting pregnant, she awkwardly answers, “No, technically, I didn’t drop out. I, uh, I kept going as long as I could after I got pregnant, which I would recommend to any girl. Not the getting pregnant part, obviously. Um, although, uh, if that happens, um, you know. . .it shouldn’t. I mean, it could but

you should try to avoid it. . .um, anyway, uh, I got my GED, yeah.” Debbie, the mother who invited Lorelai, interrupts, telling her to “move this along.” Lorelai attempts to return to the subject of her profession, but the teenagers keep questioning her about her pregnancy and the choices surrounding it, reminding her that if she had “waited” and “had a baby at a different time with a different man” then “it wouldn’t have been Rory.” As Debbie glowers at her from the sidelines, Lorelai tries to recover, promising them, “Look, you guys, this is a very important subject, and I promise that another time I would love to take you all for a cup of coffee and, and talk about. . .” Lorelai’s offer to talk about her experiences as a pregnant teenager only prompts an even angrier look from Debbie, at which point Lorelai concedes defeat and introduces the other guest speaker.

However, her escape is only temporary, as she is confronted by Debbie and the other mothers, all with matching shoulder-length blonde hair-dos. Debbie claims that she “felt obligated to tell the other moms about your little performance at school before they heard about it elsewhere,” while another mother accuses Lorelai of “preaching to our daughters that it’s okay to get pregnant at sixteen, am I getting that right?” and “flaunt[ing her] mistakes.” Lorelai first attempts to defuse the situation with humor and reminds Debbie of how the students kept questioning her despite Lorelai’s efforts to change the subject. However, when they start to directly judge her for her choices, she goes on the offensive, telling them,

You have no right to judge me. All I said was that for my particular circumstances things worked out okay. I advocated nothing to them. You’re all acting like I walked into that room tossing condoms in the air. [. . .] Fine, next time I will. I’ll bring a banana and we’ll have a little show and tell. How ’bout that?”

Without directly mentioning it, the show manages to briefly skewer the conservative philosophy of abstinence-only education, as the “traditional” mothers are terrified by any mention of teenage sexuality, whether it be the story of a pregnant teenager who made it work or the threat of teaching their children how to avoid Lorelai’s fate by practicing safe sex.

This episode highlights the difference between Lorelai and the more traditional (i.e., married) mothers of the town. The episode emphasizes the contrast in small comedic ways, such as Lorelai’s comment that “All those Stars Hollow moms looked alike, except for Lane’s mom and that one mom with the freaky glass eye that never moved,” a line that prophesizes the on-the-street showdown at the end of the episode between the long-haired brunette Lorelai and the other mothers with their blonde, sensible but still perfectly coiffed, hairstyles. This difference is also illustrated in terms of social distance. When Debbie calls to ask Lorelai to speak at the school, Debbie tells her, “The gang and I have missed you so much at school events. You were always such a kick,” but Lorelai cannot place her (even though she remembers Kathy, Debbie’s daughter). This is a reflection on Lorelai’s line regarding how she only remembers the mothers with differences. Lorelai is remembered not only because she was a “kick,” but also because of her status as a single mother. As long as she is performing her role as a Horatio Alger-esque single mother, succeeding despite obstacles and past “mistakes,” she is viewed as socially acceptable. However, once she vocalizes this difference by refusing to label her aberration a mistake, this gap between them becomes impossible for the “traditional” mothers to ignore. The possibility that their teenaged children may be sexually active and could benefit from Lorelai’s honest perspective is unfathomable to them. Through the series’ construction of Lorelai and the evidence of her success as her style of mothering as seen through Rory, the show depicts Lorelai

as being on the right side of this conflict within the liberal, idyllic, and accepting world of Stars Hollow.

With *Gilmore Girls*, creator Amy Sherman-Palladino produced an idealistic and appealing vision of single motherhood. In *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*,” Juffer reproduces this snippet from her personal journal:

My role model is Lorelai Gilmore, who regularly jokes about her inability to cook. On one episode, she announces that she is organizing the kitchen, which turns out to mean that she has delegated a drawer to take-out menus and is alphabetizing them. There’s a gradual lowering of standards—the single mother doesn’t have to prove her worth through her cooking talents. Good thing, take-out. Sometimes going to the grocery store seems like too much. (68)

The series depicts Lorelai not as a perfect mother who has everything together and figured out but rather as a woman trying to balance motherhood, her career, and her own sexual desires despite her own flaws and fears, the character becomes both relatable and inspirational, despite the lack of discussion as to how her socio-economic status allows her this lifestyle.

The series ends with the possibility of Lorelai finally finding love with her friend Luke, but Rory’s decision in the penultimate episode to decline her rich boyfriend’s marriage proposal and promise of a house in California with an avocado tree in the backyard is equally, if not more, significant (“Unto the Breach”). As mother and daughter pack up Rory’s dorm room after her graduation from Yale, they discuss Rory’s decision:

LORELAI: Someday you'll meet someone, and you'll just know it's right. You won't want to hesitate. You'll just know.

RORY: I hope so.

LORELAI: I really do believe it.

RORY: So I guess no avocado trees.

LORELAI: Well, no avocado tree.

RORY: You know, I think I'll get my own avocado tree.

While she feels sorrow over the end of her relationship, Rory knows she made the right decision. She has seen Lorelai's example of finding one's own "avocado tree," and because of that, she does not want to settle for anything less. Her gamble pays off, as she finds a job as a journalist for an on-line magazine covering and traveling with Barack Obama's presidential campaign ("Bon Voyage").

The series ends with a going-away party thrown for her by the entire town of Stars Hollow, which wants to celebrate the success of the girl they watched over as she grew up, recalling the "it takes a village to raise a child" philosophy of the town (and the show). In her 1992 book *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan rails against television and film's inability to "produce [. . .] images of sexual women, who are also mothers, and who, in addition, have fulfilling careers. 'Sex, Work and Motherhood' is evidently too threatening a combination on a series of levels" (183). *Gilmore Girls* answers this challenge not only with its depiction of Lorelai but also by ending the series with the idea that it is possible to raise a daughter who will be capable of this balancing act as well. In *Pregnancy and Power*, Solinger contends, "If the government and law supported the motherhood and mothering work of young women raising their children, perhaps millions of teenage mothers in the United States today could raise their children with the dignity and authority now denied them" (242). While *Gilmore Girls* presents a vision of single motherhood

and community that is available to only a small segment of the population, if available at all, it does provide a vision of what could be possible in a perfect world.

Lauren Graham's current role on NBC's multi-generational drama *Parenthood* presents an intriguing contrast to the presentation of single motherhood on *Gilmore Girls*. Graham plays Sarah Braverman, a single mother to a teenaged daughter and son. The series opens with Sarah moving her family back in with her parents because of her financial troubles. The series does not linger much on the musician father of the children, but it is made clear that he and Sarah were married at one point. Despite her previous status as a married mother, Graham's character in this series does not have her life figured out, in contrast to the characterization of Lorelai. Sarah is not a modern-day Horatio Alger-type of single mother; the bulk of her employment history is as a bartender with a few freelance jobs designing posters for local rock bands. Sarah's status as a wife and mother prevented her from cultivating her graphic design skills, something she is able to accomplish only after moving back in with her parents and sharing her own parenting demands with them, a luxury afforded to her, like Lorelai, because of her class and parents' financial standing. The Sarah of the pilot episode aligns more closely with cultural assumptions about the single mother, but, with the help of her family, she is able to slowly shift into a more "acceptable" pop culture single mother, both in terms of her own career and her children's evolution from undisciplined, sullen teenagers into more responsible students and active members of the family unit. This "evolution" was necessary in order for the character of Sarah to appear acceptable and appealing to a broad network audience.

Gilmore Girls successfully subverts many of the cultural assumptions about single mothers, but it is only able to do this by aligning Lorelai within the accepted stereotype of the single woman in general—white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, and beautiful. In many

ways, she and Carrie Bradshaw are interchangeable, with *Gilmore Girls* as a possible parallel imagining of what Carrie would have been like if she had gotten pregnant at sixteen. In the next chapter, I will explore what happens when a television show presents a main single female character without the trappings of beauty, whiteness, and comfortable financial footing. *Ugly Betty* imagines a world with the glamorous fantasy of *Sex and the City* and the wealth and social standing of the elder Gilmores through the eyes of a character who has none of these qualities.

“It Looks Like Queens Threw Up”: Beauty as Social Construction on *Ugly Betty*

In the fall of 2006, *Ugly Betty*, the story of Betty Suarez, a Latina woman in her early twenties working at *Mode* magazine (a fashion publication in the vein of *Vogue*) and portrayed by the Latina actress America Ferrera, premiered on ABC. The series was the first successful U.S. primetime adaptation of a telenovela, the Colombian *Yo Soy Betty, la Fea* (*I Am Betty, the Ugly*), which originally aired on RCN (Radio Cadena Nacional) from 1999 to 2001. The Colombian telenovela became a global phenomenon with adaptations appearing in countries as varied as Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, and China. The original Colombian version also made a splash on the U.S. Spanish-language channel Telemundo, allowing the network to challenge Univision, the dominant Spanish-language network, in the ratings (Rivero).

ABC's *Ugly Betty* became a favorite among viewers and television critics for its humorous yet sensitive portrayals of characters typically relegated to token status on American television—immigrant families, gay men, transgendered individuals, and women who do not fit into traditional definitions of beauty. One of the reasons why the series is able to present such varied characters is because of its genre positioning as a sitcom/soap opera, both genres which have traditionally been more open to presenting characters outside of the mainstream. In her discussion of the first season of *Ugly Betty*, *Salon* writer Rebecca Traister writes, “With the chimichurri sauce and the stuffed rabbit, *Ugly Betty* has joined shows like *All in the Family*, *Roseanne*, *The George Lopez Show*, *Everybody Hates Chris* and the prematurely axed *Lucky Louie* in the very narrow pantheon of television that has explored what it's like not to be rich and/or white in America.” In a discussion about the show on the popular culture website Gawker, one commenter wrote, “I've loved *Ugly Betty* for this reason: the loving family with solid values at the heart of the series was made up of an illegal immigrant father, an unwed mother for a

sister, and a gay teen nephew. Week after week I kept thinking: how are they getting away with this on broadcast TV?” Instead of the stereotypical Cinderella story where the heroine gets a makeover²⁶ and finds the love of her life, it is Betty’s professional, if sometimes unconventional, efforts that make her successful at work and appealing to young and single female viewer. *Betty, la Fea* creator and *Ugly Betty* producer Fernando Gaitán told the *Guardian* in 2000: “Latin American soaps are all about the class struggle. They’re made for poor people in countries where it’s hard to get ahead in life. Usually the characters succeed through love. In mine, they get ahead through work” (qtd. in Hodgson). In its adaptation for American audiences, the producers of *Ugly Betty* shifted from the melodramatic soap opera format of the telenovela to a one-hour situation comedy in which the melodrama is played to humorous effect. While the series does allow Betty to have numerous romantic entanglements with a variety of men, each one “better” than his predecessor in terms of class and traditional male attractiveness, the series focuses on Betty’s professional development and attempts to fit in at *Mode* without changing who she is and her (platonic) relationships with her co-workers and family, aligning itself in many ways with Gaitán’s original intentions for *Betty, la Fea*.

Ugly Betty differs from many of its single female-centered sitcom predecessors, including *Sex and the City* and *Gilmore Girls*, in that its main character is appealing not because of her looks, fashion savvy, or romantic and sexual prowess, but rather for her professional abilities and ambitions. In this way, Betty resembles Murphy Brown in regards to Betty’s focus on her career rather than her romantic life, but there is an added layer of empathy that often seemed missing

²⁶ While the fourth and final season of the series does feature a slightly more “fashionable” Betty—her hair is smooth and straight, her braces get removed, and she begins to wear more designer pieces—her makeover does not become a major plot point. Instead, it is shown more as a gradual evolution as her character shifts from assistant to editor and the result of her access to and growing awareness of contemporary fashion.

from Murphy's interactions with her co-workers. Her empathetic and ethical nature evokes Mary Richard's office "good wife" role in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, particularly in Betty's interactions with her boss Daniel. However, her outsider status in the office, symbolized in her wardrobe and physical appearance, but also more subtly indicated by her race and class, prevents many of her co-workers from taking her advice or ideas seriously. Betty appeals to viewers because of her professional and personal tenacity and her ability to remain true to herself, even when changing to fit in to the world of high fashion would be easier. *Ugly Betty* does not punish its heroine for her subversions, whether they be by choice, such as her wardrobe, or by circumstance, such as her race. Instead, it presents these differences as something to be celebrated for their ability to help Betty think outside the traditional *Mode* box. When viewed in conjunction with the other subversive characterizations and castings on display in the series (a beautiful transgendered woman who is portrayed by a supermodel and a high-powered African-American fashion editor, played by a former Miss America whose reign was cut short by scandal), *Ugly Betty* critiques cultural standards of beauty, particularly in regards to racial and gender norms, by situating itself within the belly of the beast, so to speak.

A new type of single woman heroine on television, Betty does not fit into the mold of the typical "26th floor girl" (as the female employees of *Mode* magazine are often referred to by the other employees of Meade Publishing), just as she does not fit the mold of the typical single woman on television. Ferrera, the actress portraying Betty, is a traditionally beautiful woman, even if she is heavier than many of her Hollywood counterparts. Ferrera became known in Hollywood for playing roles that emphasized her difference in films such as *Real Women Have Curves* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and its sequel. The show continues this emphasis on Ferrera's "Otherness" by emphasizing features such as her weight and adding

“layers” of ugliness through frizzy wigs, glasses, and unflattering clothes, unlike her other single female counterparts, both on *Ugly Betty* and other female-focused sitcoms. Through wardrobe and styling choices, the series makes visible Betty’s outsider status. It is through this difference, both in terms of her outward appearance and ethnicity, that she is able to succeed at *Mode* and emerge as a heroine both to her employer on the show and to the audience.

Ugly Betty normalizes singleness in the world of the show by primarily featuring unmarried characters, particularly women, in its cast. Of the five women with starring roles in the first and second seasons, all but one are single, and even that lone married character (Claire Meade, wife of Meade Publications owner Bradford Meade and played by Judith Light) is divorced by the end of the first season. Besides Betty and Claire, also included among the cast are Betty’s sister Hilda (a single mom, played by Ana Ortiz, living with Betty and their father and raising a teenage son), Wilhemina Slater (creative director of *Mode* magazine, portrayed by Vanessa Williams), Amanda Tanen (receptionist for the *Mode* offices, played by Becki Newton), and Alexis Meade (son of Bradford and Claire Meade, who underwent sex reassignment surgery, played by supermodel Rebecca Romijn). These single women provide a range of experiences in terms of ethnicity, professional power, motherhood, and beauty. Traister contends that the show is “preoccupied with difference—the ways we acknowledge or punish or misinterpret it,” and much of this discussion of difference is played out through the experiences of the unmarried female characters.

While *Ugly Betty* has been lumped in with other twenty-first century shows featuring multi-cultural casts,²⁷ it differs from the other series in this category, such as *Lost*, *Heroes*, and

²⁷ See Vincent Brook’s article “Convergent Ethnicity and the Neo-Platoon Show: Recombining Difference in a Post-Network Era” in the July 2009 issue of *Television and New Media* for more discussion on this phenomenon.

Grey's Anatomy, in that Betty is firmly established as the main character. By allowing the viewer access to both Betty's office and home lives, the series establishes a contrast between the Suarez home in Queens (primarily non-white and lower class) and the *Mode* offices in Manhattan (primarily white and upper class). This establishes the primary conflict highlighted by Vincent Brook in his article "Convergent Ethnicity and the Neo-Platoon Show: Recombining Difference in a Post-Network Era"—the "desire to assert difference yet also be accepted into the mainstream" (333). These contrasts extend beyond ethnicity to include standards of beauty and femininity and class differences, illustrating the multiple layers of oppression experienced by a single woman like Betty.

Betty's creative solutions often save the day for the magazine, and, significantly, these solutions often stem from her outsider perspective. It is her ingenuity in the face of conflict and insults that endears her to the audience and makes them want to cheer for her. She is an aspirational character because of her work ethic and cheery disposition rather than for her looks or wardrobe, like Carrie Bradshaw or even Lorelai Gilmore. Betty proves herself worthy of her position at the magazine by the end of the pilot episode after coming up with an ad campaign for Fabia Cosmetics, a make-up company. She presents a sentimental proposal showing the connection between mothers and daughters and linking Fabia Cosmetics to this special relationship. While this campaign is not as edgy as her new boss's ill-timed idea to use a backdrop of a car crash,²⁸ she manages to win over both Fabia and Daniel and save the campaign (and advertising dollars) for the magazine.

While Betty proves herself professionally competent over and over again, one of the ongoing conflicts of the show is Betty's fashion sense (or lack thereof, according to her

²⁸ Fabia, the owner of the company, has just been accused of running over a group of pedestrians with her SUV when Daniel makes his original proposal.

coworkers) and the divide between what is considered beautiful or ugly. The series opens with a shot of Betty waiting for an interview and sitting next to a traditionally beautiful (white) woman, who is wearing a poncho (“Pilot”). Texting on her phone, the woman ignores Betty. Betty tries to make conversation and compliments the woman: “I like your poncho. My dad got me one in Guadalajara.” After a brief but withering stare, the woman replies, “Milan. Dolce and Gabbana. Fall.” While everyone around her is wearing cool neutrals, Betty is outfitted in a plethora of patterns and colors. The notion that Betty does not belong here is openly vocalized by the man who was supposed to be interviewing her. He calls out for Betty Suarez, but as soon as he sees her, he tells her that there has been a mistake and that all the entry-level positions have been filled, ignoring Betty’s pleas to be considered for a job. Visible to the audience but unseen by Betty, a powerful-looking older white man watches the scene. Because the show quickly established Betty as an “ugly duckling” both through this opening pilot scene and the title of the series itself, the viewer knows that this CEO-type is not looking at Betty with sexual interest.

In addition to her double-digit dress size and mouth full of braces, Betty’s “ugliness” is also seen as linked to her home address in Queens, a neighborhood which symbolizes both class and ethnic deviations from the “norm” of the white, middle-class existence typically depicted on television. The differences between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens are exemplified through the microcosms of Meade Publications and the Suarez household. As the episode shifts to Betty’s home, we see Justin, a young Hispanic boy and Betty’s nephew, watching a telenovela. Notions of ethnicity and masculinity are immediately undercut, however, as he quickly asserts, “I don’t like telenovelas. I want to watch Fashion TV” (“Pilot”). Justin’s recognition of the differences between the worlds of his home and that of *Mode* magazine are further shown when Betty receives a phone call from the owner of Meade Publications Bradford

Meade, the man who had been watching her from above during her (non-)interview, offering her the job of assistant to the editor-in-chief of *Mode* magazine. As soon as he hears the word *Mode*, Justin pulls out a copy of the latest issue and implores Betty to “try to dress fashionably. Do you have anything?” Betty replies in the affirmative, leading into the next shot when she turns up at *Mode* for her first day wearing a bright red poncho with “Guadalajara!” emblazoned across the front, inspired by her benchmate’s designer version from the day before.

Upon seeing her enter the *Mode* office, Amanda, the white, fashionable, blonde receptionist at *Mode*, asks Betty, “Are you the before?” referencing the “before” and “after” makeover features common to women’s magazines. To Amanda, someone who looks like Betty must be in the offices seeking help for her appearance. Betty is confused, and Amanda switches tactics, asking Betty if she is delivering something in a slow, over-pronounced tone, a not-so-subtle jibe at Betty’s ethnicity and presumed lack of English language skills. The camera angle shifts back and forth between Betty and Amanda, emphasizing the differences of wardrobe and looks between the two. Betty remains in the entrance to the office, while Amanda is firmly entrenched behind the desk. This bit of blocking underscores their positioning within the world of *Mode*—Betty is on the outside, trying to get in, while Amanda just seems to effortlessly belong there. Despite the show’s positioning of her as an outsider, Amanda’s cruel humor works to align the viewer through sympathy with Betty.

Amanda’s reception of Betty is an exaggerated form of Michel Foucault’s notion of the gaze. The power of femininity works “from below” in a Foucauldian sense, meaning that the dichotomy of gender (among other forms of selfhood and subjectivity) is maintained chiefly not through physically coercive means, but rather through “individual self-surveillance and self-correction to the norms” (Bordo 27). Foucault asserts that all that is needed to enforce this self-

regulation is “[j]ust a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its own weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (155). Betty is subjected to this gaze throughout the series and does allow it to affect her self-esteem at times, particularly when the gaze comes from her professional superiors. However, for the most part, she is the exception to the Foucauldian rule, as she good-naturedly ignores her co-workers’ critiques and ridicule and maintains her own sense of style and femininity in the face of their attempts to humiliate her. She is immune, in a sense, to the power of the gaze because she is confident in herself, a potentially inspiring message to female viewers who are also subjected to the gaze in their everyday lives.

The title sequence of the series also reinforces the notion that Betty stands out in the world of *Mode* because of her physical appearance. The screen is split horizontally into three parts, and a variety of ethnically diverse, traditionally beautiful female facial features (eyes, nose, and mouth) shift across the screen, creating ethnic facial mash-ups before pausing briefly on a complete white face. Betty’s features are then integrated into the pattern, creating visual disruptions in the sequence as it pauses three times on mash-ups of Betty’s features matched with those of the original “beautiful” faces. After flashing the title of the show above Betty’s mouth full of braces, it flashes through the facial parts again before finally settling into a close-up of Betty’s complete grinning face. This fifteen-second sequence quickly introduces one of the main themes of the series. Betty’s ugliness is seen as a disruption in the world of high fashion, but she remains true to herself, broadly smiling her way through almost every conflict. While her appearance is often employed to humorous effect, particularly in the exaggeration of her “uglier” features in the title sequence, it is her ability to succeed despite these flaws that make her an

appealing character. Betty is fully aware of her “disruptive” appearance in the world of *Mode*, but she is determined to make the best of the opportunity that she has been given. Through the series’ occasional indulgence in flashbacks, the viewer becomes aware of the fact that Betty has spent much of her life feeling like the “ugly” sister and an outsider even within her own community because of her perceived “ugliness.” It is this lifetime spent as an outsider that prepares her for the unwelcoming atmosphere she faces at *Mode*.

Amanda’s assumptions about Betty’s purpose in the office are made based on Betty’s physical appearance; Amanda never assumes that Betty could be there as a new employee because she violates what Naomi Wolf refers to as the “professional beauty qualification” (PBQ) (27). Wolf describes the emergence of the PBQ in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, contending that

What is happening now is that a parody of the BFOQ [a bona fide occupational qualification]—what I’ll call more specifically the PBQ, or professional beauty qualification—is being extremely *widely* institutionalized as a condition for a woman’s hiring and promotion. By taking over in bad faith the good-faith language of the BFOQ, those who manipulate the professional beauty qualification can defend it as being nondiscriminatory with the disclaimer that it is a necessary requirement if the job is to be properly done. (27-8)

Early glimpses of the *Mode* offices and its inhabitants indicate a strict, albeit presumably unofficial, PBQ in place at the magazine. Betty stands out among the other employees not only for her bright, non-designer attire, but also for her braces and heavier weight. In her discussion of the show, Traister asserts that “As far as the lily-white Meades are concerned, Betty might as well not have secondary sexual characteristics: She’s so ‘ugly’ that she’s not even female.”

Betty does fulfill a PBQ for her job, but, in this case, it is her lack of conventional beauty that qualifies her for the job of assistant to Daniel Meade, the editor-in-chief of *Mode*. The show

quickly establishes Daniel as a womanizer; in his first scene, his father Bradford catches him receiving oral sex from his assistant, and it is this incident that leads to Bradford offering Betty the job. Christina, the in-house seamstress who quickly bonds with Betty due to their shared outsider status as “not beautiful” in the world of *Mode*, tells Betty the truth: “[Bradford] made Daniel hire you because he didn't want his son to be tempted to sleep with his assistants anymore” (“Pilot”). Betty looks understandably shocked and hurt but tries to quickly recover, saying, “No, no really, it's fine. I should be grateful that I got my break. It's not so easy for everyone. This is just how it was supposed to happen for me.” The idea of a PBQ is subverted, as her main qualification is her perceived lack of sexual appeal. In a scene between Betty and Amanda (before Betty knows the real reason behind her employment), it is made clear that Betty was not hired for her professional qualifications as an assistant to the editor-in-chief. Amanda asks Betty where she had previously worked, and Betty answers that, apart from internships and part-time work, this is her first “real job.” Amanda, who has been the receptionist for the office for a number of years, replies, “That's funny. I was told I didn't have enough experience for the position.” Despite the fact that her job offer was actually an insult of sorts, Betty is determined to make this job work for her and her future. As she tells Justin when she first gets the phone call from Bradford, “[*Mode*] wouldn't have been my first choice, but if I do good here, I can go anywhere in the company” (“Pilot”). She is willing to “pay her dues” and accept her outsider status since it will help her professionally in the long run.

While her “ugliness” helps her get the job, it also prevents her from being fully compensated for the work she does. She is shocked by how small her first paycheck is but soon learns that part of the unofficial compensation is access to the previous season's clothes and accessories in “The Closet,” which is run by Christina (“Swag”). However, since Betty is not a size two, most of the items of clothing are inaccessible to her. Many of her co-workers, such as

Amanda and Marc, also believe that she would not even “fit” the accessories; though body size is not a factor with a Gucci purse, they believe that she would not know how to wear such a high-end designer piece and therefore does not deserve it. This type of mindset is another example of the PBQ at work, as access to sample-sized clothing is considered an acceptable substitute for actual wages.

The substitution of free designer clothes and accessories for an actual living wage is thought of as acceptable in the *Mode* offices because, in theory, it allows even the employees on the lowest rungs to achieve the PBQ. However, Betty uses this transfer of goods for services rendered as a bartering tool to receive actual goods, in the form of her father’s heart medication, rather than as a tool to fit into the *Mode* mold (“Swag”). When her father Ignacio is dropped from his HMO because of his questionable immigration status,²⁹ Betty tries to reason with the insurance agent, who finally tells her that the social security number her father has been using belongs to a dead man. She then attempts to bargain with the neighborhood pharmacist, but the pills are prohibitively expensive without health insurance. She finally decides to barter the Gucci purse she received from the *Mode* seasonal closet cleaning. Despite Marc and Amanda’s insults and claims that the purse was too good for someone like her, Betty felt “pretty” while carrying the purse—not because of its “it bag” status, but because it reminded her of a purse her mother, now deceased, handed down to her when she was a child. Fashion becomes important here not because of the status associated with such a luxury item but instead for the memories and feelings it evokes. Christina tells Betty that she loves fashion because “it’s good for the soul—it makes you feel good,” and Betty’s brief experience with the purse perfectly illustrates this point of view. However, she also understands that her father’s health is more important than a pretty purse, so she sacrifices this symbol of external beauty for several months’ worth of the heart medication.

However, Betty (and the audience, vicariously through her) gets her revenge on Marc for his comments when she buys a knock-off of the purse and gives it to him in exchange for a favor “to

²⁹ Ignacio illegally immigrated from Mexico to the United States before the birth of his daughters, a secret he kept hidden from them.

be determined later,” as well as a second knock-off (“Swag”). Christina warned her that everyone in the office could spot a fake on sight, a warning that Marc echoes himself when Betty makes her offer. By passing off a fake as the real, Betty, and the series by extension, shows that beauty and high fashion are both social constructs. Because she carried both the real and fake purses with the same amount of confidence, she was able to pass off the knock-off as the “real” article. Betty’s joke/vengeance is used here to expose the tenuousness of the seemingly strict dividing line between “high” and “low” fashion.

While Betty’s confidence allowed her to bridge the chasm between a Gucci purse and its knockoff counterpart, the gap between Queens versus Manhattan in terms of beauty, class, and race proves to be too large in “Queens for a Day.” The episode begins with Betty being denied entrance to a Manhattan nightclub for the party for Daniel’s first issue as editor-in-chief, reaffirming her outsider status. Camera flashes are going off everywhere, as the camera shoots Betty from above, emphasizing her smallness in the crowd. She finally catches the attention of the bouncer, who does not believe that she works at *Mode* and encourages her to “come back on Monday night—that’s when we let anyone in.” When she returns home early after not getting in to the party, her sister Hilda tells her, “Those places aren’t for people like us.” She then offers to help Betty and reminds Betty of her own success selling Herbalux, a vitamin supplement. “You have to look it to be it,” she tells Betty, continuing, “They’re [her co-workers at *Mode*] not going to change. You have to.” Hilda is essentially telling Betty to accept the PBQ and change herself to fit it rather than expecting her boss and co-workers to accept her based on the quality of her work alone.

Betty faces this very conundrum later in the episode. Daniel needs a high-profile photographer for a shoot for the next issue to demonstrate that he is worthy of the editor position. Betty manages to set up a meeting with the famous photographer Vincent Bianchi, despite his previous disagreements with Meade Publications, because she and Vincent grew up in the same neighborhood. Although Vincent agreed to the meeting because of their shared Queens roots, Daniel asks Betty to “try to dress up a little” for their lunch meeting at a fancy Manhattan

restaurant. Betty decides to take Daniel's advice and embarks on a makeover quest with the help of her sister. The show alternates between quick shots of Betty's day of beauty in a busy Queens salon and Wilhemina receiving her own pampering in an exclusive-looking Manhattan salon. Betty brings in a magazine advertisement featuring Jaslene Gonzalez, winner of the reality show *America's Next Top Model* and the only Latina winner of the series so far, as an example of the look she wants to emulate. During her consultation with the stylist, Wilhemina simply says that she wants a look befitting an editor-in-chief, the position she is trying to manipulate and scheme her way into. In contrast with Betty, Wilhemina does not need to provide a pre-existing example of what she wants since, as creative director of a fashion magazine, she creates the styles rather than copying them. The audience sees a woman quietly threading Wilhemina's already perfectly arched eyebrows, and then the episode cuts to Queens, with a heavy-set African-American stylist assessing Betty's bushy brows and telling her assistant, "we're going to need the big tweezers." Wilhemina has someone massaging her shoulders while another employee refills her champagne glass, while Betty is reprimanded by both the stylist and Hilda because she can't stop laughing as her feet are being exfoliated. The scene ends with Wilhemina staring at her perfect chignon in the mirror, and then cuts to Betty, with a teased-out kinky hairstyle and sparkly false eyelashes, admiring the intricate design on her acrylic nails. While the scene quickly sums up the difference between beauty in Queens versus beauty in Manhattan, it also illustrates the power of beauty rituals in increasing one's self-esteem. Both women are preparing for important meetings (Betty with Vincent and Wilhemina with her father, a United States senator), and by "enhancing" their appearance, they hope to exhibit the confidence they do not necessarily feel on the inside with regards to their respective appointments.

Unfortunately for Betty, what is considered beautiful in Queens does not translate in Manhattan. As she leaves the salon after her makeover, Betty walks through her neighborhood on her way to work. The neighborhood is coded as Hispanic through quick establishing shots of billboards and storefront signs in Spanish, as Hispanic men and women walk down the street. Everyone turns to look at Betty as she walks by, culminating in catcalls from a group of

construction workers. Betty turns around in surprise and asks if they were talking to her. When they answer in the affirmative, Betty appreciatively replies, “Thank you!” However, the warm reception to her new look cools as soon as she reaches the *Mode* offices. She rides the elevator with Bradford Meade, who does not at first recognize the “ugly” assistant he hired for his son. When Betty reintroduces herself, Bradford hesitates before responding, finally settling on “You look very. . . colorful.” Wilhemina sums up Betty’s new look to Marc more directly, telling him, “It looks like Queens threw up,” quickly drawing a line between a beauty of “quality” in Manhattan as opposed to a one of “quantity” in Queens. Wilhemina makes her critique more clearly during a staff meeting. Daniel is discussing his redesign of the magazine, and Wilhemina uses Betty as an example in her argument against the redesign. As she begins to speak, she stands up and moves next to Betty, who is standing at the head of the table with Daniel in front of the magazine’s staff. Wilhemina says,

Sometimes, change is a positive thing [smooths her hair], and sometimes, they can spin out of control. You start with a simple redesign and, before you know it, you’re talking about bold new colors and a daring new look, and, the truth is, you haven’t really improved on a thing. I’m just saying, change isn’t always for the better. In some cases, it can make a bad situation [looks Betty up and down] even worse.

Wilhemina is making it clear that effort alone does not help one achieve the professional beauty qualification. Betty was attempting to fit in, but her efforts only emphasized the difference between her and the other women at *Mode*. Betty’s makeover and subsequent breakdown in the office bathroom (she tries to keep a smile on her face in the conference room but goes to the bathroom to cry alone) disputes the idea presented by magazines like *Mode* that a woman can feel good about herself simply by attending to her appearance. Betty tells Daniel, “I’m the jerk for thinking that fake nails and a new hairdo could make a difference on someone like me.”

Betty is so upset by Wilhemina’s insults that she tells Daniel to take Amanda with him to lunch and have her impersonate Betty in order to make a good impression on Vincent. However,

this plan quickly backfires, as, just like Betty is unable to be a “26th floor girl,” Amanda is unable to pretend that she is anything but that, greeting Vincent with a “Ho-la” (pronouncing the “H” and emphasizing the first syllable) and refusing a roll with a simple “Eww. Carbs.” Betty once again comes to the rescue, bringing Daniel both the forgotten photo shoot proposal and the Queens authenticity that first made Vincent agree to the lunch. Vincent is impressed with Daniel because of his association with Betty and agrees to do the photo shoot as long as he deals only with Daniel and not the other “blowhards” at Meade. When Daniel gives Betty the good news, he tells her, “Fake nails or not, you really came through for me.” Betty may never fit into the *Mode* mold, but her talent and authenticity make her a good employee in spite of her “ugliness.”

The notion of beauty as a socially artificial construct is one of the main themes of the series, beginning with the transformation of America Ferrera, who plays the title role. Before being cast in *Ugly Betty*, Ferrera became known for her curvaceous figure after her roles in *Real Women Have Curves* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, in the vein of other Latina celebrities such as Hayek and Jennifer Lopez. Almost every mainstream media article on the show makes a point of saying how “beautiful” the actress is in real life, contrasting the character with the actress who portrays her. *Time* magazine television critic James Poniewozik writes, “[Betty’s] features are broad and unmistakably Mesoamerican. (Ferrera is strikingly pretty in real life),” while Lola Ogunnaike in the *New York Times* commented, “All involved in Ms. Ferrera's daily transformation on the set in Los Angeles gush about how attractive the actress is in real life.” However, when Ferrera appeared on the cover of *Glamour* magazine’s “First Annual Figure-Flattery Issue” with the headline “Ugly Betty Is Hot!”, her body was airbrushed down to a more “acceptable” size (see Figure 1). Melissa McEwan, writing for the blog Shakesville, asserts, “You can star in a movie celebrating women with curves, and you can star in a television show celebrating nonconformity, but you will be allowed to demonstrate neither on the cover of *Glamour*, upon which you will instead be airbrushed to the verge of total unrecognizability, where only your familiar and lovely grin remains to identify you.” Ferrera was publicizing the series, but the irony of digitally whittling her down to a generic model-size two seems to have been lost on the editors. Apparently, *Glamour’s*

method of flattering one's figure is to simply airbrush one's self to fit into cultural ideals of what a beautiful body looks like, according to the dictates of fashion magazines.

While Ferrera has not commented publicly about the cover, it provides a point of contrast with the first season *Ugly Betty* episode "The Box and the Bunny." Wilhemina and Daniel decide to feature Natalie Whitman, who is best known for playing a Bridget Jones-esque character. Whitman has not yet lost the weight she gained for the film, so the staff of the magazine meets with Natalie and her publicist to discuss how much airbrushing should be done. The scene opens with voices remarking on what should be changed—"Slim the hips," "Lift the breasts"—as the camera angle moves around the room before focusing in on an image of Whitman on a computer screen. The shot remains on the computer as the magazine staffer uses a Photoshop-like program to make the changes. While the show speeds up the process on-screen, it allows the viewer to see just how much images in magazines can be manipulated. Bordo analyzes our cultural obsession with thinness, asking where we get the idea that "any vestige of fat must be banished from [the] body":

Most likely, it wasn't from comparing herself to other real women, but to those computer-generated torsos—in ads for anti-cellulite cream and the like—whose hips and thighs and buttocks are smooth and seamless as gently sloping dunes. No actual person has a body like that. But that doesn't matter—because our expectations, our desires, our judgments about our bodies, are becoming dictated by the digital" (Bordo xvii-xviii)

As each "flaw" is pointed out, the shot occasionally shifts between Natalie, who looks embarrassed, and Betty, who looks shocked and disturbed. Natalie finally interrupts and asks if this is all necessary, remarking, "I thought I looked. . .," and Wilhemina finishes her sentence: "Normal? Wonderfully so." But she then goes on to tell Natalie that "normal" would be fine in any other magazine, but *Mode* is about aspiration, not normalcy, and asks her, "Why not look as good as you possibly could?" Betty, who has been quietly observing all this time, whispers a "hmm," causing Natalie to ask her what she thinks. She tries to tell Natalie, "I think you look great," but Daniel interrupts her before she can finish her sentence.

The meeting quickly ends, but, a few minutes later, Betty sees Natalie still sitting in the conference room, now alone and using the computer to slim her image down bit by bit, until the image of herself disappears completely. The viewer sees Natalie from Betty's perspective, through the glass wall of the room. Betty, representing the "normal" girl, is on the outside looking in, watching a celebrity, who is supposed to represent the pinnacle of beauty, realize that she can never be pretty enough either. Beauty, according to the dictates of *Mode* (and, by extension, its real world fashion magazine counterparts), is shown to be a fantasy rather than an achievable aspiration. This idea is further emphasized when Betty overhears Natalie's publicist asking her, "Who wants to hire a fatty?" Once again, Betty is on the outside looking in, with the camera shooting her through a door with three circular windows in a horizontal row. Mirroring the effect of the title sequence, Betty is divided into three parts, only this time it is a full-body shot, with the windows, emphasizing not only her plump face with glasses and a mouth full of braces but also her rounded midsection and legs.

In her book *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks contends that "in a fashion world, especially on the consumer side, where clothing that looks like it has been designed simply for reed-thin adolescent girls is the norm, all females no matter their age are being socialized either consciously or unconsciously to have anxiety about their body, to see flesh as problematic" (35). For all her self-confidence, Betty is affected and disturbed by what she is witnessing, culminating in her confession to Natalie, "Truth is, I'd kill to look like you." The camera pauses on Betty after she says this, then shifts to Natalie, who appears genuinely upset by the situation, as she watches Betty exit the elevator. Betty's confession affects Natalie, who returns to Daniel's office, telling him that Betty "inspired me to come up with a solution to fix this whole problem." She instructs Daniel to publish the photos sans retouching and explains her motivations in an interview on Fashion TV: "I just want to put a spotlight on the hypocrisy of this business which seems intent on making any normal human being feel like an outcast," a statement which could be applied to the series as a whole as well. The issue of airbrushing in the age of Photoshop has received a lot of attention in the media in the twenty-first century, first most notably with Jamie Lee

Curtis's decision to appear in *More* magazine in 2002 in a photo spread that featured her first without any styling or flattering light or camera angles and then in a more traditional, "glammed up" version that took thirteen people and three hours to achieve (Ryan, "Jamie Lee Curtis has nothing to hide"). Curtis approached the magazine with the idea herself and insisted on revealing the truth behind the amount of work it took to achieve the second image. Even though *Ugly Betty* was not the first to comment on the impact overly-styled and heavily-airbrushed images have on its viewers, it is notable that a prime-time network series devoted an entire episode to the issue.

The character of Wilhemina Slater further illustrates the emphasis on physical beauty in the magazine's offices. After a brief introduction to the *Mode* creative director in a scene in the magazine's conference room during the pilot episode, the second scene in which Wilhemina appears features her assistant Marc injecting Botox in her forehead as she reclines on a chaise lounge in her office. She is furious that she has not been promoted to editor-in-chief, having been passed over for Daniel Meade, in an obviously nepotistic move by Daniel's father Bradford. As Marc injects the anti-aging toxin in her face, she rails against the Meades and the decision, outlining all of her qualifications, "Twenty years, Marc. No one has done more, worked harder. I have lived for this magazine. Helped make it into the icon it is today. Then that nasty nepotistic son-of-a-bitch gives my job to his [son]!" She then lowers her voice by a few decibels, and she asks, "Tell me the truth. Am I getting old?" He reassures her with an "Absolutely not!" which is immediately followed by a concerned "But you could use a tad bit more between the brows." Unable to find a professional reason for her lack of promotion, Wilhemina worries that it is an issue of age and waning beauty. Marc's remark that Wilhemina needs a little more Botox between her brows is not a negation of his previous remark but instead a comment on the maintenance required to remain beautiful (which is backed up by his own glee at getting to keep the leftover Botox for himself, despite the fact that he appears to be in his early twenties).

The character of Wilhemina Slater and notions of beauty are further complicated because of the actress playing the role, Vanessa Williams. In 1983, Williams was the first African-American woman to win the title of Miss America, which resulted in her receiving death threats and hate mail.

Ten months into her reign, nude photographs of Williams surfaced and were printed in *Penthouse* magazine, and Williams was pressured to resign. Despite the fact that she claimed that she was pressured into posing for the pictures and was told they would never be published, Williams was still vilified in the media:

Williams' situation seemed to be about more than a single young woman's error in judgment. Many people, both inside the black community and outside it, saw racial politics at the heart of the scandal, and debated how Williams' race might have affected events. No matter how people viewed the scandal, Williams often was cast as representing not only herself, but also her race. (“People & Events: Breaking the Color Line at the Pageant”)

After a few years out of the spotlight, however, Williams resurfaced with her debut album, *The Right Stuff*, which achieved gold record status and earned her three Grammy nominations. In addition to a successful career as a recording artist, Williams also began to act, first on Broadway in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and later in film and television. Compared to her fellow Miss America winners, Williams has done well professionally, not only because of her title and the ensuing controversy, but also because of her talents as a singer and actress. Even the official Miss America website barely mentions the scandal, choosing instead to concentrate on her post-Miss America professional success: “Despite [Williams’] resignation over questionable photos, she performed her duties as Miss America in an exemplary fashion. She moved into the world of entertainment with ease and grandeur. [. . .] Today, Vanessa has four children and some describe her as the embodiment of American values. (“Miss America: 1984”)

While, as *Ebony* magazine writer Karima M. Haynes wrote in 1994, “[r]arely are the words ‘former Miss America’ associated with [Williams’] name today” (43), her status as the first African-American Miss America raises interesting questions regarding Williams’ casting as

Wilhemina Slater. In an article published in the Summer 1984 issue of *The Antioch Review*, Gerald Early writes,

Vanessa Williams was chosen [as Miss America] largely because her good looks are quite similar to those of any white contestant. It will take no imaginative leap on the part of most whites to find her to be a beautiful girl. She does not look like the little black girl of the inner-city projects who reeks of cheap perfume and cigarette smoke and who sports a greasy, home-made curly perm and who has a baby at the age of fifteen for lack of anything better to do. Her beauty, if anything, is a much more intense escapism than that of her white counterpart. In effect, her selection becomes a kind of tribute to the ethnocentric ‘universality’ of the white beauty standards of the contest; in short, her looks allow her ‘to pass’ aesthetically. (294-5)

Williams’ light skin and European features do not directly threaten the dominance of white beauty standards. Bordo contends that this type of homogenized ethnicity does not “overwhelm the representation and establish a truly alternative or ‘subversive’ model of beauty” (25). This same “homogenized” beauty allows the character of Wilhemina Slater to fit into the PBQ of the fashion world.

Wilhemina’s positioning in the world of *Mode* is complicated in the second season episode, “Grin and Bear It.” While trying to identify her biological father, Amanda finds an old picture of her recently-discovered biological mother Fey Sommers, the former editor of *Mode*, with an assistant credited as “Wanda.” After some quick work in Photoshop, Amanda realizes that it is a less-fashionable and less-conventionally beautiful Wilhemina, “Ugly Willy,” in Amanda’s words. Wilhemina confesses that she is the woman in the picture and admits that Fey

paid for her makeover and helped her become a supermodel and, later, *Mode* creative director in exchange for Wanda/Wilhemina's silence regarding Fey's pregnancy and subsequent giving up of the infant Amanda. Fey's decision is not only symbolic of the price women had to pay in order to be successful, particularly in the early 1980s when Amanda was conceived, but also of the persona and attendant PBQ Fey had to maintain in order to achieve her powerful position. With Fey as her mentor, Wilhemina recognized that, in order to get ahead in the fashion industry, she had to meet the PBQ already in place.

The series critiques this unattainable definition of beauty both by portraying the "plain" Betty as the heroine of the series, illustrating that a woman can be confident and successful even if she isn't a size zero, but also by uncovering how the concept of beauty is created and manipulated. This cultural criticism is particularly evident with the character of Alex/Alexis Meade, portrayed by supermodel Rebecca Romijn, who is best known for her work with the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit editions and lingerie company Victoria's Secret. The pilot episode establishes that Daniel had an older brother, Alex, who died two years earlier in a skiing accident. Throughout the first half of the first season, viewers watch Wilhemina conspire with a woman covered by robes, hoods, and masks. In the episode "In or Out," the mystery woman is finally revealed, with close-up shots revealing bandages being snipped away from her body. Finally, as Wilhemina discusses their plan to take over Meade Publications, the woman steps out of the shadows and removes a hooded white robe and reveals a body clad in a skin-tight white silk dress. Wilhemina remarks, "Never underestimate the power of ambition," as the woman looks in a mirror and runs her hands over her body. Wilhemina continues, "Looks like that skiing accident really paid off, Alex Meade." The woman quickly corrects her, "It's Alexis, darling."

By casting an internationally-recognized supermodel in the role of a male-to-female transgendered person, the producers are not only attempting to normalize transgenderism (a worthy feat in and of itself) but also commenting on the constructed nature of gender and beauty in our culture. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler asserts:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (175)

While Rebecca Romijn is playing a post-op transgendered woman and not a biological man in drag, Butler's discussion of the performance of drag provides a point of analysis for Alexis Meade and the actress/model who portrays her. By casting a woman known for her beauty and traditionally feminine figure³⁰ in both the fashion and pop culture worlds, the *Ugly Betty* producers are asserting that female beauty can be constructed even out of a body born biologically male. Butler contends that "[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (175). By having Romijn imitate transgenderism, the show explicitly reinforces the constructed nature of beauty, and, by extension, the idea of femininity as a performance.

This idea is explicitly illustrated in the episode "Brothers," which features Alexis's return to Meade Publications in the midst of the media frenzy surrounding her transition. Alexis enters the building as the song "I Know What Boys Like" plays on the soundtrack. After making her way through the crowd of paparazzi and reporters screaming questions like "Do you enjoy wearing dresses?", she rides the elevator up to the *Mode* office with Betty. Betty tries to inconspicuously check her out, when Alexis abruptly summarizes her transformation in a litany reminiscent of the airbrushing debate about Natalie Whitman: "Okay, let's cut to it. They soften the jaw. Slim the nose. Lower the hairline. Shave the Adam's apple. Then there are the implants: cheeks, breasts, ass. I'll spare you the more graphic details, but just to put a rumor to rest, they didn't save 'it' in a

³⁰ In addition to posing for *Victoria's Secret* and the *Sports Illustrated*, Romijn also played Mystique in the *X-Men* film franchise, with a costume that consisted of blue body paint and a few strategically placed prosthetics.

jar.” She pauses for a moment as Betty looks at the patch on Alexis’s arm. Alexis quickly explains that it’s a hormone patch “so my moustache doesn’t grow back.” Betty excitedly asks, “Really? Where’d you get that? Because I have to bleach all the time, and it’s such a pain.”³¹ By asking Alexis for beauty advice, Betty is displaying both an acknowledgment of the work required to maintain a culturally acceptable performance of femininity and admiration of Alexis’s (more) successful performance—her knowledge of “what boys like.” Betty is not asking for advice on hair or make-up, constructions which typically reinforce femininity, but rather for advice on facial hair, a feature that un-“corrected” blurs the lines between feminine and masculine.

In the episode “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the series continues its critique of beauty standards and assumptions. In an editorial power move intended to gain control over the magazine from Daniel, Alexis decides to pose for the cover of *Mode*. During the photo shoot, the song “Boys Wanna Be Her” by Peaches plays over quick-cut shots of Alexis in a fitted pink blazer sexily crawling on her desk and smoking a cigar. The lyrics “the boys wanna be her/the girls wanna be her/I wanna be her” repeat over and over as the character both proudly displays her femininity and winks at the rumors and media interest with the phallic cigar. The resulting cover shows Alexis in all her feminine glory, with the headline “The Future of Sexy and the New Face of *Mode*” with surrounding smaller headlines advertising stories of “A Dating Odyssey: *Mode* Girl Seeks Single Man” and “Pool-side Pin-up: Swimwear Meets Gorgeous.” These headlines not only indicate a recognition of beauty as a construction (the “new face of *Mode*” is not one with you’re born with, but rather one created with scalpels and collagen) but also Alexis’s accept-me-as-I-am attitude—she’s ready to use her new body, whether that be by dating a man or wearing a bikini. The “future of sexy,” according to the cover, is just as much about self-confidence as it is about technological advances.

As the series enters its final season, Betty begins a transformation of her own. In the third season finale, Betty is promoted to the position of junior features editor (“The Fall Issue”). Her

³¹ This is actually the second time in the episode another woman has admired Alexis’s performance of femininity. Earlier, as the Suarez family watched the television coverage of the Meade family drama, Hilda tells Betty, “You have to find out where she gets her nails done.”

wardrobe and styling choices had been gradually improving over the course of the series, particularly after Patricia Field, a New York fashion designer best known for creating the costumes for *Sex and the City* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, started styling the wardrobe for the show in its third season.³² While Betty's new and "improved" style is mostly composed of de-frizzed hair and trendier clothes (still with her trademark mix of colors and patterns), the episode "A Million Dollar Smile" from the fourth and final season features the removal of her braces and imagines what Betty's life would have been like if she had been born with perfect teeth. While the episode does introduce some problematic dichotomies (a woman can be either ugly and nice or pretty and mean), it also illustrates the line between beautiful and ugly in our culture.

The episode opens with Betty waking up on the morning of her orthodontist appointment. The audience watches her dance around the living room and stopping for a moment to look in the mirror at her mouth of metal one last time. Unfortunately, between her chatty orthodontist Dr. Frankel and an ill-timed fire alarm that sets off the sprinkler system, Betty shows up for "picture day" at *Mode* (everyone is getting new ID cards) looking more like the old "Ugly Betty" with frizzy hair and a mouth still full of braces. The first few scenes of the episode place Betty back into the role of *Mode* outsider, right when both she and the viewer begin to think that she's starting to fit in. We see the other employees strike supermodel poses for their pictures, while, in her picture, Betty's eyes are closed and her mouth is stuck in an awkward grimace. Marc, who has been lingering in the background making snide comments, offers to help Betty "fix" her picture with the miracle of Photoshop. The scene is once again reminiscent of the Natalie Whitman episode, but also calls to mind the title sequence, as Marc literally scrolls through different mouth and hair options. After he has given her a metal-free smile and windswept hair, the picture seems to be a photo of America Ferrera, out of her "Ugly Betty" make-up and costume. Betty thanks Marc for his help, but Marc continues to manipulate the photo, until the image of Betty is nearly unrecognizable. When Betty tells Marc, "This looks nothing like me," Marc replies simply, "You're welcome" before walking off. Betty has earned Marc's grudging respect over the

³² Field also styled the pilot episode of *Ugly Betty*.

course of four seasons, but he still cannot resist making her the butt of his jokes because her appearance still does not easily fit into the *Mode* mold.

In a scene with Daniel, the episode once again presents a contrast between Betty's work ethic and personal appearance. Daniel is trying to schedule a photo shoot featuring the "Million Dollar Bra" from Eve's Seduction, a Victoria's Secret-type company. Betty saves the day by talking with Eve's assistant and making a plan to convince Eve to allow *Mode* to shoot the bra between its debut at the Guggenheim Museum and its departing flight to Cairo. Betty celebrates her success by confidently stating, "Betty-1; giving up-0," but, rather than thanking her for her help, Daniel fixates on a raisin stuck in her braces, telling her, "It's kinda gross." Despite all her progress, both professionally and personally, the episode continues to relegate her back to her positioning as "Ugly Betty."

All of this tearing down, however, is used to set up the contrast between "our" Betty and the Betty that is presented in a dream sequence after Betty sustains a minor head injury. She shows up for the party for the million-dollar bra, but security turns her away because she does not look like someone who works at *Mode*, especially when she shows the guard her Marc-created ID. After her braces set off the metal detectors and an ensuing scuffle with the guard, Betty hits her head on the floor and has a dream that she was born with perfect teeth. She wakes up as she did at the beginning of the episode, on the couch at her father's house in Queens, but this time she wakes up in a stylish and slim-cut dress suit, with perfectly curled hair. She moves to look in the mirror and sees that her mouth is braces-free. Dr. Frankel suddenly appears behind her and tells her that she got her wish—she was born with perfect teeth. As Betty inspects her now-perfect smile, the title sequence begins, giving the viewer an immediate point of comparison to mull over during the commercial break.

It turns out that having a perfect smile has changed more than just Betty's appearance. Her family no longer lives in their house in Queens; since Ignacio did not have to pay for Betty's braces, he was able to invest money in "the tech boom" and bought a mansion, "Casa Suarez," for the family in the city. The viewer also gets small hints that having a perfect smile changed Betty's personality as well. When she realizes that she does not need her glasses, Dr. Frankel tells her that she got Lasik eye surgery because she "wanted perfect eyes to match your perfect teeth. In this world, you're actually a little vain" ("A Million Dollar Smile"). Betty muses, "That doesn't sound like me at all," but she quickly learns that more than just her teeth has changed in this reality. Since Betty is now the "pretty sister," Hilda has been relegated to the role of the "ugly" sister. Both Hilda and Ignacio have a very nouveau-riche look to match their new home, but Hilda is no longer slim and stylish; instead, she looks up to Betty as her "fashion guru." When Betty asks Dr. Frankel about Hilda, the orthodontist tells her, "It's a law of the universe. There can only be one really pretty sister. I mean, think about it—there's Paris and Nikki, Kim and Khloe, Beau and Jeff [. . .] You'd be surprised how something as simple as perfect teeth can change you. . .and the people around you."

Betty begins to see these changes as soon as she enters the *Mode* offices. Marc is the receptionist in this reality since, as soon as Wilhemina saw Betty's perfect smile on the day of her interview at Meade Publications, she demotes Marc and hires "Pretty Teeth" as her new assistant, which eventually leads to Betty's promotion to managing editor. The viewer sees a flashback to that day, mirroring the opening scene of the pilot episode, except with Betty in the role of the snobby competitor, talking down to her dowdy benchmate who compliments her poncho. Because Betty was not there to counsel Daniel, he has married Amanda, who openly takes money from the office's petty cash drawer and carries on affairs with other men in Betty's

office. She and Betty are “besties” who make fun of Marc for his “lesbian jeans” and “jheri curl” “only every Monday-Friday,” according to Amanda. This Betty is firmly ensconced in Wilhemina’s manipulations, and Daniel views Betty as an enemy, to the point where he is even a little scared of her. When she stops by his office, Daniel is surprised that she is talking to him. He cowers before her a little, asking if she stopped by to give him bad news or just to make fun of his wardrobe, before finally telling her, “You may have everyone else around here fooled, but I know the real you. Underneath that perfect smile, you’re ugly, Betty.” The camera zooms in on Betty’s confused face, emphasizing the fact that this character is not the same Betty viewers have been cheering on for four years.

Blogger Chloe, on the website Feministing, sums up the problematic dichotomy being presented:

Real-life Betty worked her way into Daniel's heart by working her butt off, and by repeatedly saving his. Perfect-teeth Betty, under the tutelage of Wilhelmina, becomes just as scheming and heartless as her mentor, and becomes Managing Editor. [. . .] So there you have it: Being pretty makes you bitchy, and being ugly endows you with compassion and empathy. So go ahead and hate on those pretty girls, because on the inside, they're hideous. You can't be both beautiful and kind, ladies, just like you can't be both beautiful and smart. It's just the “law of the universe.”

Dr. Frankel expresses this very sentiment when Betty asks her, “How could having perfect teeth change me this much?” The orthodontist responds, “Having braces is hard, right? People make fun of you, and it hurts your feelings, which makes you compassionate. Pretty-teeth Betty? People fawned all over her, and it went to her head.” The series seems to be positing a lack of

conventional beauty leads to an abundance of compassion, as well as the inverse of that equation, a premise that is only strengthened by the fact that it is “ugly” Betty in “pretty” Betty’s body who decides to save the day for Daniel and the magazine by rescuing the million-dollar bra from Wilhemina and her scheme to embarrass Daniel. As she tussles with Wilhemina, Betty murmurs, “I want my old life back” and hits her head on the floor one more time, bringing her back to her own reality.

Betty wakes up to Daniel attending to her, asking her if she’s all right. When she realizes that she needs her glasses to see, she gets excited, a feeling that is only heightened when she feels her braces and realizes she is back in her own world. She wakes up to realize that the bra is missing and assumes that, like in her dream, Wilhemina is responsible. After she rips off Wilhemina’s shirt, only to reveal a black bustier instead of a diamond-encrusted bra, she tries to leave, giving excuses about her concussion, and runs right into the mannequin with the bra and gets her braces caught in it. Her mishap, however, saves the day, as Eve, notorious for her lack of a sense of humor, bursts into laughter at the sight of Betty tangled up in the bra and offers to let the magazine shoot the bra for two hours. The physical comedy of the scene underscores the series’s on-going critique of the PBQ. Betty’s ugliness in the form of her braces at first appears as if it will destroy the planned photo shoot, but it instead saves it by endearing Betty to the tough Eve.

The only way to save the bra is to remove her braces, and, luckily, Dr. Frankel is there to clip them out and away from the expensive lingerie. After her braces are removed in front of everyone, Daniel is surprised at the sight of a metal-free Betty, telling her, “You look great” as he moves around to get a better look. The two Bettys are now reconciled in a sense, and while Betty’s personality does not change with her new look, Daniel’s idea of her does seem to be

changing. As she shifts away from her “Ugly Betty” look, Daniel begins to see Betty as potentially more than just a trusted friend and employee.

Betty’s physical transformation raises an interesting question in regards to the nature of ugliness on the show. Her make-over is actually a make-“under,” as the newly-“pretty” Betty is merely Ferrera the actress without the artificial braces and bad wig. Chloe from *Feministing* contends, “What I don't love about *Ugly Betty* is the assertion that slapping a pair of glasses and some braces on America Ferrera and making her hair frizzy makes her ‘ugly,’ because, come on, just look at America Ferrera.” The line between ugly and beautiful is proven to be a narrow one, as all Betty needed to be considered attractive, at least in Daniel’s eyes, was some hair-smoothing serum and to finish her time in braces purgatory.

In the last few episodes of the series, the producers gradually drop hints that Daniel is falling in love with Betty, setting up a cliffhanger of whether Betty will accept a job offer in London or stay in New York with her family and remain at *Mode* with Daniel. As Betty rides the elevator up to the *Mode* offices to tell Daniel that she is taking the job in London, the picture on the wall behind her is an animated image of a butterfly in flight (“Hello Goodbye”).³³ Betty has emerged from her own cocoon of sorts, both professionally and physically, and is ready to take flight to a new environment. However, Daniel is not quite ready to let her go. As the *Mode* staff prepares for the 100th anniversary issue of the magazine, Daniel asks Betty to write his editor-in-chief profile, telling her, “No way I could have done this job without you. We make a good team, you and me.” Over the past four years, Daniel has come to appreciate and rely on Betty, leaving both his mother and, possibly, his unconscious, to wonder if he would like his partnership with Betty to be romantic as well as professional.

³³ Like much of the office décor at *Mode*, the picture in the elevator changes from episode to episode and reflects the episode’s theme.

This notion is reinforced when Daniel refuses to sign a waiver releasing Betty from her *Mode* contract, even going so far as to set fire to it in front of her. At first, he is upset that Betty did not talk to him about her decision: “I’m angry. I can’t believe that you would make a decision that big without talking to me at all” (“Hello Goodbye”). This sentiment seems to indicate more than just professional resentment on Daniel’s part. When Betty continues to question him about why he will not sign the release, he hesitates before telling her, “I don’t know how I feel about releasing you from your contract. We’ve invested a lot in you, Betty. If it was anyone else, I’d say no.” He does not explain what exactly he thinks the magazine has “invested” in Betty, leaving the audience to ponder whether he means her professional accomplishments or her personal makeover. Claire questions him about his intentions, asking him, “Are you sure this isn’t about more than just Betty’s editing skills? [. . .] I’m talking about the fact that you might have feelings for her. [. . .] If you are having such a hard time with her leaving, you need to give her a reason to stay.” While Claire and Daniel are scheming to keep Betty, Marc is advising Betty to stand up to Daniel and insist that he sign the form, and the two conversations are spliced together in the episode. Betty and Daniel run into each other in the hall, each intent on saying what Marc and Claire have helped them work up the courage to tell the other, but Daniel gets in first. He tells her, “Betty, I can’t live without you,” and then the episode cuts to commercial.

After the break, Betty is sitting in her family’s living room, telling them about Daniel’s confession. While the audience is not privy to the rest of Daniel and Betty’s conversation, we learn that Daniel has offered her a promotion to full editor as well as a salary increase. Betty decides to take the job in London despite this new offer, but Claire still continues to play matchmaker, telling Betty, “Losing you is very hard for him, Betty. I don’t think he even

realizes quite why yet” (“Hello Goodbye”). Betty leaves for London without talking to Daniel again, and the series draws to a close with images of a stylish Betty in London, directing her employees over a working lunch, shopping, and walking through the streets, all without her trademark clumsiness. There is an upbeat soundtrack that abruptly stops when she runs into Daniel on the street, who has resigned from *Mode* and confesses that Betty has been an inspiration to him. He tells her that he wants to make something of himself, on his own: “I just realized that I’ve had everything handed to me. I’ve never gotten anything on my own—like you.” He has realized that for all *Mode* has “invested” in Betty, she has become who she is now on her own, on her own terms. He tells her that he is going to stick around in London for a while and asks her if they can go to dinner that evening. It is left unclear what his intentions are for their dinner, but Betty agrees and walks away alone. As she navigates London, the words “Ugly Betty” are superimposed over the scene, as it did at the end of the pilot episode, but this time, the “Ugly” moves up and out of the frame, leaving only the “Betty,” directly informing the audience that she is no longer the ugly duckling of the fashion world.

By leaving the relationship between Betty and Daniel open-ended, the producers were able to placate the Betty-Daniel “shippers,”³⁴ as well as viewers who believed Betty should pursue her professional ambitions above all else. Unlike the ending of *Sex and the City*, where Mr. Big rescues Carrie from an unhappy relationship in Paris so they can be together, or even the finale of *Gilmore Girls*, which featured a kiss between Lorelai and Luke, *Ugly Betty* seems to be asserting that a woman should be true to one’s self and dreams and let love find her (even from across the Atlantic Ocean). By the end of the series, Betty has won over all of her *Mode* co-workers, even those who were her enemies in the past, such as Marc, Amanda, and Wilhemina,

³⁴ “Shipper” is a fandom term for someone who “promotes, projects and just plain revels” in a relationship between two characters in a popular culture text (“Shipper”).

who compliments her on her gutsy career move: “It’s interesting you spent four years climbing the ladder here, and now you’re leaving. I never thought I’d say this, but you have balls, Betty Suarez” (“Hello Goodbye”). She has won over all of her colleagues, not by imitating them, but by being herself and working hard.

Despite her “makeover,” Betty’s personality still comes through in her new stylish persona. Even when she’s wearing designer labels, she still wears her (imitation) pearl necklace with the large gold “B” pendant, a gift from her mother. This necklace represents the influence of her family. No matter how much time she spends in Manhattan, as opposed to Queens, with rich people, as opposed to her own middle-class immigrant roots, she carries with her (or, in the case of the necklace, wears) the life lessons imparted by her parents, sister, and nephew. During her going-away party in Queens, Ignacio expresses his pride in what she has accomplished and how she is following in his and her mother’s footsteps:

You’re moving across an ocean where you won’t have any family, any friends. You won’t know the city. I know what that’s like, *mija*. When your *mami* and I left Mexico to come here, we were so afraid. But it was the best decision we made in our lives. Something tells me you’ll look back and say the same thing about this move. (“Hello Goodbye”)

Betty is immigrating to make a new life for herself, in the same way her parents did in order to give her a better life. However, because of all that she has been through, both good and bad, she will never forget who she is. As she rides away to the airport, she looks out the back window at her family. Her face is reflected in the glass, and the image briefly shifts to the old “ugly” Betty. No matter how straight and shiny her hair is, or how perfect her teeth are, or how stylish her

wardrobe might be, Betty will always be Betty, grinning her way through life and remembering where she came from.

Ugly Betty represents a departure from other female-focused situation comedies by focusing more on Betty's hunt for her place in the professional world rather than the hunt for a husband. One possible explanation for this departure is the generational difference between Betty, who, at the beginning of the series, is fresh out of college, and Carrie Bradshaw and Lorelai Gilmore, who are both in their thirties over the course of their respective series. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, in their book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, assert,

Feminism arrived in a different way in the lives of women of this generation; we never knew a time before 'girls can do anything boys can!' [. . .] For these women, and for anyone born after the early 1960s, the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it's simply in the water. (17)

While Carrie and Lorelai were born on the cusp of the second-wave feminist movement, one assumes (and, in the case of Lorelai, directly sees) that both women were expected to follow the traditional path of marriage and motherhood, possibly with a career inserted somewhere between these two responsibilities. Unlike Carrie, who frets about her lack of a date to her book launch party, Betty is able to celebrate and enjoy her professional successes even if she does not have a romantic partner with which to celebrate. For her going-away party at *Mode*, Betty arrives without a "plus-one," but there is no discussion about her lack of a date as she dances the night away with Marc and Amanda, even after her conversation with Claire about Daniel's possibly burgeoning attraction to Betty ("Hello Goodbye"). Her success is not tainted by the lack of a

man to with whom to share it, as the series refuses to downplay her achievements by positing that the absence of a man equals a hole in her life, just as her “ugliness” does not prevent her from getting what she wants professionally.

While both *Sex and the City* and *Gilmore Girls* challenge cultural assumptions about single women (in regards to female sexuality and single motherhood, respectively), *Ugly Betty* goes one step further by celebrating difference. Betty is attractive to the viewer not because she is a role model in terms of fashion or romance but because she is tenacious in the face of conflict. *Ugly Betty* is the most stylistic of the three shows, both in its look and locale, but Betty remains relatable because she is an outsider in that world. Because the series both portrays her hardships and allows her to overcome them, Betty becomes a sort of “everywoman,” a character who is aspirational for who she is on the inside rather than for how she looks on the outside. *Ugly Betty* challenges our cultural definitions of female success by not defining that success according to standards of heteronormativity or beauty. Instead, her professional accomplishments are presented as the most important, as illustrated in the finale. Not only does Betty actively choose her career over the vague possibility of a romantic relationship with Daniel, the episode itself, as written and directed, chooses Betty’s professional success as the more important plot point. Her career move is properly resolved, with the quick montage of her at work, but the fate of her relationship with Daniel is left open, a stark contrast to the many single-woman-centered sitcoms before it that had marriages, proposals, and other grand romantic gestures at their center. *Ugly Betty* critiques beauty standards from within the world of the series, while it also critiques heteronormative traditions within the genre of the sitcom.



Figure 1: *Glamour*, October 2007

Conclusion

Television series are produced and imitated based on their success in reaching audiences. Each of the three series I have discussed have individually contributed to the shifting portrayals of the single woman on television through their addressing of women's sexuality and reflecting, and, in some instances, critiquing, social attitudes about single women. As situation comedies, the shows all employ humor to frame and partially diffuse the potentially radical representation of single women characters. *Sex and the City* provides a space in which to discuss women's sexuality and provides an alternative to patriarchal representations of single women. Through its presentation of multiple perspectives, as seen through the four main characters, the series illustrates a range of female desire and the maturation of the single woman in an urban environment. *Gilmore Girls* depicts a successful mother-daughter relationship, which breaks with many of the stereotypes of single motherhood in our culture, even as the series itself ignores the privileges of race and class that allow Lorelai to be seen as a "good" mother, despite her unmarried status. By presenting the oftentimes-serious experiences and struggles of the single mother in a comedic fashion, the Gilmore girls' non-traditional lifestyle and relationship makes these characters likeable and appealing. *Ugly Betty* represents a break from most female-centered situation comedies, including *Sex and the City* and *Gilmore Girls*, by presenting a main character who is not conventionally beautiful (particularly in her styling as Betty Suarez) but who is still appealing to viewers. The series challenges cultural notions of what is considered beautiful, in the workplace, in fashion, and on television in general, and uses physical comedy and postmodern fragmentation to emphasize the parsing of women's bodies in our culture. Each of these series reveals the re-emergence of the single woman as a likeable, engaging figure.

Each of the three series I have analyzed in this project has a counterpart currently airing that further develops the issues I have discussed. *Cougar Town*, starring former *Friends* star Courteney Cox and currently in its second season on ABC, is the only *Sex and the City*-esque show to survive a full season on network television, including attempts by former *Sex and the City* producers Candace Bushnell with *Lipstick Jungle* and Darren Star's *Cashmere Mafia*. While the creators and writers behind *Gilmore Girls* neglected to address the economic and social reasons behind Lorelai's ability to be a successful single mother and business owner, the MTV reality series *16 and Pregnant* and its spin-off *Teen Mom* attempt to portray the reality of teen motherhood by addressing the issues of education, finances, and relationships with parents and boyfriends. While these MTV productions are not sitcoms in any sense of the word, the producers' attempts to portray the real-life experiences of actual young single mothers would have been unimaginable a decade ago, and, even now, reveal many of the stigmas and stereotypes still associated with teen motherhood. *Ugly Betty*'s attempts to feature a more "average" single woman (at least according to Hollywood definitions) can also be seen in NBC's *30 Rock*, which premiered the same season. While most of the series are not direct imitators, the shows demonstrate the continuing impact of the television series I have discussed.

30 Rock follows a traditional sitcom format, even calling back to classic shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *That Girl*, and *Rhoda*, but it subverts many of the conventional narratives and traits of the single-woman sitcom by incorporating them in order to tear them down. The single female protagonist, Liz Lemon, is by no means a perfect character; in fact, the writers for the series, Fey included, seem to revel in exposing her bad habits. One bit portrays Liz singing a song called "Night Cheese" to the tune of Bob Seger's "Night Moves" while scarfing down a huge block of cheddar cheese, while on-going jokes make fun of her

questionable domestic habits (she refuses to vacuum her apartment because of bad memories associated with the sound of it and often resorts to wearing a bathing suit when she doesn't have any clean underwear). She is rarely shown exercising, and, in the few scenes in which she is, she has a glass of wine or a pastry in hand while slowly sauntering on the treadmill.

Her appeal lies not in her appearance or romantic successes; rather, fans love Fey, Liz, and the series overall for their comically brutal honesty. There aren't many single women who can relate to the glamorous lifestyles presented on shows like *Sex and the City*, but there are some for whom a perfect evening sometimes just means a meatball sandwich with extra bread and a Tivo'ed episode of *Top Chef* ("Cougars"). Through the presentation of Liz Lemon, *30 Rock* functions to normalize singlehood—quirks, neuroses, warts, and all. While *Ugly Betty* was successful in critiquing the beauty standards placed on women in our society, it still presented romance within the confines of a heteronormative fantasy. *30 Rock's* romantic storylines are also almost exclusively heterosexual, but it does occasionally question the notion of heterosexuality and homosexuality as an either/or equation,³⁵ portraying sexuality as a spectrum and breaking with the heteronormativity seen on most single woman sitcoms. Liz Lemon may want the fantasy of a husband and family, but she wants it on her own terms and is unwilling to place the rest of her life on hold in order to achieve it, breaking both the cultural assumption, as well as the traditional narrative of many single-woman sitcoms, that marriage is the ultimate accomplishment for a woman.

Throughout this project, I have attempted to illuminate how the single female character on sitcoms has been adapted to reflect the shifting attitudes towards the single woman in our

³⁵ See season one's "Blind Date," in which Jack sets Liz up on a blind date with a lesbian and season two's "Cougars, in which both Frank and Liz are attracted to the young coffee delivery man.

culture overall. While the single working woman is no longer presented in the same pitiable, “cute but dizzy” light of the 1950s and 60s, she is still seemingly required to be confined in more subtle ways since she lacks the “constraints” of marriage. In order to remain relevant, television has had to address the fact that more and more women and men are delaying marriage in favor of concentrating on their professional lives and simply enjoying life as a single adult. However, while the contemporary single female character is allowed more sexual and professional freedom than her predecessors, life as a single woman is still typically presented as an “in-between” period of a woman’s life rather than a potentially empowering life choice. While most people do desire to find a life partner with which to share their lives, the notion that a woman’s life is not complete until she finds a husband is problematic when viewed in conjunction with the notion of compulsory heterosexuality still present in our culture. Bachelorhood can be presented as a desirable and even enviable life choice on series such as *Two and a Half Men*, but a woman exercising the same sexual privilege, such as Samantha on *Sex and the City*, is seen as merely needing the love of the right man (Smith Jerrod, in the case of Samantha) in order to “settle down.”

When analyzing these characters through the lenses of feminist and television theories, it becomes apparent that, while they are allowed and perhaps even expected to have professional lives of their own, they are also expected to conform to more subtle cultural expectations of beauty, heteronormativity, and (appropriate) sexuality. If a character does break away from these expectations, that break must be presented through humor, even if the producers of the series itself are attempting to question the validity of these expectations. Humor has been used throughout the history of the situation comedy to diffuse the tension in any storylines that challenge traditionally held beliefs regarding gender, race, class, or sexuality. The presence of

humor in the three shows I have discussed is especially important because of the more serious issues they sometimes address. By interjecting humor into the more dramatic storylines, all three series avoid being viewed (and disregarded) as polemical.

My primary focus throughout this project has been on never-married female characters, but an analysis of divorced and widowed single characters is also needed. Divorce is no longer taboo on television, as it was in the early 1970s with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and shows such as *One Day at a Time*, *Kate and Allie*, and the contemporary *Cougar Town* have all explored what the experiences of women who find themselves unattached after years of marriage. An extensive analysis of the once-but-no-longer-married single female character is needed, particularly a comparison of divorced women with children and without.

It is imperative to study and analyze these single female figures because they expose the social fears surrounding how independent a woman can be while still be considered an “acceptable” woman. While sitcoms present a fictionalized world in which representations are often caricatures and stereotypes, television is a large part of the cultural landscape in which women learn what it means to be a “woman.” By breaking down these characterizations and analyzing their individual aspects, the viewer can better understand their influence and view these aspects in a more critical light. It is especially important to analyze these representations in the women’s studies classroom. Encouraging students to investigate how single female characters are presented within texts with which they are often already familiar allows them to better understand how concepts of womanhood and compulsory heterosexuality are socially constructed. There may never be a perfect feminist role model on television, but, through an understanding of how culture both influences and is influenced by televisual representations, we as viewers can analyze and enjoy these shows.

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Vita

Born and raised in Hot Springs, Arkansas, Ashli Dykes developed a love for literature and story-telling at an early age when she constantly would beg her parents to read her just one more book. Dykes started college at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, in 1998 intending to become an elementary school teacher, but she quickly realized that she could not ignore her first love and graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, a concentration in writing, and a minor in art history in 2002. While working on her master's degree, she wrote a paper on the television series *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and discovered that writing about television was another way to explore story-telling. She earned a Master of Liberal Arts with a concentration in English from Henderson State University in 2005, writing a thesis that analyzed vampire tales in literature and television. In May 2011, she will graduate from Louisiana State University with a doctorate in English.