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Finding a Place in the History of Feminist Television: Sexuality in HBO's "Girls"

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FINDING A PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF FEMINIST TELEVISION:
SEXUALITY IN HBO'S *GIRLS*

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the HBO series *Girls* (2012-) from a feminist media studies perspective. Through an in depth analysis of the history of feminist television, this paper claims that *Girls* takes a pro-sex feminist stance on issues of sexuality and identity and therefore progresses the timeline of depictions of feminism in prime-time television. A discussion of the socio-political debates between feminists during the Women's Liberation Movement, known as the "Sex Wars", serves to anchor the series to a specific feminist discourse. Ultimately *Girls* utilizes its coming of age and sex comedy narrative to discuss the uncertainty that comes with exploring one's sexual identity during early adulthood. The series' dealings with expressions of conflicting sexual identities, discussions of reproductive justice and themes of complex female friendship furthermore connect it to programs from past decades that were, just as *Girls* is now, feminist landmarks of their time.

Introduction:

This essay will analyze the HBO television series *Girls*, both critically and textually, in order to uncover the ways in which the series speaks to two overlapping, yet equally important spheres of academic study. By studying *Girls* from the perspective of Feminist Media Studies, this project will first address the history of depictions of women in television and later situate those representations within the greater context of feminist discourses around sexuality and identity. It is vital for this work to first define these fields of study so that we can better understand the ways in which *Girls* serves as a suitable text through which we can examine themes in each field. Feminist media studies stems from the broader fields of Media Studies and Women and Gender Studies (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, 152). As a field of research, it focuses on the various roles women play in the production and consumption of visual media. This field of study functions in relation to the myriad goals of the second wave of feminism that took place during the 1970's and 1980's and in turn draws particularly close attention to the impact women have both on and off screen. By addressing said representations and the reception of these images, particularly the ways in which female characters function in relation to male counterparts, assumed gender roles, and the struggle over power, Feminist Media Studies strives to examine the impact these images have on society at large, either through their potential to deconstruct or affirm preexisting norms (152).

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, feminist media criticism and practices stemmed from discontent with misrepresentations of women in television and film (152). In this era, women were drawing attention to their position within various domestic, political, and cultural spheres and feminist media scholars in academia began questioning women's participation in, representation by and creation of various media industries. During this

period, feminist theorists attempted to both critique and recreate media forms. In doing so, these works strive to create “counter narratives and counter representations that contest male regimes of cultural production and empower women to use media for their own interests and pleasure” (152). Feminist Media Studies analyzes the way in which media positions women, investigates how female audiences consume various mediums, and urges women to take active roles in producing media texts that reflect their lives and experiences.

Within the field of feminist media criticism, there are numerous methodological approaches including reception analysis, historical analysis, theoretical analysis and textual analysis. This essay will contribute to Feminist Media Studies by offering an historical and textual analysis of how *Girls* stakes a claim around still controversial feminist discourses of sexuality—a topic that garnered feminist attention during the pro-sex and anti-sex feminist debates of the 1980’s, now known as the “Sex Wars”. In order to accomplish this, I will look at the representations constructed by the series and discuss, in depth, the ways in which these representations are vital to the development of feminist images in prime-time television.

Through both narrative and character development, *Girls* works to explore three crucial realms of feminism via one unifying theme. This essay will argue that the series adopts a pro-sex stance on depictions of sex, expressions of conflicting sexual identities, and discussions of reproductive justice. In doing so, *Girls* also addresses a number of other feminist concerns. Among these topics are, gendered roles and expectations within society and a sense of camaraderie among women —both of which are familiar themes in feminist television series from the past. In light of the series’ unique dealings with these themes and refreshing depiction of female sexuality and identity, *Girls* warrants a critical discussion of its efforts.

Television and Feminism History:

When it comes to the relationship between feminism and television, the history can be a bit complicated. Women's roles within the television industry have varied over time and therefore the timeline of feminist images in television has not strictly been one of progress. For the purpose of this work however, a timeline is vital in order to situate *Girls* within an appropriate sphere of contextual criticism. Many of the issues addressed within *Girls* draw upon thematic elements from television shows that were feminist landmarks of their time. The key element in discussing the significance of *Girls* and shows preceding it in a meaningful way falls upon one's ability to understand the social climate within which each text was produced. In short, understanding the culture in which a show was created allows us to both better understand the show and the culture.

In her book *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement*, Bonnie J. Dow establishes a timeline of feminist issues portrayed in prime-time television. Beginning in the 1970's and making her way well into the 1990's, Dow focuses on the impact of television on the cultural dialogue of feminism. Among some of her main points, Dow emphasizes the representations of women in relation to their devotion to careers, more precisely the ways in which social expectations of marriage and domestic roles shape the types of female characters that are cast in television series (Dow, 1992, 30). Her discussion later turns toward the influence of consciousness raising groups on the depictions of "Therapeutic Feminism" which, in Dow's eyes, is the portrayal of a woman's awareness of the impact patriarchy has on the construction of femininity and female empowerment (64). Lastly, Dow discusses the impact of postfeminist mentalities on the types of feminist characters that fill our television screens (86). *Girls* in many ways, owes its existence to these series that came before it. In short, the long list of series that failed to fully develop nuanced

themes and feminist characters laid the foundation for *Girls'* representations of female sexuality and identity. More importantly, without the myriad efforts to include feminist discourses in the overarching narratives of these shows, our understanding of the intersection between feminism and popular culture would be vastly different.

At the time of its inception in 1970, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* conformed to a style of fictional television that is considerably different than what we are familiar with today. Series with prominent female characters often built narratives that placed women in the home, which in turn reinforced the supposedly rightful and inevitable position of women in domestic roles. While *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not the first working-woman sitcom, it is regarded as the first to frame working women in a way that emphasized their ability and willingness to find fulfillment in a work centered life in the same fashion that men could (24). Furthermore, work wasn't depicted as a temporary state or substitution to marriage in this series. Based on the life of lead character, Mary Richards, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* proved to be wildly successful both in its reception and reproduction. The series launched three separate spinoff series and the situational, comedic format can be traced through a number of feminist series to date. Of all of its notable representations of liberated women, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* thrived through its willingness to confront gender biases through equal opportunity rhetoric (31). The series itself offered audiences a visible and relatable depiction of issues prominent within second wave feminist movements. Not only was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* giving female characters power, but the narrative also followed the effects of that female empowerment in all of its nuanced forms.

Another key theme within this series is one that is explicit within the narrative of *Girls*. Dow explains that the sense of comfort and camaraderie between the three female leads, Mary, Rhoda and Phyllis, grew stronger throughout each season—contributing “some

of the most progressive discourse to emerge from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*” (45). This type of female community was related to the prominence of consciousness raising groups of the time and reinforced the necessity of platonic female friendships void of petty competition or patriarchal influences. In short, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* reflected the struggle for gender equality on screen through meaningful explorations of well-known feminist issues. The series ultimately exemplified the potential television possessed in its ability to both spark and bolster social change. It is of course important that we examine the series both as a product of its time and as a stand-alone text. As will soon be discussed, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* offered improvements upon many sexist themes within prime-time television, but as a series, it also left room for improvement. The later half of the 1970’s and 1980’s were times of great success as far as media portrayals of women went.

With the success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the theme of women on their own grew widely popular—a trend that Dow explains as simultaneously disturbing, because of the fascination that came with women’s vulnerability, and encouraging in the sense that women’s liberation could actually be used as a ploy to improve television ratings (60). The growing number of women portrayed from the mid 1970’s well into the 1980’s however, shared a number of characteristics beyond their journey toward liberation—they were mostly white, heterosexual, middle class, and unmarried, which surely ignored a large portion of feminist politics and more importantly, viewers who identified with feminism.¹ But, as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* set the stage for feminist television, *One Day at a Time* expanded the reach of such series’ appeal. Running from 1975 to 1984, *One Day at a Time* is largely credited for being the first successful series to feature a divorced female lead character. As Dow

¹ Sadly, HBO series and television shows in general continue to not advance beyond this trend. Many series to date continue to cast white characters that promote a heteronormative script. Race is a very important issue within Feminist Media Studies, however it does not play a central role in the work this essay is setting out to accomplish.

points out, other series such as *Diana* in 1973 and *Fay* in 1975 presented divorce as a central theme, but neither series lasted more than a year. *One Day* uniquely separated itself from the explicit political feminist scripting of say a show like *Maude* (1972-1978) in that the series discussed feminist issues more organically. However, it is especially interesting to compare *One Day at a Time* with *Maude* because in doing so, one can better understand the diversity of feminist programming that began to emerge at this time (61). Ann Romano, *One Day's* lead character, embodied the characteristics of an emerging woman of the liberation movement rather than one who is already mature and self-confident in her position within the feminist movement. Maude Findlay on the other hand represented a particular type of feminist, one that exhibited very few inhibitions and was, in many ways, privileged because of her husband's financial security (61). *Maude* built episodes around explicit feminist issues, including abortion, menopause and sexual harassment, while *One Day at a Time* took a more implicit approach toward feminist programming. For example, Anne's ties with her children reminded audiences of her previous married life and in turn added to her complexity as a feminist character. Additionally, the series often used self-actualization as its main feminist theme, utilizing Anne's search for self-discovery as her claim to freedom (73). For example, Ann chose to remain unmarried for the show's entirety, claiming that she needed to know who she was and the type of life she wanted to live before she lived that life with a man. Her empowerment stems from her ability to embody many conflicting characteristics and yet still challenge the status quo of the male centric world she lived in. *One Day at a Time* avoided adaptations of traditional ideals of womanhood in its representations of workplace conduct, motherhood and dating, while *Maude* challenged those ideals head on with a character that spoke her mind outright, using specific feminist rhetoric to express herself and her views.

Programming from the 1970's reflected, in many ways, the activism that defined the era. Prime-time television utilized its public position as a means of discussing and popularizing crucial issues within the Women's Liberation Movement. However, as the climate of social revolution within American culture began to shift toward a rejection or alteration of second wave feminist goals, television programming mimicked this so called "backlash" to feminism (Faludi, 1991). Shows such as *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Knots Landing* (1979-1993), *Dynasty* (1981-1989) and *Falcon Crest* (1981-1989) personified the contradictions within postfeminism in its appeal to both women in the workplace and its ode to the popular genre among housewives, the soap opera. Prime-time shows in the 1980's stressed, as Dow puts it, "competitive individualism", focusing on narratives of competition between women over "men, money and power" (97). Many television critics of these series identify the ways in which the contradictory narratives make them hard to label as strictly feminist. For example, powerful women are central leads but their power almost always comes from their association with a male counterpart. Themes of sisterhood are far from the center of programming, and many female friendships that are depicted are too wrought with competition to last. Dow explains that in *Dynasty* the most successful characters are often the most immoral while the happiest of the women are those who are willing to please their men by maintaining their subverted place within the home (97).

Other series from the mid to late 1980's adapted such themes by placing women in strictly professional roles. *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988) and *L. A. Law* (1986-1994) have obvious influences of feminism in their focus on gender discrimination in the workplace and recurring female success, however many of these female characters are made to be insufficient in other ways. For example, Dow points out that many female characters suffered from infertility, mental health problems or relationship

instability—making their personal lives subject to failure on account of their professional success (98). In this era, audiences were privy to a number of narratives that established the stereotypical postfeminist ideal of women having it all, at a cost that is. This is arguably the most notable trend in prime-time television of this time. Series such as *Thirtysomething* (1987-1991), *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and *Growing Pains* (1985-1992) worked to incorporate women's equality in the workplace while maintaining the notion of the nuclear family. In doing so, these postfeminist television programs functioned on the assumption that feminist goals were a thing of the past, achieved. Much of the effort put into successful feminist programs prior to these had simply been undermined, leaving the timeline of feminist television conflicted in a number of ways.

To explain prime-time programming during the 1980's as some kind of hegemonic rejection to second wave feminism is to simply ignore a handful of shows that worked explicitly toward feminist goals, and which garnered attention from feminist television scholars for their efforts to attract a working woman audience (101). *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-1988), as Dow explains, is the quintessential example of the heterogeneous nature of popular programming during this time. While the series is often labeled postfeminist because of its approach to gender biases at an individual rather than collective level, Dow points out that the series is not unique in doing so. *One Day at a Time* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* both addressed women's issues from an individual perspective but are both still considered examples of feminist programming. *Cagney and Lacey* is unique however in that its feminist aspirations were continually questioned, resulting in a shift in the series' overall tone. In her book, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*, Julie D'Acci qualifies the series' impact in arguing that the series' approach to feminism "changed...from a criticism of institutional inequities (sexism, racism, and, to a lesser degree, classism) to an examination

of women's issues (or what the industry imagined as such issues) that had the potential for dramatic intensity and exploitability" (D'Acci, 1994, 155-156). *Cagney and Lacey* challenged conventional codes of femininity in its early narrative. The series utilized the masculine cop show genre but centered the plot around two female lead characters without sacrificing any of the violence, competition and action that typified that style of television. However, as the series struggled to maintain solid ratings, it shifted its narrative to become more competitive with other programming of its time. In doing so, much of the action shifted from the workplace to the home and the two lead women appeared more in tune with their emotions rather than devoted to their work—functioning on the assumption that a female character could not embody both qualities at the same time. The history of *Cagney and Lacey* is controversial in that the writers and producers understood that audiences approached particular genres of television with gendered expectations. Failing to offer audiences these types of characters meant that ratings would be less favorable. The particular story of *Cagney and Lacey* is not distinct, but rather popular programming began to utilize the sitcom format far more often when approaching feminist issues—the comedic approach allowed for particular plot points to be received as less controversial. In short, beliefs about gender strongly shaped television programming, particularly genre conventions and the roles women play in different types of shows.

It is within this category of comedic programming that we find a 1980's series that compares to *Cagney and Lacey* both in terms of bold feminist representations and an understanding of the importance of genre in garnering viewer support. It is the theme of female friendship within *Designing Women* (1986-1993) that really warranted the feminist praise that the series received. As a show focused around four recurring lead characters, fulfilling a stereotypically feminine role, *Designing Women* contrasts some of the most popular

feminist themes during the preceding decade of programming. These four lead women don't seem to be fighting to make it in a man's world—they aren't lawyers or law enforcement officers, they are interior designers and they're personal narratives reflect some very traditionally feminine traits. Additionally, the series doesn't utilize the emerging woman theme that was so central to *One Day at a Time* but rather focuses heavily on the progress of the women's collective. *Designing Women* dealt with female friendship during a time when popular programming was severely lacking in diverse representations of female experiences. Recurring topics included PMS, breast size, and dating divorced men. The manner in which such things were discussed however is precisely the reason the series is so well regarded by feminist media scholars. In short, *Designing Women* depicted a resurgence of consciousness raising groups in a way that resisted the individualism of the postfeminist attitude. Moreover, this inside look at the private conversations of women can be traced through programming well into the following decades. The later half of the 1990's provides us with succinct examples of this development in popular feminist programming.

Female friendship has continued to grow in popularity within the situation comedy genre. In 1998, *Sex and the City* debuted on HBO, exemplifying many of the same themes within *Designing Women*. Female friendship is central to the show's narrative but topics such as sex and men remain at the forefront of narration as well. In fact, *Sex and the City (SATC)* draws upon some familiar themes from many postfeminist series—including the balance between work and family, divorce, and abortion. However, *SATC* proves to be most useful for this essay in its explicit dealing with sexuality. As a series that is so obviously focused around the diverse female sexualities among a group of young women, *SATC* sets the groundwork for *Girls* and therefore the two series are often compared to one another. The four female lead characters in *SATC* address issues of desirability, sexuality and female

friendship in ways that directly resonate within the narrative of *Girls*. Among some of its most notable feminist elements, *SATC* produces images of female sexual fluidity and the narrative often highlights the ways in which experimentation is an important aspect of one's understanding of sex and sexuality. The series as a whole has its flaws, and many feminist media scholars have addressed these, however *SATC* is praised for directly addressing the tension that is still very much present between a woman's independence and her desire for love, sex and partnership (McCabe and Akass, 2004, 234). Not only is *SATC* a show about women, but it also is a show about women who like each other—a trend that is missing from many series that aired in the years prior. *SATC* focused its primary narrative around the bonds between women, and in doing so the series highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of those bonds. The series exemplified the ways in which women can engage in a homosocial relationship with other women while still seeking a heterosexual one with a man (Jermyn, 2009, 56). *SATC* depicted the four female lead characters as being each other's "significant other" while contrasting this bond with their continual search for heterosexual sex and love. Audiences watched as these women offered support for one another when it came to many things, including direct acknowledgments of the pressures they faced with work, with love, and with sex. The series even depicted multiple expressions of queer sexual identities throughout its six seasons. Ultimately, *SATC* furthered the development of feminist television by focusing on the uncharted territory of sexuality and the importance of female friendship (especially in the metropolitan milieu that is New York), but in doing so the series essentially established some of the fundamental themes that a show like *Girls* could eventually enhance through more complex representation of women in similar scenarios.

A series that had an equally important impact on the depiction of feminist identities during the 1990's was *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002). While we're able to uncover many familiar

themes within this series, *Ally McBeal* stands out as a notable feminist program for its achievement of conflicting feminine identities within the workplace as well as bold representations of sexuality. *Ally McBeal* has undergone some intense scrutiny since its inception—Calista Flockhart’s image appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1998 with the caption, “Is feminism dead?” appearing underneath her. However, the history of the series as whole offers audiences a unique perspective on the relationship between popularized depictions of feminism for television and expressions of feminism in real life. *Ally McBeal* placed a woman at the center of its narrative (one that takes place in a law firm) and not only is Calista Flockhart’s character faced with the pressures of a demanding career as a lawyer, but she maneuvers her way through the pressure of this career while also working alongside her ex-husband and his new wife. Similar to the ways in which we find tensions in the feminist discourses of *SATC*, so to does *Ally McBeal* address these conflicts. Ally is very much in search of a fairytale type of love, which is interesting when pitted against her independence as a modern day career woman. But what *Ally McBeal* offers audiences is an expression of conventional femininity that takes into account a woman’s ability to remain respected in the workplace despite her biological sex or preferred expression of femininity. Ally in *Ally McBeal*, in many ways, acts out her feminism through her right to be rather neurotic and at times even annoying. As Joke Hermes points out in his article “Television and Its Viewers in Post-Feminist Dialogue: Internet-mediated Response to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*”, male characters have been granted this right for a long time now and conversely they have been beloved in spite of their being obnoxious (Hermes, 2002, 198). *Ally McBeal* depicts the complexity of the female identity, especially as it relates to the life of a modern day career woman.

With two monumental series like *SATC* and *Ally McBeal* to guide the way, Showtime debuted its series *The L-Word* in 2004 and with it, the timeline of feminist programming included more diverse expressions of female sexual identifications. *The L-Word* focuses on the lives of a group of lesbians who befriend one another while living in Los Angeles. The series follows the relationships that develop between the main characters and the ways in which their personal relationships are affected by their sexual orientations. More than anything else, the series successfully worked to bring gay women to the forefront of popular programming. In her book *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts it in a Box*, Merri Lisa Johnson includes an essay written by Candace Moore in which she explains the importance of *The L-Word* within the grander scheme of third wave feminist programming. Moore says that the series depicts a particular type of “heteroflexibility” and in doing so viewers are privy to a number of varying negotiations of lesbian identities (Moore, 2007,119-123). *The L-Word* addresses its place within the timeline of feminist television and even goes so far as promising the “Same Sex. Different City” as compared to its predecessor, *Sex and the City* (121). Importantly, *The L-Word* worked to appeal to viewers who identified with the broader label of feminist, not just feminists who also identified as lesbian. In short, the series is vital to our understanding of the progress of prime-time feminism because it diversified the types of women that were depicted on screen—both in terms of racial background and sexual orientation.

The current state of feminist programming is no different from the series we’ve already discussed in that television shows that are on air today continue to reflect further development of televisual feminism through a continual confrontation of sexist narratives. We’ve watched as multiple series have slowly but surely incorporated important feminist discourses into their narratives and in turn have aided in the shift toward a more equal

representation of women in television. In her article, “Knope We Can! Primetime Feminist Strategies in NBC’s *Parks and Recreation*”, Erika Engstrom discusses the ways in which some of the shows Dow focuses on treat feminist ideologies as only a partial theme within the larger narrative of each distinct production (Engstrom, 2013, 6). In other words, shows like *One Day at a Time*, *Maude* and *Sex and the City* worked to disrupt patriarchy through the inclusion of feminist themes and characters, but never created images that reflected a complete transformation of the power dynamic (or even hinted at one, for that matter).

There are a handful of series on air today, however, that Engstrom feels are normalizing the presence of feminism on screen. Among these is the NBC series, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) that places a woman at the center of the narrative but manages to highlight diversity and equality through many of its characters and its narrative. The series is filmed in the mockumentary format that not only adds to the intimacy of our relationship with the characters, but also places the series within the comedy genre, where many of the preceding shows we’ve discussed have flourished. Through this characterization, *Parks and Recreation* continuously uses satire to ridicule the blatant sexism rooted in the fictional American town in which it takes place—including lines such as “Any woman caught laughing is a witch!” and “In the result of a exact tie, the seat is awarded to the male candidate and the female candidate goes to jail” (8). Leslie Knope, the principal character, makes light of these injustices and her place within the sexist system through her ability to emphasize the absurd amount of prejudice in Pawnee law and her ability to be successful despite it. Engstrom goes on to explain that *Parks and Recreation* takes a more subtle approach to feminism through Leslie Knope’s pro-woman stance and the progress she eventually makes within Pawnee’s patriarchal hegemony (11). Furthermore, *Parks and Recreation*, in Engstrom’s view, goes beyond depictions of feminism from solely a woman’s perspective

and includes male feminist characters as well (11). The series sets a social landscape by which its characters can achieve progress in necessary ways that aren't scripted as radical plot points. Rather, the personal is made political through Leslie's work to better her city and herself.

Premiering in 2012, coincidentally the same year *Girls* premiered, Fox's *The Mindy Project* offers viewers an interesting example of feminist programming today through its frequent depictions of casual sex and furthermore, the series' ability to address such themes speaks to the constraints of network comedy. Mindy Lahiri, the main character of the series offers audiences a unique depiction of a feminist character through her complex and at times conflicting representation of feminist ideologies. *The Mindy Project* does not wear its feminist identity on its sleeve, but rather the overarching narrative composes an empowering message for audiences, especially those who are familiar with the conflict that can arise from traditional feminist goals and contemporary expressions of femininity. Mindy Lahiri does not act as some kind of spearhead feminist character, she does not use explicit feminist rhetoric nor is the series' narrative primarily focused around one particular feminist goal. Rather, *The Mindy Project* offers viewers a type of feminist character that depicts a fully-fledged woman, one with faults and one who is unashamed of her obsession with Hollywood gossip and hyper-feminine trends.

In her article, "How 'The Mindy Project' Brought Stealth Feminism to TV" Maureen Lee Lenker delves into the ways in which Mindy embodies some very important contradictions within her character, but represents them in such a way that code her as a complex feminist icon. *The Mindy Project* demonstrates that "intellect, ambition, and professional success aren't mutually exclusive with girliness and femininity" (Lenker, 2014, 1). Furthermore, Mindy's role as an OBGYN when paired with her sometimes uber-feminine

self expression grants her a certain credibility when offering her patients advice on achieving sexual empowerment and dealing with the societal challenges that often come with that (1). Impressively, *The Mindy Project* accomplishes all of this while airing on network television, which in many ways contradicts historical conventions of genre. *The Mindy Project* undoubtedly fits within the timeline of feminist television, arguably more so than other series, but it is important to note the ways in which the series also progresses the history of network comedy. *The Mindy Project* is all about sex and the many forms in which sexuality can be expressed. More specifically, the series continuously depicts Mindy having casual sex—a theme that has not been expressed as boldly in the past. Ultimately *The Mindy Project* approaches feminism in a subversive way, by embracing a complex character set and scripting explicit feminist scenarios in a way that remains entertaining and informative. Maybe most impressive of all, *The Mindy Project* accomplishes all of this while also placing a woman of color at the center of its narrative.

With this historical context, it becomes evident that representations of women in television have evolved to reflect particular issues within feminist thought. Expectations of monogamy and the increasing presence of women in the workplace have been recurring themes by which feminist rhetoric could make its way into prime-time television narratives. However, representations of female identities on screen have, historically, lacked in their inclusion of sexuality and the complexity of the female sexual identity. Additionally, the progress that we've seen thus far in the transformation of the female image has, for the most part, reflected the most mainstream and adaptable concepts within the second wave of feminism—making them presentable topics for heavily accessed programming. Sexuality on the other hand has historically been a hotly debated topic within the feminist movement—making it especially difficult to depict in mainstream media. I intend to argue that *Girls* does

a particularly good job at dealing with this topic in a way that lends itself to an entertaining narrative but also remains didactic in its dealings with a period of feminism referred to as the “Sex Wars”, in which feminists debated over “pro-sex” and “anti-sex” issues. In doing so, the series incorporates many issues that were central within feminist programming of the 1970’s and 1980’s while also offering much more complex depictions which resonate with contemporary feminist views.

Conflicting Sexual Desires and the “Sex Wars”:

Girls clearly owes a lot to these representations that we’ve discussed and the cultures and series that produced them in that the HBO show features strong feminist characters that are empowered. Without the strong examples from series that preceded it, these types of representations may not have been possible. However, where *Girls* differs from these shows is that it prominently addresses issues directly related to the “Sex Wars” of the 1980’s and in doing so distinguishes itself within this history of feminist programming as well as the history of the feminist movement. Sexuality is by far the most prominent theme within the series, but *Girls* manages to present this theme with an unwavering complexity—which surely owes an historical debt to debates among feminists in the “Sex Wars” and constructions of female identities.

Sex has long played an increasingly important role in the sociopolitical landscape of our nation. Debates about sexual liberation can be traced to the 1960’s Sexual Revolution and the Women’s Liberation movement and discourses around the topic are still hotly debated today. Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter chronicle the ways in which the topic has transformed as the state of feminism has shifted over the years. In their book *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, Duggan and Hunter cover almost every milestone in these

debates one could imagine, however for our purposes I see two key elements worth discussing in relation to *Girls*—battles over the regulation of pornography and discussions of obscenity in art. While both topics reference specific issues within the “Sex Wars”, the central concerns of each debate speak to larger themes that are central to the narrative of *Girls*.

Beginning in the late 1970’s and undergoing its most ferocious peak in the mid 1980’s, the “porn wars” as Duggan and Hunter refer to them, are characterized by the conflict among feminists over the acceptance or rejection of male dominance and female submission in pornographic films and to a greater extent, the acceptance or rejection of particular sexual acts and their relationship to sexual identities. Key players in these debates over pornography included feminist activists and scholars who fell on either an anti-sex or pro-sex side depending on their view of the role such films and the culture they promoted, played in American society. Pro-sex feminists fought for the fluidity of female sexuality, claiming that one’s sexual identity should remain unregulated because of the impact it had on one’s ability to feel empowered. Anti-sex feminists or the group of people opposed to pornography, fought to eliminate the genre of film completely—claiming that the porn industry and the products and culture that it produced were done so prominently by men and for men. Anti-pornography feminists fought against female domination within sexual culture. Through its explicit dealings with conflicting sexual desires and expectations in the bedroom, *Girls* ultimately addresses both sides of this issue. The series bridges the dichotomy between sexual pleasure and sexual danger, representing ways in which sex can explicitly encompass both, sometimes at the same time. If we turn to the discussion of Hannah’s sex with Adam we can site some specific examples.

Sex scenes became synonymous with the series from that memorable moment in season one when Lena Dunham's character took off her clothes and hopped on all fours. In this pilot episode, viewers were introduced, not so subtly, to Hannah's "booty call" and his abrupt attitude toward sex. The afore mentioned scene is worth taking a deeper look into in order to uncover the ways in which the physical makeup of *Girls* relates to the porn wars and furthermore visualizes this era of feminist discourse. We watch as the camera establishes Adam and Hannah on a couch in the middle of the frame. Our view shifts from this wide angle shot to a close up shot of the two characters lying horizontally. Adam enters and exists the frame from above while Hannah remains still filling the bottom half of the shot. As Adam enters Hannah from behind, the camera cuts between a close up of Hannah's downturned head with Adams blurred torso in the background and a close up of Adam in profile thrusting back and forth. We watch as Adam grips Hannah's shoulder and leaves his hand there as he remains positioned above her and pushes her body forward and back. Adam, in many ways dominates this scene, but he doesn't dictate it. Hannah speaks up when consent is necessary and she ultimately proves to enjoy herself as the scene concludes with the two characters smiling sitting next to each other in the same wide angle shot that it began with.

While Hannah's frankness doesn't speak to the series as a whole, her awareness of and openness towards sex is characteristic of the women who make up the leading cast for the show. The four female characters have their own views towards sex and their sexual preferences and experiences are individually unique, yet one thing they have in common is a curiosity about sex and a willingness to discuss it. From the outset of the series, Hannah, Jessa, Marnie and Shoshanna face radically different challenges when it comes to sex and we are introduced to each one of their sexual histories in a way that helps to define the series'

unique narrative. As we'll discover later on in this essay, *Girls* is full of contradictions, ones that ultimately encourage a more complex character set and competing discourses that prompt a feminist read of the series. Sexuality, being that it is a deeply personal form of identification, is a way in which *Girls* speaks directly to the fluidity of the female identity and reflects this complexity and diversity between its characters on screen. In the early stages of the series, the four women appear to fall into familiar categories—Hannah is the creative one, Jessa is the worldly one, Marnie is the proper one and Shoshanna is the virgin, but as we become more familiar with each woman and are introduced to them in scenes that address their sexual experiences, we learn that these strict categories by which they are broadly defined, barely fit them at all. Rather, each woman embodies a unique set of desires and experiences that influence her relationship with sex and understanding of her own unique sexual identity.

The complexity of the lead character Hannah's sexuality and feminist identity becomes apparent when we first learn of her sex life through the season one scene previously described. Hannah has just quit her unpaid internship and learned that her parents will no longer be supporting her financially. In what can be viewed as a ploy to replace the attention she lost from her parents, Hannah calls up Adam and his attempts to console her don't evolve much beyond sex. It's easy to dismiss this interaction and, even more, the relationship between Hannah and Adam in the first season of the series as depicting notable flaws within the sexual culture of the generation their characters represent. This scene in particular reflects a fast-paced sexual culture, which in turn lends itself to many questions regarding consent, and power dynamics in the bedroom. More specifically since we know Hannah to be a young, educated, self proclaimed feminist character, her sexual identity—being that she is open to experimentation and is often willing to take on a more

submissive role in bed, in some ways contradicts her feminist characterization. From an anti-sex feminist perspective, that highlights the dangers associated with sexual relationships that reflect power imbalances, Hannah's willingness to explore multi-faceted pleasure in the bedroom (specifically her acceptance of male dominance) is an antifeminist act because it supports a patriarchal power dynamic and ultimately progresses a narrative of female submission. However, to view Hannah's sexuality and the pleasure that comes from her sexual experience as wrong or antifeminist is to ignore the feminist perspective that views sexuality as complex. The empowerment that stems from Hannah's freedom of choice in the bedroom and exploration of sexual acts is something that pro-sex feminists would embrace. In some ways the most feminist aspect of Hannah's sexuality (and personality) is how contradictory it is. The fact that she has a relationship that reproduces some power dynamics associated with sexism and female submission reinforces that feminist women live in a society in which gendered power affects our experiences. Without first hand experiences of sexism would there even be any feminists to begin with? *Girls* offers representations of this sexism that ultimately teeter between pro-sex and anti-sex conflicts.

Hannah's sexual experiences that we are privy to, unconventional sex and all, reinforce the importance of her personal narrative to the overall work *Girls* is doing to increase diverse images of female sexuality in television fiction. Take for example in season one, episode two when Adam and Hannah experiment with role-play for the first time. Adam says that when he first met Hannah, he knew she'd want sex to be rough. She's confused, because he makes references to events that never happened and then goes on to pretend that Hannah is a child and is breaking the rules by being with him. Eventually, Adam climaxes and Hannah is left questioning what just happened. As a viewer, it's hard to watch this scene and not question the implications of such an encounter on the meaning of

female sexual agency. Is Hannah the object of Adam's sexual desire or is he finding pleasure in acting out some other fantasy? The key element in this scene is the sadism that appears to be central to Adam's sexual fantasies. Can this type of sex be pleasurable for Hannah even though it relies on her submission? Yes, Adam does possess power in his dominance in the bedroom, but does Hannah's willingness to play a submissive role translate to a lack of sexual agency? This is exactly the type of questions anti-sex and pro-sex feminists were wondering about during the "Sex Wars".²

The exploration of this scenario is precisely how *Girls* fuels discussions about the politics of modern day sex. The encounter, and others like it later in the series, seem to be one sided because Adam is able to act out his sexual fantasies without feeling the need to pay attention to Hannah's desire, but we learn that the sexual experiences benefit Hannah as well. She makes her choices regarding her body and sex, and while they often turn out different than she had originally expected, her intentions were clear and so she hardly ever looks for affirmation in that regard. We know, from the exposition of the series that Hannah is a curious character, willing to explore a range of new experiences in order to have an interesting story to tell—even if it means being selfish in her search. From her perspective, sexual experiences exist within the same sphere as other lived experiences and so she's willing to explore all that sex has to offer in order to deepen her understanding of her own sexual identity and simultaneously expand the pool of escapades upon which she can draw from for her story telling. Hannah, in this sense represents a pro-sex stance and continuously furthers a narrative that revolves around empowerment via complex and sometimes

² The exploration of S&M is not unique to *Girls* however. Such themes have made their way into mainstream Hollywood films and popular literature as well. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise premiered its first film in February of 2015. The film explores the pleasure one man finds in S&M acts and the ways in which he teaches his significant other to find pleasure in them too.

contradictory means. In the end, Hannah is made more aware of what she likes and more importantly what she doesn't like, while receiving new material for her book.

The second correlation between *Girls* and the “Sex Wars” comes with the show's willingness to script nudity into both the most sexual and mundane of scenarios— an applause-worthy ploy to make the series reminiscent of everyday life. After all, people aren't clothed 24/7, therefore neither are the characters on *Girls*. It's of course important to take into consideration the context in which *Girls* airs. As a show premiering on HBO, a network that is well regarded for its dedication to pushing boundaries and willingness to include sometimes graphic visuals, the series fulfills the expectations of its brand; however, seeing as how *Girls* also explicitly speaks to a culmination of feminist issues from the past forty or so years, the series works to transform some of the regulations placed on nudity that are present in other prime-time feminist series that we've discussed.

Surely, feminists were representing nudity during the 1960's through the 1980's, but they couldn't do it on prime-time television. Feminists have historically utilized the naked body as means of artistic exploration. Various performance pieces in which feminist artists explored political narratives have placed the female nude at the center of their work. Sue-Ellen Case discusses the ways in which during the past few decades, American culture has seen a rise in artistic performance pieces that utilize the nude form as a means of exploring the “gender and sexual systems it [signifies]” (Case, 2002, 186)³. *Girls* moves such representations to a more accessible platform. Not only does *Girls* reference the fine line between sexually dominant play and sadism, but it also does so by explicitly showing such scenarios unfold rather than just referring to them or editing them out modestly. There are

³ To learn more about specific feminist artists and the ways in which the female body played a key role in their representations of sexuality and feminist discourses, see Sue-Ellen Case's “The Emperor's New Clothes: The Naked Body and Theories of Performance”.

countless occasions in which we see Lena Dunham's fully nude body or Shoshanna, Jessa and Marnie in their bra and underwear. Such scenes go so far as to depict these women in unflattering positions—adding to the ways in which *Girls* breaks the expectations on appearance for female lead characters. Although Hannah doesn't fit the standards for conventional beauty, she is still depicted as being sexual and attractive which in many ways aligns with critiques of femininity from the 1970's onward. Therefore, Hannah's character is a product that emerges from the feminist discourse that came before *Girls*. Furthermore, the series has set a new precedence for the depiction of female sexuality by choosing to include scenes that offer a contradiction to the well-known omission of unflattering sexual positions or the aftermath of intercourse.

To return to Dow's timeline for a moment, feminist series airing in the seventies and eighties were constricted by the strict regulations put forth by the "Family Viewing Hour", not allowing them to show anything that could be deemed unsuitable for children during the first hour of prime-time television (27). Because of this, censors on sex and nudity were, of course, ever present in all shows vying for prime-time spots. Series today still face the challenge of creating suitable programming when they air on network T.V, however with the increased access to cable and subscription networks comes a greater freedom of representation. HBO surely faces a different set of challenges in this regard because the network's viewers subscribe with the expectation in mind that those types of regulations do not restrict the types of shows they'll watch. This brings us to the debate over obscenity that characterized a large portion of the "Sex Wars". *Girls* utilizes its position as a coming of age series to include nude scenes that may otherwise have been viewed as obscene by the standards set forth for the "Family Viewing Hour" and likewise by anti-sex feminists. The

series takes an uninhibited approach to its portrayals of sex, which ultimately bolsters its pro-sex position and affirms depictions of sexuality by pro-sex feminists that precede the show.

To emphasize this point, an analysis of a scene from the episode “Role Play” in season three will be helpful. In this episode Hannah decides to try her hand at seducing Adam through sexual role-play. As part of her costume, Hannah wears a wig, but she also wears a strappy lingerie outfit—we are privy to both the public and the private aspects of her character (which seems to shift many times throughout the entirety of the scene making it comedic as well). A shot reverse shot sequence between Hannah and Adam in the bedroom results in Hannah taking off her clothes to reveal her nude body in the black garment. The scene references the anti-sex position of television networks that would have been present during the height of the prime-time restrictions we’ve discussed. Hannah says to Adam “It’s humiliating to show off my house underwear like this, you’re so demanding.” This quote directly references the dichotomy between public and private spheres that has been central in the history of feminist discourses. The camera pans to follow Hannah crawling onto the bed. She positions herself on all fours, picks up a berry and tries to seductively eat it as Adam watches. In her clumsy way, Hannah doesn’t do quite what one would deem as sexy. She fails to swallow the whole berry and rather spits in out on the bed. However, Adam continues with the role-play and unzips his pants; his attraction to her doesn’t rely on her fulfillment of conventional femininity. The scene cuts to a close up shot of Hannah lying on her back and Adam lying on top of her. Hannah’s bent leg and the backboard of the bed, frame the shot. Adam thrusts himself back and forth on top of her and we listen as the two characters narrate their own sex scene. Hannah claims she is now a “cheerleader who usually fucks football players” instead of the “hedge fund manager’s wife” she said she was earlier. Hannah’s calling Adam the “school weirdo” eventually turns him off and the scene offers

one more meaningful depiction of sex. The camera cuts to a wide-angle shot of the bedroom with Adam's back to the audience and Hannah still lying on the bed. Adam pulls off a condom and throws it on the floor, an act that tends to be omitted from many sex scenes in both television and film and one that is frequently featured in *Girls*.

This scene offers viewers a representation of sex that includes female nudity and interactions before, during and after sex. We are offered a perspective that reinforces the show's pro-sex stance. Hannah's body is central to the scene in spite of her curvy figure and clumsy sexual conduct. Furthermore, Hannah acts on her agency as she has planned the encounter and narrates the events. She is empowered in this way, even if she places herself in the submissive position. Lastly, the scene offers us a depiction of what happens after sex that we know to be common in reality—the removal of a condom. By providing plot points within this scene that mark the beginning, middle, and end of sex, viewers are left with a more comprehensive understanding of both characters sexual identities and the implications that that has on the overall narrative of *Girls*. The series as a whole works to develop a number of other scenes like this one just as fully, which in turn strengthens the importance the series places on sexuality.

Casual Sex and its Narrative Implications:

Sex within the narrative of *Girls* is overwhelming characterized as a casual act. That's not to say that the sex within the series has casual implications. In fact, this type of representation ultimately takes into consideration the heterogeneity of female desire, because the series offers myriad sexual experiences. Even in comparison to a show like *SATC*, which has rightfully been praised for its defiance of a traditional shyness toward sex, *Girls* is making progress in notable ways. Dunham has created a new standard for the depiction of female

sexual empowerment on screen—one that proves to be confident of its position by not only scripting frequent sex scenes but also doing so in a way that reinforces the importance of female sexuality as being independent from a woman’s desirability. In Hannah’s case, she is not punished for having desire, specifically sexual desire, but rather is depicted in such a way, though it may sometimes be hard to watch, that affirms her power of desire. She is capable of being outwardly submissive in the bedroom at times while still remaining a sexually empowered woman overall. Because of this, Hannah stands as a contradiction to what many viewers may expect from a feminist character, but actually Hannah is a shining example of what it means to be sexually liberated—able and willing to explore a range of sexual desires without the pressure of societal standards of female sexuality or the judgment that often follows suit.

The entire cast of lead female characters on *Girls* work to support this heterogeneous sexuality. Most importantly, sex in *Girls*, more often than not, is not coupled with the search for a relationship, and it surely isn’t the main topic of conversation among the women on the show. Sex proves to be a part of everyday life for these women without it acting as the primary bond of friendship. *Girls* provides us with a long list of examples in which this is confirmed as true. The sex scenes within the series are neither constructed in ways that support a male-centric society, nor are the conversations about sex that follow fixated on male pleasure. Rather, the camera’s positioning establishes a sense of equality between Hannah, Jessa, Marnie Shoshanna and their partners that shies away from a single characters’ subjectivity. Take for example in “It’s About Time” in season two when Marie and Elijah have sex. Either end of the couch they are laying on frames the scene and both characters share equal space within the frame, often time splitting the screen in half. In “She Did” in season two, Ray addresses the power he has in his sexual relationship with

Shoshanna. Because she lacks sexual experience, Ray explains that, by default, he has power to teach her how sex works. However, the physical make up of the scene, with both character prominently featured, depicts a balance between them.

Equally as important to the narrative of *Girls* is the fact that sex, as a topic of conversation, is rarely referenced in terms of monogamy. The women in the series frequently have sex, but in doing so they are not assumed to be committed to their sexual partners. In “Hard Being Easy” in season one, Jessa has sex with her ex-boyfriend—an encounter that occurs once and never again in the series. In “Video Games” in season two, Hannah sleeps with Jessa’s stepbrother and soon forgets about him. Frequently, as is the case with sex between Elijah and Marnie, the women of *Girls* look to some of their sexual mishaps as comedic relief. Elijah and Hannah laugh at the fact that Elijah had sex with a woman even though he is gay. The same applies for the way Marnie and Hannah eventually bond because of their ability to laugh at Marnie’s willingness to sleep with Elijah. The casual nature of sex within *Girls* is not to be mistaken for lacking in narrative implications however. In short, sex serves as the central theme through which many of the series’ other thematic elements emerge.

The series’ Pilot, and the episodes “Vagina Panic”, “All Adventurous Women Do”, “Another Man’s Trash” and “Role Play” also contain great examples of this construction of equality between partners and a subversion of the traditional heteronormative script. As the show progresses into its fourth season, all of the lead female characters are featured in a committed relationship at one point or another. In this way, their sexuality is depicted more clearly for viewers because it functions in relation to another person in a more consistent way. However, it’s important to note, that we are privy to a variety of examples in which a woman’s sexual agency is derived from conflicting and sometime competing sources. This

affirms that the women in *Girls* are not dependent upon a partner in order to feel sexually empowered nor are their narratives focused around the search for that partner.

The Role of Sexuality in Defining Oneself— Breaking the Virgin/ Whore Trope:

The character of Marnie fits into the overall narrative of *Girls* in a way that is crucial to the series' depiction of feminism. Marnie serves as a model for the ways in which a woman's sexual desire, in ways that are complex, can serve as a sense of agency. The feminist movement, specifically the Women's Liberation Movement and the "Sex Wars", created space for these types of complex representations of women's desire within *Girls*. The four lead characters are completely sexual and assert their desires. We're first introduced to Marnie while she is in a committed relationship of almost four years. She's grown bored of the sex she is having with her college boyfriend, Charlie, and wants to explore sex in a manner that allows for more improvisation and fewer emotional attachments. Marnie's relationship at the beginning of the series reflects some ideas that feminists have fought for. An abolition of expected sexual roles and identities, a widely accepted societal view toward female sexual desire deeming it acceptable for women to want to actively engage in sex and a conscious understanding and promotion of equality within sexual relationships. Marnie had seemingly achieved a relationship rooted in equality, yet she was overtly unhappy—claiming that Charlie is "so busy respecting [her] that he looks right past [her]" ("Vagina Panic"). In this episode, Marnie goes so far as insisting Charlie enter her from behind so that she doesn't have to look at his face during sex. She seems to gain more sexual pleasure from a brief conversation with Booth Jonathan, one of her artistic idols, than any of the sex scenes with Charlie. It's important to emphasize that Marnie shows that she is in no way lacking a desire for sexual pleasure, but that for her, sexual pleasure is not dependent upon an emotional

attachment to a partner. Marnie in this way represents a view of pro-sex feminists. She shows that there is a certain pleasure in danger, thus leading to an embrace of role-playing around power imbalances.

Marnie embodies another contradiction to how we envision a feminist character. In a sense, Marnie has been placed in the traditional role of masculine subject. She is the possessor of desire, receiving all of Charlie's attention in a way that he believes fits her expectations, yet she is turned off by his dependence and wishes he'd be more dominant in the bedroom. This tends to be a common point of criticism toward *Girls*. Marnie is dissatisfied in her sexual relationship with Charlie despite the effort that it took to make this relationship possible in the first place. The series' position within the feminist movement is often misinterpreted as being postfeminist—being read as unappreciative of the gains made by the feminist movement and unconcerned with discrimination. Pamela Aronson, in her article 'Feminists or "Postfeminists"?: Young Women's Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations,' talks about the complexity in deciphering between millennial generation feminists and postfeminists. Aronson explains that much of the negative criticism toward young women, like the ones depicted in *Girls*, comes from the contradictory nature of their beliefs. She continues by saying that these criticisms "...tend to operate with uniform definitions of feminism, ignore generational differences, and/or study groups that are too homogenous to provide conclusions about the full diversity of today's young women" (Aronson 2003, 906). In short, Aronson hits the nail on the head. The characters in *Girls* are anything but homogenous, so to address them as such is to ignore their unique feminist identities. To explain further, there is not a script to follow in order to be a feminist, thus correct feminist behavior can't be proscribed.

It's becoming increasingly more difficult to label a person feminist, antifeminist, or postfeminist because a rigid set of guidelines explaining how empowered women should act simply doesn't exist, which is a good thing! This is one of the points of certain feminisms, one that is core to the "Sex Wars". The feminists concerned about the extent to which patriarchy often structured sexual relationships (making them dangerous) had a tendency to proscribe what was "safe" sex or "equality" or "feminist" sex. Yet many feminists disagreed with their characterization of "feminist" sex, arguing that it in no way resembled what turned them on. They demanded that sex be recognized for its pleasures and danger—sometimes both at the same time. The women in *Girls* tend to focus on individual solutions to individual problems, making them inherently selfish and perhaps immature, not antifeminist—Marnie, at times, is the ultimate example of this. Katherine Bell delves deeper into this misinterpretation. Bell says, "to see the girls' drive for self-improvement as simply another sad byproduct of postfeminist ideology is to maintain a fragmented understanding of these youth" (Bell 2013, 364). To criticize Marnie, and all of the women of *Girls* for that matter, by dated ideologies rooted in strict how-tos is to neglect a character's ability to express their desires—even when these desires do not follow a feminist script.

Now back to Marnie's case— this chasm between respect and female sexuality divides Marnie and Charlie's relationship and ultimately leaves them both unsatisfied. Charlie's efforts to maintain a constant level of intimacy during sex by looking into Marnie's eyes, comes off as patronizing. If Charlie is trying to protect Marnie from certain types of sexual interactions; he is hindering her ability to grow as a sexual being. Marnie's frustrations with Charlie's overly sensitive sexual demeanor reflect her feelings of suppression when it comes to her sexuality. If women begin to feel constricted by their postfeminist sexual role, their position may prevent them from exploring their identities as sexual creatures. Marnie

embodies the desire to reestablish female sexuality by focusing on individual sexual desires. Moreover, her unwavering efforts to achieve sexual liberation on her own terms confirm her character as feminist and reinforce Aronson and Bell's earlier points that her feminist identity can, and arguably should, be established on an individual basis.

Later on in the series, Marnie reassures viewers of her autonomy and feminist ideology by using sex and her sexuality as a means of reassurance when she lacks control in her professional and personal life. She pursues a secret relationship with Ray, and continuously assures him that she is only in it for herself. Choosing not to care what the consequences may be for sleeping with Shoshanna's one and only ex-boyfriend, Marnie puts her personal desires first, as selfish as it is. It may seem odd, but she gains more than just sexual pleasure from sex. Ultimately Marnie is able to assert her freedom of choice and independence by becoming the subject of sexual desire. Marnie takes full advantage of the power of sex in a multitude of scenarios, making her a dynamic character worthy of feminist praise. It's the complexity of Marnie's character that makes her interesting. Marnie is pursuing her own pleasure—a feminist goal. Yet, she's betraying her friendship—not very feminist. But does being a feminist, or living a feminist life, mean never screwing up? Marnie embodies contradictions that allow for a narrative characterized by progress—both personally and with her relationship with others.

Shoshanna holds an important place in this particular narrative of *Girls*, although her character differs greatly from the other three women. As the only character in the series to have not had sex, she serves as a point of contrast by which we can examine the well-known virgin/whore trope in popular culture. With her lack of sexual experience and fascination with popular culture tailored toward female audiences, Shoshanna spends the majority of season one exemplifying her skewed understanding of the relationship between sexuality and

female empowerment. Ultimately, she represents an old narrative for women in television fiction. We often view her in scenes that highlight her naiveté and dated opinions. In particular, Shoshanna's eagerness to draw comparisons between what she assumes is proper femininity (which she's either learned from watching television or reading a self help book) and the expressions of womanhood she encounters in real life, reinforce the ways in which Hannah, Marnie and Jessa are creating their own feminine realities that are unique to their lived experiences rather than the common themes that are perpetuated in films or published guidelines for achieving proper femininity. Shoshanna's positioning within the narrative of *Girls* often works to highlight the disconnect between her skewed views and the other women's. Bell puts it this way, "So beholden to the feminine "how-tos" is Shoshanna that all comedic moments involving her character are found in the discrepancy between her overwrought plans for living and her flawed missteps" (364). In "Vagina Panic", Shoshanna, Hannah and Jessa talk about the unpredictable nature of Hannah and Adam's relationship, especially referring to the bruises that have resulted from Adam's aggressive tendencies in bed. In an effort to provide some guidance, although it was never requested, Shoshanna pulls out a book titled *Listen Ladies: A Tough Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love* that she conveniently keeps in her purse. She reads from the pages a list of restrictions placed upon women and their intimate relationships with men. Among these is, "Sex from behind is degrading. Point blank".

The author of this book places herself in a position of privilege by speaking in finalities that leave no room for individual experiences and the unique perspectives that come with them. Shoshanna claims that this book "completely changed [her] perspective" and it's evident, by the way she uses the book as a direct response to Hannah's confusion, she takes each statement within its pages as the truth, not to be debated. Although

Shoshanna's reliance on this book, and other sources similar to it, result in anti-sex perspective towards sex and femininity, each time she expresses her opinions we are provided with poignant responses from the other three women. In response to *Listen Ladies*, Jessa questions where her own sexual desires fit within the book's rigid constraints. She determines that the author of the self-help book, and other people who work to promote a homogenous concept of proper behavior for a woman, are by no means interested in the well being of women as a collective. Jessa ultimately asserts her freedom by saying "Every time I have sex, it's my choice" and by actively choosing to not be associated with the "ladies" that the book interpellates she establishes herself as one of the most outspoken feminist characters on *Girls*. The difference between Shoshanna and the three other women does not stem directly from her lack of sexual experience, but rather the credence she gives to narratives that establish and promote correlations between respectable femininity and virginity. Shoshanna is by no means more respected as a woman because of her virginity, nor is she disrespected because of it.

Girls breaks the virgin/whore trope by extending its narrative judgments beyond each character's sexual histories. We watch as the series progresses through three seasons and with it, each character grows in ways that add to the complexity of the image of modern day female sexuality, especially in terms of its relation to morality and desirability. Even Shoshanna's virginity is depicted in a more progressive way than we've seen before. Take for example the token character in many television series that abstains from sex because of religious reasons. She is coded as normal because her religion justifies her choices. When we are offered a character that is not religious and is a virgin, she is depicted as being prudish and therefore is punished for her decision. Shoshanna offers audiences a challenge to this narrative through her depiction of virginity from the perspective of a woman from the

millennial generation. Shoshanna isn't a virgin because she is religious and she isn't abstaining from sex intentionally. She explains that an appropriate time never arose for her to have sex and therefore she continued about her business relatively unencumbered by her virginity. The series deals directly with the stereotypes applied to female virginity through Shoshanna's character. While lying in bed with a man she knew from her childhood, Shoshanna explains that she's "the least virgin-y virgin ever". The claim doesn't work in her favor, since Matt refuses to sleep with her saying, "It's just like virgins get attached. Or they bleed. You get attached when you bleed" ("Hannah's Diary"). It's moments like this within the narrative of *Girls* that highlight the absurdity of clichés about female sexuality found in television fiction. Without Shoshanna, we'd be left with a group of very sexually active women without anyone to compare/contrast their experiences with. It's unfortunate however, that it takes Shoshanna losing her virginity for her perspectives to shift from anti-sex to pro-sex. The series could have surely worked harder to highlight this progress before Ray and Shoshanna had sex. As if her ideas around personal worth weren't strong enough already, after losing her virginity, she begins to shy away from her socially influenced view of desirable femininity and instead focuses more on the power of the individual and the uniqueness of each person's history, sexual or otherwise. To quote the Shoshanna herself, "I may be deflowered but I am not devalued" ("She Did").

Reproductive Justice, a Foundation for Female Support:

As previously mentioned, the character of Jessa significantly adds to the series' dealings with feminist issues. Without her, *Girls* would miss one of the most important aspects of sexuality as it pertains to the history of feminist programming and the Women's Liberation Movement. Jessa introduces the topic of reproductive rights and reproductive

justice into the series' narrative. In this sense, *Girls* builds upon themes depicted in *Maudie*—the series first credited for addressing abortion as a central theme within its narrative. Most memorably perhaps, of all dealings with sexual liberation within the *Girls*, is season one's confrontation of issues revolving around reproductive rights of women. In "Vagina Panic" and "All Adventurous Women Do" Jessa acts on her right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy—allowing her the freedom to have sex without reproductive consequences. This sparks a discussion among the characters addressing the pressure placed on women in our society when it comes to sex and motherhood. The current state of feminism is a direct reflection of the hard work by women's rights activists in the past. Reproductive rights are a hot topic for discussion and there still exists a strong tie between a woman's sex life and the legitimacy of her abortion. Jessa acts as an example of the necessity for reproductive control and reproductive justice—a term that works to defend the need for legal abortion and contraception by stating that reproductive rights are inherent human rights and therefore their effects extend beyond a woman's sexual life (Kimala Price 2012).

The inclusion of this narrative within *Girls* offers a refreshing view on a woman's right to control her reproduction and the ways in which that decision-making process may take on a different meaning for the millennial generation and the hook-up culture that exists among it. With an increased awareness about sex, and tendency to engage in casual sex, the characters of *Girls* bring with them individual narratives that beg for an acknowledged preemptive measure to avoid unwanted pregnancies. When discussing Jessa's choice with Adam, Hannah addresses the financial commitment parenthood requires and the state in which many young adults may find themselves in, when faced with an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy. Hannah says, "What was she going to do? Have a baby and bring it to her babysitting job?" ("Vagina Panic"). The feminist movement has made this progress in

popular culture possible. Abortion has been very controversial in television. The feminist movement, and the expectation that abortion should be legal, safe, and available, has opened up space for abortion to become a normalized subject in popular culture. There's no denying that views toward female sexuality have evolved beyond the virgin/whore trope, but we rarely see this evolution reflected in popular culture. Jessa's story, when coupled with Shoshanna's, brings about a new platform upon which a woman's desire and needs are placed in a position of importance within the series' overarching narrative.

Additionally, the theme of reproductive rights offers ground upon which the female lead characters can show support for one another in meaningful and inherently feminist ways. This space of female friendship as it has been seen in visual media texts before *Girls*, is complicated. To return briefly to our discussion of the history of feminist television series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was one of the first series to capitalize on this particular type of feminist support. However, as became more noticeable in series in the late eighties onward, female camaraderie either was non-existent or superficial. This type of self-fashioning friendship is defined by Allison Winch as an "affirmative space for maintaining femininity" in which women help each other through the "mutual minefield of negotiating relationships, body, work, family [and] depression" (Winch, 2012, 70). Winch refers to Diane Negra's book *What a Girl Wants?: Fanaticizing the Reclamation of Self in Post Feminism* in order to explain that often times these affirmative spaces are linked to beauty and health in female-oriented series. *Girls* is different in this sense. The women don't have disposable incomes, they don't live physically healthy lifestyles, there are no shopping sprees or fancy lunches, and the women don't talk about marriage as a thing to aspire toward (Bell, 364). *Girls* deconstructs representations of femininity and female friendship that can be found in some postfeminist

series of the 1980's through its willingness to include sometimes unsatisfying, yet realistic conclusions to the issues women face.

Following the so-called “vagina panic” in episode two of the series, Hannah is faced with the unsavory news that she indeed does have an STD. As if that plot twist doesn't raise interesting enough of an issue, the way in which the narrative unfolds around Hannah's discovery goes on to reinforce how common such a diagnosis is among women. The type of female friendship that Winch says is a common thread within the “Girlfriend Flicks” genre does not take shape in the way we, as viewers, may expect it to, given the situation at hand. Rather, Shoshanna discredits the severity of the disease while Jessa eventually consoles Hannah by assuring her that “all adventurous women” contract an STD in their lifetime. In this sense, *Girls* emphasizes the complexity of young, female sexuality by utilizing it as a means to explore the possibility of support groups and finally provide audiences with a narrative that reflects the effort put into the fight for reproductive justice.

The normalization of feminist issues within popular culture is a process that is continuing to occur. As *Girls* works to depict the theme of abortion and reproductive justice in its narrative, the series moves close to normalizing this feminist discourse. However, as we've learned from the timeline of feminist programming, the relationship between the controversial debates over sexuality (including reproductive rights) and popular culture is far from copacetic. *Girls* is surely taking a step in the right direction by focusing on the effects abortion and, to an even greater extent sexuality, have on many other facets of female experiences and identities.

The Importance of Young Adulthood in the Progress of Feminist Programing:

Girls is a product of the numerous and varied feminist television series that came before it. The series owes its ability to represent sexuality, in the candid way that it does, to the fact that other series from the 1970's, 1980's, 1990's and shows still airing today, have already depicted and to a great extent normalized important feminist discourses. We've seen the ways in which expectations on marriage have been directly confronted in *One Day at a Time* or workplace equality played a central role in the narrative of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. *Cagney and Lacey* and *Designing Women* brought female friendship back to the forefront of prime-time representations of feminism. Without these shows, *Girls* wouldn't be able to depict sexuality and female identities as boldly as it does, if at all.

That the series does so through young women is part of its valuable cultural work. The fact that *Girls* depicts its characters as part of the millennial generation adds to the series' complexity. *Girls* uses its main character to set the tone for this complexity. Hannah aligns herself directly with the uncertainty of young adults (specifically millennial adults) in her position—searching for their voice in a society that is already so full of profound voices. I'd like to pose the idea that sexuality, in the case of *Girls*, acts as a metaphor for the uncertainty that comes with this coming of age tale and the particular historical time period in which the series takes place. The characters in the series face a number of obstacles in which their own judgments, beliefs and identities are called into question. The series uses sexuality as a means of exploring these uncertainties narratively without explicitly offering an answer to each unique challenge the characters face. In doing so, we as viewers are privy to one way in which this uncertainty translates to a type of vulnerability in *Girls*' characters.

At the base of its narrative, *Girls* addresses vulnerability, especially that of women, in relation to a society that historically has subverted their independence. In doing so, the series

calls upon people within the millennial generation and even more so, people who have experienced similar stories in their coming of age, especially women, to find themselves in its characters and its narrative. In short, *Girls* utilizes the narrative of coming of age as a means to explore the role sexuality has in the formation of a woman's identity. The series reflects a sense of fluidity within this process and in turn encourages sex as a form of empowerment. The diversity of its character set, especially in terms of the challenges they face as members of the millennial generation (seeing as many landmarks of feminism occurred before their time), allows the series to appeal to just as diverse a group of viewers. Twenty-Something Feminism, as a genre within television, acts as a compilation of the determination of the feminist movement with the uncertainty that comes with being a young adult. *Girls* has taken advantage of this intersection and, with it, the series is beginning to transform images of sexuality in meaningful ways. Just as *Girls* is an ode to series before it, surely other series will improve upon these themes in the future—ultimately strengthening the relationship between feminist discourses and popular culture.

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