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New Girls, Old Stereotypes:
Identity and Indiscretion in Contemporary Single-Woman Sitcoms

On HBO's *Girls,* single women struggle with imperfect bodies, unfulfilling sex, financial crises, and daily degradations – a deliberate departure from *Sex and the City*. "I felt like I was cruelly duped by much of the television I saw," creator Lena Dunham admits.

Dunham's alternative vision reminds me of the mid-1970s novel and film *Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York*. Like Dunham, the fictional Sheila complained, "Hollywood had been deceiving [single women] all these years." Sheila embodies disillusionment, plotting her suicide while screwing unworthy men. The novel's dark humor resonated so strongly with readers that some "booed" the film for granting Sheila a conventional happy ending.

Sheila was one type of "single girl" character who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when independent women became highly visible in popular culture. For every perky, triumphant Mary Tyler Moore, there was a character who failed to find fulfillment. Consider the bleak film *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, in which a barhopping teacher follows her sex drive to a violent end. Such narratives illustrated the dangers of taking feminism and sexual liberation too far.

Girls is significant for addressing such themes in television and for reframing the failed single girl as comedic rather than tragic. But *Girls* and its counterparts– among them *Apartment 23*, *2 Broke Girls, Whitney* and *New Girl* – are building upon established media conventions. I'm interested in discussing the programs' lineage: What aspects do they borrow from the past, and what do they tell us about modern mores? Do such series really represent progress?

Let's start with the word *girls*. *New Girl*'s opening theme evokes the '60s sitcom *That Girl*, which starred Marlo Thomas as a wide-eyed, zany urbanite. Then, as now, *girl* was a less assured, more playful term than *woman* and made singlehood into an extended adolescence. Girls eventually grow up, assuming adult responsibilities of marriage and gainful employment. Dunham uses the term strategically – HBO's *Girls* is a narrative of maturation, starting with Hannah's break from parental support.

These girls, however, aren't afraid of mature language, using words like *vagina* and *bitch*, and tackling taboo topics like masturbation. This style of comedy is particularly bold for network TV, and supposedly places women on par with men. Characters are also forthright about sex – *Apt. 23*'s Chloe brags about her conquests, and Hannah contorts herself to meet her partner's sexual kinks. (Conversely, sentimental boyfriends are presented as dull or deceitful.) Collectively, these series suggest that sexual experimentation is disempowering, that it drags women down to men's base level rather than elevating relationships (tellingly, *New Girl* was originally called *Chicks and Dicks*). Like their 1970s predecessors, characters illustrate that sexual liberation can be carried too far.

Single characters typically face economic challenges: Sheila Levine longed to escape the typing pool, *That Girl* pursued sparse acting jobs, and even Carrie Bradshaw regretted blowing her savings on shoes. Yet they lived in material comfort and afforded the rent. In contrast, *2 Broke Girls* calculate their savings following every episode of minimum-wage work. Caroline is an heiress who, like Hannah, is suddenly forced to pay her own way. However, references to wealthy parents and elite pedigrees reassure us that such heroines have resources and will land on their feet. The new single woman may work low-wage jobs, but she typically isn't working class (Max is a rare exception).

Racial homogeneity continues to define the genre. Just as classic single-girl sitcoms represented "new women" as white, these contemporary narratives are wrapped in white privilege. Hannah loses her parents' financial support but maintains her sense of entitlement; *2 Broke Girls* thrives on racist jokes and tired stereotypes. Other characters bolster white ethnic stereotypes: in *2 Broke Girls* and *Apartment 23*, the dark-haired heroine is the worldly, sexualized counterpart to a blonde neophyte. And the neurotic, self-deprecating humor of *Girls* channels earlier Jewish characters such as Sheila Levine and Rhoda Morgenstern. What's clearly lost in this whitewashed television world is a sense of what singleness looks like across lines of race, class, and culture. How might a woman of color negotiate singles life? Would she feel more pressure to pursue monogamy? Would she have the audacity to declare herself "the voice of [her] generation"?

I have mixed feelings about this new generation of "girls." I agree with Dunham that we need depictions of the unglamorous realities that bar young women from achieving success and sexual empowerment. But it's disappointing that these purportedly innovative programs speak in stereotypes and reinforce well-worn, cautionary messages about sexuality. Yes, these women share strong bonds with friends – but they fail to embrace collective actions that might make the bedroom and boardroom more equitable for everyone. Instead, we again have the aimless woman adrift in the city, not yet ready for marriage but not modeling any appealing alternatives.