

# SEX AND THE CITY

## Carrie Bradshaw's queer postfeminism

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### Endings

In February 2004, the final credits of HBO's *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) rolled and a near-total media frenzy of goodbyes, tributes, commentary, and post mortems on the show ensued, testifying to the importance of the show to many viewers. Decidedly not innovative in its format, the show chronicled the life and loves of Carrie Bradshaw, a thirty-something single writer living in New York City. Where it was innovative, however, was its placement of Carrie in a tight-knit group of female friends with whom she could talk. In its combination of frank sex talk and best girlfriends, *SATC* became one of the most watched and discussed television series in recent memory.

The popularity of *SATC*, I believe, is due in part to its place at the juncture of two related trends in recent popular culture: postfeminism and queerness. The show is postfeminist, a term I will explore below, in the ways in which the women of *SATC* enjoy the fruits of women's post-70s equality. In many ways obvious and subtle, the series explores the meaning of women's sexual equality in the wake of the social and cultural achievements of second wave feminism. For postfeminists like Carrie and her friends, gender differences, such as wanting to look sexy and flirt, are playful, stylistic, and unrelated to the operations of social power and authority. Women, if they so chose, can work, talk, and have sex "like men" while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman. At the same time and despite its insistent heterosexuality, *SATC* is a series that has taken advantage of the narrative possibilities afforded by queerness. By "queerness" I mean narratives, images, and plot structures that can be read as queer, whether or not the characters, actors or writers involved identified themselves as queer. As queer involves attempts to weaken the naturalized and normalizing binaries of sexuality (straight vs. gay) and of gender (masculine vs. feminine), it offers important insights into the show's approach to the women's desires.

Recognizing *SATC* as postfeminist and queer requires seeing the way the show shadowboxes with history, or specifically, with second wave feminism. The ghost of 70s feminism haunts *SATC* through a repressed, nightmarish vision of autonomous womanhood, the lesbian/feminist, a man-hating, definitely humorless, and certainly fashion challenged caricature. Postfeminism is forged against this ghost of the scary lesbian/feminist as are most popular manifestations of "feminism" or "liberated women" since the 1970s. In terms of the origins of queer activists, 70s feminists, lesbian or not, had by the late 1980s become profoundly associated with the critique of male sexuality in the anti-pornography movement. Misnamed "anti-sex" feminists, those who marched to "take back the night" or who publicly spoke out against rape came to symbolize all that "feminism" could say (or not say) in terms of sexuality. Sex without power, sex between equals, sex as "erotica" and not pornography was seen as making up a rigid code of

“feminist” sex practice, according to those who, for instance, liked sado-masochistic sex with their feminism.<sup>1</sup> Queer, as a movement and a term, formed in part out of the discrediting of feminism as a force for sexual freedom.

To see Carrie Bradshaw’s queer postfeminism, then, is to see her sex life as a product of a longer representational history of women, feminist or not, who sought sexual freedom or freer expression of female sexuality. A quick history of a few of her popular cultural predecessors, women who came to be associated with popular feminism in the 1970s, casts light on how, for Carrie nearly forty years later, queer comes to stand in for a lost feminism.

### **Beginnings: Urban Freedoms and Popular Feminism**

The show’s title, *Sex and the City*, pays direct homage to Helen Gurley Brown’s (1962) classic *Sex and the Single Girl*. Brown’s story is essentially that of Carrie Bradshaw thirty years earlier: girl comes to city, finds a niche for herself dating married and unmarried men, enjoys the attention, sexual and romantic, and decides to write about her experiences. Brown has no female friends, only boyfriends, who do not find her brash independence troubling. Likewise, *Sex and the Single Girl* stressed the connection between women’s financial independence and their sexual liberation, noting that needing a man for entertainment was sexy, but needing one for financial support was not. Carrie and her friends live the life described by Brown, living in their own apartments, supporting themselves, and not requiring marriage to keep them financially or sexually afloat.

If *Sex and the Single Girl* asked if women can stay single and sexy, then Erica Jong’s (1973) novel *Fear of Flying* posed a somewhat different question: can a woman have sex like a man and be happy? Isadora Wing, Jong’s heroine, is a seasoned New Yorker and a committed writer who poses questions to herself/the reader in a manner very much as Carrie does on her computer screen. Both Isadora and Carrie have a hearty appetite for sex and have gained a degree of fame for their exploration of female sexuality in their work. Isadora, most famously, longed for what she called the “zipless fuck.” Historically associated with gay men, sex with strangers, or almost strangers, had migrated into mainstream straight singles culture since the mid 1960s yet it had not been absorbed into dominant norms about what good girls do.<sup>2</sup> Jong’s novel shocked readers when it held up sex with strangers as a desire that women might also have. The desire not only for sex without husbands, but good sex freed of the burden of love, is a kind of sex that Carrie and her friends often state they want. According to Isadora and to other popular female heroines of the 70s, liberation required that women stand on their own to prove themselves truly independent, symptomatically equating independency with adulthood.<sup>3</sup> Yet as Isadora discovers, love and independence don’t always work well together. She also learns that sexual freedom isn’t all she had hoped it would be. Isadora’s negotiations with love, sex, and selfhood make her a prototype for Carrie Bradshaw who struggles with the many ways in which straight women (historically) do not have sex like men, despite their best efforts.

The last foremother in this brief history of Carrie Bradshaw is Candace Bushnell, author of the collection of columns entitled, *Sex and the City* (1996). If Jong, and by extension Isadora, had some bearing on popular representations of 70s feminism, then Bushnell, and by extension, her character “Carrie,” is in dialogue with postfeminism. Bushnell is the spiritual granddaughter of Helen Gurley Brown, who like Brown, began her career writing for *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*. All this ended when she gained attention in 1994 as the *New York Observer*’s resident “Sex and the City” columnist

(Chris Mason 2000). The column examined her own life (through the voice of her alter ego, Carrie) and the lives of her friends, acquaintances, and New York City's social elite. Bushnell's view of 70s feminism was that it won for women the right to have sex like men and to earn as much money. Charlotte, who in the column is a British journalist, captured Bushnell's updated view of the zipless fuck: "There's a thin line between attraction and repulsion . . . And usually the repulsion starts when they begin wanting you to treat them as people, instead of sex toys" (Bushnell 1996, p. 43).

In Bushnell's column, these hardened, high powered Manhattan women come together to bond cynically over the multiple ways men disappoint them, both for wanting to spend the night after sex or for not wanting to spend the night after sex, depending on whose "tale from the city" one is overhearing. It is important to note, however, that in Bushnell's column, these women are not friends, or not friends in the ways that the HBO series defines them. HBO producer Darren Starr took a different piece of 70s feminism for his rendition of Carrie Bradshaw. Unlike Helen Gurley Brown, Isadora Wing or Candace Bushnell, none of whom have girlfriends, Starr put Carrie in a web of committed relationships with other (straight) women. For this Carrie, sisterhood is indeed powerful if not political.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship, then, between 70s feminism, postfeminism and popular queerness is tangled up in *SATC* in ways that testify to just how hard it is to learn from our (feminist) elders. While Carrie must reconcile the contrary pulls of wanting true love and wanting a good lover, wanting independence and wanting a husband, neither she nor the HBO audience is granted enough perspective to see that this struggle has a history, that Carrie is not the first to grapple with the paradoxes of "modern" heterosexual femininity. However, the absence of historical memory in *SATC* is ameliorated by its offering of queer answers to these straight girls' paradoxes. Ironically, *SATC*'s postfeminist dismissal of feminist politics, or the need for a transformation in the social organization of gender, sets the stage for queer knowledge to stand in for feminist insight.

### **New Answers to Old Problems: Postfeminism and Queer**

There is no consensus among media scholars or feminists about the definition of "postfeminism." Part of the term's instability is its adjacent boundaries with a number of related, and themselves relatively unstable, terms. Feminism, antifeminism, third wave feminism, and postfeminism share in the first term's historic vagueness. Contra Catherine McKinnon (1987), the term "feminism" cannot be left unmodified. Indeed, as a term, it increasingly demands qualifiers to stabilize its meaning as it circulates widely in popular, academic, and political discourses, accruing contradictory meanings from all.

Since its advent in 1913, "feminism" as a term has signified equal rights for women, votes for women, sexual liberation of women, and critiques of male power.<sup>5</sup> The term "feminism" had multiple meanings in the 1920s and 30s but it was not until the 1960s and 70s that it began its frightening accumulation of qualifiers, each attempting to specify and clarify the various political stakes for feminists. The growth of modifiers was, in rough chronology, liberal, socialist, radical, cultural, women of color, and lesbian. Each "kind" of feminism traced its origin and its evolution differently, acknowledging affiliations with liberal, nationalist, student and civil rights organizations, among others. By 1990, these specific distinctions had become merely historical, less and less salient to a new generation of gender activists.

If second wave feminism of the 1970s was a case study of political subdivision, then recent feminism is divided along entirely different lines. Beginning with Susan Faludi's 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, the question was no longer "are you a cultural or radical feminist?" but "is feminism dead or alive?" Were we going through a backlash against feminism, a markedly new third wave of feminism, or a moment of postfeminism? Is the glass of women's activism/gender consciousness half full or half empty? These became some of the questions around which the discussion of feminism revolved.

Faludi inaugurated, but certainly was not responsible for this new era of anti/third wave/postfeminist confusion. She wrote what can only be described as a jeremiad against the role the media played in the de-escalation and discrediting of second wave feminist politics. Once having been the disseminator of feminist consciousness, now, according to Faludi, the media—popular journalism, news, television, movies, and the experts which feed them—generated a profound antifeminism to ward off the gains of threatening and potentially powerful women. Her message was clear: Women get too powerful; men, via the hegemonic force of media, launch campaigns to convince women of feminism's failure, represented in *Backlash* as day care crises, a corporate glass ceiling, the difficulty of finding men, and other false issues drummed up by "the man" to keep women down. Faludi, along with Naomi Wolf and her bestselling book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used Against Women* (Naomi Wolf 1991), put antifeminism on the pop-cultural map and did so as avowed feminists.

The cultural work Faludi and Wolf's books did cannot be underestimated. In the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, and Germaine Greer, Faludi and Wolf produced tomes that addressed, in encyclopedic fashion, the shadowy psychological and institutional crevices in which men hide their power over women. The difference between the anti-feminism that Faludi identified as a backlash and that Wolf interpreted as a new "feminine mystique," was intended to rouse a distracted feminist nation back to action. Both stressed that the gains won by first and second wave feminists had left the latest generation of women smug in their convictions of equality. That women's victory over discrimination was yet to be won was catalogued in frightening and relentless detail in both accounts. In these formulation, antifeminism, or a broad rejection of feminist goals, transformed 70s feminism into 1990s postfeminism, a conviction rooted in popular culture's view of feminism's redundancy.

Yet, despite the rhetorical force and bracing simplicity of "patriarchy" on the move, Faludi and Wolf unintentionally served as midwives to a new set of feminist modifiers. The antifeminism that Faludi and Wolf feared was in ascendance and would ultimately undermine feminist gains was, in other hands, an altogether different beast. What Faludi saw as *Time* magazine's antifeminism or insistence that feminism was dead was, for the writers of television shows like *Ally McBeal*, a narrative opportunity to explore how women lived with feminism's bittersweet victories. For the viewers of *Ally McBeal*, *L.A. Law*, and *Designing Women* or heroines like Ripley in the *Aliens* series, these texts were expressing a somewhat hopeful post-revolution feminist sensibility. Rather than a wholesale loss, for some younger audiences, the images of women in 1990s popular culture were engaging precisely for their mutation of 1970s feminism. Viewers liked the step down from high feminist alert represented in these shows' abilities to show likeable feminine characters "making it" in modern (a.k.a. equal) work settings.

Well, which is it? Neither audiences nor scholars agree on how best to distinguish among the latest cluster of feminisms—antifeminism, postfeminism, and third wave. Some scholars see postfeminism and antifeminism as versions of the same phenomena. Tania Modleski, in *Feminism without Women* (1991) defines as postfeminist texts “that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world” (Tania Modleski 1991, p. 3). The question she asks of any text is whether it undermines or shores up patriarchal structures against their “potential ruin” (Modleski 1991, p. 87). Others, like Jane Arthurs (2003) and Moseley and Read (2002), see postfeminism as the convergence of popular culture and select aspects of feminism organized through revisiting the distinction between feminism and femininity.<sup>6</sup> For them, the tension of postfeminism rests on the shifting line between the (unfeminine) autonomous woman and the (feminine) girlfriend, wife, lover. Finally, Amanda Lotz (2001) links postfeminism to postmodernism and postcolonialism in its attempt to incorporate the lessons learned from the mistakes of identity politics and the critiques made by feminists of color. For Lotz, postfeminist textual attributes include those that “explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit”; critique a conception of oppression not grounded on the multiplicity of identities women occupy; challenge the assumption that race, class or disability activism are not “feminist” issues; and deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality.

While Lotz’s description of contemporary feminist theory is accurate, her use of the term “postfeminism” to describe these developments is ultimately confusing. In fact, the post-identity politics that Lotz identifies represents a hard-won evolution within feminist theory begun in the late 1970s by women of color. Further, the feminism that rejects gender binaries has not abandoned a conception of gender as a system of power. The line between feminist and postfeminist Lotz wants to assert collapses upon closer examination. That said, Lotz’s postfeminism, with its emphasis on diverse expressions of activism, is nearly identical to the self-definitions of third wave feminists, a generation of feminists trained in women’s studies classes and by mass marketed feminist writings, including Faludi and Wolf’s. These third wavers reject the category woman as a basis for activism, deconstruct gender binaries, and refuse political separatism of any form.<sup>7</sup> Third wavers are also informed by queer theory and activism around sexuality and identity. Unlike consumers of postfeminist views of women’s equality, third wave feminists, who may or may not engage with popular culture, agree on the need for a gender-conscious activism.

A more useful model of understanding postfeminism, both historically and in the present, is to see it as a re-negotiation of antifeminist and feminist thought in and through popular representations of women. Today’s popular postfeminism explores the new possibilities afforded to women in the wake of feminist legal gains while at the same time reasserts and re-naturalizes what in the nineteenth century was framed as the separate spheres of gender. Separate spheres for our historic moment are not defined through physical spaces along the public/private divide, but through ideas about the distinctive psychological reality of women. In its emphasis on women’s unique reality, one that takes place alongside that of men’s and children’s, this definition of postfeminism marks a change in, or restoration of, heterosexual power relations.

HBO’s *SATC* reproduces the psychological essentialism so prominent in postfeminist representations while also celebrating women.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, *SATC*’s interest in female sexuality, the very aspect that connects the show to a history of single women, is also

the feature of the show that connects it to a different, and at times competing, way of representing sexuality and liberation. Queer theory, which emerged out of 70s and 80s gay and lesbian theory and activism and the devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, has become a visible presence and formidable rival to feminism on matters of sexuality. For *SATC*, queerness figures as a narrative structure that directs Carrie and her friends to solutions that exist beyond postfeminist individualism.

Historically, heterosexuality as a distinctive gender and sexual identification has been both omnipresent and oddly invisible. In the history of twentieth-century sexological, medical, and psychological thought, heterosexuality had been theorized as that which is known and knowable, the obvious sexuality against which all other forms of sexual desire are measured, found wanting, and closeted (Jennifer Terry 1999). More recently, scholars of sexuality have challenged the insistent "normality" of heterosexuality, arguing that it is as much a performance as any other constructed identity. As queer gender theorist Judith Butler argued in 1990, heterosexuality operates as much through what it excludes as what it includes:

Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why sexuality is to some degree always closeted, especially to the one whom would express it through acts of self-disclosure. (Judith Butler 1990, p. 5)

For queer-informed gender theorists, heterosexuality exists through a set of self-disclosed practices and desires structured by exclusion, by what cannot be disclosed without endangering the performative success of specific heterosexual genders. Legal scholar Janet Halley similarly argues that heterosexuality should be read as an unstated location of "those who have not fallen out of it" (Janet Halley 1993, p. 83). Like Butler's formulation, Halley's highlights the lack of specificity over who is heterosexual and what constitutes heterosexual sexual practice, both which lend the identification a false illusion of homogeneity. In Halley's words:

Despite its representation as monolithic in its nonhomosexuality, heterosexuality . . . is a highly unstable, default characterization for people who have not marked themselves or been marked by others as homosexual . . . The threat of precipitous expulsion from the class of heterosexuals, and from all the material and discursive privileges enjoyed by members of that class, bribes class members into complicity with a pervasive representation of the class as coherent, stable, exclusively loyal to heterosexual eroticism, and pure of any sodomitical desires or conduct. (Halley 1993, p. 83)

While this default class openly expels the homosexual other who marks him or herself as gay, Halley argues that it also "covertly incorporates the homosexual other, an undertaking that renders it profoundly heterogeneous, unstable, and provisional" (Halley 1993, p. 85).

Such accounts of heterosexual instability, produced by academic scholars informed by queer subcultural writings, performances, and practices, do not exist only in university theory seminars. Queer maintains a dynamic relationship with mainstream mass media. One obvious result of queer visibility is an increasing recognition of lesbians and gay men as recognizable comedic and dramatic "types." Yet queerness has filtered into popular culture in less obvious ways as well.<sup>9</sup> Carrie and her friends live in a world where they enjoy the company of their gay male friends, meet potential sex partners in clubs, bars, and parks, and

pledge everlasting love to each other. Even as the main characters are “straight,” the narrative queerness of the show alters the representations of their heterosexuality, drawing it out from the shadow of its hegemonic closet. The women’s heterosexuality functions as a site where postfeminism and queer mass media interact.

### **Carrie’s World of Love and Ritual**

*SATC* is structured by two major and overlapping themes, both of which testify to the entanglement of postfeminism and queerness. The first, which is potentially the most disruptive to heterosexual allegiances, is that of the committed friendships between the women. The second is the bawdy talk the women engage in about their sexual partners. Explicit sex talk is the feature of the show most celebrated by critics, but also the feature of the series that does the most work towards expelling any potential for heterosexual instability. Together, both the female friendships and the frank sex talk demonstrate the incoherence that Janet Halley describes as a key feature of heterosexuality. In many ways, weekly episodes of *SATC* can be read as short lessons in the ways in which Carrie manages her incoherent desires. She manages her heterosexual identity not by “leaving” it and taking up a new one, like “becoming” bisexual or gay. Carrie finds satisfactions beyond those offered by men through her committed relationships with her girlfriends—Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha—without whom she would be adrift in a sea of orgasms, shoes, and inadequate boyfriends.

When one tunes into the show, one quickly gathers that these women’s girlfriends are the most valued people in their lives. And indeed, the show insists that these relationships are more lasting and trustworthy than those with men or potential husbands. The friends enjoy an intimacy that nostalgically returns female viewers to college dorms, boarding school, or sleep away camp. The friends have their own apartments, jobs and lives, yet thanks to modern communications are in constant contact with each other. If they are not talking on their cell phones with each other, they are walking the streets deep in conversation, or riding in cabs together. Their conversations are as intimate as the sex with men they enjoy. In many episodes, the heterosexual sex is akin to jogging or clubbing, but the talk is the true subject, the process by which the show’s narrative, its knowledge and its pleasures, are generated. The pleasures of talking are challenged by the competing ones of eating and stylish self-presentation. The episodes unfold around the friends’ shared breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and cocktails. At each gathering, the friends appear in different outfits and are ready to discuss the latest chapter in the chronicle of their sexual and romantic problems. Eating heartily, even if salad or saltwater taffy, literally and metaphorically stands in for other bodily pleasures, pleasures given to oneself yet amplified when done with others. Such eating moments literally structure the show far more than do the women’s sexual encounters. Shared meals, in conjunction with the never-ending conversations, function as the pauses where the women make sense of their lives, where they try to sort out what matters and what does not. They measure themselves against each other, listening in sympathy or outrage to how one of their friends might handle the same situation.

These conversations, on cell phones or face to face, become the bedrock of their collective life and of Carrie’s sex column. For not only does she get a regular supply of dating stories from her friends, Carrie also gets the discussion and debate about sex and its significance. Through these conversations, in fact, Carrie gets access to a more discursive

and imaginary place where sexual pleasure is not confined only to the bodies of those involved, but to those who get to listen to the stories about pleasure. For example, in season four, when Carrie has a gigantic orgasm with a guy who has an Attention Deficit Disorder, part of the pleasure of that orgasm comes from talking about it to her friends. The friends' collective marveling at a night of pleasure, at a forbidden practice, or at specific orgasms, secures the pleasure in time and place, makes it more real, and importantly makes it possible for the speaker (and the audience) to savor it all the more. The connections that are not genital, but are pleasurable, that make sex more real than when one had it, complicates the series' representation of heterosexuality. For what the friends come to want are not only the good nights of sex, but also the pleasures they get from sharing it, through conversation, with that someone special who cares.

Crucially, these friendships, with their problems and jealousies, offer the women an emotional alternative to the compromising world of boyfriends and potential husbands. The bonds that they forge, and upon which they rely, provide the women with the support that the endless stream of men cannot give them. The friends rely on each other to pay attention to their worries, to care about their latest \$400 shoes, to be there when their mother dies, when a boyfriend dumps them, or when they dump a boyfriend.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, in function if not in name, they provide each other with an alternative family. This elective family structure is one that gay men and lesbians have relied on for generations—a self-selected family that willingly meets its members' needs.

The challenge the friendships pose to the women's heterosexual identities is not that such friendships mark them as gay. Rather, the connections they have with each other create an alternative to their boyfriends, an alternative that, by its very existence, grants the women options different from those traditionally signified as "heterosexual" (where women satisfy their desires with one man, serially or monogamously). Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha have created a world within a world or, to borrow historian Carroll Smith Rosenberg's term, a "female world of love and ritual" that supplements the heterosexual world of men in which they also live (Carroll Smith Rosenberg 1975). This bifurcated existence must belong to our history of heterosexuality as a feature of how heterosexuals, but not only heterosexuals, use passionate bonds with same sex friends to manage what literary critics Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis call the "dissonance between lived experiences of pleasure and desire and culturally sanctioned expressions of heterosexuality" (Dennis Sumara & Brent Davis 1999, p. 193).

One of the projects of feminist historians in the late 1970s was to reclaim women's friendships from the shadows of the nineteenth-century private sphere. For slave women, as documented by Deborah Gray White and Angela Davis, or for white middle-class women, as documented by Carroll Smith Rosenberg, the culture of separateness forged deep bonds with other women over birth, death, marriage, baptism, and care-taking.<sup>11</sup> Women's historians have argued that these private bonds were passionate, that they involved psychological and physical intimacy, and provided support and love that women living in racial/gender hierarchies could not get from men, who like women, lived largely in homosocial worlds.

The historical record leaves little material to determine if genital contact between the women in Rosenberg's study took place, that being one manner of determining if the women could be retrospectively be labeled a lesbian and incorporated into the (problematic) project of establishing a gay heritage.<sup>12</sup> But the evidence leaves ample record of the emotional intensity and devotion women had for their female friends. As Rosenberg



suggested, not only should historians be leery of applying twentieth-century labels to pre-twentieth-century subjects, but that no clear division can be drawn between homosexuality and heterosexuality in the historical record (Rosenberg 1975, p. 26). Nor on cable television, I might add. If the series' *raison d'être* is the detailing of how hard it is to find a man worth committing to in modern Gotham, the show is nevertheless structured around the women's non-heterosexual desires. Its clever innovation was to build the narrative around the very familiar and under-theorized alternative women do have to men, to boyfriends and to the institutions of heterosexuality. The world of love and ritual the four friends create for themselves allows the series' exploration of female heterosexuality to go forward without marking the women as homosexuals.

Female friendship, then, is the first thematic of *SATC*. The second is female sexuality itself. Sexual explicitness occurs in two related arenas in the show: showing the women having sex with multiple partners over the course of the series and the characters' use of explicit language to describe to their friends the sex they have had with men. The sex talk, which makes up the bulk of the friends' discussions, is one site of the series' postfeminist sensibility. The tactic of show-and-tell around the women's sex demonstrates that "heterosexual sex" refers to many things besides the missionary position or female sexual subservience. Many critics and viewers initially believed that the sex talk was the aspect of the show that was most innovative and had the most potential to disrupt confining gender constructions.

The women's frank talk about the explicit sex achieves a number of important effects. First, the sex talk takes place in the context of the friends' conversations, conversations that constitute what is knowable by the show. This knowledge works in the same way that consciousness-raising sessions did for second wave feminists. The women's talk provides an account of the "dissonance" the characters experience between ideas about heterosexual romance and their experience of straight sex. The talk explains what's not comfortable in sex, what they don't like about what this or that lover does, what they would like more of in sex, what they desire to have happen. But equally important, the talk also insists on the pleasures of heterosexual sex for women. These women are shown enjoying intercourse in an array of positions with numerous partners. The characters love penises and the men who bear them. They love feeling desirable. The pleasure they take in sex, in which they narrate to each other in conversation, both bind them to each other and erotically to heterosexual pleasures. This must be seen as an important contribution the show makes—these women are the subjects of heterosexual sex, not its object.

That said, the series postfeminist sensibility undoes some of its potentially liberating aspects. At the same time the talk focuses on the pleasures of heterosexual sex, it also centers on their search for "the right man." While the show celebrates the friends' pleasurable sexual encounters, these moments of sex are narrated (on multiple levels of the show) in and through the quest for romantic love. The search for lasting romance reproduces the enduring message that woman's ultimate personal and sexual liberation lies with men. While the show demonstrates that it is good to find a hard man, for Carrie and her friends, a good man remains so hard to find.

Paradoxically, the search for the right man, which up until the last season had inevitably failed, underscores the centrality of the women to each other. In episode forty, "All or Nothing," Samantha gets sick and none of her lovers come to nurse her. In her hour of need, when all the desirability is gone, when there is no make-up, no lacy underwear, and no fancy cocktails, it is Carrie who comes to give her medicine

and wipe her nose. Carrie reassures her lonely and despairing friend that they are not alone, that they have each other. A moment of postfeminist angst—being liberated is not all we were told it would be—is mitigated by the show’s queer perspective. Having each other becomes the way these women manage what is often represented as their lonely heterosexuality.

The show returns viewer back to this meta narrative of queer families and even insists on ritualizing those self-chosen bonds. At the end of season four (episode sixty-four, “Ring a Ding Ding”) Carrie asks Charlotte for a loan with which to buy her literal home and to preserve her symbolic autonomy. At lunch with wine, a now separated Charlotte slides her engagement ring, encased in its original soft velvet box, the symbol of what straight women are said to desire, across the table to Carrie as a down payment for a new home. Carrie inhales sharply, looks up and searches Charlotte’s eyes for her meaning. “Will you take it?” Charlotte asks. Carrie takes Charlotte’s hand, and whispers, in a voice full of love, “are you sure?” The penultimate scene that haunts Carrie and her friends’ inner closet of romantic desire is enacted, but not with the “proper” person straight women imagine themselves sitting across from. Instead of the boyfriend, it is the girlfriend. Not the lesbian girlfriend, but the straight girlfriend. And for this show, at least, and in this literary Gotham, this is indeed the “proper” person, the friend who will always be there.

Similarly, in the final season (episode eighty-eight, “The Ick Factor”), Carrie demands that her new boyfriend acknowledge the centrality of her relationship with Samantha. Samantha, recently diagnosed with breast cancer, is the character that is at once the most sexually adventurous and the most vulnerable to fears of growing old alone. During Miranda’s wedding, Carrie and Samantha hold hands. Underscoring the family that already exists, the camera turns to Carrie and Samantha as we hear Miranda promise to her husband “to have and to hold, in sickness and health, as long as we both shall live.” Boys on the side, indeed. Call the boyfriend to dispose of rodents and girlfriends to dispel fears of growing old alone. What made *SATC* different was that it regularly suggested that this family of four could be enough to make up a life, a life still worth living without the husband and baby, a life led outside the historic feminine and feminist script.

Yet throughout its tenure, the show walked the fine line between exploring the potential enough-ness of same sex families while never tipping the women into outright gayness. This unstable project—at once insisting on the women’s autonomy from men through their relationships with each other and their heterosexuality—reflect the convergence of postfeminism and queerness in series as it struggled to conceptualize women’s freedom, sexually and psychologically. Rather than insisting that Carrie is not straight, we must note the multiple ways in which *SATC* demonstrates, inadvertently and episodically, that heterosexuals have desires that sometime defy the simple equation between genital contact and sexuality, that sometimes disrupt the lines we draw between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and that sometime crack the false divides between emotional and sexual pleasures. Gender similarity continues to provide the ground of psychological and emotional pleasures as rich as to be closeted. In its postfeminism, *SATC*’s solution to the historic problem of sexuality for women simultaneously reaches backward to nineteenth-century bonds of womanhood and forward to female independence based on those same bonds.

## NOTES

1. See Jane Gerhard (2001), and Lisa Duggan & Nan Hunter (1995).
2. See Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess & Gloria Jacobs (1987) and David Allyn (2000).
3. See Bonnie Dow (1996) and Susan Douglas (1994).
4. See Robin Morgan (1970).
5. See Nancy Cott (1988).
6. Jane Authurs' wonderful analysis of *Sex and the City* emphasizes the series' relationship to consumerism and to the "interlocking circuits" of women-directed media, including women's magazines, fashion, and celebrity. We differ on our readings of the women's heterosexuality, which Authurs analyzes as ultimately dissatisfying but not to the point where heterosexuality itself is open to evaluation. I am arguing that we can see that the satisfactions of heterosexual sex for the women is complicated by the emotional intimacies the women offer each other.
7. See, for example, B Finden (1995), Karen Green & Tristan Taormino (1997), and Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards (2000).
8. Cultural feminism, a variant and mainstreamed variation of radical feminism, also stresses psychological essentialism. For example, see Jean Baker Miller (1976), Nancy Chodorow (1978), and Carol Gilligan (1982).
9. For example, *Entertainment Weekly* reported *Starsky & Hutch* (2004) director Todd Phillips calling the remake of the 70s series a "romantic comedy between two straight men" (March 12, 2004, p. 19).
10. Janelle Brown (1996–1997) calls the centrality of consumerism to postfeminist sensibilities "a new girl order."
11. See Carroll Smith Rosenberg (1975), Nancy Cott (1978), Deborah Gray White (1985), and Angela Davis (1989), are three of many examples.
12. Taking twentieth-century labels, such as "lesbian" back in time in an effort to show that "gay people" have always existed is a strategy I appreciate but do not advocate. See Lillian Faderman (1981) for an example of such a history.

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