Minorities, volatile identities and (mis-)identification: a holistic reading of HBO's *Girls*

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Abstract. Lena Dunham's series *Girls* has sparked interest and controversies, particularly during its first seasons, due to its purposeful title and its content, frequently oscillating between feminism and postfeminism. This article aims to examine the title implications in terms of representation and identification, as well as a series of textual questions posed within the last seasons, not proportionately investigated yet, in order to trace and discuss omissions and to portray the characters' further development. For this reason, we first use the series as a map to explore the notion of girlhood in the contemporary setting, and venture comparisons with womanhood, manhood and the notion of the child. Furthermore, we wish to reveal debates on racial and gender exclusion. Finally, we employ a transversal reading based on the discussion of positive and negative criticism but also on other structured readings of *Girls*. We comply with the paradigm of mis-identification or partial identification as a queer form of viewing the show that allows careful examination through various angles on the one hand, and recognizes the author's attempts to adjust to the audiences' feedbacks on the other. On the whole, we consider *Girls* to surpass trivialities that are common in contemporary quality television, even by failing to be a common denominator of girlhood.
Keywords: Cable television; Post-feminism; Gender identity; Gender based analysis; Social inclusion

[es] Minorías, identidades volátiles y (mis-)identificación: una lectura holística de *Girls* (HBO)

Resumen. La serie *Girls*, de Lena Dunham, ha provocado interés y controversias, particularmente a lo largo de sus primeras temporadas, por su título intencionado y su contenido, frecuentemente oscilando entre feminismo y postfeminismo. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar las implicaciones del título en términos de representación e identificación, así como una serie de cuestiones textuales planteadas en las últimas temporadas, aún no investigadas de manera proporcionada, con el fin de rastrear y discutir omisiones y retratar el desarrollo posterior de los personajes. Por esta razón, primero se utiliza la serie como mapa para explorar la noción de condición de chica (*girlhood*) en el ambiente contemporáneo y se aventuran comparaciones con la feminidad, la virilidad y la noción de niño. Seguidamente, se desea revelar el debate sobre la exclusión racial y de género. Finalmente, se emplea una lectura transversal basada en la discusión de críticas positivas y negativas, pero también en otras lecturas estructuradas de *Girls*. Nos inclinamos hacia el paradigma de la mis-identificación o identificación parcial como una forma *queer* de ver la serie, que permite una revisión puntual a través de diferentes ángulos, por un lado, y que reconoce los intentos de la autora de ajustarse a la retroalimentación de las audiencias, por el otro. En general, opinamos que *Girls* sobrepasa las trivialidades que son comunes en la televisión de calidad contemporánea, incluso al no ser completamente representativo.
Palabras clave: Televisión por cable, Postfeminismo, Identidad de género, Análisis de género, Inclusión social

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1. Introduction

Although HBO's cable series *Girls* uttered its last episode on April 16th, 2017, little metatextual comment has been given on the content of the last seasons of the show, at least compared to the analyses flourished upon its rise, back in 2012, and for at least two to three seasons (out of the six on the whole). The show is considered a "dramedy" that follows the lives of four young girlfriends in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York. With its critical lenses, it has inevitably drawn feminist academic attention, mostly due to its promising and generic title, but also due to its post-recession and postfeminist content and aesthetics, which have often sparked controversies.

Another main reason for such interest is the fact that creator Lena Dunham has been the first woman to be trusted with writing, directing and starring in an HBO series, all that at the significantly early age of twenty-five. Dunham plays lead Hannah Horvath, an aspiring writer in young adulthood who loses her parents' financial support in the very first episode to embark on a journey to self-definition that, more frequently than not, involves contradictory incidents, feelings, statements and conducts from her part. When her eBook editor passes away (season 3, episode 4), Hannah only cares about the future of her text, showing no signs of empathy or mourning. As a participant in a writers' workshop in the University of Iowa, she confronts all of her classmates with insults, implying she is the only legitimate creative writer of the course (season 4, episode 3). At times, her attitude has led viewers and scholars to consider her narcissistic and hard to identify with (Daalmans, 2013; DeCarvalho, 2013). Nonetheless, the duo character-narrator definitely has self-awareness and does not hesitate to express it, incorporating sarcasm in the narrative as a main component. For instance, one of Hannah's most reflective quotes is "so any mean thing someone's gonna think of to say about me, I've probably said to me, about me, probably in the last half hour" (season 1, episode 9). In this sense, *Girls* is highly parodic and self-critical and can be elaborated in multiple layers (Nash & Whelehan, in Nash & Whelehan, 2017).

Hannah's main companions, but not in the strict sense, as they do not occupy steady or proportionate showtime attention, are Marnie Michaels (Allison Williams) and Jessa Johansson (Jemima Kirke), Ohio's Oberlin College postgraduates, just like Hannah, and college attendant Shoshanna Shapiro (Zosia Mamet); all white, middle-to-upper-class representatives of the Millennial Generation, struggling to sustain themselves financially and delaying or escaping conventionalities of adulthood such as marriage or childbirth. Both Marnie and Jessa get married throughout the series only to realize it is not a desirable condition after all, while Jessa miscarries while she is purposed for abortion in the first season. These main figures are found in debt of their parents' unfulfilled responsibilities, not only socioeconomically but also emotionally. Far from having achieved economic stability, what is really at stake is their affective and pragmatic adjustment. Towards the latter there are no permanent

or clear responses by any of the four protagonists, but rather fragmentary, mixed-up acts that span from irony to (relative) thoughtfulness and from adversity to diversion. An example is Jessa's willingness to sabotage Hannah and Adam's relationship when Hannah moves to Iowa, estimating they will not last in distance and introducing Adam to her acquaintance, Mimi-Rose (season 4, episode 5).

Four have been the main and in-depth theoretical approximations composed for the discussion of the show's depictions of gender and will serve as our principal sources of analysis: first, a special editorial issue in the Taylor and Francis's journal *Feminist Media Studies* (13:2), where Kumarini Silva and Kaitlynn Mendes recollect a series of articles that question the show's purposes in the first two seasons (until 2013). Second, a 2014 book called *HBO's Girls: Questions of gender, politics, and millennial angst*, edited by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally and published right after the end of the third season, where a variety of topics is posed with a clearly feminist perspective. Third, Watson, Mitchell and Shaw's *HBO's Girls and the awkward politics of gender, race, and privilege*, examines various similar topics after one more season (2015). And last but not least, Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan's *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, postfeminism, authenticity and gendered performance in contemporary television*, where all chapters contemplate a holistic reading of the first five seasons, up until 2016, incorporating Lena Dunham's autobiographical book *Not* that *kind of girl: A young woman tells you what she's "learned"*, published in 2015.

As Nash and Whelehan (2017) point out, representing feminist issues in popular culture and contemporary television is a complicated project, because such political and ethical recommendations are often incompatible with television's aesthetic values and commitments. Representation remained a controversial issue in Lena Dunham's text until the very end, despite the fact that a grand majority of the literature and commentaries had already reported and criticized the problems of identification raised by the use of standardized and privileged female protagonists (Daalmans, 2013; Genz, McDermott, McCann, in Nash & Whelehan, 2017). In any case, the show's own awareness of criticism and the characters' own refusal to participate in the generic title suggestion is "already inscribed in the narrative itself", as Grdešić points out (2013, p. 356). Moreover, Dunham herself has seemed willing to make script redefinitions and modifications in favor of inclusion and diversification (eg. Hamilton, Saisi, in Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014), the final one being the birth of lead role Hannah's biracial baby. Criticism was almost instantly incited in social media by the paradox of the baby's race (black), despite Hannah being of white American and the father of Pakistani descent. Ambivalence, in any case, whether as an outcome of intentional or of unintentional inaccuracies, is supposed to be a fundamental device in sophisticated-quality genres.

The purpose of this study is to trace a line between the show's aspirations and the audiences' and critics' reviews, taking into account the series as a whole. This holistic viewpoint is significant, for it embraces the series' critical finale, while seizing the change of sociopolitical mindset after the recent US presidential elections' results. We will examine matters of gender representation in *Girls*, first by amplifying its conventional title and connecting it to the main female and male portrayals, and then by contemplating possible ruptures or omissions regarding minorities in Dunham's discourse. Although textual analysis will be used to exemplify our argumentation, our approximation will primarily involve an *a posteriori* transversal reading. By

careful speculation both of parts of the narration and criticism, what this study aspires to examine is the importance of this postfeminist text in a more integrated way, in relation to recent gender studies debates. This has not often been the case, since a grand majority of literature has directly compared *Girls* to its precursor *Sex and the City* and has repeatedly used specific episodes and scenes of the first seasons as quotes, while subsequent content can also be useful.

2. The girl assumption

Dunham's authority as a female creator of a quality cable TV series is discussed in this first session, mainly as a way to approach the difficulties her text has faced in order to adjust to the network's narrative imperatives, but also as an opportunity to explore what is disguised behind the so-called "female authority", and, inevitably, the title "Girls". Taylor Nygaard (2013) observes that Dunham's initial lack of reputation and experience in the domain produced a major branding campaign and advertisement in order for the show to gain prestige and legitimacy inside HBO's auteurist establishment. Comparing the series' creator with male counterparts like Larry David or Woody Allen, involved in the production, acting and direction of their work, Nygaard states that "Although Dunham's gender was one of the reasons HBO presumably recruited her, the network simultaneously worked to disavow her gendered positioning by comparing her to the masculine auteur tradition that has served them well historically" (2013, p. 372). This implies the network's gendered positioning as well, enhanced by the collaboration of executive producer Judd Apatow as a key to guarantee male viewers' interest on the show, not to mention further commercial recognition. The fear of interpreting *Girls* as "girls-only" material or incompatible with themes supposedly appealing to male audiences seemed crucial for not letting a woman –even somewhat "inexperienced"– assume full responsibility of it.

If branding strategies have been issued to refrain Dunham's potential "omnipotence" as a young female author, as Nygaard suggests, and if male audiences are apparently more than necessary in the quality cable TV industry, then why insist on keeping the series' title intact? Why embrace the somewhat immature, fragile, desexualized image the word conventionally entails as core for an all-inclusive quality series? It is important to note here that male characters in *Girls* actually have a decisive involvement in the storyline and are not simply recurring roles. We get to see their point of view just as much and as deeply, which would not make the title so reliable or representative after all. Their affective (dys-)functionality, personal and professional indecision and existential confusion are just as precarious as they are for their female companions and friends. Besides, the fact that "boys" is neither uttered nor presupposed in the title is itself an emphatic, strategic clue: it is intriguing to think about what kind of series "*Boys*" would be.

Subsequently, we are led to imagine what kind of manhood the boys encompassed by a series named *Girls* shall embody or perform. There is a debate on whether the men are actually typically heteronormative or reflective of an attempt to interrogate traditional masculinity. This contradiction is intentionally highlighted here, as both perspectives can be found in different moments throughout the seasons. The majority of the readings provided are focused on Adam (Adam Driver) and Ray (Alex Karpovsky), the two basic male protagonists, but it seems that there is a similar presenta-

tion of the rest. Adam, Hannah's on-and-off boyfriend, who during the last seasons betrays her for her best friend Jessa, is also more frequently subject to speculation, due to his outrageous and unsympathetic personality and alcohol addiction. Towards the two final seasons, Elijah (Andrew Rannells), Hannah's homosexual roommate and ex-boyfriend, and Tad Horvath, Hannah's father (Peter Scolari), out of the closet as well after season 5, gain a lot more screenplay presence, both as counterclaims to Adam's more secure and reassured sexuality. This is a turn that unavoidably alters the male inscriptions of the show, yet it does not add to a subversive breakthrough other than the deconstruction of Hannah's (and her mother Loreen's) nuclear family ideal.

Marc Edward Shaw, on one hand, seems convinced that *Girls* offers no dominant or regular paradigms of masculinity, as characters are continuously oscillating between accustomed and irregular gender performances and re-dictated. "We see that gender formation is always a becoming" (on Watson, Mitchell & Shaw, 2015, p. 73), a longing, a demand that the show does not comply with. He explains, however, that behind such practice lies a problem of evasion, for the concentration on non-dominant masculinities leaves dominant ones free of scrutiny and critique. That is why he finds it imperative to actually display hierarchical masculine representations, expose their fragile and vulnerable side, uncommon in television, and deconstruct their power under critical lenses, the ones Dunham knows how to use. This, of course, presumes a similar response and interpretation from the spectators' angle, which cannot be easily foreseen or molded. Despite that, it is hard to describe such rigid patterns without falling into ideologically marked irony or sarcasm.

Frederik Dhaenens makes a reading resembling the one made by Shaw: "the men in Girls are negotiating divergent discourses on masculinity instead of embodying a hegemonic masculine ideal" (in Nash & Whelehan, 2017, p. 121); but, on the other hand, he adds that hegemony is an intrinsic necessity for all those described as divergent masculinities. Therefore, his idea that Elijah, as openly gay, holds on to a stereotypical homosexual ideal, helps the writer express that, even though not hegemonic, other masculinities are often complicit in aspiring to and supporting the hegemonic patterns. Not only that, but gay masculinities imitate or translate the heterosexual hierarchies to install their own, leaving aside questions of subversion and aims for further political empowerment. This is depicted in a scene (season 5, episode 4) when Dill, a famous news anchor, invites Elijah to a fancy restaurant, respecting all sorts of cultural rituals such as non-verbal communication and lavish dress code, much to Elijah's discomfort.

In *Girls* there is a difficulty in understanding identities as stratified or as prototypes of female and male figures, a lot more common in contemporary television in general. Dhaenens, using Ray's example, believes that uncertainty in socio-economic level is responsible for what can be seen as a change in these characters' masculinities towards inclusivity. His view is that homohysteria, a notion he borrows from Eric Anderson, narrowed down to the condition of enhanced compulsory heteronormativity, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, arouses in social periods when masculinity feels endangered and needs to be revalued, whereas periods of tolerance towards gender diversity can actually accept two main archetypes: what we have seen as hegemonic on one hand, present in every patriarchal structure, and inclusive or more permissive on the other. This division is used to conclude that, even though inclusive patterns are met in *Girls* regarding masculinities and identities in general,

more often than not, "identities are cisgender and grafted onto heteronormativity" (in Nash & Whelehan, 2017, p. 132).

Returning to the title issue, if "girls" is an implicit way to dispute or oppose mature womanhood (Grdešić, 2013), then it easily and undeniably relates to "boys", as both are volatile identities indicative of psychical *moratorium*, that is, of a state of extended adolescence, perpetual disaffection and renunciation of responsibility. Additionally, they are both prone to rejecting established feminine representations as obsolete and undesirable. This is more logical for boyhood than for girlhood, due to a general fear of this potential identification, which femininity portrays, shared among cultures and even considered intrinsic of human personality (Sambade Baquerín, in Pérez Sedeño & Ibáñez, 2012), at least as a cultural trait. Femininity's subordinate position in patriarchal societies disqualifies a potential hegemonic version of itself. But it is rather femininity's romanticized and subordinate connotations that make even girlhood and femininity discordant categories. Victoria Cann (in Savigny and Warner, 2015, p. 155) stresses:

> Sometimes I think that we use gendered descriptors without really reflecting on what we understand them to mean. For example, 'female', 'woman', 'young woman', 'girl', all have different connotations and evoke different thoughts in our minds. I find the word 'female' to be somewhat problematic as it infers biology […]; meanwhile, 'young woman' places girls in a particular stage on the path to (inevitable) womanhood (essentialising gender in the process). When thinking about generation, I also find the word 'child' to be problematic as it is not only genderless (which is problematic as discourses of gender impact all aspects of cultural life), but also because 'child' is a word that is not found to have resonance with young people themselves […].

"Girl" connects femininity with youth, but since it is more flexible, it is hardly an essential category for Cann. It resembles a position of authority, since it deserves writing a memoir about it at twenty-five, as Hannah does, but it has been also highly criticized as a position of enunciation that is rather irresponsible, isolated and apolitical. Kimberly Turner (in Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014) uses the term as a synonym of queerness, to contrast heteronormativity's projections towards the child. The child is not only genderless or asexual, as explained by Cann, but also the promise of a future, an intermediate that guarantees heteronormative subjectivation and validation, masked behind innocence and need of protection. Meanwhile, the protagonists of *Girls* are not devoted to typical heteronormative or long-term relations. Hannah and Marnie's relationship or Jessa and Marnie's "erotic" scene (season 1, episode 8) exemplify this homoerotic tendency, thus she classifies them altogether as queer. Queerness serves for Turner as a disturbing position that resists reproductive futurism and allies with the *jouissance*-death drive, the remainder that culturally stays out of order. It denies stable identities and questions the dependence on integral and integrated figures, whilst relinquishing girlhood's sexuated conventionality.

Dunham's work does not provide emancipatory or inspiring role modeling, since it is hard to follow, obscure, at times even mundane and inconsistent, and the title is an indicator of that. Connotations of sisterhood, heritage or sense of community are left aside. The cultural material explored impedes those bonds from being established. The show does not wish to be responsible for a new generation of girl-audi-

ence that can relate even before reaching young adulthood, but to curiously circulate the symptoms (*sinthomes*, for Turner, in line with Edelman's interpretation of the lacanian term) associated with the contemporary, precarious aspirations of selfhood. This precariousness is what leads Anna Backman Rogers to enunciate that *Girls* is actually "the end game of postfeminism" (2015, p. 46).

3. Universal paradigms and minority exclusion

In a different theoretical approach of the series, Tisha Dejmanee discusses what she observes as a "turn to interiority" in postfeminist television from mid-00s on, its main preoccupations being the increasing concern with interior spaces and internalized consumption, inherent to postfeminist thought. Instead of dismantling this contemporary patriarchal regression, the new interiority highlights postfeminism resilience and applicability in various social contexts, as a means of *depoliticisation* of fundamental second wave claims through strategic lifestyle promotion and repudiation of activism and engaged social participation. As she states,

> "[…] in the contemporary moment, consumption and labour are directed inwards, as the home and body replace the city as the spaces of significance for postfeminist performance and femininity is traditionalised and romanticised, made prominent as an appropriate corollary to the inherent strength of women. This interest in conservative depictions of the home and family reveal the easy appropriation of feminist rhetoric by the national and corporate interests of the day, as the socio-cultural context of 2005 heralds these changes as a product of necessity and choice" (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 131).

Digital progress, certainly echoed in *Girls*, has obviously accelerated and validated this process, not only by "domesticating" numerous socio-cultural practices such as do-it-yourself methods, professions, shopping, types of communication and entertainment, but also by producing new, artificial and transgeneric identities and cyberspaces. Furthermore, the democratization of these profiles and spaces enable a paradox: it is not fear or guilt that ties people up to domesticity anymore, but proper decision and freedom of expression.

Another factor added by Dejmanee is, namely, "the increasing instability of the borders of the nation state in an era of globalisation" (idem, p. 123), that has (re-) generated the fear of unknown, external threats and the need to return to the impermeability and sterility of the home. That is why it is significantly interesting to revisit *Girls* in the US post-election era, when prevalent neo-conservative ideologies and securing discourses encourage enhanced boarders and undoubtedly alter the notions of national integrity and interior/exterior. Dejmanee's reading of Hannah's body and home as constantly penetrated, mirrored in her commitment to nakedness, her unsatisfied appetite for food and sex and the culmination of her obsessive-compulsive symptomatology, is stated as a strategy of revealing the abject parts of intimacy. Nash and Grant (2015) understand this as a complex strategy as well, noticing how this particular body re-signifies sexiness and consent outside dualisms. Since she gets pregnant, Hannah manifests her growing belly in various occasions in the sixth season, just as she introduces her nudity in lots of other episodes. The birth of a bi-

racial baby in the last episode is the epitome of the presence of the outsider within. Hannah's body does not operate as a metaphor of a whole nation's body in any case, but it can be read as a subversive tool.

Interpersonal borders are also progressively weakened. Friendship is not idealized or prioritized as a liberating mystique, as the four friends do not end up together. The struggle to protect a group dynamic that does not comfort all members is expressed at least once in every season, primarily by Shoshanna, testifying not only feelings of loneliness and disengagement of the Millennial generation, but also an imposed postfeminist stereotype on the value of shared experience. In conjunction with previous ideas concerning the title, it remains problematic to create collective or universalized hypotheses based on relationships or female and male portrayals of the series:

> "The desire to see *Girls* as universal comes from a specific type of reading and interpretation of the series. Both the viewers that recognize themselves in the show, and those that feel left out, approach the fictional narrative in the same way: evaluating its quality by comparing it to the "reality" of their own lives" (Grdešić, 2013, p. 356).

Despite there being forums and globally spread communities that comment on and exchange opinions about programs such as *Girls*, thanks to social media (Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014), viewers outside the specific US social and cultural context of the show find it (even) harder to identify themselves with the suggested Brooklyn post-recession lifestyle. Even though New York has systematically served as one of the commonest settings for series and movies in the postfeminist era, millennial precarity, politics in times of recession and privilege are not conceived in the same way throughout the "Western World". Menéndez and Zurian (2014) schematize targeting of storyline creation by associating character construction with its respective consumption; almost as if identification were the demand and representation were the supply. They designate the text as a hipster version of *Sex and the City*, with a more unconventional and subcultural narrative that has a strictly determined female target audience. The created archetypes need to facilitate the most efficient and easiest possible identification, although, as we have detected, many have criticized this particular "incapacity" of the show.

That does not necessarily entail that the series' suggested lifestyle is undesirable for the viewers. The new commercial femininities facilitate multiple modes of mirroring, which results to a global girl archetype, previously (in the '90s and early '00s) enclosed in the girl-power ideology, and currently presented as the absolute eradication of polyphony. Following Angela McRobbie's points, neoliberal feminist principles oblige young women to produce a stable self by being harshly judgmental towards their own public images and habits. This is part of a general re-traditionalizing strategy that leads to homogenization, now that social media and cable television have reached great levels of expansion and have brought discussions on plurality in different levels. In McRobbie's words (2009, p. 59):

> "The friendly (hence unthreatening), beautiful and somehow pliable, global girl who exudes good will, thus marks out the spaces of undoing of post-colonial critical pedagogy as well as of post-colonial feminist critique. Or at least we might

understand this to be the underlying (and re-colonising) aim of the promotion of global girlhood by the global media, the commercial domain (the fashion-beauty complex) and through specifically neoliberal forms of governmentality".

Katherine Bell (2013) uses *foucaultian* terms to express how the show blends neo-liberal, institutionalized privilege and postfeminist acumen to emphasize a double monitoring process hidden behind the characters' coming–of–age. Apart from the aforementioned re-colonization, propagated by the external image, an introspective institutionalization takes place by succumbing to an unconscious but panoptical vigilance and by spiraling around individual issues. This goes hand–in–hand with selling a marketable and legible self that is purposed to be consumed by others: as Genz points out (Nash and Whelehan, 2017), although recessionary brand culture demands an authenticity of experience, this often leads to ordinary, pseudo-bohemian manifestations very present in the narration. This is what best justifies or at least recognizes the protagonists' narcissistic tendencies, regularly commented even by other characters inside the series.

It has been our motive to correlate the formulation of neoliberal predominant manhood with *Girls* and its depictions of masculinities and femininities, in a quest to reveal these forced social binaries' effects and the ways this has been critically outlined by the show, sometimes positively and others negatively. Nikita Hamilton (in Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014) asserts, in line with what we have already examined, that it is neither realistic nor convenient to expect *Girls* to be representative of all young women. Dunham is more than allowed to express her own experiences, and if they do not include, for example, diverse racial realities, there is no point of accusing her of racial diversity deficiency. *Girls*, according to her, can fit into neither feminism nor postfeminism, but is a complex compilation of both ideologies. That is why it is not feasible for viewers to wholly identify with the main female characters: "Some women will not be able to identify with them at all, while others are able to identify with particular conversations or certain personalities which they as young women, young men, older women or older men have experienced" (idem, p. 48). This partial or mis-identification is crucial in democratizing the gaze and permitting diverse interpretations.

In the same sense, she adds, the problem lies in the construction of black characters within a binary logic, where there is either overt race preoccupation, or its existence is absolutely neglected. "Constructing a black character that pleases everyone is an inherently politicized act, given the current state of mainstream culture where every representation is subject to analysis and argument" (idem, p. 52). We could observe the same for gender identities, in which case fluidity and diversity make representation an even harder issue to deal with.

The fact that, throughout the seasons, Dunham has altered her script's content to adjust to her audience's demands for racial inclusion, is an indicator of social media's reactive power, a relatively new element in the mass media culture. Boké Saisi (in Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014), for example, mentions Twitter's negative feedback effect in particular, which led to the introduction of a black character, named Sandy (Donald Glover), for two episodes in season 2. Even the fact that the recurring actor was chosen for a mere two episodes was criticized, as not long enough to represent black identity and interracial interaction. Similarly, the counselor Marnie and her husband Desi visit to discuss their conflicts (season 6, episode 4) is black, and has

been thought as a simulated authority in social media. Are the public's expectations erroneous, in the sense that *Girls* does not directly address race anyhow, or rational in the sense that people of colour have accepted whitewashing for way too long in the television history for not demanding their inclusion?

4. An alternative reading

The vast majority of the aforementioned studies, except for Grdešić's, have aimed their attention at the show's own choices. However, Rose Weitz (2016) has experimented with student viewers' interviews regarding the series' content. With a sample of 28 women college students of a Women and Sexuality class, she analyzed perception and response to the first three episodes, reflecting how female audiences are not passive receptors but actively involved and reactive to mediatic stimuli. The main methodological problems of her experiment, as she properly acknowledges, concern the fact that all subjects were familiar with gender and sexuality conceptualization, were not random participants but members of a course, and data codification was only carried out by her. Moreover, questions centered on matters of affinity towards characters and themes ~~and~~ did not encompass the entire storyline. The researcher's intention was to classify responses, positive or negative, as either feminist or post-feminist; an act that automatically assumes at least one of these two readings is indispensable and inherent to the show, and that comprehends postfeminism more as a synonym to anti-feminism. Nevertheless, Weitz anticipates such critique in the following way:

> "Although research on audience reception remains far less common than textual analyses, its key concepts have gained broad acceptance. At the heart of audience reception studies is the idea that although media producers may "encode" a "preferred reading" into a film or other text, each audience "decodes" the text in its own way. Some audiences may adopt the preferred reading, but others –especially those who are marginalized by ethnicity, social class, gender, or some other factor– may create "oppositional" readings that counter it or "negotiated" readings that combine preferred and oppositional readings." (2016, p. 222).

Based on Weitz's declarations of possible oppositional or negotiated interpretations, useful in order to counter-attack or simply to disavow the encoded, suggested ones, in this last session we will venture a transversal reading of *Girls*, not only as a more sensible approach to minority audiences, but as a way to conceptually transcend typical symbolic affirmations implied by the show for its viewers. The fact that her sample has not involved male subjects is significant, because it forecloses the gaze and standardizes data coding, creating a kind of preferred reader, instead of preferred read-ing. Instead of re-establishing the male gaze discarded by Weitz, we can play with the interchangeability of the sexes, parting from Baudrillard's idea that "we are all *symbolically* transsexuals" (2002, p. 10). The philosopher argues that the sexual and the political are not so correspondent or parallel, but as we are currently surpassing the binary masks of politics, it may be possible that we have also reached a similar position with sexes, heading towards hybridism and slipperiness. We can also inscribe ourselves into what Samuel Chambers (2009) describes as queer cul-

tural politics, in the sense of understanding meanings and identities as relational and potentially political, as ways of resistance to imperative registers.

Under these lenses, the *trans* condition lies not so much in surpassing binaries as in simulating difference. The only direct textual reference to trans is found in the second episode of the sixth season, where Shoshanna, Elijah and Jessa assist a women entrepreneurs' gala called "WeMun", as in "Women Entrepreneurs meet up now", an initiative under Rachel and Zeva, Shoshanna's ex-friends whose lifestyle she is supposed to have discarded. In a glamorous event, where young women are seen socializing with cocktails, the two caricaturesque characters, founders of a jeans brand, make a presumably encouraging speech on female mobilization and synergizing in the business arena. Zeva (Barrett Doss) mentions: "We're all strong, like-minded women, so let's crack open our brains and really get into it". Rachel (Annie Q.) instantly adds: "Yes! Whether it's how to rock a romper at a work event, or who you should be voting for, a "women woman" is the person to ask. Also, for those of you asking on our Facebook if the group is open to trans women, the answer is, we don't know, okay?"

The scene is a parody of the typical New York start-up event: indecision on the social arrangement of whether "women entrepreneurs" is an essential umbrella term or can be interpreted more inclusively is an effective satiric statement Dunham wants to make. An enterprise initiative like that would be far more consolidated and congruent if it had at least outlined its target bounders. On the other hand, the stated ambivalence towards trans women actually reflects the show's own irresolution of that case. Trans women are referenced and definitely exist in Dunham's universe, but they are not narratively exhibited. The text is a hybrid in many ways, but its indecidability does not wish to abolish what is socially given, paraphrasing Françoise Collin (2006, p. 50). Sexual position, especially in narrative, and sexual practice are divergent, but tend to be confused in Dunham's discourse. Particularly, in her memoir, she refers to "essential gender difference" (2015, p. 77), asserts "[…] the vagina is our most emotional organ" (idem, p. 117), and talks social and biological privilege as follows:

> "I have been envious of male characteristics, if not the men themselves. I'm jealous of the ease with which they seem to inhabit their professional pursuits: the lack of apologizing, of bending over backward to make sure the people around them are comfortable with what they're trying to do. The fact that they are so often free of the people-pleasing instincts I have considered to be a curse of my female existence. I have watched men order at dinner, ask for shitty wine and extra bread with a confidence I could never muster, and thought, What a treat that must be. But I also consider being female such a unique gift, such a sacred joy, in ways that run so deep I can't articulate them. It's a special kind of privilege to be born into the body you wanted, to embrace the essence of your gender even as you recognize what you are up against. Even as you seek to redefine it" (2015, 130-131).

It seems a contradictory observation, due to the fact that she understands masculinity as a culturally articulated and modified trait, whereas her female condition is addressed in different terms, as essential rather than existential –even though she uses the word "existence". Not only that, but she mystifies this female condition as unable to be symbolically articulated. This might coincide with Luce Irigaray's no-

tions of the female as "not-all", as the leftover of the patriarchal structural, linguistic inscriptions (Irigaray, 1985). She even proceeds to claim this recognition as a means of political change, but it is impressive she does not account for women's social positioning, except only for the interiorized people– pleasing tendency, which she naturalizes as instinctive. Essence is not understood as strategic but as literal. But it relates to traditional femininity only up to a certain point; for instance, Cann alludes to "fangirling" as a consciously hyper-feminized performance that almost reaches irony and involves consuming and obsessing over cultural texts. Girls, caught in between the essentialization of "female existence" and cultural determination, enter the paradox of embracing traditional femininity by recognizing its devaluation, in a way that turns out subverting normative values.

Fangirling's cultural significance becomes not only a (paradoxical) strategy but also a denominator of the third wave of feminism, since there is a hidden mother-daughter metaphor behind the relation between the second and the third wave. Rebecca Munfond and Melanie Waters (2014) remind how second wave feminists are not simply symbolic but frequently actual biological mothers of the third wave. However, the latter seem unwilling to embrace this tie, dissociating themselves through generational but also conceptual discrepancies. Second–wave victories "haunt" the postfeminist present, and this is precisely why postfeminism can be understood both as the inevitable evolution of feminism and as a deconstructivist regression to patriarchal associations. This argument of the "present absence", this inherited political privilege that seems almost impossible to abide, has not only been detailed by several blogs and commentaries of the show, concerning Hannah's relationship with her mother Loreen (Becky Ann Baker), but is perfectly designated in Dunham's memoir: "I understood that feminism was a worthy concept long before I was aware of being female, listening to my mother and her friends discuss the challenges of navigating the male-dominated art world" (2015, p. 41).

Thus the show's last two episodes highly contradict each other: the second-to-last is a celebration of a proper third-wave young female adulthood, as it takes place in a party, where a "friendly-intervention" (fangirling act?) proposed by Marnie concludes with the decisive separation of the quartet, sending the message that girl power does not always last forever. What follows is an array of awkward solitary dance moves: Hannah, in a depersonalized mood, realizes her friends have grown up to a much less codependent dynamic and withdraws her former emotional investments on them. On the other hand, the last episode describes the eventual change of Hannah's life since the arrival of her son, Grover. There, motherhood is overtly commemorated, answering to the previous episode with what really seems to matter in terms of subjectivation. Marnie patiently shows her affection to an excessively demanding Hannah, who has turned irritable and bad-tempered not knowing how to handle the new situation (how to attend her baby's biological demands). The two friends live together, alongside Hannah's mother, Loreen, in a kind of second-wave coalition.

Returning to Turner's view of the series as queer and reluctant to provide definite answers, this final enunciation point, motherhood, proves to reestablish dominant, hierarchical axioms. Being a mother is the only solution to achieving a wholesome subjectivation and a linear generational inscription, and Hannah does not hesitate to lecture a younger girl she finds on the street about its importance. If this is a metaphor of the necessity of embracing the second-wave legacy, it certainly contains

normative components that do not belong there. Marnie's motivation to stay with her friend and help her raise a child does not comply with this self-contained economy; it is a remainder that irrupts Hannah's emotional stability. A related solution is seen to be given in Shoshanna's case: after having discovered a new, liberated self in season 5, by leading a completely unfamiliar life in Tokyo, and after having valued freedom over a stable relationship that might seem ideal for her, in the end she settles herself by getting engaged. During the final intervention, she uses this election to preach the other girls for having made terrible decisions and for not stabilizing their lifestyles. Accordingly, in the last episode, Loreen discourages Marnie from abandoning a personal journey to steadiness by living with her best friend. Prioritizing gained political attention for the second wave, especially through its Marxist affiliations, by circulating the intersection of women's multiple, usually incompatible, roles, albeit not always disengaging from traditional models.

Lastly, the attempt to exhibit Hannah's suburban life as a new mother is very significant in terms of corporal representation and maternity. Grover is a boy, something she does not easily cope with, as she tells Jessa (season 6, episode 9). This leads us back to the title implications, as a presupposed other is actually being born to disturb the "girly order" of the series. Furthermore, he is unable to connect somatically with his mother and breastfeed until the final scene, which makes her desperate and paranoid. Hannah attributes this as a sign of hostility and aversion from his side, although intentionality is rather unlikely projected to a newborn. Whether it is his condition of boy, black, baby or generally other that affects Hannah the most is unclear. What is clear is that he introduces the promise of a future (taken after Turner, in Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014) that suspends the project of perpetual queerness we are left with in the second-to-last episode. By being biracial and a product of choice, however, he hybridizes Hannah's constituted notions of identity and family, and becomes an embodied subversive tool as well, countering the rise of neo-conservatism in a suburban American environment.

5. Conclusion

Girls isn't a show just about white millennial women who take advantage of their privilege to care about trivialities. To judge the show for its deficiencies in representing all sorts of "female experiences" or for the exclusion of other subjectivities such as transgender, queer or racial identities is nonessential. It is not Dunham's obligation to introduce us to themes or realities that are not hers, just so that the text can be deemed inclusive or universal. Neither can we classify her thinking as authentically postfeminist or third-wave, just to make it part of a specific genre. Let us not forget that she begins *Not* that *kind of girl* by declaring: "There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman" (2015, xviii). She goes on to report society's disrespect of women's memoirs in a clearly second-wave tone.

However, the literature examined here does not locate her as such. Scholars have often emphasized the indie and hipster conventions comprised under the show's postfeminist alibi, and are siding for or against Dunham, depending on how they view postfeminism as such and interpreting under various scopes the first season's now almost mythical quotes and scenes. We stress that there are no "easy" ways to

identify with the text or its characters, and that it is through fractional, mis-identifications that one can approach the storyline's and the title's complexities. Certain minorities are evaded or poorly depicted, but the fact that the exhibited identities are not abiding or definitive partly "queers" the view by itself, following Chambers' argumentation. Television portrayals such as those in *Girls* should be understood more as suggestions that may deviate norms at times.

According to Amy Shields Dobson, performances of femininity are "in–movement" for girls, as they have to negotiate discourses that are often very contradictory. However, they tend to operate as reflections of the economic, class and raced social environment they are inscribed upon. Girl power has worked, in the past two decades, to offer confidence, but has led contemporary young women to a type of imperative of voicing themselves. They are constantly encouraged to brand and exhibit themselves through digital media as choice-making agents that do not passively absorb cultural stimuli. This is a stress factor for them and seems rather an "agentic objectification", as she states (Dobson, 2015, p. 31) than a key to subjectivation. On the other hand, this kind of criticism, along with the academic commentary of the show we have been discussing, is (logically) of US origin. To our knowledge, there have not been recompilations or systematic academic debates on the show by non-American audiences. Aside from post-colonial lectures, it is surprising European viewers have not yet provided substantial analyses, as if the series were not applicable in a non-Anglo-Saxon cultural framework.

In conclusion, *Girls* is a text that remains mutant until the very end, and deserves multiple, critical and queer interpretations. As Fuller and Driscoll explain, *Girls*, like other HBO series in general, intrinsically "[…] seek to *discomfort*, both by hybridizing disparate genres and by producing 'edgy' controversy" (2015, p. 258). Wallis Seaton (in Nash & Whelehan, 2017) recalls a scene (season 4, episode 2) where Dunham uses Hannah to directly address criticisms: in a writing workshop task, where her colleagues render her presented text privileged and essentialized and her tutor advises her to remain silent throughout the process, Hannah struggles not to intervene and defend herself and her feminism. This is the kind of proposition Dunham makes: positioned, privileged, maybe biased or egocentric, potentially exclusive, but on the edge.

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