"Quality Postfeminism?"

Sex and the Single Girl on HBO

By DIANE NEGRA

[1] A very vibrant area of work in television studies at the moment dedicates itself to freshening up debates over "quality television" in an era of "must-see" programming (see Jancovich & Lyons, as well as Carr, Metz & Tankel, forthcoming). This article considers the meanings of "quality" driving HBO's "Sex and the City," a television series that operates as a key cultural paradigm through which discussions of femininity, singlehood, and urban life are carried out. The quality claims made by "Sex and the City" must be situated against the backdrop of heightened address by the culture industries to women consumers over the last decade. It is vitally important to note that the series' narrative precursors and contemporaries include a wave of romantic comedies about twenty and thirtysomething single women, current cultural presuppositions regarding "postfeminism," and the maintenance of New York as a style center in the national imagination.

[2] Clearly, "Sex" is (among other things) a remnant of the dramatic practices of primetime soap opera associated with Aaron Spelling and his protégé Darren Star. At the same time these practices are reworked to disassociate them from their tabloid origins and re-calibrated toward an emergent re-definition of "quality television." That definition, as I will show, relies on three foundational concerns in the series' dramatic narrative:

- The pathologization of single women amidst intense neoconservative pressures to define women's lives in terms of marriage and domesticity. "Sex and the City" originates with the recognition that single women retain if not quite on the same terms, the status of "social problem" they have long held. In this respect, the series' female ensemble stands in relation to Ally McBeal (of the eponymous Fox dramedy) and Bridget Jones (the caricatured "singleton" of print and film).
- The series' highly ambivalent investment in a notion of "postfeminism," a cultural catchphrase most often used to express a widely-shared assumption that feminism is no longer desirable or viable.
- The series' invocation of a vivid New York regionalism. The attribution of quality in "Sex and the City" stems in part from its association with New York's elite financial and cultural status in the national imaginary. The series' urban New York setting is indispensable to its presentation of a group of women beset by the cultural dilemmas and stigmas detailed above as it recuperates these stigmas, in part, through the consumer power of its professional protagonists. In its production design, product placement and self-conscious location work at hip New York shops and restaurants, the series emphatically locates itself in a world of cutting-edge urban style. The final effect of this is the creation of a luxurious lifestyle blueprint poised to compete with suburban domesticity.

Taken together, these concerns dimensionalize what is, for "Sex and the City," essentially a two-pronged definition of "quality." On the one hand, its version of quality recognizably participates in a tradition of "smart" entertainment offering up a series of rejoinders to the platitudes of a postfeminist culture (determining whether these rejoinders are substantial or superficial will be one of the key challenges I undertake in this article). On the other hand, "quality" is also more literal (i.e. demographic and consumerist) in a series that luxuriates in the empowering effects of high style.

Pathologizing Single Femininity

[3] Widely acknowledged as a neoconservative era, the
1990s/early 2000s have been characterized by heightened pressures to define women’s lives in terms of romance and marriage. Notably, this period has seen perhaps the most intense cultural coercion for women to retreat from the workplace since the post-World War II period, although by the 1990s the economic feasibility of such a choice for most women was greatly reduced. Thus, the particular target of such discourse is the well-educated professional white woman who, unencumbered by feminist dogma about her entitlement to non-familial personal rewards, abstains from paid work in a display of her “family values.” A variety of recent popular cultural narratives centralize/idealize a woman’s apparently fully knowledgeable choice to retreat from public sphere interactions in favor of domesticity. For instance, in 2000 Cosmopolitan ran an article entitled “Meet the New Housewife Wanna-Bes” which outlined “the new domestic dream” and included interviews with a variety of young professional women who aspired to marry, leave their jobs and stay at home. Accounts such as these, though likely to be both sensationalistic and reductive, did draw from social realities; 2001 U.S. Census data revealed that 22% of women with advanced professional degrees were not in the labor market at all (Hewlett 306, Though I problematize the uses to which Hewlett puts data such as this later in the article, these are nevertheless striking figures).

Meanwhile, in addition to such diffuse phenomena as the publicity campaigns for mother-focused sales strategies that include Target’s “Lullaby Club” and the emergence of stork-designated convenient parking for mothers and pregnant women at supermarkets, there are a variety of other direct demographic symptoms of an intensified culture of “family values.” For example, a 1998 Redbook article, “When Two Is Not Enough” chronicled a late 1990s “suburban boomlet” comprised of an uptick in the number of white, middle class women electing to have more than three children. Meanwhile, at least one state antipoverty program endorsed by the Bush administration conceptualizes marriage as a social and economic diagnostic for impoverished women, and in a so-called “faith-based” initiative, the federal government has begun to extend generous support to abstinence-oriented high school sexual education programs (See Boo). In order to qualify for federal funding such programs are obliged to teach that sexual activity outside marriage is likely to be physically and psychologically harmful — their curricula often incorporate rituals that operate as “wedding warm-ups” such as “abstinence ceremonies” in which “purity rings” are worn (See Ali and Scelfo). The intensified American bridal industry (a $32 billion a year “wedding-industrial complex” according to Chrys Ingraham) and the heightened prominence of weddings within popular culture targeted to women (evident both in the greater frequency of weddings as television special events, particularly as season enders in primetime series and in the emergence of the “wedding film” as a significant strand of the “chick flick” genre) have massively increased their cultural purchase over the last decade. For Ingraham, “clearly, weddings have become the most watched yet ‘unnoticed’ phenomenon in popular culture” (Ingraham 8).

With discourses of ideal femininity clearly tilting away from the professional path, retreatism has become a recognizable narrative trope. Accordingly, both film and television have incorporated fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife or sweetheart in a hometown setting. This is the premise of films including Practical Magic [1998], Hope Floats [1998], One True Thing [1998], and Sweet Home Alabama [2002] as well as television series such as Providence,” “Maggie Winters” and “Judging Amy.” Such retreatism must be contextualized within a culture that has visibly intensified its efforts to idealize mothering over the last decade while registering concerns about the compatibility of the “female personality” and the corporate workplace. These concerns have taken their most extreme form in the emergence of executive coaching firms which train women to play down assertiveness to avoid alienating their colleagues in the business world (for an account of one such firm see Banarjee).

A corresponding development in romance films has been an emphasis on schooling women in the need to scale back their professionalism lest they lose their femininity (One Fine Day [1996], The Wedding Planner [2001], Someone Like You [2001], Miss Congeniality [2000], Six Days and Seven Nights [1998], Bed of Roses [1996]). Meanwhile both film (Saving Silverman [2001]) and television (“The Man Show”) exhibit a new license to caricature femininity as dependent, manipulative and a threat to male homosociality. Recent reality programs have also re-introduced retrograde matchmaking and courtship narratives in which a woman is either openly transferred from her father to prospective husband (“Meet My Folks”) or cast as a competitor for the attentions of a wealthy bachelor (“The Bachelor”).
Thus, at a time when right-wing political activities (such as anti-choice activism) are being increasingly mainstreamed, and the family normalized as the exclusively-recognized social unit, American women are bombarded in a variety of forms from advice literature to reality programming with neoconservative logic that defines their primary if not sole interest as (heterosexual) romance and marriage. More recently, this logic has targeted single professional women as selfish, emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about "forgetting" their essential roles as wives and mothers. In Spring, 2002 an onslaught of public discourse centering on female professional regret converged in both fictional and non-fictional forms. The publication of Sylvia Ann Hewlett's book *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* sparked a wave of mass media attention to the regretful professional woman in such forms as a "60 Minutes" profile and a *Time* cover story employing the headline "Babies vs. Career." In the profiles, women in their forties and fifties testified to the loss of personal time, companionship and family planning options in their lives while younger women in professional and graduate programs expressed anxieties about the taint of female ambition and achievement in the dating market. For instance, in the "60 Minutes" segment, several female students of Harvard Business School deemed the stigma of their affiliation with Harvard the "H-bomb" and discussed the fact that when socializing they avoid specifying "Harvard" by name, saying only that they go to school in "Boston" or "Cambridge." *Life or Something Like It* [2002], a cinematic cautionary tale centering upon a professional woman's epiphany about the need to change her life arrived in theatres just as these themes were being highlighted by print and broadcast media. Intensifying trends already put in place by romantic comedies such as *Someone Like You* (in which the heroine is compelled to apologize for criticizing masculinity) *Life or Something Like It* demonstrates the urgency of scaling back career aspirations in favor of a "real life" that is prohibited to high-level professional women. Lanie Kerigan (Angelina Jolie), a Seattle tv reporter, opens the film fiercely ambitious to take her career to the national level. The film then employs an openly hostile plot device to compel her to rethink the meaning of her life; a homeless psychic, Prophet Jack (Tony Shalhoub), convinces her that her death is imminent. Lanie realizes that ambition has crowded out intimacy in her life and so chooses to stay in Seattle, temper her professional goals, and marry Pete (Edward Burns), a cameraman with a young son. Her epiphany occurs at the high point of her career, when she has been brought to New York to conduct an interview on a national news program with her role model Deborah Connors (Stockard Channing), a celebrity journalist renowned for her ability to elicit tears from her guests. Lanie trumps her role model by forcing her into emotional recollection and regret with a single question "Was it worth it?" Though Deborah at first asks coolly "Was what worth it?" the reply "Well, for instance, you have no children" gets to the heart of the matter and reveals the implication behind the question. Deborah's crisp professionalism disintegrates as she breaks down recalling a romance from her past and obvious personal regrets. *Life or Something Like It* appears to have been an unusually well-timed film and is remarkable for this acrimonious exchange between characters who represent emergent social archetypes: the regretful female professional and her talented junior cohort who will make better life choices.

[7] In line with the increased misogynist turn of recent popular culture, many of the current fictions about single women in America pathologize thirtysomething single women as abject, deviant or deficient. Yet "quality" for "Sex and the City" bespeaks a desire to probe this cultural script, even if ultimately the series seldom musters a fully-fledged critique. As its best, the series systematically destabilizes some of the most pernicious mythologizing of contemporary female experience. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell* (Aug. 27, 2000) for example, asks probing questions about the pretense, performativity and self-deception that can underwrite bridal ritualization. Charlotte’s intense self-involvement because it is "her day" (as she repeatedly puts it) nevertheless prevents her from acting on the knowledge of her fiancé’s impotence. As a bridal march begins to play she confers with Carrie in the vestibule, and the two women attempt to explain away Trey’s sexual limitations — in the end, as Carrie puts it, "Charlotte was 34, single, and standing in a $14,000 dress. She was getting married." Although she sees herself as a paragon of idealized romance and intimacy, Charlotte has been dishonest with herself about Trey, while Miranda, anxious to avoid being a single bridesmaid at her friend’s wedding, decides to reclassify herself as a stewardess rather than an attorney when she finds her professional status alienates potential dates. While Miranda’s class masquerade leads downward, she finds that the man she meets is masquerading in reverse (the assistant manager of a shoe store, he has claimed to be a physician). Returning to the
Postfeminism and "Chick" Narratives

[8] "Sex and the City" is part of a wave of print, broadcast and film texts that emerged in the mid and late 1990s fictionalizing the experiences of single urban women. While labels such as "chick flick" and "chick lit" have entered the popular lexicon, there is as yet no comparable label for prime-time "chick tv." What separates the series from the vast majority of chick flick narratives is its willingness to linger on the contingent and the unresolved, frequently closing an episode in a bittersweet mode that would be off limits to the mainstream chick flick whose ideological conservatism demands positive resolution. While the chick flick's reflection of social pressure for marriage and childbearing and emphasis on the difficulties of female professionalism often produce heroines who unlearn the insights of feminism, "Sex and the City's" "quality" interpretation of similar dilemmas enables it to explore ambivalence, regret and hope more acutely. While its female protagonists certainly face difficult choices and wrestle with embarrassment, humiliation and occasionally despair, the series tends not to curtail their options or finalize their choices. Accordingly, "Sex and the City" avoids the choice and renunciation scenarios of recent romantic comedy in which major characters choose to downgrade their careers and/or accept professional putdowns (Someone Like You, Life or Something Like It, Kate & Leopold [2001]) or are physically or socially humiliated by a man who represents their romantic destiny (The Truth About Cats and Dogs [1996], Ever After: A Cinderella Story [1998]). In short, for this particular HBO series quality is embodied in its freedom from the pat resolutions that tend to define the mainstream chick flick. I want to turn now to a consideration of how such strategies might be understood in relation to the debates over postfeminism.

[9] As Sarah Projansky has recently pointed out, "Because postfeminism is and can be so many different things, it is a powerful, pervasive and versatile cultural concept" (66). Indeed the term itself seems to have entered wide usage without necessarily any clear agreement about its meanings and much like other 1990s buzzwords like "family values" or "multiculturalism" it exhibits a plasticity that enables it to be used in contradictory ways. While in its various forms postfeminism exhibits a range of relations to feminism from complacent to hostile, it is clear that most types of postfeminism are underwritten by canny distortions of feminist dogma. One example of this shapes up in the recent spate of publications that could be considered postfeminist "scare literature" such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s widely-hyped Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children. Although Hewlett calls for societal and corporate change to alleviate the difficulties of combining female professional life with procreation and childraising, she also acknowledges she is not "holding her breath" that such changes will take place, and she emphasizes that young women had best devote their twenties to finding a mate and making time to have children rather than fall prey to the "creeping nonchoice" about procreation that she argues has diminished the lives of an earlier generation of high-achieving female professionals. More bluntly, bestsellers such as The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially invent a liberal stigma against marriage in order to celebrate the status quo as if it had become compromised by social radicalism. The book’s authors decry "an unacknowledged war on marriage" as "an attempt to demote marriage from a unique public commitment — supported by law, society, and custom — to a private relationship, terminable at will, which is nobody else's business" (11). Popular accounts such as this have clearly been empowered by the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, the conspicuous legislative product of a neoconservative, postfeminist culture and an "attempt to 'manage' the national imaginary" through "discursive disqualification of sexual minorities from a citizenship that presumes marriage and family" (Westervelt 115 & 112). While critics such as Don Westervelt have
For Projansky, whose careful delineation of multiple postfeminisms is one of the most complete academic discussions of the subject, there are five interrelated categories of postfeminist discourse. The first is linear postfeminism, which constructs an historical trajectory in which we are now at an endpoint, the second backlash postfeminism, also declares feminism to be finished but holds it responsible for negative cultural work. Equality and choice postfeminism likewise sees feminism as completed, but exaggerates its impact, imagining that full equity and choice have eradicated previous forms of discrimination. (Hetero)sex-positive postfeminism defines feminism as antisex and produces a new feminism geared toward female sexual activity and freedom, and finally male postfeminism celebrates the availability of feminism to both women and men but frequently highlights men as superior feminists. What is apparent from Projansky’s discussion is that even while postfeminism shifts its shape it tends to restrict feminism to a monolithic status marking it out as archaic, binaristic, antiseXual and most significantly unproductive within the experience of contemporary women.

For critics like Suzanne Danuta Walters, postfeminism not only engages feminism selectively and partially, it generates a set of contradictions that involve declaring the feminist movement "(predictably if illogically) dead, victorious and ultimately failed" (106). In an article written over ten years ago that appears both trenchant and prescient, Walters further wrote that:

*Popular* postfeminism is therefore predictably located within the generalized anti-feminist backlash that has been given free rein within the past ten years. Sources as diverse as *The New York Times*, the film *Baby Boom*, bestsellers about "career women gone wrong," and tv sitcoms of beset single women (such as the new series *Rosie O’Neil*), present a somewhat contradictory image of a movement both devoid of currency and at the same time responsible for the sad plight of millions of unhappy and unsatisfied women who, thinking they could "have it all," have clearly "gone too far" and jeopardized their chances at achieving the much-valorized American Dream. (Walters 106)

Indeed, one of the key premises in current antifeminist postfeminist constructions of women’s life choices (whether in the form of advice literature or film, print or broadcast fiction) is the need to abandon the overly-ambitious 1980s program of "having it all." Whereas mainstream chick flicks often include an epiphany in which the heroine perceives the futility of following such a path and re-prioritizes the elements of her life in favor of heterosexual romance and/or motherhood, "Sex and the City" throws open such decisionmaking in ways that would go against the script of the mainstream romance. In "All or Nothing" (Aug. 13, 2000) Samantha’s elation as she settles into a new apartment and enjoys an evening with Carrie, Miranda and Charlotte leads her to yell out into the street "You see us, Manhattan? We have it all." Although one of the episode’s plot strands entails Samantha’s serious re-consideration of that claim as she falls ill with the flu and discovers that none of the men in her black book can be counted on to help her while she is sick, this is not a simple case of a character being punished for hubris. Feverish, miserable and disheveled, Samantha does tell Carrie "I should have gotten married," and "If you don’t have a guy who cares about you, it all means sh**," but it is clear that Samantha’s flu has triggered a temporary emotional collapse, a "delirium" as Samantha herself will later refer to it after her recovery. Other elements of the episode actively problematize the dominant definition of "having it all," notably re-directing this phrase to characterize the intimacy of the female friendship group, as Charlotte moves ahead with her engagement to Trey by signing a pre-nuptial agreement and Carrie reflects that "we didn’t have it all because we didn’t have Charlotte.

"All or Nothing" sharpens its sense of dialogue with current postfeminist culture through a variety of references to "chick flicks," "chick lit," and neoconservative female-oriented advice literature. In their evening at Samantha’s new apartment the group watch *An Affair to Remember* [1957], Carrie tells Big that their affair will be coming to an end by saying "This is gonna be like the Bridges of Madison Avenue," and she challenges Samantha’s advice to her about the relationship by asking "What is this, The Rules according to Samantha?"
admonishes Miranda to "never say Cathy comic to me again." Likewise in "Running with Scissors" (Aug. 20, 2000) Miranda brusquely quashes Carries's hope that she can resolve her relationship with Aidan and affair with Big by telling her "I don't watch Lifetime Television for women." In references such as these the series demonstrates its knowledge of the images of abject single femininity that proliferate in popular culture while differentiating itself from those images. But the most fully realized response to such cultural imaging occurs in "Four Women and a Funeral," (July 4, 1999) an episode whose canny play with a "chick flick" film title bespeaks its intentions. In this episode Miranda buys her own apartment and in the process is quizzes by her realtor about whether she needs so much space as a single woman, and asked by her lawyer whether it is her father who is providing the funds for the down payment. Miranda's blithe "just me" response to such questioning becomes strained when she is then compelled to repeatedly check the "single woman box" in the paperwork related to the purchase. As she moves in to the apartment, Miranda is met by a neighbor who tells her that the previous occupant, an elderly single woman, died alone and by the time her body was found half her face had been eaten by her cat. While her first response is to increase her own cat's feeding schedule, Miranda's fears intensify when she chokes on a piece of food alone in her apartment, and she ultimately suffers a panic attack the next day on the street. In terror, she confesses her fears to Carrie who offers reassurance by reminding her of their friendship, and as Miranda prepares a letter attesting to her single status (her lawyer has mistakenly categorized her as separated) she finds that the very act of acknowledging her identity in writing alleviates her fears. In actively confronting the mythologies that stigmatize the single female household and the ownership of property by single women and exposing their irrationality, this episode differs from mainstream chick flicks that tend to uphold such mythologies even while subjecting them to gentle comic treatment. For instance, in Sleepless in Seattle [1993] Annie's (Meg Ryan) staunch insistence that the claim that a woman over forty is more likely to be killed by a terrorist than to get married is "not true," is met with her friend Becky's (Rosie O'Donnell) rejoinder, "But it feels true." Similarly, in Bridget Jones' Diary [2001] Bridget contemplates her single status and vividly imagines herself a corpse undiscovered in her flat and ultimately eaten by dogs.

[14] While it frequently provides rich alternatives to the bleak landscape of mainstream popular cinema, "Sex and the City" isn't entirely free of conservative ideological constructions. In fact, the series' greatest weakness is perhaps the degree to which it validates class and wealth snobbery. This is particularly evident in "Where There's Smoke" (June 4, 2000) when Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha take the ferry to working-class Staten Island. The episode features several caricatures of "dumb" working class masculinity. The second season pilot "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" (broadcast on June 6, 1999) offers further evidence of the ways in which the series can both frustrate and reward the feminist spectator. On the one hand, Miranda's vehement objection to the group's talking only about their relationships with men is predictably attributed to residual breakup trauma on her part. On the other hand, the episode contains a nicely-crafted conclusion in which Carrie, devastated after seeing Big for the first time since their breakup, makes a phone call to someone offscreen. Carrie says that she knows "things are still weird between us," asks to meet at "our place" in fifteen minutes, and then enters a restaurant searching for someone we are invited to presume is Big. Instead, after a few moments of delaying camerawork, we find that it is Miranda seated at a table. Through this sequence we are forced to re-adjust our expectation that a devastated woman will seek out again a man who has hurt her, while we are reminded that intimacy in women's lives is not confined to romance. The latter, of course, is a point the series makes again and again with its frequent reminders that female friendship is enduring while romantic disappointments are recurring. In particular, the episode "Shortcomings" (Sept. 12, 1999) celebrates the power and stability of female friendship while explicitly revising the dominant definition of family when, in a closing voiceover, Carrie agrees that "family is the most important thing," speaking these words as she enters a restaurant to join Charlotte, Miranda and Samantha. In this respect, "Sex and the City" draws somewhat from the active cycle of female friendship films that appeared in the 1990s, while for the most part avoiding the pitfalls of what Karen Hollinger has identified as the most successful variant of the type: the sentimental female friendship film. Most often vehicles "for the propagation of a conservative social message of female accommodation to a reformed patriarchy," such films tend to fortify patriarchal constraints through an identification system in which women's shared experience of these constraints makes them appear inevitable and even rewarding (238). "Sex and the City" endeavors to value female friendship without capitulating to such social norms.
"No one is more New York or has more style than you," Lynne (Margaret Cho) to Carrie "The Real Me," June 3, 2001

[15] In addition to its status as the right location for a rendering of "high style" as a feature of everyday life, New York is associated by tradition with a certain cultural permissiveness in regard to the social identities of single urban women. As I have argued elsewhere, a distinctive fusion of cosmopolitanism and vulnerability has been a trademark of the "New York girl" from 1930s goldigdig musicals to Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly and the Diane Keaton roles of Woody Allen films (see "Queen of the Indies:" Parker Posey's Niche Stardom and the Taste Cultures of Independent Film"). In the chick flick genre, the association with New York is sometimes cited as an explanation for unconventional or unruly female behavior. For example, in My Best Friend's Wedding [1997] as Jules (Julia Roberts) wildly pursues her best friend at the reception to celebrate his forthcoming wedding to another woman, a wedding guest explains her behavior with a pithy "She's from New York" that is met with a knowing nod from another guest. More recently, big budget and independent chick flicks alike have used New York as the setting for professional ambition associated with the renunciation of one's hometown (Sweet Home Alabama) and for sexual experimentation in part explained as a reaction to the dating dilemmas of New York twentysomething professional culture (Kissing Jessica Stein [2002]). Recent DVD promotion for the latter film indicates just how conversant "chick" fictions are with one another across the apparent media divide: Kissing Jessica Stein is now publicized using the tag line "There's More Than One Kind of Sex in This City!"

Across the range of these fictions, female experience is particularized in such a way that New York itself serves as an explanatory framework for unusually assertive female behavior. This assumption has been built into the series from the start, as Samantha says in the pilot "This is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have as much money and power as men." (An exaggeration to begin with, this is hardly a claim that would hold any national validity and it betrays some of the series' underlying fantasy structures). Moreover, "Sex and the City" directly associates itself in its credit sequence with visual landmarks of the New York skyline. This sequence, whose visuals, sound and editing pattern evoke a miniaturized sexual experience also focalizes Carrie's erotic relationship to the city itself. The sequence of Carrie as forlorn urban Cinderella (in pink tank top and tulle skirt) concludes with a splash of water that suggests romantic/sexual disappointment or shock before she is re-stabilized by her own idealized, eroticized image. As she glimpses an advertisement for her column on a passing bus, Carrie is symbolically re-integrated with the cityscape. Romance with the city is evidently on display in "I Heart New York" (Feb. 10, 2002) where when Big departs for California, it is suggested that New York itself is to serve as Carrie's romantic substitute. Meanwhile in "Anchors Aweigh" (July 21, 2002) Carrie rejects a sailor during Fleet Week when he criticizes New York for its garbage and noise and explicitly identifies the city as her new romantic partner, her "great love." It is worth noting further that in an appearance on "Inside the Actors Studio" Sarah Jessica Parker told host James Lipton that the part of her series character that she could identify with most was her love affair with New York.

[17] L.S. Kim contends that in opposition to the "false feminism" of a series like "Ally McBeal" which turns largely on the dreaminess of its protagonist (Kim points out that Ally is blind to her own performance of femininity) the "Sex and the City" ensemble "possess a stronger gaze of others as well as of themselves" (324). We can see this, in part, by the intensely bonded relationship that all of the characters (though particularly Carrie) display with New York. While "Ally McBeal" means for its Boston setting to be distinctive, it largely operates only to establish the high education and professional credentials that Ally possesses but that gain her no personal happiness or self-understanding. Consequently, numerous episodes in the series close with an image of Ally alone and forlorn on the streets of Boston — highlighting her disintegration from her environment. By contrast, "Sex and the City" emphasizes over and over again the urban pleasures that its female figures find in New York and knits their dilemmas, concerns, joys and disappointments together with the life of the city. One of the series' most recurrent devices for doing this is to incorporate mock interviews with "regular" New Yorkers who corroborate a particular "working theory" that will center Carrie's weekly column (as well as the episode itself). To take just one of numerous examples, "The Monogamists" (July 19, 1998) includes a
sequence in which "real" New Yorkers" offer their (non)experiences of monogamy in response to Carrie’s wondering if “in a city like New York... monogamy is too much to expect.” Thus, the concerns of the "single girls" of "Sex and the City" are generalized in ways that mitigate against the standard pathologization of single femininity in broad popular culture. Further, while Ally’s urban isolation restricts her mobility such that we seldom see her anywhere but in her office or apartment or in court, the women of "Sex and the City" are pictured in a wide variety of settings and locations. They are fully integrated with their environment in a way that validates their subjectivity and deepens their psychology.

[18] By its third and fourth seasons, the series had solidified a re-interpretation of New York that was sufficiently distinct to be transposed to other contexts. So for instance in the summer of 2001 the Tribeca Grand Hotel began to advertise "Sex and the City: Weekends" as part of an ad campaign inviting prospective guests to "Escape to New York," a gambit which in itself presupposed the attractions of New York urban experience to the readers of the suburban edition of The New York Times (in which the ad appeared). Similarly, On Location Tours, which runs TV-based tours including one in Northern New Jersey that takes a "Sopranos" theme, began including in its repertoire a "Sex and the City" bus tour that makes stops at restaurants, gyms and shoe shops featured in the series. The tour company’s website invites prospective customers to "Follow in the fancy footsteps of Carrie & Co. as they conquer New York City!" and specifically solicits bachelorette and birthday party groups. A January 8, 2002 "Today" morning show segment interestingly took as its starting point the implicit premise that the city was becoming feminized and commodified through the appeal of the series, and sent Billy Bush, a male correspondent, along on the tour. Casting him first home alone eating takeout and watching the opposite of "quality television" ("Full House") the correspondent is transformed on the tour as he incongruously shares sexual confidences with other participants, has a pedicure and is finally outfitted in a feather boa and stiletto heels. The segment brackets itself with conservative reassurances that this is all just play however; its (third-generation) interpretation of the series casts the "single twentysomething" tour guide as nearly a prostitute when the correspondent tells us that "No, sex is not included in the package." Moreover the segment closes with the conservative voiceover "Billy Bush would like the world to know that he is happily married."

[19] The centrality of the series to constructions of local identity was further established in the references to the series that accumulated after September 11. After the World Trade Center attacks, the series star, Sarah Jessica Parker, was profiled as an ideal New Yorker whose characteristic panache could be recontextualized within a narrative of regional recovery. Accordingly Parker is described co-chairing the first major society event after the attacks, a charity dinner, and movingly telling the assembled group that "New Yorkers always have the right accessories. And this season the two accessories that everyone is carrying are courage and pride" ("Manhattan Rhapsody" 234). This use of Parker’s regionalized stardom is all the more telling for the fact that female voices tended to be downplayed in a wave of September 11 testimony and commentary that privileged male authority figures and newly idealized blue-collar white males.

[20] That the series and its central star persona could be employed as a kind of fresh re-interpretive grid for New York itself surely proves the immense cultural purchase of the "Sex and the City" franchise. In becoming a template for new ways to experience and "map" Manhattan, "Sex and the City" reveals both the very distinct pleasures of a show popular enough to spawn new experiential modes and some of the restrictions generated by the series’ emphatic New York location work, and invocation of the city as urban playground. "Sex and the City’s" (sometimes) over-the-top glamour and its unreal economics co-discursively figure its representations of female autonomy and sexuality as equally removed from "regular experience." Accordingly, the New York-based tourism and vacation promotions that associate themselves with the series emphasize an "unusual" and "atypical" experience that awards brief license to empowered female sexual behavior in a sanctioned format adjacent to committed monogamy (the bachelorette party or the weekend getaway). This is most evident in the On Location "Sex and the City" tour, which while it cultivates a certain identification with the series protagonists also sharply emphasizes the unreality of their fictional lives. In a recent account, a tour guide is cited as breaking down the impossible economics of Carrie’s glamorous lifestyle and after mispronouncing the name of a luxurious handbag brand, telling the tour that "The other thing I know how to pronounce is Target." Thus,
the series' association with the hyperbolic, the vicarious and the unreal, may blur class and sexual politics and ultimately diminish its presumed status as a threatening text in a neoconservative culture.

Conclusion

[21] “Sex and the City” occupies vitally important space in a social and representational environment that regularly pronounces judgment over childless, unmarried and/or professional women. At its best, the series generates complex portrayals of (mostly) single, sexually active working women, sketching in rich detail characters who would have merely been femmes fatales in another era. In this sense, and in opposition to a range of recent cinematic romances, the series can not be said to reflexively participate in a cultural postfeminism that leaves behind the more challenging, complex and unresolved questions and issues of earlier feminisms.

[22] Yet if “Sex and the City” unsettles some of the tenets of mainstream postfeminism, it unquestionably gives credence to others. One of these is a sense of liberation from the direct political goals of feminism in favor of a freedom “to explore the endless possibilities of free-floating desire — desire which is almost always linked to consumption and sexuality” (Whelehan 92-93). We should bear in mind that “Sex and the City” is only available in the first place to those spectators who can afford a costly cable subscription service, and it is important not to overpraise a series whose concerns would be utterly unrecognizable to whole groups of American women. Indeed, its restricted race and class focus (despite its multicultural urban setting) is evident in the almost laughable uniformity of the WASP surnames of the four female protagonists (Hobbes, Bradshaw, York and Jones).

Another feature of “Sex and the City” that needs to be carefully considered is the way in which the attribution of perpetual girlhood to thirtysomething women can be celebrated by an ageist culture even while it also becomes a strategy for dismissing such women as not having attained full adulthood.

[23] While “Sex and the City” offers a welcome ambiguity and ambivalence about those dilemmas that are most likely to be oversimplified, caricatured and romanticized within a self-proclaimed “postfeminist” popular culture and endows its single thirty and forty something protagonists with a visibility and a dignity sorely lacking in mainstream romantic comedy, there are also, I think, some significant limitations that come as a consequence of locating the “single girl” experience so exclusively in affluent, urban New York. In fact, the emphasis on such a setting may run the risk of deflecting attention from the alienation and diminished citizenship of single women who exist in a variety of class categories and geographical locations and whose lives play out at significant remove from the luxury and consumerist pleasures so frequently highlighted by the series. Such a view was recently suggested by Catherine Orenstein in a New York Times op/ed piece that compared the series unfavorably with the single heroines of earlier television programs such as “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” and “Murphy Brown.” While in substantial agreement with Orenstein that “Sex and the City,” despite its sexual frankness and celebration of the solidarity that can accompany female friendship leaves unchallenged some rather retrograde notions of femininity, I am inclined to reiterate the importance of the rightward drift taking place in contemporary American culture. Some of the series’ limits need to be linked to a lowered sense of expectation for what constitutes subversive or transgressive media content in an era of great suspicion about feminism and an equally great susceptibility to apolitical consumerism. As I have indicated, “quality demographics” mean as much for cable outlets as they ever did for traditional networks and the critical accolades currently directed at HBO for its ability to update and innovate broadcast storytelling should not impede our hope and expectations for still more diverse, egalitarian television fiction in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: My thanks to Bonnie Blackwell and Martha Nochimson who offered helpful comments on early drafts of this piece and to Przemek Budziszewski and Shelley Cobb who assisted with research and re-formatting.

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