

Netflix and Chill – The Cultural Politics of Sex in the #MeToo ‘Moment’

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Abstract

This thesis explores the queer feminist potential of the #MeToo 'moment'. Drawing on themes prevalent in previous cultural moments of the 'Sex Wars' and 'Raunch Culture', I argue that the rise of the #MeToo hashtag and concomitant disclosures, trials, apologies, and cultural discussion has led to a significant shaking up of sexual politics within Anglo-US feminism and – more broadly – the sexual discourses in these societies, beyond individual exposures. I position the #MeToo 'moment' within another controversial chronological concept, 'fourth-wave feminism', drawing attention to the latter's efficacy for understanding aspects of Anglo-US feminist theory and practice and extending the meaning of feminist 'waves'. My investigation is located in the entertainment media of our time, Netflix, and focusses on two shows: *Orange is the New Black* and *Sense8*. I ask, primarily: how can this new era of sexual politics be conceptualised?, while also assessing the potentialities for sexual mores reflected in, and influenced by their textual depictions. Through close readings of these representations I seek to identify the subtle, radical discourses at play, to assess how these accrue meaning within their cultures, and to offer a glimpse of a contemporary queer feminist liberatory sexual politics. This analysis coalesces around four themes: embodied feminism, (toxic) masculinities, identity politics (and particularly trans aesthetics), and utopian queer possibilities. I conclude by briefly locating my analysis within current pandemic cultures as experienced in the UK and US, with the (alleged) rise in the consumption of online media and non-contact intimacies alongside very troubling domestic and societal discord, wondering if and how my arguments might help understand sexual cultures in this emergent Corona 'moment'.

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

1. Introduction: The Path To #MeToo

To 'Netflix and Chill' has displaced the traditional euphemism of coming in for a 'night cap' to create in modern parlance an offer of sex, which feels distinctively apt for the current technological and cultural zeitgeist. This thesis is an exploration into such a zeitgeist, which seeks to examine and interrogate the cultural, political and technological factors which are at play in current sexual discourse. I conceive of an important 'moment' in such discourse, a point at which the momentum of the #MeToo movement has collided with the potent politics of fourth-wave feminism during a time of seismic shift in how and where we consume cultural output. As our relationships with mobile technology become ever more intimate, I examine the ways in which our understandings of intimate relationships have themselves become more mobile and shifting in meaning.

It has taken me a long time to write this thesis. Economically mandated, part-time study, coupled with chronic mental illness, topped off with a global pandemic – just as the finish line was in sight have presented a series of challenges for sure. But despite and because of this, I have been rewarded with an broadened perspective due to the false starts and dead ends which are afforded by a decade-long study.

Back in 2011 when I started, I had all of the assuredness that comes with being twenty-five; this was going to be a thesis about the 'evils' of 'Raunch Culture' and hypersexualisation; the objectification of lap-dancing clubs and the degradation of 'lads mags' and smutty billboard adverts. I had discovered 'third-wave' feminism as an undergraduate and devoured poster texts such as Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Levy, 2006).

Whilst studying, I worked evenings in a call centre and would dread the nightly walk to the bus stop, past a series of 'Gentleman's Clubs' which were popping up left, right, and centre in the city I loved. Cat-calling or, more often for me, fat-calling by 'lads' in roped off queues or from the windows of rental limousines shamed and frightened me, and magazines like *FHM* conspired with adverts plastered to bus stops to remind me that as a woman, my worth was primarily located in my ability to conform to a particular definition of 'sexy': a definition that I both literally and figuratively did not fit. I was thus energised by Levy's apparent ability to codify a sexual zeitgeist that to me posed a clear and present danger.

The existence of such a 'zeitgeist' was further evidenced by a surge in feminist activism. The early 2000s saw the formation of organisations such as *Object*, *The F Word*, *Feminist Frequency* and *Hollaback*, and I revelled in the new feminist DIY activist spaces I was finding. In addition, a new 'feminist informed' cultural output was pouring from our screens. Carrie

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Bradshaw and Ally McBeal were showing women that they could own their bodies, their careers and their sex lives, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena Warrior Princess* showed that they could kick butt too.

Feminist scholars have come to regard such 'post-feminist' texts as limited by their tendency to evoke the 'wins' of feminism whilst simultaneously discharging the movement's relevance to the modern woman (McRobbie, 2004; Dean, 2010), but it should not be understated the extent to which these depictions marked the start of something new in the representation of women and the cultural politics of sex (Gerhard, 2005).

With a clearly defined enemy in Raunch Culture, a lively activist movement and increased cultural output, I instinctively agreed with claims that a feminist 'third-wave' was emerging both inside and beyond the academy. The problem with zeitgeists, however, is that they are ephemeral, and tricky to observe from within. A few years into this PhD and the everyday discourse around Raunch Culture appeared to have come and gone with stories circulating in academic articles, magazines, and conversations far less frequently. I now understand that much of this discourse was deeply problematic and slut-shaming. It sought to blame women who sold 'sex' and 'sexy' for the further objectification and devaluation of women's sexualities, but failed to address any of the structural, political or ideological motors at play. The conversation around sex work (thankfully) became much more enlightened, and I too came to realise that much of the criticism of Raunch Culture (including my own), at best privileged sexual labour above other kinds of labour, or categorised it as somehow 'special' in a way that simply didn't make sense to me anymore. As a Marxist, my understanding of labour is that *everyone* who works and creates surplus value (doesn't hold the means of production) is exploited; the factory worker, the call centre agent, the accountant and the sex worker alike. In the worst criticisms, participants in sex work and Raunch Culture were outright blamed for the objectification of their fellow women and were seen as committing treacherous 'female chauvinism' (Levy, 2006) for simply doing a job to pay their bills like the rest of us.

It felt as though feminism and mainstream culture had accepted that a woman should be free to find and express sexual empowerment however she chooses, and feminism itself appeared to have moved on from being solely a blanket (white, middle class) collectivist endeavour to embrace a more nuanced identity based politic. This is no bad thing. The cultural shift within mainstream feminism has opened up feminist spaces to be more intersectional and inclusive of sex workers, trans folk and women of colour (Adichie, 2014; Williams, 2019). Though much work is still to be done within many toxic white feminist spaces (Drake, 2019), that is where the discourse is now.

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The 'lads' of lad culture had also grown up. Their tedious and offensive magazines lost out to an age of internet pornography and sophisticated metrosexualism (Perry, 2016; Webb, 2018), and I wonder if that left those of us who had been so concerned about the rise of Raunch feeling that the battle had been won? *FHM* was dead. *Page Three* was no more and the *Playboy* brand had become synonymous with cheap and tacky. But did we really 'win' anything? The fall of lad culture was surely a sign of the times rather than a response to a hard-fought and well-articulated feminist campaign? This is not to do disservice to the work of activists during the noughties, but a realisation that in this case, fashion proved to be a more transformative force than feminism.

Were we now living in a post-raunch epoch? An era by where the irony, cliché, and overt 'retrosexism' (Gill, 2009) of 90s/2000s Raunch Culture was no longer necessary because its tenets went without saying. Society no longer needed *FHM* or *Playboy* to sexualise and objectify women, and the patriarchy no longer needed niche print or video media to disseminate its wares and normative assumptions. Perhaps the process of 'mainstreaming sex' that Rosalind Gill wrote about in 2010, was now complete. 'Raunch Culture' was no longer a subculture or sexy take on mainstream culture; it was mainstream culture.

Interest in Raunch Culture, it would appear, was dead and initially, I was academically bereft. I felt that I had missed the boat and that there was nothing further to say on the subject. A few dicey months ensued whilst I battled with what, if anything could be salvaged from the wreck of my PhD research to date, and that's where things *really* began to get interesting again.

I started to think about current issues around women's sexual autonomy and the politics of sex, such as the Harvey Weinstein revelations and the explosion of the #MeToo movement, and I began to speculate about what might have replaced Raunch as the current sexual hegemony; what connected Raunch Culture to #MeToo and how and why did this shift happen? I realised that I wanted my research to unpack the mechanics at play and assess what the concurrent cultural output might tell us about how such politics had shifted. In short, to answer the question 'Where is the cultural politics of sex today?' I also came to realise at this time that my interest was really in cultural representations of sex, gender and sexuality and the politics of those representations, as opposed to sexual practices or mores in general.

I did not yet have fully formed research questions to pursue, but rather a renewed academic curiosity, and a visceral sense that a cultural shift had occurred; I had an urge to look underneath the rock just to see what was there. At this stage, being unencumbered by the directive nature of research questions, I was able to sit a while with the 'mess' in front of me, which turned out to be a turning point for my project.

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Amongst the mess, (and I'm not going to lie, panic!) I found a cultural politics teeming with potential to explore. Just as 'Raunch Culture' had not simply been a single concept, but a confluence of political, cultural, technological and mediated forces, so too #MeToo represented more than just the online movement of its namesake, but a similar juncture. I came to think of 'Raunch Culture' and '#MeToo' as representing specific 'moments' in the cultural politics of sex. Moments which were both distinct and linked in important ways. My focus shifted towards trying to unpick this new cultural 'moment' that #MeToo had come to represent. I knew from my earlier research the difficulty in chasing and trying to pin down a zeitgeist, so it became apparent that a radical approach would be needed.

Firstly, I would need to be able to situate this new 'moment' that I was identifying. Chapter Two seeks to do this by providing a critical context for the #MeToo moment, delving into two earlier principal moments; 'Raunch Culture', and its predecessor the feminist 'Porn/ Sex Wars'. The chapter explores the academic and popular response to these decisive moments and charts their intersections with the perceived second and third waves of feminism to create a critical historiography for the #MeToo moment. Chapter Three builds on this, giving a theoretical exploration of #MeToo, exploring its origins, the successes and limitations of the #MeToo movement itself, and the coinciding fourth-wave socio-political/ cultural factors which have converged to create, an important cultural 'moment'.

Having done a considerable amount of examination around Raunch Culture in my earlier work, I came to this new challenge aware of the difficulties inherent in trying to explore and explain something as broad and fluctuating as a cultural moment. I knew that I would need to find some lens under which to examine the #MeToo moment; some way to create a series of credible 'snapshots' of what was going on, to use as samples of the moment, which could be subjected to further interrogation. Chapter Four details my considerable methodological wranglings on this front. From finding the right subject of inquiry, to choosing the right media form and sample texts. In addition, I explore further the theoretical frameworks I have utilised, including the notions of 'moments' and 'snapshots', and the methods employed in creating and probing these thematically and discursively.

Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, deal with the textual analysis of my chosen Netflix texts: *Orange Is the New Black (OITNB)* and *Sense8*. *OITNB* is a six-season Netflix original created by Jenji Kohan. The show begins as a 'fish-out-of-water' narrative, following a middle-class white woman, Piper Chapman, who is incarcerated following her conviction for historic drug trafficking offenses. *OITNB* has been noted for the diversity of its casting and its willingness to tackle difficult social issues such as police brutality, race and mandatory sentencing and prison over-crowding, to name a few. The show is loosely based on the real-life autobiography

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of Piper Kerman, though increasingly deviates from the source material as the show progresses.

Sense8 is a two-season science fiction series, created by the Wachowski sisters (*The Matrix*), also an original for the Netflix platform. The show follows eight strangers from across the globe who come to discover that they share a psychic link, and is notable for how it probes topics such as the genders, intimacies and the romantic, platonic and sexual relationships of these strangers as they become entangled.

In Chapter Five, I examine the thematic employment of feminism within the texts, arguing that although a feminist presence marks a continuation with third-wave texts such as *Sex and the City*, the feminism is put 'front and centre' in my texts, explicitly named and illustrated in ways which mark a departure from the earlier works and one which is compatible with the ethics and aesthetics of fourth-wave feminism.

In Chapter Six, I examine how my texts deal with the cultural politics of masculinity and look at what can be gleaned by comparing this with their handling of feminism and femininity in Chapter Four. I argue that my texts, and especially *OITNB*, tend to paint straight men into one of three broad categories: the 'affable man-child', the 'creepy perv' and the 'dangerous predator'. Within this chapter I also begin to conceptualise how my shows represent abstractions of sexual 'pleasure' and 'danger' which are key themes throughout the three 'moments' that this thesis identifies.

Chapters Seven and Eight turn their attention to the ways in which both of my texts utilise utopian or speculative narrative devices to imagine alternate futures and realities in which sex and sexual politics offer radical potentialities. In Chapter Seven, I look at the imagined matriarchy which is created in *OITNB* during the prison riot episode (season 5, episode 7 (Kohen, 2017b)). A microcosmic community is created with no male presence, and the implied result is a more peaceful, equitable, and ultimately safer affair. I also look at the centring of identity politics in my texts and explore how identities such as 'butch', 'trans' and 'bisexual' become more than simple characteristics, but the sites of sexual and political possibilities.

In Chapter Eight I turn my gaze to *Sense8*, which as a piece of science fiction, represents in an alternative reality which I posit is able to create a 'queer utopia' in which traditional boundaries around sex, gender and relationships are dispensed with in favour of suggestive modalities for the cultural politics of sex, which are cinematically ground-breaking, highly provocative, and demonstrative of a particular kind of sexual politicking that the #MeToo moment encapsulates.

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This thesis concludes by weaving together the separate threads which have been evaluated above, to create a picture of a novel and important 'moment' in the cultural politics of sex. I show that the #MeToo moment represents both an evolution of the earlier moments, identified herein as the 'Sex Wars' and 'Raunch Culture' as well as a marked departure from them. Like its predecessors, #MeToo coincides with a shifting between feminist political 'waves' and specific stages of mediated technological advancement.

The thesis rests by taking a step back, to consider how the multitude of pixels explored under the #MeToo moment coalesce, creating sexual and cultural possibilities and wondering what such possibilities might mean for a hypothesised Covid-19 moment, which I posit may be emerging at the time of writing. A moment where intimate relationships and cultural politics are once more evolving and intersecting with lockdown-enforced technological adoptions and increasingly radical political narratives.

2. 'Moments' Gone By: A Critical Context For The #MeToo Moment

This critical context aims to generate an analytical historiography of sexual politics in recent decades and, specifically, to offer a frame of reference for the #MeToo moment, which is central to this thesis. I identify two crucial 'moments' which shaped and to some extent steered the current #MeToo moment: the feminist 'Sex Wars' of the late 1970s, and the Raunch Culture of the late nineties and first decade of the 21st century. For the former, I give only a brief overview to illustrate thematically and politically where the later 'moments' can trace their origins back to. For the latter, a more in-depth exploration of the themes, debates and dynamics at play is given to compare and contrast with the #MeToo moment that will emerge from it. I note that each 'moment' identified in this thesis has arisen within the broader context of a distinct (though at times concurrent) feminist wave: The Sex Wars within the second-wave, Raunch Culture within the third, and #MeToo within the fourth.

Making Waves: Contextualising Sexual Moments and Feminist Advancements

The very public denouncement of the music megastar and now Fourth-Wave feminist icon, Beyoncé, as a 'terrorist' by established feminist theorist and critic, bell hooks, for example, can be seen as characterising this supposed generational and theoretical divide between feminists and feminist waves

(Rivers, 2017, p.1)

The notion of feminist 'waves' has to some extent come to form a kind of logic or obviousness within feminist canon. Though debate lingers around the exact starting and ending points for each wave and around areas of potential overlap, the story is broadly thus:

- The first wave (pre 1960s) – focussed primarily on women's suffrage and property rights
- The second wave (1960s-1980s) – focussed on gender roles, sexual freedoms and reproductive rights
- The third wave (1990s-2000s) – focussed largely on issues of representation and cultural feminisms
- The fourth wave (2010s-present) – shift from focus on questions of equality to questions of difference (Brooks, 1997)

It is important to note at this juncture that despite the prevalence and common-sense appeal of the feminist waves model, is not without its critics (see (Nicholson, 2010; Hewitt, 2012;

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Evans, 2016b). In addition to widespread disagreement around the details, definitions and scope of each wave, Nicola Rivers notes that;

The notion of a consolidated and coherent feminist past where women are united under universal aims, is at best romanticized, and at worst, a tool used to undermine contemporary feminism.

(Rivers, 2017, p.2)

Lola Olufemi argues that the assumed simplicity and linearity of the waves models ‘often erases the splintered nature of feminist struggles, neglecting the existence of dividing lines across race and class’ (Olufemi, 2020, p.12). She argues that what is generally understood as the progressive history of the feminist waves as outlined above, charts only the history of mainstream, (predominantly) white, middle class feminism and thus erases the contributions of feminists of colour, those perceived to be on the margins, and the struggles, dissention and mis-steps which occurred along the way. I am inclined to agree with her assessment that ‘it is impossible to create a narrative that does justice to knotty truths lived by feminists of all kinds’ (Olufemi, 2020, p.12) so it is crucial to detail here how and why I utilise the ‘waves’ model in this thesis and where I understand its limits to be.

My choice to employ the waves metaphor was actually one of the easier decisions that I made on this project and was an entirely utilitarian one. Quite simply, it is just too useful a shorthand to forgo because it makes the evolving strands of feminism intelligible, allowing me to make connections and observations about continuity and divergence. To adopt any other terminology would have cost valuable time and words and detracted from the main focus of the thesis, and I don’t think that such a sacrifice would have adequately addressed the model’s shortcomings regardless.

I have thus opted to use the term ‘waves’ throughout, but with the critical caveat that it is not understood here as a totalising or all-encompassing monolith, but as a brush which paints with broad strokes and is as notable for what it neglects as what it includes. Moreover, it is with Olufemi’s accurate characterisation of waves referring to only ‘mainstream’ feminist thought in mind that I have approached this project. In particular, noting in chapters two and three how the third and fourth waves are distinct in that they attempt to bring voices marginalised by earlier forms of feminism (particularly Black feminism and transfeminism) into the mainstream which the waves model charts. Finally, it should be noted that the ‘waves’ metaphor was devised specifically in the Anglo-American context of feminisms, which means that it sits well with the same geographical focus of my thesis; but its utility would become less meaningful, were one to expand out into Netflix’s global markets and the cultural and political resonance of its productions outside the US/UK focus.

(Sex) War: What Is It Good For?

As feminists, we know that the personal has *always* been political, and discourse around women's sexual virtues and agency predates the very advent of feminism as an understood position (de Beauvoir, 1949). The 1982 Barnard Conference held at Barnard College, New York, was a watershed moment in this discussion of virtues and agency because the discussions which arose from its theme of 'sexuality' dislodged anti-pornography as the de facto feminist position on sex, and created space for more, so-called, 'sex-positive' viewpoints.

Throughout the feminist second-wave, pornography was largely accepted by feminists as a destructive industry, predicated on the sexual objectification and de-humanisation of women. The infamous anti-porn work of Catherine MacKinnon (MacKinnon, 1988, 2001; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1998) and Andrea Dworkin (Dworkin, 1989, 1976) highlighted the ways in which pornography primarily (or exclusively) served the sexual interests of men at the expense of women, and the period witnessed radical feminists adopting some uncomfortable bedfellows (no pun intended), from the far right of American politics, whose objection to porn was situated in puritanical and religious sensibilities. For many feminists, pornography was irredeemable and the notion of women choosing, or being in any way liberated by its 'graphic depiction of women as vile whores' (Dworkin, 1989, p.200) was unthinkable.

There were however exceptions to this viewpoint. Judith Butler recognised a need to 'counterbalance the anti-pornography perspective on sexuality with an exploration into women's sexual agency and autonomy' (Butler 1982 cited in Bracewell, 2016) and this need became the focus of the Barnard Conference. Unsurprisingly, a counter-protest outside the conference by Women Against Pornography (WAP) was organised and 'the drawing of battle lines and asserting of oppositional stances was formalised. Feminists were divided into two camps: either anti-porn or pro-sex' (Walters, 2016, p.2), there was little subtlety of public position and hostility between the two camps became fierce. Gale Rubin, reflects on the period;

Like many others involved in the sex wars, I was thoroughly traumatized by the breakdown of feminist civility and the venomous treatment to which dissenters from the antiporn orthodoxy were routinely subjected.

(Rubin, 2011, p.16)

Broadly speaking, this marked the beginning of the feminist 'sex-wars' which would rage on for the next twenty-plus years, covering topics such as representation of women in porn, women as producers and consumers of pornography and debates around what constituted the pornographic *vis a vis* the erotic or artistic.

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The Sex Wars are important thematically for my research because in the decades following, the dichotomy that they created has lingered. Although by the late 1990s, third-wave feminism was generally more sex-positive, the dominance of opposing paradigms persisted. Objectification vs agency, empowerment vs exploitation, pleasure vs danger (Echols, 2016) can all be identified in the discussions of Raunch Culture which followed (Levy, 2006; Durham, 2009; Attwood, 2009) in the decades succeeding the Barnard conference.

Decades later Walters highlighted the problem of the 'messiness' of sexual discourse, and argued that:

Like sex itself, feminism is messy. And perhaps one lesson of those debates is that we would do well to revel in that messiness rather than to divide ourselves into neat and tidy categories of pro-sex and anti-sex feminists

(Walters, 2016, p. 2)

This 'messiness' resonates with my own position. I have always been uncomfortable with the very idea of the 'Sex-Wars', not because I have any doubt that they occurred, but because I couldn't find within the rigid dichotomy, what Walters calls 'the binary framing of empowerment versus exploitation' (or pleasure versus danger) (Walters, 2016, p.2), a place where my own views and experiences sat. I am not, and have never been anti-pornography per se, and have always considered myself to be 'sex-positive'... I positively love sex, and vehemently advocate for the right of people of all genders to engage (or not) in and take pleasure from whatever kinds of sex they want so long as all parties involved are consenting. That said, when I first began reading about the Sex Wars as an undergrad, much of what the likes of Dworkin and McKinnon had to say about the derogatory nature of pornography resonated with me. I felt that there was an easily identifiable line to be drawn from the representational humiliation of gonzo porn to being routinely called a 'fat slag' on the street.

My stance has always been that I don't have an issue with porn in *principle* but how it plays out in *practice*. The question I have battled with throughout this thesis, and indeed my adult life, is around how to reconcile a position which could encompass legitimate feminist criticism of cultural representations, and my socialist inclination towards collectivism, whilst also centring the pleasure and liberatory potential of individualised sexual autonomy. The period of Raunch Culture which followed the Sex Wars presented a great challenge to me in this respect because it sought to further articulate some of the oppressions I myself perceived, but uncomfortably tended to police and blame women for the shortcomings of 'pornified' (Spanier, 1975) cultural output.

Sexy Girls: The Rise Of Raunch and the Third-Wave Response



Fig 1 Dolce & Gabbana Advert Sourced from (Duncan, 2015)

The emergence of Raunch Culture at the turning of the 21st century is arguably best evidenced by examining the multitude and variety of responses to it which began to arise at the time. This new phenomenon had many aliases: *Pornotopia* (Poynor, 2006), Raunch Culture (Levy, 2006), *Striptease Culture* (McNair, 2002), Guyland (Kimmel, 2008), Porno-Chic (McNair, 2009), *The Lolita Effect* (Durham, 2009), hypersexualisation, or just plain old fashioned objectification and was set against a backdrop of third-wave feminism which is evidenced in both the cultural products and feminist discourse of the moment.

Images such as the Dolce and Gabbana advert (**Fig 1**) came to symbolise Raunch Culture for me. On the one hand, a sexy depiction of silky, subtle bodies and the woman's sexual power, in keeping with the brand's identity, and on the other, a fairly incontrovertible depiction of a gang rape. Like a magic eye picture, once I had 'seen' the hidden subtext, it became quite impossible to un-see it. My particular interest in cultural politics emerges at this time and I began looking more closely into the world of cultural theory in an attempt to better understand. Just as I made my own personal 'cultural turn', so did feminist politics.

One of the defining characteristics of the third wave was its bordering obsession with the analysis of popular culture. My third-wave bible was *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and The Future* (Baumgardner and Richards, 2001), which as Adrienne Trier-Bieniek noted, argued that 'feminist and political theory has as much a place in third wave feminism as the impact of pop culture' (Trier-Bieniek, 2019).

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Imagery such as the D&G ad were met with a plethora of feminist works calling them out. Bookstores were filling up with popular texts on the subject of Raunch Culture, the academy witnessed a resurgence of interest in the sexual objectification discourse, and the mainstream media was clamouring for a piece of the action too, with high-profile figures like Gary Barlow (PA Press, 2011) and Fiona Bruce (Rollo, 2010) speaking out about hypersexualisation. Media interest in hypersexualisation was of particular note, because, as Rosalind Gill highlighted, the mainstream media was where hypersexualisation was being simultaneously both performed and derided (Gill, 2009).

What was also curious about this increased interest in hypersexualisation was the diversity of interested parties. The inside pages of Gigi M Durham's *The Lolita Effect* (Durham, 2009) feature praise from the *Daily Mail*, *Christianity Today*, *Bitch* magazine, and *The Feminist Review*; a selection not often seen together (but not un-reminiscent of the unhappy bedfellows of Dworkin, Mackinnon and the Christian right). *The Daily Mail* called Durham 'An author who writes like a human being, with very little tendency to the worst excesses of the jargon of academia', showing the growing mainstream interest in the matter at the time. Further to the literary, academic and media interest, governments and institutions in the UK, US, and Australia were commissioning reports too (Papadopoulos and United Kingdom Home Office, 2010; APA Task Force and Force, 2010; Australian Senate, 2008) and a growing political opposition in the form of feminist campaign groups such as *Object* and *Hollaback* illustrated that its presence was causing enough of a stir to get people out on to the streets (and the blogs and forums too).

Perhaps the most significant facet of Raunch Culture was the perceived process of hypersexualisation, i.e. the increased rate that something becomes sexual in nature. Caroline Roux gave the following summary of the Raunch look

I have just returned from another world where women are long-legged and large of breast. They have blonde hair that whips around their faces as though a permanent breeze was blowing and brilliantly coloured talons for fingernails. They wear few clothes and rarely speak. Existing only to please and oblige, to be there when desired, and then to disappear, they are uncritical and, except for their determination, to snare the male gaze, undemanding.

(Roux, 1997)

Feona Attwood identifies the inherent difficulty of understanding hypersexualisation as a 'thing' that can be easily isolated and combated' (Attwood, 2010, p.744). The problem is that 'what one person considers inappropriate sexualisation may be to another merely pretty,

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smart, grown-up or 'cute'. (Australian Senate, 2008 p.6). A good place to start however is by thinking about some of the artefacts of Raunch Culture and its more visible articulations. Concern arose that commercial sex was gaining a toe-hold in the high street and becoming gentrified. Strip joints became 'gentleman's clubs', the Rampant Rabbit vibrator as well-known as that much older sign for sex, the Playboy Bunny, were joined by the cheap and cheerful paraphernalia of the Ann Summers empire and by more elegant and expensive boutiques selling lingerie, toys and erotica. Pole dancing was re-packaged as a form of keep fit, and burlesque underwent a revival, producing new stars such as Dita Von Teese (Attwood, 2009, p.xv). All of this signified a new interest in women as sexual consumers.

The most prevalent idea at the heart of the hypersexualisation discourse is that it somehow involves the normalising process of moving private acts into public life. 'It is not just that we are having sex—nothing new there—but that we are obsessed with its display in the media as never before' (Poynor, 2006, p.130). 'We are in the process of designing a Pornotopia in which sex, or at least our dreams of sex, are allowed to permeate areas of life they would never have been permitted to enter until recently' (Poynor, 2006, p.9). The imagery of soft pornography came to adorn adverts on bus shelters, and the option of 'opting out' became increasingly unrealistic as the porn aesthetic moved from designated 'adults only' spaces, such as porn magazines and videos, to high streets and music videos. However, hypersexualisation was not just linked to an increased presence (or visibility) of sex in modern public life, but to the prevalence of a particular type of sex and sexuality that was on show; this is perhaps a key difference between the normal process 'sexualisation' that people like Cas Wouters described (Wouters, 2010), and the 'hyper'-sexualisation of Raunch Culture.

Raunch Culture, it was argued, borrowed from the language and iconography of pornography, a process that McNair dubbed 'Pornographication' (McNair, 2009, p.55), while Dines, describes the process of porn "hijacking' our sexuality' by where 'our pop culture resembles the soft-core pornography of ten years ago' (Dines, 2010, p.26). The dichotomous nature of this theme clearly represents a continuation of the Sex Wars with McNair and Dines both identifying the same sense of a new culture of sexuality emerging but viewing its consequences very differently: McNair seeing the potential for a liberalisation of sexual taboos, and Dines fearing the mainstreaming of an increasingly objectifying and degrading sexual mores. Dines felt that Raunch Culture tended to adopt the language and paraphernalia of professional sex work (and in particular pornography), and 'sanitise' it (Dines, 2010). In doing so, it was argued that porn 'lost much of its transgressive, taboo quality and bec[a]me acceptable, even fashionable' (McNair, 2009, p.55). Attwood observes that pornography 'turned chic and [became] an object of fascination in art, film, television and the press... the

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scantily clad, surgically enhanced 'porn look' is evident not only in the media, but on the streets' she noted (Attwood, 2009, p.xiv). Dines and McNair both argue that the porn industry had to change and adapt to stay afloat. For Dines this involved 'stripping away the 'dirt' factor and reconstituting porn as fun, edgy, chic, sexy, and hot' (Dines, 2010, p.25). Entertainment programmes such as *Girls Gone Wild* were 'whitewashed as belonging to the world of pop culture, not porn' (Dines, 2010, p.26) and McNair observed how newly emerging 'lads mags' like FHM, had to lose the 'dad's wank mag' image (McNair, 2002).

Michael Kimmel wrote about the concurrent rise of 'Guyland by where girls contended with 'the constant stream of pornographic humour in college dorms or libraries, or at countless workstations in offices across the country' (Kimmel, 2008, p.14). To be clear, Kimmel did not argue that Raunch Culture and Guyland were the same thing, but his description of Guyland implies that hypersexualisation was very much present there too. Raunch Culture, it was argued, had entered 'the world that the readers/viewers themselves inhabit or would like to inhabit. It must enter their actual or desired reality in order for them to identify with it' (Sarracino and Scott, 2010, p.32).

It is important to note that hypersexualisation was not *solely* understood as a process by which sex, or pornified sex entered the mainstream; other key mechanisms were also identified. Graham Spanier, offered a three-part explanation of sexualisation arguing that sexualisation features the 'development of a gender identity; acquisition of sexual skills, knowledge, and values; and development of sexual attitudes or disposition to behave' (Spanier, 1975, p.35). In this conceptualisation, sexualisation is understood more narrowly as simply a normal part of socialisation and development. Spanier's conceptualisation explains clearly the sociological process by which we become sexually aware and expressive but the debate around Raunch Culture implied that there was more to it than this.

Many accounts of hypersexualisation took the APA's four-point definition of sexualisation as a starting point, arguing that sexualisation is present if one or more of the following occurs:

1. A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
2. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.

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3. A person is sexually objectified—that is made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making¹.
4. Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

(APA Task Force and Force, 2010, p.6)

The APA definition attempted to provide a practical working system for identifying when sexualisation was occurring, but was not without its problems. For example, point two notes that physical attractiveness is ‘narrowly defined’ but does not explain how or by whom. It is critical to an understanding of Raunch Culture that we can recognise more specifically what the ‘sex’ of hypersexualisation looked like and what standards it held. Further to this, point four states that sexualisation occurs if sexuality is being ‘inappropriately imposed’ upon a person, a sentiment mirrored by The Australian Senate who reference the imposing of sexuality ‘inappropriately and prematurely’ (Australian Senate, 2008, p.6). This is problematic for several reasons: firstly, there is an idea that sexuality can be imposed, that sexuality is an independent force; and secondly the notion of what is and is not ‘appropriate’ varies wildly not only culturally but even within the confines of sexualisation discourse itself. Point four, then, risked acting not as an identifier of sexualisation but as a value judgement.

Regardless, the notion of age-appropriateness became a key focal point of concern about Raunch Culture. As Jackson and Scott explain, ‘evidence of the sexualisation of children is frequently represented as indicative of a more general social malaise, creating a climate in which the fears this evokes crystallise around particular stories of ‘lost childhood’.’(Jackson and Scott, 2010, p.109). Examples of concerns around age appropriateness were prevalent both in the media and in third-wave writing on the subject of sexualisation (Durham, 2009; Orenstein, 2011; Levin and Kilbourne, 2009). Raunch Culture witnessed outrage over pole-dancing toy kits, *Playboy* pencil cases and ‘sexy’ underwear all aimed at girls. Ariel Levy described a cultural change in the way in which young girls (in particular) were interacting with sexual themes:

When I was at school... you always wished to be the prettiest and most popular...but the obligation to present yourself as the skankiest—which means smuttiest, the loosest, the most wanton – even before you’ve become libidinous ...is something new.

(Levy, 2006, p.154)

¹ The APA note that the most frequently occurring, and most visible, is point number three.

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Levy further explained the presence of confusing and conflicting messages present within Raunch Culture:

Girls have to be hot. Girls who aren't hot probably need breast implants. Once a girl is hot, she should be as close to naked as possible all the times. Guys should like it. Don't have sex.

(Levy, 2006, p.158)

Lerum and Dworkin were particularly critical of the APA's report and how it categorised sexualisation as 'a harmful and dangerous process that only has negative impacts on girls and women' (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009, p.251). They accused the APA report of presenting

1. An over-determined negative impact of sexualisation on girls and women
2. A negation of a large and important feminist literature on media, consumer culture, gender, and the body
3. A lack of integration with earlier pro-desire feminist psychology scholarship
4. A conflation of objectification, sexual objectification, and sexualisation
5. An under-emphasis on girls' and women's sexual agency and resistance
6. An under-emphasis on sexual health and rights

(Lerum and Dworkin, 2009, p.253)

Further to raising concerns that the APA's understanding of hypersexualisation may be incomplete, they also argued that it may be counterproductive noting that 'task force report may actually interfere with some contemporary goals—in particular, the goals of facilitating sexual agency and pleasure, sexual rights, and sexual health for girls and women' (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009, p.253). Lerum and Dworkin were right to be concerned that the APA's grasp of hypersexualisation was too reductive. They highlighted that there was a risk of returning to the binary Sex Wars of the seventies and eighties, whereby one is either sex positive or sex-negative, thus reducing the possibility of women and girls having sexual agency.

Throughout the many discussions on Raunch Culture, the notion of objectification came up time and time again. Heldman notes that 'if objectification is the process of representing or treating a person like an object (a non-thinking thing that can be used however one likes), then sexual objectification is the process of representing or treating a person like a sex object, one

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that serves another’s sexual pleasure’ (Heldman, 2012, p.1). Like the APA’s four sexualisation identifiers, Heldman advanced a ‘Sex Object Test’ which demonstrates that sexual objectification is present if we answer ‘yes’ to any of the following:

1. Does the image show only part(s) of a sexualised person’s body?
2. Does the image present a sexualised person as a stand-in for an object?
3. Does the image show a sexualised person as interchangeable?
4. Does the image affirm the idea of violating the bodily integrity of a sexualised person that can’t consent?
5. Does the image suggest that sexual availability is the defining characteristic of the person?
6. Does the image show a sexualised person as a commodity (something that can be bought and sold)?
7. Does the image treat a sexualised person’s body as a canvas?

(Heldman, 2012)

Examples abound mainstream media. **Fig 2** shows a screenshot of a Google search for Reebok’s 2011 *Retone* campaign², notable for not featuring the faces of the women models..

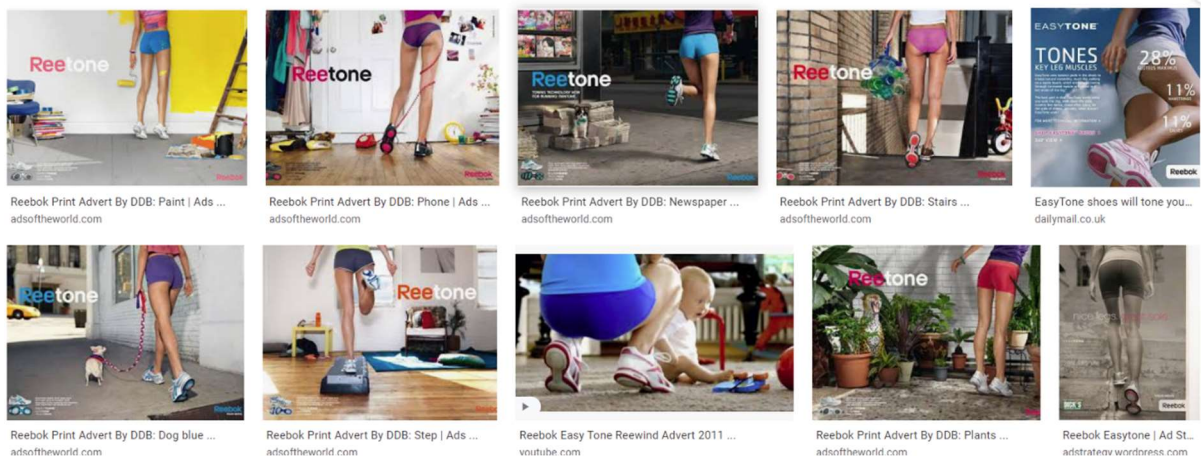


Fig 2 *Retone* Campaign by Reebok

Post-Modern, Post-Feminist?

Another defining characteristic of third-wave feminism was its interest in ‘post-feminism’ which Ann Brooks describes as ‘a frame of refence encompassing the intersection of feminism with

² Google search completed 18/04/2020

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a number of anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism' (Brooks, 1997, p.1). The term was also used by third-wave feminists to describe particular cultural products such as *Sex and The City* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which seemed to evoke the material improvements won by feminists during the second wave, whilst simultaneously implying that the need for further feminist intervention was no longer required.

This influence can be seen throughout much of the third-wave analysis whereby concepts such as 'subject' and 'object' became increasingly destabilised. Some commentators began to argue that what they saw in hypersexualisation was less about sexual objectification and more about sexual subjectification. Gill cited the example of 'a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always 'up for sex'' (Gill, 2009, p.148). She explained that 'where once sexualised representations of women in advertising presented them as passive, mute *objects* of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active, desiring, sexual *subjects* who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly liberated) interests to do so' (Gill, 2009, p.148). In introducing the concept of sexual subjectification, Gill raised important questions about sexualisation and choice, just as Butler et al had done during the Sex Wars.

The possibility of sexual subjectification gave rise to questions from a number of third-wave feminists; the most obvious being – is this the "new feminism' and not what it looks like, the old objectification?' (Levy, 2006, p.81). Feona Attwood feared that in sexual subjectification 'women are offered a limited and commodified vision of active female sexuality in place of the new languages and practices of eroticism demanded by feminism' (Attwood, 2006, p.83), and Durham argued that the iconography of sexualisation was 'framed in a clever rhetoric of empowerment and choice' (Durham, 2009, p.27). The notion of sexual subjectification as an ingredient of hypersexualisation raised once more the issue of false consciousness, and appeared to imply that the women who participated in Raunch were somehow being duped.

In addition to being sexualising and objectifying, Raunch, it was argued, was also gendered and racialised as the influence of post-colonialism on the third-wave began to emerge. Rosalind Gill stated, 'it is notable how many writers discuss "sexualisation" through a generalising logic that conceals the uneven power relations at work' (Gill, 2009, p.141). The 'power relations' including the cultural 'politics of looking' (Gill, 2009, p.143) are at the core of what this thesis is trying to unearth, both within the context of Raunch Culture, and eventually in its shift to the #MeToo moment itself.

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Rosalind Gill pointed out that 'black women's bodies still seem[ed] more likely to be portrayed as objects' (Gill, 2009, p.150), highlighting how Black women tend to be sexualised more frequently and to a greater extent. However, this is only part of the story as it is not just the extent to which women of different races were sexualised which differed, but the ways in which their bodies and this sexualisation was presented too. Gill gave the example of the 'midriff' - 'a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always 'up for sex'' (Gill, 2009, p.148). For Gill, the 'midriff' was the heroine of post-feminism; Britney Spears, or *Sex in the City's* Carrie Bradshaw, with their white American, girl-next-door good looks, their breasts, lips and of course, their midriffs provide the focus of attention and are always on display. Midriffs provided a norm of female sexualisation that was portrayed as the most desirable. Bodies that differ in size, age or colour from the midriff are 'othered' and thus treated differently.

The 'midriff' diverged from many earlier sexualized depictions of women in that her (supposed) sexual agency or, subjectification, was not in question. It became an important factor in the cultural politics of Raunch sex to examine who had such subjectification and who did not. Though Gill did not explicitly state that the midriff is white, she did explain that Black bodies are sexualised very differently from midriffs. 'Unlike the figure of the 'sexualised' midriff, this woman does not address us, does not make reference to her own pleasure or desire, and is not presented as a sexual subject' (Gill, 2009, p.150). Gill argued that women of colour experience sexualisation in a more traditional manner which predates the assumed sexual agency of post-feminism or Raunch Culture. Further to this, it can be observed that as well as the lack of sexual agency portrayed in images of women of colour, the subject of the camera's gaze also tends to differ, often emphasising the buttocks and hips of Black and Latin American women for example. It is also important to note that although there are differences in how women of colour are sexualised, there are often similarities in design but differences in affect. As Gill explained, 'in a racist visual economy, the meaning of these types of sexualisation is different depending if the bodies are black or white' (Gill, 2009, p.150). Essentially, even identically staged images of the Black body and white body, will give different meanings and offer different messages because of how the images are read in a social context that features existing assumptions about race. Such an argument rests on the third-wave's embrace of post-structuralist approaches to meaning as being discursively produced, rather than located or denoted in the intent of the producer.

The 'midriff' is as heavily defined by what she is not, as by what she is and this is particularly apparent in the sexualisation of social class. An aspirational icon, often used in advertising as part of a formula that would have us believe that we too could be like her if we bought the

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product on offer. To achieve this, ‘midriff advertising defines itself as against ‘looseness’ or ‘sluttishness’, the ‘lower-class (‘white trash’), ‘chav girl’ and ‘pram face’ and has an emphasis on a “middle-class ‘respectable’ sexiness” (Gill, 2009, pp.150–151). Images of sexualised working-class women generally do not exist in advertising or mainstream media as aspirational. (It is worth noting that this is not true of working-class men whose ‘rough’ class roots themselves are often presented as part of the appeal— think David Beckham, Sean Bean, Dizzee Rascal). However, an exception to this did occur in 2010 when singer and presenter Cheryl Cole appeared in an advert for L’Oréal. Unfortunately, the advert is now best remembered for the many YouTube spoofs and a notable parody starring Vic Reeves on BBC’s *Shooting Stars* (BBC, 2010). In the Reeves parody, much was made of Cole’s working-class roots; her Geordie accent was emphasised and idioms like ‘fag ash’ and ‘manky’ feature throughout. Further to this, as working-class *Page Three* girls like Katie Price became increasingly regarded as trashy: the midriff on the other hand was the epitome of classiness. Attwood argued that:

The ‘classiness’ of female sexual activity is extremely important here both as a way of establishing its legitimacy and of linking sexuality to a range of other contemporary bourgeois concerns such as the development and display of style and taste and the pursuit of self-improvement and self-care.

(Attwood, 2006, p.85)

Lerum and Dworkin noted, ‘while terms such as *hegemonic* recognise the widespread presence of certain types of representations over others, what is gained by using these terms is the understanding that images are a site of social power, struggle, and conflict’ (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009, p.255). As early as 1994, Janet Lee pointed out that ‘Sexualisation implies heterosexualisation’, (Lee, 1994, p.344). This remains the case even in contemporary discussions of women’s sexual agency. Moreover, these intersections of class, hegemony and capitalism form part of the politics of representation that are the focus of this study, both within Raunch Culture and #MeToo.

In addition to ‘post-feminist’ images which offered a ‘depiction of gender relations that fuels sexism, while banishing it’ (Williamson, 2003), Raunch Culture also witnessed the rebranding of old-fashioned sexism as ‘ironic’ (**Fig 3**). Irony became ‘that catch-all device that allows advertisers to have their cake and eat it: to present titillating and sexist images of women while suggesting that it was all a deliberate and knowing post-modern joke’ (Gill, 2009, p.110). For this reason, Williamson referred to it as ‘sexism with an alibi’ (Williamson, 2003) and Roux explained that we are encouraged to view these images of Raunch Culture as ‘a tickle rather

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than a slap sent in the direction of society's new power group: women' (Roux, 1997). Implicit is the understanding that we 'know' that such sexism is out-dated, and harmless, and is thus funny. Gill argued that this represents a 'bid to incorporate feminist ideas whilst emptying them of their political significance and domesticating their critique of gender relations' and this only works so long as the audience 'get it.' (Gill, 2009, p.149)



Fig 3- Lucy Pinder Lynx Advert image from (Mirror.co.uk, 2011)

Whilst cultural productions regarded as 'post-feminist' were eyed with suspicion, Rivers notes that the concept became situated 'within the third wave, broadly fitting with the assertion that a primary objective for third-wave feminists was to disrupt a white, heteronormative, middle-class view' (Rivers, 2017). She argues that the post-modern third-wave began the process of destabilising the concept of 'woman' which 'far from rendering feminism unintelligible ...has in this instance allowed for the movement to become more inclusive' (Rivers, 2017). Serano describes the third-wave:

Intentionally pluralistic, [it] espoused and celebrated difference, and contested all binaries and rigid identities. The transgender movement sprung out of this wave and forwarded similar sentiments.

(Serano, 2007, pp.xii–xiii)

This broadening and diversifying is a phenomenon I explore further in Chapter Three by examining how the fourth-wave has built upon, adopted and centralised (though not invented!) ideas around intersectionality and transfeminism.

'Add to Basket' - Raunch Meets Consumer Culture

If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff— big fake boobs, bleached blond hair, long nails, poles, thongs— then you can sell it. Suddenly, sex requires shopping; you need plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure, a mall.

(Levy, 2006, p.184)

Another area where third-wave feminism collided with Raunch Culture was in the embrace of consumerism, or what Andi Zeisler has dubbed 'market feminism' (Zeisler, 2016). The 'girl power' of the Spice Girls or edgier riot grrrls (Lemish, 2003) are typically cited as examples and as we can see how this relationship was problematised in a debate between M G Durham and Cas Wouters. In *The Lolita Effect*, Durham cites the example of girls' underwear sold by Walmart which featured the slogan 'who needs credit cards?' on the crotch. She argued that 'it is hard to see this as not implying that selling sex is a great option for teenage girls' (Durham, 2009, p.23). Wouters however took objection to Durham's conclusion: 'it is certainly in bad taste... But how does it relate to exploitative, abusive, and harmful female sexuality?' For Kilbourne and Levin, sexualised images and products were 'not intended to sell children on sex— they [were] intended to sell them on shopping' (Levin and Kilbourne, 2009, p.50) and we can see from this, the complex ways in which third-wave feminism became embroiled in questions about sex and consumerism as it both embraced and rejected them simultaneously.

Gail Dines argued that the problem was that capitalised sex was antithetical to pleasure.

A kind of sex that is debased, dehumanised, formulaic, and generic, a kind of sex based not on individual fantasy, play, or imagination, but one that is the result of an industrial product created by those who get excited not by bodily contact, but by market penetration and profits.

(Dines, 2010, p.x)

However, people like Brian McNair highlighted that hypersexualisation might also have desirable consequences; 'For many women, emerging into feminist-inspired sexual freedom and experimentation, access to and use of porn is a marker of political progress' (McNair, 2002, p.43). McNair identified possibility in what he dubbed the 'democratisation of desire' and argued that it might allow us greater choice and expression in our sexuality.

A key driver of the democratisation of desire came in the form of technological development as the costs, size and inaccessibility of audio-visual equipment fell. McNair explained that in the late 1970s a pornographic film would have cost around \$350,000 to make, but by 1990

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films were being produced for as little as \$8000 and the expertise required to make a porn film were greatly reduced (McNair, 2002, p.39). Now, more than 25 years later, this cost has fallen substantially again with the advent of video-enabled mobile phones, DIY pornography and the internet as the primary vehicle for pornographic distribution and we can see here how the Raunch Culture moment became situated within its own specific technological context.

For McNair, increased access to the equipment and distribution channels of porn resulted in the proliferation of much more diverse, and also niche, content, which could only be a good thing for human sexual expression. However, Feona Attwood argued that McNair ignored the fact that the developments that he categorises as being democratising also made our sexualities 'more available for regulation' (Attwood, 2006, p.82). She also accused him of oversimplifying 'the ways in which developments in sexual taste, representation and practice may also be related to positions of power, particularly in terms of class and gender relations' (Attwood, 2006, p.83). I have to say that, at the time, I was sceptical of McNair's optimism: it certainly didn't look like mainstream depictions of sex were becoming more diverse, but as my research entered the century's teenage years, my chosen texts alone, with their trans, poly-amorous and pansexual characters of more varied race and class backgrounds would seem to suggest that he was right. For me, the 'democratisation of desire', though linked with consumer and choice feminism, has also be brought about by the democratisation of modes of production. The internet-distributed television providers such as Netflix, who are no longer beholden to advertisers and their retro-sexists wares, for example, show that though the market has been a force for change, it has not been the sole force.

3. From Movement To 'Moment' – The Cultural Politics Of #MeToo and the Fourth Wave

#MeToo... Well Sort Of

We celebrate as the Weinstein monster is, we hope, blocked from wielding his shockingly unchecked power over not one more woman and her career. Let this, too, be the fate of President Trump, Russell Simmons, and anyone else who may be proven to have used their power to rape, assault and repeatedly harass.

(Ward, 2018)

Having identified the second-wave moment of the Sex Wars, and the third-wave moment of Raunch Culture, I now turn my attention to the final, fourth-wave moment of #MeToo, the cultural and sexual politics which form the core subject of this thesis, and the context for the cultural output studied later on.

You could be mistaken for thinking that #MeToo arose from the Twitter campaign of the same name, which exploded globally following the Harvey Weinstein allegations in 2017. Reported as a watershed moment, and one which marked the opening of the floodgates as more and more high-profile women (and some men) came forward to divulge their own experiences of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of powerful and notorious men. However, the #MeToo campaign did not actually begin on Twitter, nor is it a recently formed movement. As Jessie Kindig explains, '#MeToo began decades ago as part of an activist campaign led by Tarana Burke to support marginalized women of color who experienced sexual assault, yet only went viral when it was popularized by the white and the wealthy' (Kindig, 2018). 'Burke realized that the phrase 'me too' could release survivors from the shame they felt and serve to empower them – especially in minority communities' (Adetiba and Burke, 2018).

Anuhya Bobba writes importantly about the hypocrisy of white feminism in the #MeToo movement in light of Tara Reade's allegations of sexual assault by Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden (Bobba, 2020), arguing that the movement's slogan, 'Believe Women', appears not to be so wholeheartedly affirmed when the woman in question is a woman of colour and the man is a liberal.

Kindig goes on to explain that the notion of 'Me Too' has its roots in what, in 1981, Angela Davis called 'the awesome fact' – that staggeringly few women can claim to never have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault (Davis, 1981) but also comments that

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the notion of 'shock', often expressed in response to #MeToo revelations, can itself be misleading because it obscures the continual and historic presence of harassment, especially in the lives of marginalised communities. The 'awesome fact' might well be awesome but it is not new, and it is something that many women have known about all along. Perhaps what is new is the realisation that it has been happening to other women too. 'If shock is a form of disavowal, it also has a galvanizing function: it offers the potential... for what was a public secret to become a public protest... what happens to our bodies is where our politics can begin' (Kindig, 2018).

Like most people, the first I heard about 'Me Too' was when its hashtag went viral. It appeared to begin with celebrities and famous women sharing their stories, but soon I began to see my own friends and loved ones publicly disclosing their own (oftentimes traumatic) experiences online. In my mind, there is no doubt that this was a powerful moment, an example of the very real and meaningful political impact that often maligned keyboard warriors could have. It was a rare moment of feminist high fiving, women in their millions speaking the truth of their lived experiences to power and raising awareness of what had always felt to most men like a dirty little secret, and to most women an unavoidable fact of life as a woman. As Kindig notes 'Becoming a woman involves the daily negotiation of violence and its threat, and figures women as both subjects of desire but also its objects' (Kindig, 2018). I have no doubt at all that this simple hashtag had a very real and profound, empowering effect for many of the women who used it. I was also conflicted, however.

In addition to my overwhelming sense of sadness, that it had taken a movement of literally millions of women to get the message heard, there was also a nagging part of me which I explored in my journal, and later a blog post at the time:

I also wonder what this means for those of us whose bodies and/or identities exist outside the scope of unwanted sexual attention? Those of us that are 'too fat', 'too old' or 'too ugly' and are consequently desexualised and othered. I can honestly say that in my nearly-thirty-one years on this earth I have never been catcalled. That is not to say that I have not experienced street harassment, far from it. Any fat girl will tell you that to have the audacity of walking down the street whilst eating a sandwich on route from A to B is to brace for impact, pray for invisibility and expect abuse. It is also not to say that I don't believe the frequency and intensity of which it happens to other women – I do. I have seen it and heard the countless testimonies of friends and allies. It is also, most definitely not say that I only wish I was deemed attractive enough to harass – I absolutely don't. I can think of few things more terrifying than having to rebuff or ignore such unwanted attention. My questioning here is about the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual erasure.

Is it my place to comment on something I have little experience of? Do I risk hijacking the important and valid discourse around harassment

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by even asking how my experiences relate? I am also all too aware that for some, their non-conformity enters them into a new arena, not harassment, not erasure, but fetishisation. A complex world where aspects of identity are sexualised in isolation and by where consent may or may not be present. I am keen to see if there might be a way to open up the ongoing discourse to create a space that examines the myriad of interconnected modes of sexuality policing without derailing or gaslighting the existing conversation.

At the moment, the truth is that I am not sure. I sit with a discomfort that I don't fully understand. I want to throw my support behind the 'me too' campaign but wonder if my experiences are simply too divergent or irrelevant. I feel, that at best, I can say 'Me Too' – where the * relates to the further introspection and musing contained herein.*

Blog Post, written by me 16.10.17³

My hesitancy above has amplified the more I have read about #MeToo. Perhaps the most pertinent commentary has surrounded the notions of how we as feminists can harness its fifteen minutes of fame. Elizabeth Adetiba asks the important question 'What next?', and Mason Dees highlights that '#MeToo has made it clear what we are against. But what are we fighting to create?' (Mason-Deese, 2018). Reese and Coontz extrapolate further:

If we allow these salacious details to take over everything and don't get at the root of why women, for so long, did not feel able to express this, we will either have this blow over or it will continue – and it will be a convenient way of bloodletting every few years... If we just focus on the sexual abuses of individual men, we could have something similar to a downside of the progress we made in race relations. When everybody started saying that discrimination is a bad thing, people then started to argue that discrimination is over – the argument being that because we say it's bad, we no longer have to do anything about it. The parallel here is that you could say it means we just need to teach men to behave better, and go after individual men instead of talking about women's lack of power in the workforce.

(Reese and Coontz, 2018)

Tarana Burke herself makes an important point and cautions against the tendency to whitewash the movement (Adetiba and Burke, 2018), while former Charlie Rose producer Rebecca Carroll 'described a pattern of Rose undermining her work, how she was 'silenced and punished.' With Rose, she writes, 'His sexualisation of white women was a manifestation of gendered power dynamics in the same way that his not sexualizing me was an expression of racialized power dynamics' (Gira Grant, 2018). It is thus imperative that we approach #MeToo intersectionally, recognising that the ways in which women are harassed,

³ Full blog post at <https://ellietalkstothevoid.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/me-too/>

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(de)sexualised can vary significantly, just as we saw with the notions of objectification and subjectification under Raunch.

Race is a hugely important factor when deconstructing the #MeToo movement. To be entirely critical or dismissive of what it has achieved risks undermining the very real opportunity for healing that it has offered many women. Burke comments that 'our [the Black] community doesn't go to therapy in the same way' in (Adetiba and Burke, 2018) so the opportunity that #MeToo has afforded cannot be understated. Moreover, she highlights that not only is there greater interest in celebrity vis-a-vis *white* victims, but the consequences for the abusers of women of colour don't ever seem to be as severe. R Kelly remains relatively unscathed despite being caught *on tape* with an underage girl, and Chris Brown was rewarded with his own show on Netflix in 2017 despite his 2009 conviction for felony assault against Rhianna. Law notes that in highlighting so many cases of white victimhood, there is a risk that we 'might reinforce notions of what a victim looks like: notions that exclude survivors who are women of color, trans, poor and/or have past histories with law enforcement' (Law, 2018).

I am also interested in how something so obviously and overtly about solidarity risks being diluted to focus on individual actions. 'The conversation is largely about Harvey Weinstein or other individual bogeymen. Burke expressed her frustration that 'no matter how much I keep talking about power and privilege, they keep bringing it back to individuals' in (Adetiba and Burke, 2018). As is the risk within fourth-wave feminism more generally, of individualism overshadowing collective endeavour, in the case of movements like #MeToo it risks negating structural causes of oppression and places emphasis on individual actions and misdemeanours which require personal apologies and individual treatment for sex addictions. Gira Grant notes that 'the stories women have related under the #MeToo banner are getting edited down to something else, a vaguer behaviour: 'sexual misconduct'. This is a mistake. Misconduct can sound like a purely interpersonal problem, a disagreement that causes 'offense' but is no one's fault in particular. Harassment, however is enabled by a system: the boss, the human resources department... a workplace culture of disregard' (Gira Grant, 2018).

Identity politics is such a double-edged sword. I spend a lot of my time in the socialist movement defending the ways in which identity politics, rather than separating us from our class affiliations, allow us to describe how our character traits intersect and create overlapping, conflating and diverging sites of oppression. However, fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo movement are susceptible to the co-opting of their identity politics by oppressive forces. I cannot begin to describe my rage as a pansexual woman, when Kevin Spacey opted to turn his non-apology into his personal coming out narrative (Spacey, 2017), as if queer people have not spent decades rebuffing the conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia. Moreover,

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as a mentally ill person myself, and an advocate for mental health awareness and acceptance, I have no problem in accepting the existence of sex addiction. However, in talking in terms of his personal addiction and going to 'rehab', Spacey reinforced the idea that this problem is about individual men and their personal failings, and not one of structural and material gender oppression. As well as being deeply problematic for the feminist political cause, this also has the effect of letting the rest of the non-gropey men off the hook by facilitating their plausible deniability; that this is something other, 'bad' men do, but in which they do not themselves engage and thus do not benefit from. Or to put it more succinctly, to dismiss that second-wave claim that 'all men are potential rapists'⁴.

In an attempt to address this issue, Mason-Deese advocates for what has been called 'A politics in feminine': 'a way of doing politics differently, a way of doing politics that seeks to overturn the social relations at the heart of capitalism, a politics that seeks to *change everything*' (Mason-Deese, 2018). Whilst this notion appears admirable, it is not obvious at first how the 'politics in feminine' differs from other forms of revolutionary ideology such as Marxism or Anarchism or Feminism. She argues further that:

Politics in feminine refuses victimhood. Instead, its strength from what various feminist activists have called ['among women'], or practices of everyday self-organization between women that allows not only for discussing shared experiences, but also for something akin to consciousness-raising. Here, all women and their different experiences and knowledges are valued, leaving no room for superstars, whether actresses or academics. And in the ['among women'], networks of interdependence are also created, in which women build skills and relationships that ultimately allow them to challenge the norms of power, both capitalist and patriarchal...

More than a politics of survival, a politics in feminine is built around desire, around women's desire, and in direct opposition to a form of politics that conceives of militancy in terms of self-sacrifice and suffering. The politics in feminine seeks to enhance the spaces for women's joy and desire to flourish. #MeToo can open the space, not for a 'sex panic' as some critics would have it, but for a politics premised on desire. The desire not (to) be harassed or attacked as well as the positive desire to assert our bodily autonomy.

(Mason-Deese, 2018)

This is a highly interesting argument for my research and hints at how I believe the #MeToo movement can begin to be characterised as more than simply an online movement, but as a distinct *moment* in the cultural politics of sex. Mason Deese argues that 'we must turn #MeToo into a process of investigation, into collective charting of how different women are situated in

⁴ Exact citation unknown as attributed to multiple authors, but the phrase 'all men are rapists' is found in Marlyn French's 1977 book *The Women's Room*

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colonial capitalist-patriarchal power. And through this mapping, construct concrete relationships of resistance and alliance, where we are figured not as victims seeking redress, but as active political subjects' (Mason-Deese, 2018). The crux of this thesis is an attempt to do just that: to locate this new, feminist entity and politics of sex, by viewing it through the lens of its contemporary cultural output.

What The Hell Is Fourth-Wave Feminism? A Political Context for #MeToo

The idea that there is anything inherently 'new' in this latest conceptualization of feminism is continually problematized. Indeed, whether associated with a surge in online activism and the utilization of new technology, or coupled with an evolving understanding on intersectional feminism, much that has been promoted as defining the fourth wave has in fact being previously linked with prior waves.

(Rivers, 2017, p.5)

Having assessed #MeToo as a movement and inspected its roots and some of the responses to it, I now want to paint a picture of the site of its aforementioned 'collision' with cultural and political factors in order to demonstrate the utility of elevating our conceptualisation of it from a single-issue 'movement' to a much broader, and socially significant 'moment'. I will start by examining the political phenomena of fourth-wave feminism which tells us about the kind of politics that #MeToo embodies. I will then move on to look at how such politics have entered contemporary cultural spaces and output to show that there is something important and distinct happening in the cultural politics of sex, which has arisen from the specific politics of the fourth-wave and their collision with changing modalities of cultural production, such as internet-enabled television, which are coalesced in the new cultural moment that I am calling #MeToo.

The notion of a 'fourth-wave' of feminism is contentious, and as Rivers alludes to above, it has been noted that what has come to be understood as the fourth-wave, contains perhaps more continuation with its predecessor than previous waves. However, despite elements of continuity with the third-wave, I believe that there are enough new developments, or differing approaches to pre-existing concepts, occurring within feminism at present to mark this as a distinct and important new 'wave' in its own right. Defining precisely what fourth-wave feminism is, is a difficult undertaking, in part because it is characterised by its pluralistic nature, and in part because we are very much still inside the fourth wave. However, as I will examine below, the following are, for me, the key areas of development and progress:

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- The centering of transfeminist approaches to gender
- The mainstreaming of intersectional approaches and identity politics
- The adoption of ‘choice feminism’, celebrity and consumerism
- A radical inclusivity in approaches to sex work
- A turn towards more radical, collectivist approaches (despite critiques to the contrary)
- A wholesale integration of the internet into feminist praxis and an accompanying cultural competence and engagement⁵

I began from a perception that there *has* been a feminist resurgence in the last ten or so years, which is differentiated from the ‘third-wave’ of the late 90s and early 2000s, both in terms of its methodology and ideology. Wikipedia (cited as a social barometer of current consensus rather than as definitive critique) locates the start of the fourth wave in 2008 (Wikipedia, 2018c). My own instinct is that the start was perhaps a little later than this, but it serves as a good benchmark for illustrative purposes. It is also a time frame supported by Chamberlain, 2017; Munro, 2013; Baumgardner, 2007. My evidence for the existence of a new iteration of feminism is also largely from being active in the feminist movement, both online and IRL⁶, but also from the spate of books and articles being published on the topic (see in particular, Zeisler, 2016 and also Chemaly, 2017; Connelly, 2015; Evans, 2016b; Lewis, Marine and Kenney, 2018; Richards, 2017; Springer, 2017; Rivers, 2017). For the purpose of this ‘snapshot’, however, I am using ‘fourth-wave’ as a kind of shorthand to mean the feminism in the last ten or so years.

Fourth-wave feminism, like all forms before it, has been simultaneously celebrated as the saviour, and touted as the downfall, of feminism as we know it. Perhaps, more unique to discussions around the fourth-wave however has been the discourse on whether it is *really* feminism at all.

It’s a feminism that trades on simple themes of sisterhood and support – you-go-girl tweets and Instagram photos, cheery magazine editorials about dressing to please yourself. The fight for gender equality has transmogrified from a collective goal to a consumer brand.

(Zeisler, 2016, p.XV)

Zeisler, as noted above, adopts a pessimistic view of the fourth wave as some sort of selling-out of feminist values, but I think her approach misses some of the important new political work which is going on within feminism right now. Despite arguably being the most diverse

⁵ I do not include a specific section on this, because the presence of internet, social media etc is demonstrated throughout my analysis of the Fourth Wave and #MeToo moment.

⁶ Internet slang, ‘In real life’

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and multifaceted iteration of feminism to date, there are some themes and strands which are fairly constant across the board, the first of which is a much broader and inclusive understanding of gender.

Trans-Feminism

Afterall, at its core, feminism is based on the conviction that women are far more than the sex of the bodies that they were born into, and our identities and abilities are capable of transcending the restrictive nature of the gender socialization we endure during our childhoods.

(Serano, 2007, pp.238–239)

The fourth wave is significantly marked in its departure from the second wave of the 1960-80s (and in particular, Radical Feminism) by its almost universal conceptualisation and acceptance of gender being best understood as a spectrum rather than a binary set. Whilst the second wave freed women from the notion that biology was destiny and called into question the roles that were ascribed to people based on their sex (as biologically determined and as distinct from gender which was understood as socially constructed), fourth-wave feminism rejects the rigidity of both sex and gender as categories.

Such a conceptualisation is a direct influence of queer theory and transfeminism, which, although predate the fourth-wave, have been historically marginalised or treated as alternative feminist modalities. My argument is that under the fourth wave, queer and transfeminist principles have shifted from running concurrently and alongside mainstream feminist thought to now be not only accepted as given but actively promoted and fought for by fourth-wave feminists.

Judith Butler wrote what can be understood as the foundational text on queer theory, *Gender Trouble*, in 1990. In it she advanced discourses on gender by arguing that in addition to gender being socially constructed, sex too, was nothing more than a construct (Butler, 1990), or as Kate Bornstein fabulously writes 'please — don't call it "biological sex" or "social gender". Don't call it "sex" at all — sex is fucking; gender is everything else' (Bornstein, 1994, p.149)! Butler argued that gender is 'performative' in that it is created when men and women carry out ritualistic and habitual behaviours which in themselves produce and reproduce gender. Though her ideas were hugely popular and influential at the time (particularly within the academy), they remained within the new but distinct field of queer theory and did not enter mainstream feminist canon as such. However, in destabilising the concept of gender, *Gender Trouble* laid the foundation for transfeminist thought, which began to emerge in the late 1990s.

Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* (Bornstein, 1994) clearly builds on and is indebted to queer ideas;

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The possibility missed by most of the texts prior to the past few years, and by virtually all the various popular media, is this: the culture may not simply be creating roles for naturally gendered people, the culture may in fact be creating the gendered people.

(Bornstein, 1994, pp.14–15)

Their remarkably personal account of living as a ‘gender outlaw’ shed light on the pain and misery experienced by trans people and pointed at gender as the cause. ‘It’s the grasping for gender — any gender — that’s always been a cause of my suffering’ (Bornstein, 1994, p.151). For Bornstein, and many others, queer theory posited the possibility of additional, nonbinary genders: ‘I don’t call myself a woman, and I know I’m not a man’ (Czyzelska, 2016). She notes that ‘when we introduce multiple binaries ‘the circle is no longer a binary — it’s a dialectic. In form, a dialectic system is a playground’ (Bornstein, 1994, p.xvi), which hints at the productive potential in creating ‘deliciously problematic’ (Bornstein, 1994, p.xvi) genders, or ‘gender trouble’ (Butler, 1990). Such forms, I argue, are not only especially centralised and celebrated in the fourth wave, but evident in the queer-feminist cultural output I examine later in this thesis.

Building on Butler and Bornstein’s contributions, perhaps the most pivotal ‘transfeminist’ text was Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* (Serano, 2007). Serano objects to the conclusion sometimes (erroneously) drawn from *Gender Trouble* that her gender is merely performance as for her, this implies some level of artifice in what she feels very innately: ‘while femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped and enforced by society, to say that it is entirely “artificial” or merely a “performance” is patronizing towards those for whom femininity simply *feels right*’ (Serano, 2007, p.338).

If one more person tells me that “all gender is performance” I think I’m going to strangle them. What’s more annoying about that soundbite is how it is often recited in a somewhat snooty “I-took-a-gender-studies-class-and-you-didn’t” sort of way, which is ironic given the way that phrase dumbs down gender.’ It is a crass over simplification that is as ridiculous as saying all gender is genitals, all gender is chromosomes, or all gender is socialization. In reality, gender is all of these things and more.

(Serano, 2013, p.105)

She argues that both feminism and queer theory ‘rendered it implausible that we could have some kind of self-understanding regarding our own gender that differs from our assigned and socialized gender’ (Serano, 2007, p.xv). Instead she posits the notion of a ‘subconscious sex’;

If I were to say that I “saw” myself as female, or “knew” myself to be a girl, I would be denying the fact that I was consciously aware of my physical maleness at all times. And saying that I “wished” or “wanted” to be a girl

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erases how much being female made sense to me, how it felt right on the deepest, most profound level of my being. I could say that I “felt” like a girl, but that would give the false impression that I knew how other girls (and other boys) felt. And if I were to say that I was “supposed to be” a girl, or that I “should have been born” female, it would imply that I had some sort of cosmic insight into the grand scheme of the universe, which I most certainly did not...On some level, my brain expects my body to be female’

(Serano, 2007, p.80)

Here, and below in her more formalised ‘intrinsic inclinations’ model, we can see how Serano formulates an intermediary path between viewing biology as destiny, or biology as construct, towards a rendering that best fits her lived experience as a trans woman.

- 1. Subconscious sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation represent separate gender inclinations that are determined largely independently of one another.*
- 2. These gender inclinations are, to some extent, intrinsic to our persons, as they occur on a deep, subconscious level and generally remain intact despite social influences and conscious attempts by individuals to purge, repress, or ignore them.*
- 3. Because no single genetic, anatomical, hormonal, environmental, or physical factor has ever been found to directly cause any of these gender inclinations, we can assume that they are quantitative traits (i.e., multiple factors determine them through complex interactions). As a result, rather than producing discrete classes (such as feminine and masculine; attraction to women or men), each inclination shows a continuous range of possible outcomes.*
- 4. Each of these inclinations roughly correlates with physical sex, resulting in a bimodal distribution pattern (i.e., two overlapping bell curves) similar to that seen for other gender differences, such as height.*

(Serano, 2007, pp.99–100)

Infographics such as *The Genderbread Person*, and *The Gender Unicorn* below reflect these more diverse (Bornstein) and complex (Butler/Serano) understandings of gender and have been widely shared in online feminist spaces in addition to being used in teaching and training around gender and gender diversity. In this new sliding-scale approach to gender, people can exist at any or even multiple points along an axis of masculine to feminine, and some folks, who identify as non-binary, genderqueer or agender, may exist outside of the spectrum entirely.

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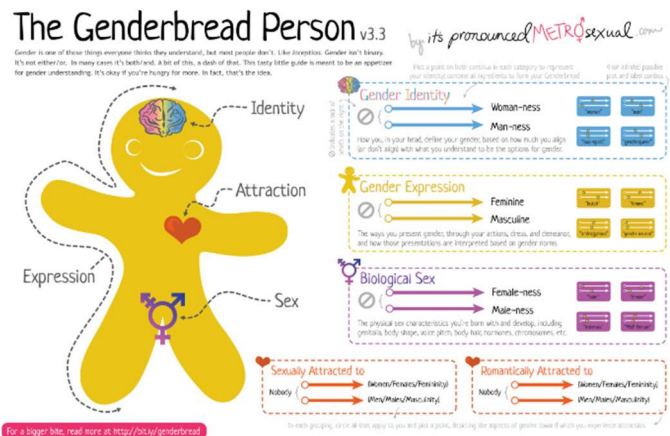
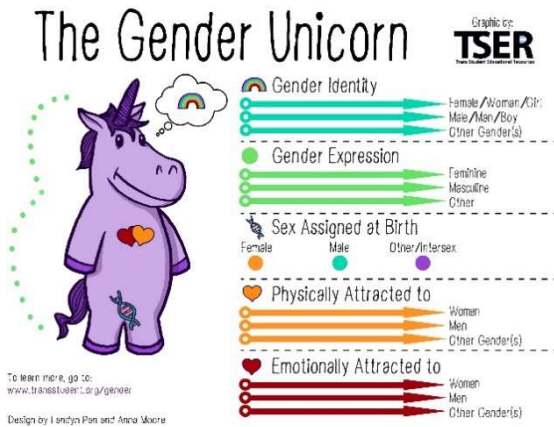


Fig 4.0 The Gender Unicorn (Pan and Moore) **Fig 5.0** The Genderbread Person V3.3 (Genderbread.org)

Bornstein themselves reflects on the developments in the twenty plus years since she published *Gender Outlaw*:

Not-man, not-woman — I defined myself by what I was not. Today, tens of thousands of people who understand themselves to be not-men, not-women use words that describe precisely who they are: femme-identified non binary trans, or gender nonconforming, or agender or transmasculine genderqueer and so forth.

(Bornstein, 1994, p.xiv)

The fact that The Genderbread Person is already on its third version, is testament to how quickly ideas about gender have been evolving in recent years, as is Facebook’s 2014 decision to allow people to select from any one of 71 gender options on their profile (Williams, 2014) and the press coverage as more organisations offer the gender neutral title ‘Mx’ on their customer accounts (Bulman, 2017).

In addition to further destabilising gender, Serano made another major contribution to fourth-wave feminism in her conceptualisation of ‘transmisogyny’ which ‘encapsulates the interplay between transphobia and misogyny’ (Serano, 2007, p.xiv). She highlighted that the discrimination she faces is not just because her subconscious sex does not align with her biological sex (transphobia), but also because of her femininity (misogyny), observing that it was not just the patriarchy which hated femininity but that feminism itself had come to treat it

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with scorn describing feminism's wholesale dismissal of femininity as 'one of [its] more unfortunate missteps' (Serano, 2007, p.xix). Moreover, Serano notes that:

Women who engaged in feminine beauty practices were perhaps the biggest target of such criticism as they were accused of donning "symbols of oppression", being manipulated by "thought control", alienating themselves from their own bodies, and taking part in "self-imposed passivity"... By arrogantly assuming that no woman could be legitimately drawn toward feminine expression, these feminists permanently relegated femininity to the status of "false consciousness".

(Serano, 2007, pp.333–338)

In the fourth-wave we have seen attempts to reconcile feminism with femininity as typically feminine behaviours, aesthetic choices etc have come to be regarded as matters of individual choice and preference as opposed to internalised forms of patriarchal oppression or false consciousness. It is true that the celebration of 'femme' was also present in the Girl Power of the third-wave, but my sense is that at that time, it became almost prescriptive or compulsory; that the third-wave was in itself 'girly'. The fourth simply allows femme as one of many legitimate identities and aesthetics

Here, she is referring to the second-wave tendency to demonise femininity, but I think the same argument could be made in relation to how some, third-wave feminists were critical of the women of Raunch Culture accusing them of being dupes or 'female chauvinists' (Levy, 2006). Third-wave feminism it can be argued may have hailed the feminine, but only if it was performed correctly and not in ways which were deemed 'too sexy' or objectifying.

The final contribution of transfeminism to the fourth-wave that I want to discuss is the ways in which it rails against 'TERF'⁷ ideology which seeks to invalidate the identities of trans people or cast them as threats to woman-only safe spaces. This reportedly contentious issue has received a lot of public attention, particularly in relation to the comments of children's author J K Rowling (see Ferber, 2020; Colyard; O'Connor, 2020; Flood, 2020). The graph below also offers a glimpse at the extent to which interest in this topic has piqued.

⁷ Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist

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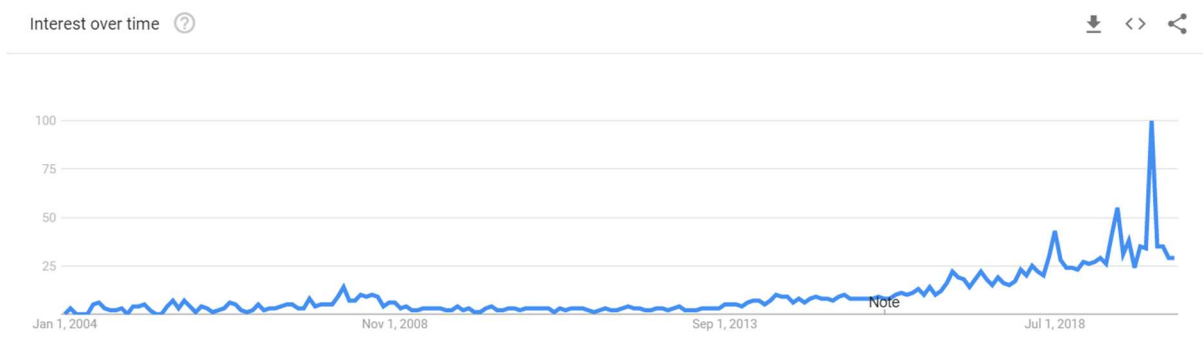


Fig 6.0 Google Trends Results for the frequency of Google searches of the word ‘TERF’ (Google, 2020)⁸

I do not wish to afford much airtime to the beliefs of this group as I feel that to do so gives credence to a form of feminism⁹ which is exclusionary and bigoted and not itself the focus of this thesis, however their objections can broadly be summarised as being based in the view that trans women (in particular) are really men because they have been socialised as men and as such pose a risk to the safety of women, and in particular, domestic abuse survivors. They also allege that transgender people re-enforce the gender binary that second-wave feminists fought to smash because some trans people adopt typically masculine or feminine gender identities.

Bornstein refers to ‘gender defenders’ and ‘gender terrorists’ as people ‘for whom binary gender forms a cornerstone of their view of the world’ (Bornstein, 1994, p.94). Though they preferred to be called ‘gender critical’ feminists, I will use the popularised term TERF to refer to people who do not accept the presence or validity of transgender people. TERF represents not just the aforementioned trans critics, but the conceptualisation under the fourth-wave (though clearly, once more influenced by the likes of Bornstein) of an enemy to contemporary feminism, which is in itself interesting. It is also the preferred term of the trans community and I feel it is an accurate description of the position held by these people. As Judith Butler has recently commented:

My wager is that most feminists support trans rights and oppose all forms of transphobia. So I find it worrisome that suddenly the trans-exclusionary radical feminist position is understood as commonly accepted or even mainstream. I think it is actually a fringe movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen.

(Butler interviewed by Ferber, 2020)

⁸ Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

⁹ Though I am inclined to argue that such views are not actually feminist at all

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Not only is Butler taking exception to the theoretical stance of TERFs, but she is rightly highlighting that they no longer represent the mainstream of fourth-wave feminism. My point throughout this section is not to suggest that fourth-wave feminism has invented trans inclusivity; simply that it has adopted it as its de facto position and this has largely been as a result of the contributions of queer theory, post-structuralism, trans rights and transfeminism. Moreover, transfeminism has opened up the very concept of 'woman' within fourth-wave feminism. As Leslie Feinberg noted much earlier, 'I think that if we define "woman" as a fixed entity we will draw borders that would need to be policed. No matter what definition is used, many women who should be inside will be excluded' (Feinberg, 1996, p.109).

Queer and transfeminists have fought TERF logic by countering arguments made with ideas drawn from transfeminist and queer theory. For example, Butler denounces the notion that trans women threaten women-only spaces as phallogentric; 'it assumes that the penis is the threat, or that any person who has a penis who identifies as a woman is engaging in a base, deceitful, and harmful form of disguise' (Butler cited in Ferber, 2020). Serano also addresses this by sharing her own experience (which is all too common among trans folk):

Yes, I do know what those women have been through. I have had men force themselves upon me. Like you, we trans women are physically violated and abused for being women too. And there are no words in your second-wave feminist lexicon to adequately describe the way that we, young trans girls, forced against our will into boyhood have been raped by male culture. Every trans woman is a survivor and we have triggers too. And my trigger is pseudo-feminists who hide their prejudices behind "womyn-born-womyn-only" euphemisms'.

(Serano, 2013, p.31)

Moreover, Feinberg asks in response to the allegation that trans women are not socialised as women and thus don't have the shared experience necessary to define them as women:

If facing women's oppression defines being a woman, how long do you have to live it before you're "in"? Many lesbians went through a long period of heterosexuality before coming out. Would anyone argue that they should be excluded from lesbian gatherings because they were heterosexual during their formative years?

(Feinberg, 1996, p.113)

Serano builds on this by positing that:

What truly unites feminists is not a shared history (as we each bring a unique set of life experiences to the table), but our shared commitment to fighting against the devaluation of femaleness and femininity in our society.

(Serano, 2007, p.311)

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Serano cautions against any and all forms of 'gender entitlement', which is 'when a person privileges their own perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of other people's genders over the way those people understand themselves' (Serano, 2007, p.9) and Feinberg notes that the body, instead of being a place of judgement or policing represents the 'intersection of the demands of the trans movement and the women's movement...The heart of both is the right of each individual to make decisions about our own bodies and to define ourselves' (Feinberg, 1996, pp.104–105). It is this logic, I argue, centred by fourth-wave feminism, which has not only adopted trans-inclusion, but the specificities of queer and transfeminism in relation to its very understanding of gender.

*If your Feminism isn't Intersectional, It isn't Feminism*¹⁰

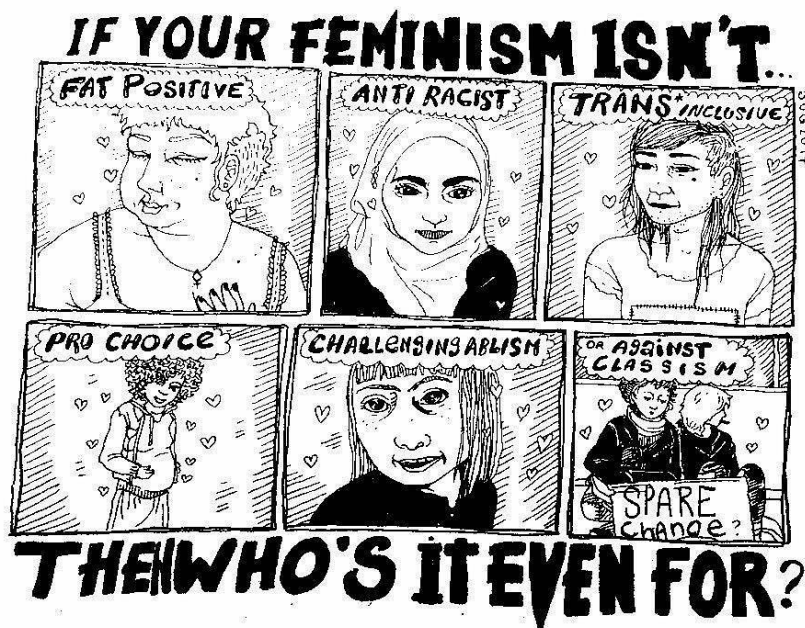


Fig 7. Untitled Comic by Bug Cru (Bug Cru, 2014)

Anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men.

(Adichie, 2014)

In much the same way that trans feminism was not invented by the fourth wave, but embraced by it, the same can be said for intersectionality. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1988 (Crenshaw, 1988) and is taken to refer to the ways in which people's oppressions and

¹⁰ Common fourth-wave slogan, origin unknown

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privileges intersect; the ways in which the oppression I experience as a fat, queer, woman is not simply the sum of the oppressions of each of those identities.

The contribution of black feminists, from bell hooks to Audre Lorde, is essential here. However, hooks' book *Ain't I a Woman?* (hooks, 1987) was written precisely to chart the ways in which mainstream (read, white) feminism had left black women behind. My argument is that the fourth wave has co-opted racial politics (and other intersections) as part of its mainstream. This is not of course to say that fourth-wave feminism is a perfect haven of inclusivity, but that it's intersectional aspirations are now at the core of the movement.

The fourth-wave period, and in particular 2020, has seen an explosion in the publication of and interest in, popular texts on race (see Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Akala, 2019; Olusoga, 2017; DiAngelo, 2019). Moreover, there has also been a recent spate of popular intersectional texts charting often overlapping topics such as race, disability, feminism and queer (see Olufemi, 2020; Phipps, 2020; Kendall, 2020; Wong (Ed), 2020; Lester, 2020; Ryan, 2019 in the last year alone).

A key development in this fourth-wave intersectionality has been its notable attempts to distance itself from so-called '(Neo-)Liberal Feminism'

I mean mostly Anglo-American public feminism. This includes media feminism (and some forms of social media feminism) or what media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has called 'popular feminism': the feminist ideas and politics that circulate on mainstream platforms. It also includes institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism: the feminism that tends to dominate in universities, government bodies, private companies and NGOs'... In other texts it has been called 'neoliberal feminism', 'lean-in' feminism and 'feminism for the 1%'. This is because it wants power within the existing system rather than an end to the status quo.

(Phipps, 2020, p.5)

What is interesting about these kinds of texts is that they show how during the fourth-wave period, it is less inclusive forms of 'white feminism' which are being othered whilst intersectional approaches, often themselves critical of the mainstream, become mainstream themselves. Though sometimes derided as such, this is not always a bad thing, as Olufemi states 'when feminism enters the mainstream, it does not automatically lose its meaning or its appeal. What matters is the way it is discussed and whether or not that discussion challenges or affirms the status quo' (Olufemi, 2020, p.7).

Alison Phipps is a white feminist whose book *#MeToo Not You* (Phipps, 2020) specifically seeks to destabilize political whiteness, including her own. In it she discusses how the #MeToo movement was co-opted, as I have discussed, by white feminists. What I think is interesting

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about the fourth wave then is not that it can be characterised by white feminism taking over movements such as #MeToo (though this did happen and must be called out), but by the calling-out and critiquing of such transgressions. I do not want to suggest that this is a simple, linear process which has occurred/ is occurring, or that the fourth-wave is a completed project; there is tension and struggle, but for me, fourth-wave feminism can be defined by this struggle and by its attempts, efforts and at times publicised failures to do better than its predecessors.

Moreover, in addition to calling out short-comings within the movement, the fourth wave has seen feminists from a much more diverse range of backgrounds carve out spaces within the movement for themselves. Mikki Kendall and Frances Ryan both employ intersectional perspectives in their books to render visible more diverse experiences of victimhood:

When we talk about rape culture the focus is often on potential date-rape of suburban teens, not the higher rates of sexual assault and abuse faced by Indigenous American and Alaskan women. Assault of sex workers, cis and trans, is completely obscured because they aren't the right kind of victims. Feminism in the hood is for everyone, because everyone needs it.

(Kendall, 2020, p.xviii)

All of this is not to say that issues of whitewashing, heteronormativity, ableism and the erasure of people of colour do not still persist, but high-profile examples of this are now more frequently 'called out' and there is more discussion around inclusivity within feminism. Key examples of this are the wide-spread criticism of Lena Dunham's TV show *Girls* for its lack of racial diversity in casting, despite being set in the heart of Brooklyn (Jackson, 2018; Stephens, 2016; Zeisler, 2016; Kendall, 2020) and of the casting of white actor Tilda Swinton in the role of 'The Ancient One' in 2016's *Doctor Strange* (Evans, 2016a; Park, 2016). The impact of all of this is a feminism which is better placed than ever to tackle issues of difference and inequality because such discourse now form part of its central thesis. Kendall argues that women of colour are not 'supporting characters in feminism' (Kendall, 2020) and as Olufemi points out, this is important for all feminist progressivism;

Refusing neo-liberalism will open you up to a world where 'feminist' means much more than 'woman' or 'equality'. Making these connections is crucial to any revolutionary work because it means that nobody is left behind, nobody's exploitation goes unseen. It asks us to practice radical compassion, to refuse to ignore the pain of others. It demands that we see how tackling seemingly unrelated phenomena like prison expansion, the rise of fascism, neo-colonialism, and climate crisis must also become our priorities.

(Olufemi, 2020, p.5)

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My Feminism, My Choice: Fourth-Wave Choice, Celebrities and Consumers

The heightened pluralism of fourth-wave feminism extends beyond its intersectional aspirations and also encompasses its emphasis on individualism and the politics of choice. 'Choice' has been a prominent and at times difficult word in the feminist lexicon since the second wave. Rooted in the idea of 'a woman's right to choose' in relation to reproductive freedom, abortion and *Roe v Wade* (1973), 'choice' also became prominent in discussions around sex work during the third-wave/ Raunch Culture and of course during the second-wave Sex Wars. The fourth wave, however, has taken the idea of choice and run with it.

The fundamental problem with 'choice feminism' is regarded to be that if every choice a woman makes is feminist, then nothing is. Alex Kucynski talks about 'an activism of aesthetics' (cited in (Zeisler, 2016, p.221)), whereby the aesthetic choices of women have become recognisable political acts. To some extent, this has always been the case, and debates about hairy armpits and the use of make-up are not novel to the fourth-wave. Zeisler notes, however, that what *is* new is the extent to which this 'activism of aesthetics' appears to her to have displaced traditional forms of activism and now risks being seen as the sole way to *do* feminism. This, she explains is to the detriment of authentic feminist struggle, 'having the luxury of time to spend debating the liberatory dimensions of pubic hair might suggest that more pressing feminist issues have been resolved; people engaging in these dialogues, after all, probably aren't taking time out from working three minimum wage jobs to hop online and weigh in' (Zeisler, 2016, p.235).

Whilst I think Zeisler is right to highlight the problems of replacing collective action with individualist choice, I do not agree with her assessment that this is what is actually happening within the fourth wave. Zeisler herself highlights that much of this type of discourse is happening online, and I think that this shows how fourth-wave feminism has become *more* accessible to people working 'three minimum wage jobs'. Fourth-wave feminists are often pejoratively described as 'keyboard warriors', a moniker that alleges that online activism or 'clicktivism' is somehow less authentic or less meaningful. This idea is rooted in the notion that signing the odd online petition or sharing a particularly punchy tweet or meme is a poor substitute for more traditional forms of political and feminist activism: the kind which involves placards, soap boxes and Reclaim The Night marches.

There are several problems with this assumption. Firstly, it negates the very real way in which online activism allows participation from marginalised groups who might not have the time, resources or physical capacity that more traditional forms of activism require. At times when I

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have been particularly adversely affected by my mental health disability, leaving the house, attending meetings, or interacting with the outside world in person has been simply impossible: online activism has literally been a lifeline for me, allowing me to 'keep my hand in' and still feel as though I was contributing in some small way to the social justice issues that I am so passionate about. Moreover, for those with caring responsibilities who are working multiple jobs or anti-social hours, online activism offers a way of joining in, which doesn't require that one has every 2nd Tuesday of the month available to attend planning meetings. It is true of course that my argument on the inclusivity of online action still requires access to the internet and a certain level of technical knowledge, but the spread of web-enabled mobile devices and fibreoptic broadband is increasingly lowering the bar to access.

The second problem with this maligning of online activism is that it assumes that online campaigns don't actually *achieve* anything and are not concerned about the 'more pressing issues' that Zeisler alludes to. However, some of the most prominent and successful feminist campaigns of recent years have been those executed almost entirely online. #MeToo was remarkable in the extent to which the simple hashtag not only put sexual harassment firmly on the political agenda but it has also become a by-word for a kind of grass-roots, participatory activism which is rooted in social media. This is so much the case that already commentary is appearing which co-opts the hashtag to evaluate the possibilities of a '#MeToo moment' for everything from race relations to video-game communities (MacDonald, 2018; Ramaswamy, 2018). Moreover, the petition website 38degrees has seen recent successes in campaigns to prevent the cover-up of MPs expenses, and to prevent Donald Trump from evicting families in order to build a golf course in Scotland (Carrell, 2009). Caroline Criado-Perez's 2013 campaign to keep prominent women on British banknotes was another example of the very real power of digital mobilisation, and this digital mobilisation has come to represent highly coveted ground in political elections too.

The third problem with a stance which views online participation as an inferior cousin to traditional forms of feminist activism is that it assumes that the one supersedes and displaces the other. In actual fact, digital platforms have been an incredible resource for the organisation and planning of offline actions. Facebook in particular offers groups for collective planning and pages and events for free publicity at a level which might previously have required costly and time-consuming leafletting and poster campaigns, and simple tools like Doodle Poll and Google Calendars allow effective time management for planning meetings and actions themselves. Furthermore, and contrary to what Andi Zeisler says, many activists are involved in *both* new and old kinds of organising, with the former often acting as a segue into the latter. I personally feel like digital technology has turned me into a full-time activist in the sense that

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on evenings and weekends where I am not attending meetings, rallies or other actions, I am participating in discussions, petitions and the sharing of news and commentary online¹¹.

Lastly, Zeisler also states that choice feminism doesn't offer any tangible benefit to the women who participate in it. Whilst she makes many astute observations and criticisms in *We Were Feminists Once* and has undeniable credibility as a feminist commentator, thanks in part to her work co-founding *Bitch* magazine, I do not think that she has the right to dictate what improves a person's life or gives them a sense of accomplishment. She runs the risk of coming across as patronising, and believing that she knows what is best for other women. The key here I think is to find a balance between being critical and knowing in our choices whilst still being free to make them: something which is precisely what fourth-wave feminism seeks to achieve. The fourth-wave creates a space for women to be entirely clued up on the patriarchal and consumerist origins of make-up for example, whilst still allowing them the freedom of choice to buy it, wear it, and feel empowered by it if that's what they want to do. In a sense, the fourth-wave is about reclaiming certain choices and resisting the second-wave tendency to replace the aesthetic policing of patriarchy with a different kind of feminist body/ choice policing.

Andi Zeisler quips that 'There 'are problems that can't and won't be solved by marketplace feminism. They are impervious to our "feminist as fuck" necklaces and "I Blame the Patriarchy" unicorn T-Shirts. (Nothing wrong with those, they're cute as hell)' (Zeisler, 2016), and in doing so draws attention to another of the fourth-wave's most contentious characteristics: its relationship to consumerism. Chemaly describes that 'more and more companies and messages encouraged women to see feminism in terms of making their own (limited) choices and spending their (still-lower) salaries' (Chemaly, 2017, p.202). We saw an increase during the third-wave of mainstream products being advertised in a way which was clearly informed by feminism and 'advertisers were careful not to explicitly name feminism or the current women's liberation movement: the whole point was to capture potential customers who believed enough in women's liberation to want to support companies that referenced it, but not enough to shun what feminists saw as tools of sexual objectification' (Zeisler, 2016, p.5). From Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign which started in 2004, and is still going strong, to suffrage-themed credit cards (Zeisler, 2016, p.3), we didn't have to look far to find examples of advertising that were at least employing 'the *language* of feminism, in the service of capitalism' (Zeisler, 2016, p.3) during Raunch Culture. What is novel about the fourth-wave

¹¹ What this means for my mental and spiritual wellbeing is for another time, but on the whole I feel empowered by being able to live my political life in more diverse and holistic ways.

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however is that the feminist content of consumer products is now being explicitly named and even used as a unique selling point.

Zeisler's commentary appears to conflate post-feminism with fourth-wave feminism, which is a mistake. It is true that the fourth-wave has accepted elements of choice feminism, but it has also quite prominently criticised the cynical attempts by advertisers to use the language of feminism for profit. Fourth-wave feminists have been quick to highlight the obvious hypocrisy of a brand championing 'real' beauty whilst at the same time trying to sell anti-aging soap (Craik, 2017; Celebre and Waggoner Denton, 2014). They have also elegantly discussed the limitations of 'real' beauty as portrayed by *Dove*, arguing that despite being celebrated for using more diverse models in their adverts, in reality they diverged from mainstream beauty standards by just enough; the smallest divergence possible to guarantee praise for pushing the boundaries whilst not actually challenging mainstream aesthetics in a way which might make potential consumers uncomfortable (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). What this commentary shows is that far from being duped by femvertising and post-feminist aesthetics, fourth-wave feminists are much more critically minded and sophisticated than Zeisler gives them (us?) credit for being. The continued spread of post-feminist imagery has occurred simultaneously with the rise of the fourth-wave, but this does not make them the same thing.

Zeisler does, however, articulately describe a further development in the relationship between feminism and consumerism, which has been embraced by the fourth-wave: what she calls 'market feminism' (Zeisler, 2016). Market feminism is not only evidenced tacitly in mainstream advertising, it has even created a niche market of its own: the market for feminist-themed, or 'empowertizing' (Zeisler, 2016), products which trade even more explicitly and overtly on their 'feminist' credentials. The clearest example of this are the now-infamous 'This is what a feminist looks like' T-shirts, arising from a collaboration between *Elle* magazine and The Fawcett society. The T-shirts became a by-word for the most troubling manifestations of market feminism when it emerged that they were being produced in sweatshops, paying women as little as 62p an hour (Cartner-Morley, 2017; Craven, 2014), a fact further exacerbated by the exclusive ticket price of £45...for a T-SHIRT!

I had my own misgivings about the shirts too. As a queer, fat, woman, with PCOS¹² induced hirsutism, I am *precisely* what the hypothetical thinkers, assume a feminist looks like. The fact that the campaign appeared to me to be trying to distance feminism from what Zeisler calls 'feminism's 'unflattering optic legacy' (Zeisler, 2016, p.65) felt hurtful and 'meant to reassure

¹² Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

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others that women could be feminist and still care about being normatively good-looking and attractive to others' (Zeisler, 2016, pp.65–66); to 'make feminism palatable again' (Zeisler, 2016, p.10). I understand that the aim at least was to demonstrate that a person does not have to be a walking stereotype in order to identify as a feminist, but to me, it felt as though I was being pushed out for cramping the style of the movement. Never mind the fact that the hefty price tag is, to me, more than a week's worth of grocery shopping.

Zeisler argues that the T-shirts are the tip of the iceberg in new, feminist merch. A cursory search of the term 'feminist' on Etsy¹³ returned a staggering 59,578 results... at least 30,000 of which I wanted to buy! The late American lawmaker Ruth Bader Ginsburg has become a feminist pop culture icon, now dubbed 'the notorious RBG', her image (like that of Che Guevara) appears in the form of everything from colouring books to crocheted dolls.

The fourth-wave has thus created a kind of feminist chic, which merges, or conflates, depending on how you look at it, 'a woman's right to choose' with the hegemony of consumer choice. I do, however, think that perhaps the presence of widespread critique of the Fawcett Society T-shirts, is illustrative not of the shortcomings of fourth-wave feminism but of its strengths to challenge hypocrisy, and the capitalist cashing in on the moment. The Etsy products I so covet, are largely made by DIY individual artists, as opposed to in third-world sweatshops, and this is an important distinction. For me, the Fawcett shirts represented an outdated attempt to jump on the fourth-wave bandwagon, which was quickly called out and dismissed as phony.

This 'calling out' can be seen ever more frequently since the explosion of web 2.0, social media and mobile technology, which have meant that the population is engaging with media in new and interesting ways, and possibly becoming savvier too. Rivers notes that 'as feminist academics increasingly turn their attention to both media portrayals of women, and the impact of popular cultures on women's lives, this binary between discussions taking place inside and outside of academia is being steadily eroded' (Rivers, 2017), and I think that is evidenced by just how much fourth-wave discourse takes place outside of the academy¹⁴. Zeisler acknowledges the example of public shaming whereby media, and particularly adverts which do not hit the mark for modern standards of cultural sensitivity are quickly taken to task on Twitter and Facebook. What might once have generated a couple of complaint letters can now result in powerful micro-campaigns online. 'Publicly shaming has turned out to be an incredibly

¹³ Searched on Etsy.com on 05.03.2018

¹⁴ The bibliography of this thesis for example is littered with commentary from non-mainstream news sites, entertainment blogs and social media

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effective way— and, in the case of ads offensive to women, perhaps the *only* way – to get brands thinking about the impact of their messages and imagery’ (Zeisler, 2016, p.27), and my argument is that it is the public shaming, not the existence of the ads themselves which are distinct in fourth-wave feminism.

The recent case with our old friend *Dove* is a clear example of this. **Fig 8** shows a collage of stills from their advert which was supposed to demonstrate how Dove soap is great for a diverse range of women (in line with their *Real Beauty campaign*), however it backfired spectacularly in 2017, when commentators quickly pointed out that the three-second social media clip appeared to show a Black woman using the soap and transforming into a white woman. The racist subtext was apparent to the many thousands who shared and tweeted about the ad, and it was swiftly pulled, and an apology was issued.



Fig 8 Dove’s racist advert, image sourced from (Slawson, 2017)

What was interesting about this case was that the ‘commentators’ who criticised the ad were mostly non-media professionals (the story was later picked up in the press), Twitter and Instagram activists and Wordpress bloggers, which serves to illustrate that the cultural understanding of topics such as race and gender is becoming more sophisticated.

Having explored how feminism has been used, alluded to, co-opted and dis-avowed by consumer culture, I now want to turn my attention to how consumer culture and branding has influenced fourth-wave feminism by looking at feminism as a brand in itself. If the T-shirts were supposed to subvert notions of the dungaree-wearing feminists of old, then the 2013 attempt by *Elle* to rebrand feminism (Swirling, 2013) can be seen as a venture to dis/replace it altogether with ‘a new-and-improved, quick-dry, lemon-fresh feminism’ (Zeisler, 2016, p.73). The campaign which sought suggestions on a new word for ‘feminism’ ran the tag line ‘what

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does it mean to *you?*’ and exemplified the individualism previously discussed, but the campaign itself is symptomatic of fourth-wave feminism’s perceived obsession with appearance and cultural capital. Ultimately, the campaign was a flop, possibly due to the virtually impossible nature of trying to create a single, solidified iconography for an increasingly diverse and pluralised movement, and possibly even because some of us thought that there were parts of the ‘old’ version worth saving.

What is true, however, is that more subtle incursions on feminism’s brand have been successful. Take for example the idea of ‘celebrity feminism’, which has seen a variety of international stars declare their feminism loud and clear. There has been a kind of chicken-and-egg phenomenon by which high-profile celebrities have claimed feminism to elevate their own brands, and in so doing, have improved the image of feminism as a concept.

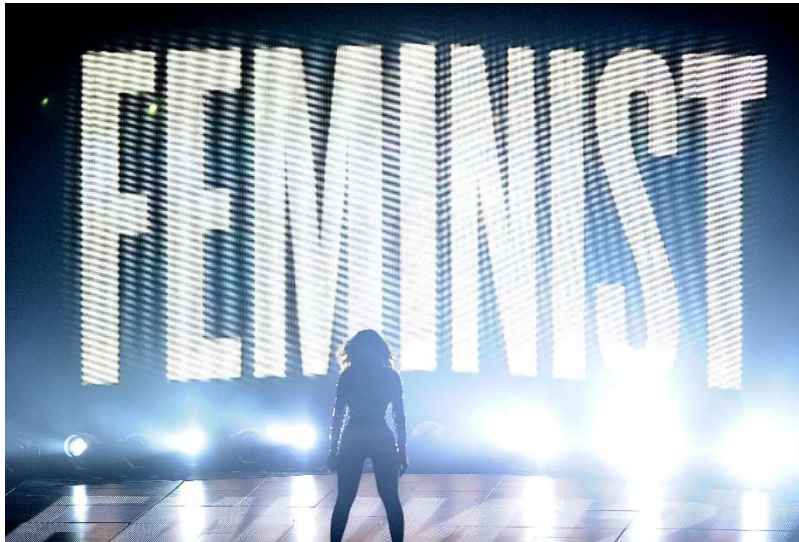


Fig 9 Beyoncé’s Feminist Declaration, image sourced from (Bennett, 2014)

In addition to the overt attempts to address feminism’s alleged branding problem, there is also a perception that during this period of feminism’s fourth-wave, feminism has become ‘cool’, thanks, in part, to the myriad of celebrities who have ‘come out’ as being feminists. From Beyoncé’s stage design above to Emma Watson’s 2014 speech at the UN, there has been an apparent rush of women celebrities announcing their feminism. Even Taylor Swift, who once emphatically claimed not to be a feminist, has gone so far as to explain that she was, in fact, a feminist all along. *Cosmopolitan* in 2014 published their list of the ‘Top 10 celebrity feminists’ (Alter, 2014), and even Miss Piggy has famously declared that ‘Moi is now, and has always been, an ardent feminist and champion of women’s rights’ (Miss Piggy, 2015).

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Aside from raising the profile of feminism, celebrity feminism has also created a 'mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt' (Zeisler, 2016, p.XIII), and there is a sense that more and more women are describing themselves as feminists. Zeisler coins the tongue-in-cheek term 'Yoncé's law' to refer to the phenomenon whereby all conversations between women aged 8-50 about feminism and young women eventually lead to a debate about Beyoncé's feminism, highlighting the extent to which feminism is now a key player in popular culture, and perhaps hinting at an explanation for its overt presence in the texts examined later in this thesis.

Whilst the feminism of celebrities such as Beyoncé is being almost perpetually celebrated, debated and interrogated, and her status as a feminist is now well established while her famous on-stage declaration can be regarded as a huge success for her own brand, the same is not true for all celebrities. Lilly Allen's attempt at a vocal and visual display of her feminism unceremoniously backfired with her 2014 video for 'Hard Out There'. The song itself contains the provocative lyrics 'If I told you 'bout my sex life, you'd call me a slut, when boys be talkin' about their bitches, no one's makin' a fuss' (Allen, 2014), but was disastrously released alongside a video featuring white Lilly Allen, surrounded by scantily clad backing dancers of colour twerking for the camera. Allen responded to the widespread criticism she received by trying to explain that she was making a conscious point about sexual objectification, but the video simply missed the mark, and resulted in her being publicly dismissed as clueless. Zeisler notes that 'it wasn't clear whether she [Allen] was critiquing the way bodies of colour are aggressively sexualized in pop culture, or just replicating the insult' (Zeisler, 2016, p.121). Either way, the Allen story represents a crucial example of the intersectional sensibilities and media savvy of fourth-wave audiences.

In addition, the above celebrity feminisms also highlight something about the *kind* of feminism which is being celebrated as cool these days. Far from viewing fourth-wave icons as examples of the new, intersectional approach to feminism, Zeisler argues that the reverse is true, noting that 'the aspects of feminism currently given voice in pop culture are the most media-friendly ones, the ones that center on heterosexual relationships and marriage, on economic success that doesn't challenge existing capitalist structures, on the right to be desirable yet have bodily autonomy' (Zeisler, 2016, p.XV). It is of course true that when we look at notable celebrity feminists such as Beyoncé and Emma Watson, they are conventionally beautiful, heterosexual women whose feminism talks about lifting women up and empowering them, without being particularly critical of gendered structures and institutions. I wonder if this tells us more about the nature of celebrity, though, than of fourth-wave feminism per-se. Zeisler goes further, noting that it is not just a case of *which* celebrities are celebrated for their feminism, but also

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how celebrity feminism is assessed for authenticity, which exposes the fact that a collective unconscious bias is still very much present. 'It's no accident that Cyrus's twerky-jerky sexual pantomimes and frequently-naked appearances in videos and magazines have been deemed to be the work of a 'feminist icon', while Rhianna and Nicki Minaj, both known for equally risqué presentations, continue to have onlookers shaking their heads and clutching their pearls' (Zeisler, 2016, p.121). Zeisler's point here is a valid one, but I wonder if the recent commercial successes of provocative artists of colour such as Lizzo and Janelle Monáe render her comments out of date already and speak to the difficulties I myself experienced in trying to describe evolving cultural phenomena contemporarily.

In some ways, then, celebrity feminism represents an arena in which famous feminists are celebrated only when they avoid the worst excesses of white feminism, whilst still remaining relatively unthreatening to the broader political status quo. It is in this respect, limited by its failure to ask the more difficult questions and explore the more systemic and political roots of women's oppression, that celebrity feminism is a safer, more sanitised offering. This would be problematic if the fourth-wave was *only* about celebrity feminism, but it isn't, so perhaps celebrity feminism has its role to play as just one facet of a bigger movement. The next question to explore is thus around precisely *what* that role is, and if celebrity feminism actually achieves anything.

To answer this question about the efficacy of celebrity feminism in the fourth-wave, we need to examine what, as feminists, we want its function to be. Is it simply enough to accept that celebrity feminism is about raising awareness, and as Ziesler notes, to conceive of feminist Beyoncé as a 'gateway drug' (Zeisler, 2016, p.254); a means of getting women, and particularly girls, asking questions about feminism in the hope that it will lead them in the direction of exploring the harder gear of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault? The commercial success of recent popular feminist texts such as Caitlin Moran's (not unproblematic) *How to Be a Woman* (Moran, 2012) would seem to suggest that there is an appetite for accessible entries into feminism. Anecdotally, too, many of the fourth-wave feminists I know, myself included, became feminist activists and academics after reading such popular texts and wanting to learn more.

For critics of the fourth-wave such as Andi Zeisler, however, celebrity feminisms do not do enough to bring about tangible change in the lives of ordinary women. Zeisler notes that 'It became a constant game of Good News/Bad News. As we celebrate the increasing number of women TV showrunners and writers, Senate Republicans have twice unanimously voted against an act designed to close the gendered wage gap' (Zeisler, 2016, p.XIV) and, 'As we

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excitedly binge-watch a Netflix series about life and love in a women’s prison, dozens of Black women have died in police custody in recent years with no satisfactory explanation as to why’ (Zeisler, 2016, p.XIV). For her, celebrity feminism ‘doesn’t challenge beliefs or processes or hegemonies so much as it offers nips and tucks’ (Zeisler, 2016, p.XV). This is a sentiment I, too, have found myself pondering as I have written work extolling the democratising virtues of Netflix whilst simultaneously witnessing it commission comedy special after comedy special by terrible men, from Dave Chapelle to Louis C K. Wanda Sykes notes in her own Netflix special that ‘you can’t have #MeToo and *The Bachelor*’ (Sykes, 2019), and the irony of talking about a new moment in feminist and sexual politics at times feels paradoxical against the backdrop of a Donald Trump presidency. However, my argument here is not that the #MeToo movement has displaced all forms of sexism or narrower manifestations of feminism, but that it currently sits alongside them, offering an alternative perspective, just as *OITNB* and *Sense8* sit alongside less ‘woke’ programming selections.

Criticism of the scope and effect of celebrity feminism is undoubtedly valid, and necessary if we are to keep moving ever forward to better, more inclusive modalities, but it is worth noting, too, that every once in a while, celebrity call outs and online outrage can have real and tangible impact. In 2018, Rihanna was credited with single-handedly wiping \$800 million dollars off of the value of messaging service SnapChat.



Fig 10 shows a screenshot from the mobile game ‘Would you rather’, which SnapChat had advertised on its platform. Rihanna understandably took offense to the thoughtless references to her domestic assault by Chris Brown in 2009 and issued the following comment on Instagram.

“Now SNAPCHAT I know you already know you ain’t my fav app out there!” She wrote on her Instagram Story. “You spent money to animate something that would bring intentional shame to [domestic violence] victims and made a joke of it!!!” She finished the statement saying, “Shame on you. Throw the whole app-oligy away.”

(Cited in (Valinsky, 2018))

Fig 10 image from (TMZ, 2018)

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The above case again illustrates the powerful positioning of social media, and how it is being utilised by fourth-wave celebrity feminism. Snapchat have since removed the advert and issued an apology: a definitive win for Rihanna. What is less clear, however, is what impact events such as these have for broader feminist struggles. As Zeisler notes, instead of asking celebrities how they ‘define’ feminism, we should ask how they enact it in their work and their communities’ (Zeisler, 2016, p.136), and it is by looking at feminist cultural output in the latter chapters of this thesis that I hope to do this.

Sex Work Is Work

Another significant area of divergence in the fourth-wave can be found by examining its approaches to sex work. I am not going to give an in-depth discussion of this as unlike the queer and intersectional/ identity politics discussed above, it does not feature so directly in my chosen texts, but it is worth noting that whilst feminists of the third-wave were highly critical of Raunch Culture and ‘Female Chauvinist Pigs’ (Levy, 2006) and actively participated in campaigns like Object to close down strip-clubs and other places of sex work, the fourth-wave has adopted an entirely different perspective.

As with intersectionality, a range of popular texts on the subject of sex work have appeared (see (Gira Grant, 2018; Magnanti, 2017; Ditmore, Levy and Willman, 2010; Smith and Mac, 2018) connoting the renewed interested in, but also very different perspective on sex work in this current moment. Moreover, as Maggie McNeal notes in her forward to Brook Magnanti’s¹⁵ book on the subject ‘social media have been such important tools in the advancement of sex worker’s rights; they have allowed sex workers to speak for ourselves’ (Magnanti, 2017).

Appearing alongside the aforementioned term TERF, another acronym has entered popular feminist parlance, emerging in 2013 for the website *Everyday Whorephobia*¹⁶: ‘SWERF’, meaning sex worker exclusionary radical feminist. The term stands in direct opposition to second-wave anti-porn and third-wave anti-raunch positions which see all sex work as forms of female oppression. The anti-SWERF stance is very much rooted in the previously explored ontology of choice feminism and essentially accepts that it is not for anyone to dismiss the choices made by women. The fourth-wave accepts that people can legitimately chose sex work for their own pleasure, and that even when the choice is economically mandated, it is no

¹⁵ Also known as Bell de Jour

¹⁶ See <https://everydaywhorephobia.wordpress.com/>

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less valid than the economically dictated employment choices of everyone else. As Mac and Smith note, ‘you don’t have to like your job to want to keep it’ (Smith and Mac, 2018, p.55).

Whilst the fourth-wave still campaigns against coercion and trafficking, it does not seek to criminalise sex work itself, understanding that the leaders on this subject should be sex workers themselves, and that their demands on what measures can improve safety and conditions are paramount. Moreover, as Olufemi notes, ‘we do not currently live in a society that could support the abolition of sex work’ (Olufemi, 2020, p.105).

Julia Serano summarises the nuance of the fourth-wave when it comes to sex, choice and empowerment, and it is her position below which I feel is closest to my own, but also most abundant in the #MeToo moment and its cultural outputs.

A woman may feel empowered wearing heels but feel disempowered by the sexualizing comments she gets from strangers when she does. A sex-positive feminist may feel empowered by the alternative depictions of female sexuality she finds in feminist porn or a queer BDSM anthology while a fourteen-year-old boy who uncritically watches hardcore porn or reads Fifty Shades of Grey may develop really fucked-up ideas about women.

(Serano, 2013, p.261)

Who Are You Calling Radical?

The final area of the fourth wave that I want to examine is its radical potential. As noted earlier, Andi Zeisler is particularly disparaging of what she sees as the fourth wave’s lack of meaningful political action or substance, and Soraya Chemaly claims that ‘today it appears that there is more widespread reluctance among women to acknowledge or confront systemic sexism or misogyny’ (Chemaly, 2017, p.202). I beg to differ.

I think it is certainly true that mainstream media coverage of fourth-wave activism fails to challenge systemic inequalities, preferring as discussed earlier to blame individual #MeToo monsters than patriarchal forces. Feminists themselves however have been more discerning:

Can we move mainstream conversations about period poverty beyond the clutches of feminine hygiene companies and towards the fundamental idea that we cannot tackle this problem without ending austerity? Can we link the public disclosures of trauma facilitated by #MeToo to the fact that many victims and survivors cannot leave violent situations because of the lack of available social housing or domestic violence provisions?

(Olufemi, 2020, p.7)

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Moreover, not only are fourth-wavers such as Olufemi articulating the need for radical, material and structural change, it is precisely because of the increased pluralism and diversity of the fourth wave that it has come to adopt such positions. Positions, which call into question the logic of capitalism, nationalism, markets and the status quo;

Neo-liberalism puts the needs of the market above all else. It also creates market solutions for social problems- and as public sectors have shrunk, women’s private burdens have grown¹⁷.

(Phipps, 2020)

While it is important to start locally and build movements in our communities, the most radical work is work that looks beyond borders and nations, and finds subversive ways to link the work of oppressed people across the world.

(Olufemi, 2020, p.17)

Though to some extent, the fourth wave has become reluctant to declare itself as ‘radical’ because of the aforementioned connotations of trans-and sex-work-exclusionary ‘radical feminism’, this does not mean that it is not a distinct and radical form of feminist politics. The fourth-wave has also added a plethora of new (or adopted) words to its activist lexicon: Heteropatriarchy, Racial Capitalism, Misogynoir, Microaggression, Woke, Tone Policing, Gaslighting and Mansplaining belie a movement that is finding new ways to talk about oppression scavenging or coining terms as it progresses.

Having discussed above the key ideas, concepts and logics which the fourth wave has adopted, I now turn my attention to what fourth wave activism looks like in practice.

From Feminist Tweets, To Feminists On The Streets: Praxis and Activism In The Fourth-Wave, Snowflakes, Safe Spaces And Avalanches

*You build a wall
We’ll build a ladder
You’re falling leaves
Dead from the branch
You’ll see how much
A snowflake matters
When we become
An avalanche*

(Petrie, 2017)

¹⁷ A sentiment which is being repeated frequently during the current ‘Covid Moment’ as governments are criticised for applying market approaches to a public health crisis.

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Having looked at some of the theoretical and cultural emanations of fourth-wave feminism, I want to continue this exploration of what the fourth-wave *looks* like by examining its activism, demonstrating that it is not fair to imply that the fourth-wave is *only* concerned with cultural, consumer and cyber activism. My own experience as a feminist activist during both the third and fourth-waves has led me to conclude that there has been a recent resurgence in feminist activism of the more traditional kind.

Of particular note, has been the rise of campus-based feminist politics. 'As Phipps and Young (2015b) argue, young women in universities ..use feminism to challenge lad cultures are treading a narrow path between a 'sexual celebration' discourse which conflates 'empowerment with sexuality and sexual pleasure and accept[s] uncritically the idea that young women especially perform their identities via the vocabulary of sex' (2015b, p. 12) and the stereotype of 'sex-negative radical feminism' who are portrayed as 'prissy, prudish, Puritanical and bitter' (2015b, p. 13 in Lewis, Marine and Kenney, 2018, p.56).

The 'narrow- path' is perhaps best illustrated by the demands of student feminists for consent classes. Pre-dating the current #MeToo discourse on harassment, was an on-campus atmosphere of resistance to the widely reported practices of lad culture (NUS et al., 2014; Wilkinson, 2012; Bates, 2014). At the even darker end of the spectrum was the 2015 case of Brock Turner. Turner, a Stanford student and star athlete, was convicted in 2016 of three counts of felony sexual assault against an unconscious fellow student at the university. His lenient sentencing, and release after just three months in jail, led to widespread criticism and renewed discussions about the prevalence of campus rape. Against this backdrop, feminist societies began calling for and organising consent classes with the aim of encouraging students to have open discussions about what 'consent' means in a sexual context, and what constitutes a sexual assault. The 'narrow-path' concept is useful here because it seeks to illustrate the ways in which these feminists were adopting zero-tolerance approaches to certain kinds of sexual behaviour, whilst still remaining vehemently sex positive. The tone of much of the material produced for these classes was around how consensual sex is the best kind, and how to have fun exploring sexuality in a respectful and conscientious way. This marks an important shift from the binary rhetoric of the Sex Wars and Raunch Culture.

Another key area where campus-based, fourth-wave feminism has been influential, is in the spread of 'safe-space' politics. The concept of a 'safe space' is based on the idea that some physical spaces, such as university campuses, students' unions, clubs, and conferences should adopt zero-tolerance approaches to language and action which might cause offense. Advocates of safe spaces understand that language is powerful and argue that some kinds of hate-speech constitute acts of violence which members of the group have the right to be

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protected from. In practice, this has led to the ‘no-platforming’ of certain speakers in campus venues; in particular speakers such as Julie Bindel and Germaine Greer, rape-apologists such as Julien Assange and George Galloway, and speakers and organisations who incite racial hatred such as Nick Griffin and the British National Party.

Further to this, feminist students have also advocated for the inclusion of trigger and content warnings on course material which might be distressing to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of discrimination. They argue that such warnings, do not mean that students are prevented from critically engaging with difficult material, only that they are warned in advance and thus given the opportunity to approach such material when and where they choose, on their own terms.

Content warnings, no-platforming policies and safe spaces have been highly contentious, particularly within academia. Opponents appeal to arguments about free speech, and the pedagogical necessity of discomfort. What is pertinent for my work here is how these policies demonstrate a particular kind of feminist activism in action which provides context for the texts I explore in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. Moreover, it has been interesting to see how these concepts have disseminated from student politics into activist spaces more broadly. Many of the left-wing and feminist spaces that I am involved with, both IRL and online, have safe-space policies which take as given that appropriate content notes will be used and that some kinds of language violate the rights of the group.



Fig 11 Snowflake Meme, sourced from multiple

Criticism of this kind of fourth-wave activism has also had broader implications. The word ‘snowflake’ has developed a derogatory meaning within popular slang, to refer to young people, particularly millennials¹⁸, who are regarded as too easily offended or too stringent about political correctness. It is based on the idea that the role of identity politics has become such that young people have an over-inflated sense of their own individuality/ uniqueness. Interestingly, the term has already been reclaimed, and is being embraced as a label to denote one’s proud support for various social justice and identity causes.

¹⁸ Alternatively called ‘generation y’, people born in the eighties and nineties, though the exact parameters are disputed.

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T-shirts (again!), with the word 'snowflake' emblazoned on them, and memes such as in **Fig 11** are already doing the rounds in a way, which, to me, demonstrates a certain kind of knowing and critical competency which is present among fourth-wave and other contemporary activists. The popular avalanche metaphor also hints at a possibility for a more collectively-minded consciousness than what critics of the fourth-wave have typically accepted, and which I posit is an important part of the appeal of both of my chosen Netflix texts.

Again, what I am interested in here is how feminism is being practiced and received now. Snowflakes and safe-spaces appear to exist within a wider cultural politics, which has also featured so-called 'call-out culture'. We saw earlier the power of public calling-out and shaming on social media platforms such as Twitter, but this also exists in micro-interactions, particularly in activist and feminist spaces, where activists routinely, and not always kindly, call-out each other's failures, offences and oversights. Terms such as 'tone-policing' and 'gaslighting' also combine to create a new vocabulary in activism, which, although is not unique to fourth-wave feminist spaces, features heavily in them, and is characteristic of the kinds of politics which are occurring now.

It is important to note at this juncture that although the role of campus-based politics has been crucial to the formation of the #MeToo moment, it has not been the sole site of renewed feminist activism. To focus solely on activism within university campuses risks pigeon-holing the fourth-wave into the relatively privileged position that such spaces occupy and negates the legitimate claim that they have become examples of mass mobilisations. Perhaps none more notable than the 2017 Women's March on Washington.

When an audio recording surfaced of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump making the below crude remarks in 2016, much of the world, myself included, surely thought that his candidacy was over. Utterly outraged, I, at least, breathed a (short-lived) sigh of relief, that AT LEAST that would be the last we'd hear of this clown, and that proper grown-up politics could resume. It seemed utterly unfathomable that someone could make such blatantly derogatory comments about 50 percent of the population, and still retain any chance of receiving the keys to the most powerful office in the world; Trump would either resign his candidacy or face a humiliating defeat in the polls, just 4 weeks later, and crawl back into the gold-plated hole in the ground he came from...

I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it, you can do anything... grab them by the pussy.

Donald J Trump as cited in (Jacobs, Siddiqui and Bixby, 2016)

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On the 21st January 2017, to coincide with ‘The Donald’s’ first day in office, 1 million (Jamieson et al., 2017) women, proudly donning home-knitted ‘pussy-hats’ marched on the streets of Washington in a demonstration that was replicated the world over.

The Women’s March on Washington was not un-problematic. With a name stolen from an earlier civil-rights action (Tolentino, 2017), allegations of transphobia (Jackman, 2018), anti-Semitism (Nussbaum Cohen, 2018) and homophobia (Sobel, 2018), and the pussy-hats dubbed exclusionary and essentialist, there is much of importance to be said about how the march was conceptualised, organised and executed. For now, however, my interest is in what such a massive mobilisation of women means for the current state of play within feminism. Though I share Andi Ziesler’s confusion about how an apparent feminist resurgence can be occurring at the same time as the evident backwards step for women’s rights that the Trump presidency and examples of rising populism around the globe represent, I maintain that the #MeToo moment is at the very least offering alternative narratives not only in the form of counter movements, and campus-based actions but in the creation of fictitious possibilities that are documented within my Netflix selections.

A Culture of Feminism, A Feminist Culture? Viewing The #MeToo Moment

Meghan Trainor’s catchy song “No,” Beyoncé quoting Chimamanda Adichie, Transparent awakening America to trans people, and Charlize Theron demanding pay equity could only happen as a consequence of an increasingly feminist-infused world.

(Richards, 2017, p. 209)

Online streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have had unprecedented successes with overtly feminism imbued programmes. *Orange Is The New Black* (2013-2019), *Transparent* (2014-2019), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present), *Dear White People* (2017-present), *Sense8* (2015-2018), *GLOW* (2017-present), *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020) have all featured subversive characters and storylines that have been truly ground-breaking in their portrayals of race, gender, age, mental health and sexuality. A caveat here is to say that none of them have been without issues and none are ‘perfect’ examples of feminist cultural output – a holy grail that I am almost certain cannot exist in our hyper-critical and socially aware era. However, the influence of feminism on all of the above, and many more shows, is undeniable, and moreover appears to represent a new kind of

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feminist media that feels markedly different from the post-feminist products of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Rather than taking the politics of feminism as a given in order to simultaneously dismiss it, these recent productions appear to put their feminism and intersectionality front and centre.

Zeisler herself reflects on the success of *Mad Max: Fury Road*: 'I loved that movie though that doesn't matter. Others didn't, which also doesn't matter. What does matter is that the most-feminist-picture-of-the-year accolades set the tone for a debate that wasn't so much about the movie itself but about feminism as an objective metric of quality' (Zeisler, 2016, p.31). She also argues that fourth-wave (or in her words, 'market') feminism has set the bar too low for itself, that 'the descriptor 'feminist' now seems to be used to lavish praise on anything that isn't overtly degrading, demeaning or exploitative to women' (Zeisler, 2016, p.32). Whilst she definitely has a point, particularly about how the word 'feminist' has become so frequently used in assessing cultural output that it risks losing its meaning altogether, I cannot help feeling that this is *not* what is happening in the productions I have mentioned.

Zeisler also offers another pertinent concept for contemplation: the 'Feminist Fallacy', a term originally coined by Marjorie Fergusson in 1990 to describe the misguided belief that depictions of powerful women actually result in progress and empowerment for women in real life. Zeisler argues that we should be aware of the 'difference between a movie offering a clear feminist lens on a subject – a way to "read" its texts as something that reflects or is informed by feminism – and the film itself being feminist' (Zeisler, 2016, p.33). This is a useful distinction but one which is difficult to apply; by what criteria should we judge the feminism of a film or television series?

Useful attempts at creating some kind of feminist barometer for cultural output have been made, most notably the Bechdel Test. Inaccurately named after Alison Bechdel¹⁹, the test is passed if a film or television programme meets these three criteria:

- The text features two or more female characters
- The female characters speak to each other...
- ...about something other than a man

Its simplicity means that inevitably some of the greatest movies of all time fail miserably²⁰, but it has nonetheless become fourth-wave shorthand for assessing the feminist credentials of

¹⁹ Bechdel actually credits her friend Liz Wallace (Hooton, 2015) and it is now starting to become referred to as the Bechdel-Wallace Test.

²⁰ Most notably my beloved *Lord of The Rings*, which I would argue all day long features some spectacular feminist characters

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key artefacts of pop culture. It has also undergone numerous adaptations such as that of Eric Deggans – does the movie or TV show feature at least two non-white characters in the primary cast in a performance which is not about race? And the Kjerstin Johnson test of on-screen female nudity in response to 2015's *Ex*– How long is she naked? For whose pleasure are the shots? Is she a corpse? (Zeisler, 2016, p.56). More sophisticated measures also seek to calculate the amount of women's screen time and dialogue featured in a text. All of the above examples have yielded results that show that even some 'feminist favourites' do not hold up to scrutiny, but I think it is of equal interest to my research that these kinds of conversations are actually taking place.

Perhaps the notion of Andi Zeisler's that I found most troubling with regard to feminist media output was her claim that to get 'beyond marketplace feminism requires that we reword the question of "Is *Mad Max*... feminist?" because otherwise we're suggesting that what matters most about a movie is that people who identify as feminists can enjoy consuming it with a clear conscience' (Zeisler, 2016, p.58). I find this requirement troubling, not because I disagree but because I can absolutely see the truth in it. The notion of the 'guilty' (Deborah White) or 'bad' (Roxanne Gay, 2014) feminist is a common theme within fourth-wave feminism and I have lost count of the number of confessional conversations I have had with feminist friends and colleagues about our 'guilty pleasures'. It is a running joke in my friendship circle that I have remarkably un-subversive taste in music; choosing 'pretty white boys' with guitars over kick-ass Riot Grrrl records any day and is a constant source of shame and embarrassment! What is important here is the specifically fourth-wave pastime of politically informed spectatorship. As the *Huffington Post* TV critic Zebra Bray explains:

We're at a place now where we almost can't consume pop culture without breaking in down, even as we are entertained by it; even as we're watching Orange Is The New Black, we're thinking about 'What does this scene say about rape?' and 'What does this scene say about relationships between white and black women?' It makes me wonder what it means for us to, you know, not just gobble them up but constantly be analysing them. Does the analysing come to anything? Or are we just doing it because that's just how we experience entertainment now?

cited in (Zeisler, 2016 p. 95)

The Mary Sue announced in 2015 that it would no longer be featuring coverage of *Game of Thrones* (GoT). The HBO series has received much criticism in both the mainstream and feminist press for its graphic and gratuitous depictions of sexual violence. Maris Kriezman states that '*Game of Thrones* is a show for *Star Wars* fans who thought Princess Leia should have been raped' cited in (Zeisler, 2016, p.105). Though the stance of *The Mary Sue* is

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undoubtedly a bold one, it does not appear to have done the show any harm. In fact, the ratings have increased year on year (Wikipedia, 2018a). *GoT* is even one of my ‘guilty pleasures’. Though I stopped watching for a while because of the gratuitous sexual violence, I returned to it, and tried to justify it to myself in terms of feminism and the strong female characters (Brienne of Tarth, Aria Stark etc). What is interesting about the *Mary Sue* decision is that there was a significant sensibility affronted by *GoT*; a sensibility which I argue is distinctively fourth-wave and routed in the new forms of spectatorship outlined above.

In Chapter Two, I sought to give a historical background to the #MeToo moment by looking at the earlier moments of the Sex Wars and Raunch Culture. In this chapter, I have attempted to frame the moment within its current political and cultural context by looking at the important role of fourth-wave feminism and the fourth-wave’s relationship with cultural output and commentary. In the next chapter, I will carry this context with me as I begin to look at designing a methodological approach for my fieldwork, and will explore in much more depth the role of technology and in particular internet-enabled television which forms the final pillar on which I argue the #MeToo moment rests.

4. Examining A 'Moment': Methodologies For Exploring The Cultural Politics Of Sex In The #MeToo Era

Surely our choice of recipe (method) and the way we prepare and cook the ingredients (methodology) affect the kind of dish (knowledge) we get. Further, different cooks using the same ingredients, because of their different views on cooking and food (epistemology), may produce quite different dishes.

(Letherby, 2003)

The contextual work carried out in chapters two and three enabled me to begin thinking more specifically about what kinds of questions I as a researcher wanted my thesis to ask and explore. By laying out the field in front of me, I was able to identify an apparent confluence of emergent forces: the #MeToo movement, fourth-wave feminism and internet-based media, and I grew in confidence that something new and distinct in the cultural politics of sex really was materialising. From there I was able to devise the following research questions which underlie all the further inquiry undertaken by this project.

Research Questions

- How can this new era of sexual politics be conceptualised?
 - How is it distinct?
 - What preceded it?
 - What are the areas of continuity and divergence?
 - What political, social and cultural factors are driving it and/or present within it?
 - How can it be contextualised?
 - What does it look like/ what kind of cultural output is produced within it?
 - What does this cultural output tell us about the current politics of sex?
 - What political statements and assumptions are being made?
 - What might be the effects of, or potentialities created by, such sexual politics?

With these broad questions in place, I then turned to establishing the precise object of my study. It had become clear from my contextual work that engaging with a strand of mainstream or popular culture would be useful for gleaning a good view of the cultural changes. Yet the prospect of exploring *anything* in 'mainstream culture' today is a tricky problem in that the very notion of 'mainstream' has, arguably, been eroded by the surge of multiplicities of content and modalities of access that have erupted forth as we have moved into an ever more

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technologically sophisticated and diverse new millennium. As David Gauntlett points out, 'it is more-or-less impossible to provide a meaningful analysis of 'representations of gender on the Internet' because there is no 'mainstream' that a majority of people are looking at' (Gauntlett, 2008, p.65).

In the early stages of this project I grasped at many, many branches. Magazine and online adverts, and music videos were early considerations because they so clearly offered content rich in depictions and representations of 'women' and 'sexy'. After all, *that* Dolce and Gabbana advert had been a pivotal point in my feminist journey. However, as I progressed further with my contextual work, I came to realise that the questions of the #MeToo moment, as I was envisaging it, were *less* about representation and more about the political narratives of sex that were taking place²¹, particularly in feminist and queer spaces. It felt too, as with Raunch Culture itself, that a great deal had already been written on these media formats (Jhally, 1990; Hoynes and Cortese, 2001) and that the subject of my analysis needed to be not only new but subversive as well. I needed to choose a site where I could identify and make incisive, innovative 'slices' through cultural depictions.

The next branch I batted about for a bit was that of Instagram selfies, particularly those of celebrities whose presence in the fourth-wave had become so ubiquitous. Selfies are potential sites of both self-objectification and self-subjectification and are micro-narratives of self, or as Iqani and Schroeder note: 'artists perform, gaze, reflect, and pose in self-portraits, which can be seen as both a mirror for the subject and the society in which he or she lives' (Iqani and Schroeder, 2016, p.405). However, I learnt two really crucial things as I leaned closer in to selfies as media objects. Firstly, it wasn't telling me enough about sexual and gender politics per se; rather, content appeared to be around how we frame our selves as sexual subjects – interesting stuff, but not quite what I was looking for. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, I was increasingly drawn to the advantages of researching in one's native culture, and I had never owned an Instagram account. I naively thought that being a tech-savvy, Facebook-obsessed, borderline- millennial, I would sign up and instantly understand what all the fuss was about, but I did not. I couldn't connect with the celebrities and 'influencers' that I had begun following and didn't see any connection between my own lived experiences, the contextual work I had undertaken, and the curated lives on display in front of me. If I am honest, as one must be, I was also a bit 'judgey'. To this lifelong Queer, Marxist, Feminist, everything I encountered felt too false and shallow. Friends assure me that there is plenty of queer, politically motivated content to be found on the platform, but I could not find anything

²¹ This is not to say that representation is no longer an interesting or relevant avenue of inquiry.

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which piqued my personal interest or academic curiosity sufficiently, and I soon realised that this was important. The truth, I have now realised, was that I did not possess the required cultural competency to even know where to begin such an analysis because these were cultural objects with which I lacked familiarity.

The internet, I contend, is *the* current site of cultural production and consumption in Anglo-US society. Access to the web has moved beyond offering cultural novelties, and is now regarded by most users as a fundamental human right (BBC World Service, 2010; Walker, Syal and Stewart, 2019). Its de facto presence in our homes, cars, pockets and watches has become so ubiquitous that it now barely warrants everyday comment. The impact on cultural output cannot be overstated. Entertainment has become ‘content’, viewers have become ‘users’ and ratings have become ‘likes’. The task of attempting to peer into the ‘culture’ in the hopes of being able to take a snapshot simply *had* to engage with this new development.

Enter Netflix. North America’s fastest growing stock between 2010 and 2015, with 65 Million subscribers worldwide, including 5 million in the UK and accounting for up to one-third of American internet traffic at any given time (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (Eds), 2018, p.1; Iqbal, 2018). In an age of diasporic viewing habits performed in conjunction with user-generated services such as YouTube, video on demand (VoD) offerings such as Hulu and BBC iPlayer and an immeasurable plethora of traditional cable and satellite broadcast networks, Netflix with its staggering user base and undeniable position as market leader, might be the closest thing we have to a home for mainstream viewing today.

This chapter offers a somewhat meandering account of my research practice because, despite the dead ends I encountered, I feel that I learnt a huge amount of value about myself as a researcher and what I wanted this project to do, and by ‘showing my workings’ the researcher context of this thesis is laid bare. Halberstam speaks of a ‘queer methodology’, and I am drawn to this concept of using a fluid approach which utilises different tools to reach often quite ephemeral concepts.

A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior’

(Halberstam, 1998b, p.13)

The chapter is in two sections, the first, reflecting on why and how I chose Netflix and my two core texts as the site of my research (what I did), while part two examines the particular queer, feminist thinking and underpinnings of my project (how I thought about it). I learnt that the

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subject of my study must be one which had the depths to allow me to explore questions of social and political narrative, that it had to represent one of the new, internet-enabled technologies that had become so ubiquitous in my cultural moment, and that it must be something that I was not only familiar, but *intimately* acquainted, with.

Netflix – A Context, A Text, A Site

The workers of the world seemed to be reasonably happy; the work itself may not have been rewarding, but they had some decent films to watch, and the radio played nice songs to cheer them up.

(Gauntlett, 2008, p.20)

In Chapter Three, I explored the notion of Netflix forming part of the *context* in which the #MeToo moment has arisen. This contextualisation, in addition to giving background to my research, has also served partly as a method in itself. As Johnson et al explain, ‘the abstract idea of the text, as an object or commodity, away from its conditions of production and its social use, can be countered by the strategies of contextualization’ (Johnson et al., 2004, p.164). I was able to explore how Netflix as an entity has helped to shape but also been shaped by the influencing factors of fourth-wave feminism, the #MeToo movement and technological advances in televisual distribution. Johnson et al argue that the shifting of focus between text and context is not about one superseding the other but an ‘attempt to hold the two in tension’ (Johnson et al., 2004, p.161). They further explain that ‘most importantly, by using a literary text as a way into a larger cultural formation, the distinction between text and context is almost eroded – the literary text becomes a moment or nodal point in the larger formation’ (Johnson et al., 2004, p.191). This idea particularly chimed with me, as I had already started to think about my contextual endeavours in terms of ‘moments’ (Sex Wars, Raunch, #MeToo), so this notion of the text and the context colliding sat well within my emerging framework. It is from these perspectives that I will now present the approach taken by this thesis to the core textual analysis components.

Firstly, to explain why I have opted to focus my research on Netflix as opposed to any of the other major platforms available (Amazon Prime, BBC iPlayer, Hulu, Disney Plus, Now TV). The most obvious reason is simply that it is the largest across both UK and US markets (Iqbal, 2018). Its huge user base arguably allows it to cater to a greater multiplicity of demographics. Netflix does not function in anything like the traditional sense of a mainstream media platform. Its business model is based on the intrinsic goal of offering all things to all people, or as David Gauntlett more cynically describes by repurposing the words of Frankfurt School

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heavyweights Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘something is provided for all so that none may escape’ (1979:123 cited in Gauntlett, 2008, p.21). The difference with Netflix is that it is able to offer something for everyone, ‘but not by being one thing to all subscribers’ (Lotz, 2017, p.26), and this is important for my work because it allows me to find within it content which is specifically marketed to, and designed for, the kind of Anglo-American fourth-wavers who are at the heart of the #MeToo moment.

This ‘something for everyone’ model also tells us about the democratising potential of Netflix more broadly. Firstly, it creates opportunities for what Cunningham and Craig have coined ‘communitainment’ (Cunningham and Craig, 2016), which encompasses the highly social activities of anticipating, shared viewing and collective dissection of media – be that in person or through entirely new cultural forms such as watch parties, movie and TV podcasts and fan-fiction. This notion of ‘communitainment’ speaks to the new ways in which shared viewing and dissection have become fourth-wave pass times, as evidenced by the emergence of feminist pop-culture sites and communities such as *The Mary Sue*, (established in 2011) and *Jezebel* (2007). Moreover, I posit that in the #MeToo moment ‘communitainment’ springs from the intersection of fourth-wave feminist politics and internet-distributed television, as the deconstruction and analysis of Netflix content has become a form of activism itself, and a new

It can also be argued that the non-linear structure of video on demand has liberatory potential for both consumers and creators. Consumers are no longer shackled to the arbitrary broadcast schedules of network ‘gatekeepers’ (Lotz, 2017, p.4), being able to watch whatever they like, when and where they chose. Writers, producers and content creators are freed from artificial narrative restraints which arise from the requirement to produce a set number of episodes to fit a set time slot. Moreover, both consumer and creator are no longer at the mercy of sponsors and advertisers, meaning that content producers are able to express more creative freedom and cater to more diverse markets, and users are able to enjoy uninterrupted consumption of a wider range of cultural output, which has to be a good thing for consumer choice- a key tenet of fourth-wave feminism as previously discussed, and an explanation for the apparent explosion in feminist TV which has occurred over the last decade.

A Golden Age Of (Feminist) Television: Beyond Representation

*There's an overall sense of possibility for women in television today.
As interest in racial diversity has increased, stories about women
have also become increasingly intersectional.*

(Blay, 2015)

It is not just Netflix’s undeniable status which makes it such an appealing avenue of inquiry. Since 2013, Netflix has also been streaming its own original content alongside material

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commissioned or rights obtained from other producers. In that time, it has curated arguably the most significant collection of overtly feminist television in the medium's history. Smash hits like *Orange Is the New Black*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, *GLOW*, and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* have sat alongside quieter, but equally subversive, titles such as *Dear White People*, *Sense8* and *Grace and Frankie*, offering a viewing experience that is not just compatible with fourth-wave feminism's values as discussed earlier, but one which has become an essential part of *doing* and talking about feminism today. In 2018, Netflix launched *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, which has seen the artist formally known as 'the teenage witch' rebranded as darker, more complex and full of moral ambiguity, involved with that most feminist of pastimes, ending the patriarchy. As Lindsay Denninger notes, 'over the course of the show it becomes clear that the Church of Night is essentially an elite boys' club masquerading as religion' (Denninger, 2018), and fourth-wave feminists like myself will of course revel in watching Sabrina go into battle.

Netflix is also starting to show a number of programmes which are specifically about sex itself. *Sex Education* offers a perfect example of the new, sex-positive, queer and intersectional content that fourth-wave feminists are clamouring for – so much so, that having only launched on the platform on 11th January 2019, Netflix announced its renewal for a second season just three weeks later. The critically acclaimed series sees Asa Butterfield play the gentle, sexually repressed son of a boundaryless sex therapist (Gillian Anderson). Asa's character reluctantly ends up taking on the role of sexual guru to his classmates, and what ensues is an exciting look at teenagers today talking about sex with each other. The sex talk in the show is frank, graphic, unglamourised and not limited – as is so often the case in the 'coming of age' genre – to heterosexual sex, and the palpable awkwardness of teenage sexual exploration creates a sense of endearment and authenticity that has been rewarded by viewing figures topping 40 million in the first month alone (Porter, 2019). *Bonding* is a mini-series which premiered in April 2019 and follows the life of a sex worker, Tiffany, and her assistant Carter in the bondage fetish trade. In the course of just seven 13-minute episodes, we see her punch a leery professor who is hitting on his students, masturbate, and murder a client who attempts to break his contract with the pair by forcing them to do sex work that they had not consented to. Tiffany shouts at the client 'You are NOT Christian Fucking Grey' (Doyle, 2009), confirming that this show is the antithesis of the book to which she is referring (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) and is a programme about choice, empowerment and consent, especially for sex workers for whom the possibility has often been denied: concepts which fit comfortably within the understanding of an audience informed by fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo movement.

It should be noted, however, that this recent surge in content being readily labelled as 'feminist' is not unique to Netflix. Amazon's Prime Video service has recently produced and aired its

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devastating adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* alongside its critically acclaimed (but problematic) story of gender transition in *Transparent*, and even dear old, conservative Auntie has finally indulged us with a woman *Doctor Who* in Jodie Whittaker. My selection of Netflix for the primary research field in this thesis is (in addition to its ubiquity and ‘something for everyone’ model) in part because the content that it is producing simply *feels* more exciting than that of its competitors. For example, *Transparent* is arguably a less significant (for the purposes of this research) and subversive text than either *OITNB* or *Sense8* because it misjudged the sensibilities of its fourth-wave audience in opting to cast a cisgender man (Jeffrey Tambor²²) to play a transgender woman, Maura — a sin neither *OITNB* or *Sense8* commit. When I first watched *Transparent*, I was struck by how the focus of the show seemed to be on the impact that Maura’s transition was having on her family, she herself becomes somewhat of a narrative device rather than a fully-fledged character. As Julia Serano explains in her analysis of the 2003 HBO movie *Normal*

Transsexuality is no longer a marginalised identity or a gruelling issue that real human beings struggle with; it is merely a literary device — a “metaphor” for the “ultimate catastrophe” that can strike a relationship.

(Serano, 2007, p.197)

Serano describes the above process as a kind of ‘ungendering’ which occurs through ‘the appropriation of gender-variant bodies and experiences while erasing intersex and transsexual voices and perspectives’ (Serano, 2007, p.196). I think it is because of its poor casting choice and ‘ungendering’ that *Transparent* reads like an education to liberal audiences as opposed to a text about, by, and for queer people.

Brilliant in its own right, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in an imagined dystopia too far removed from our own reality to offer a comparative textual reading, but its existence as a bold feminist text, and a warning about the dangers of rising religiously sanctioned misogyny, are important for illustrating a broader cultural landscape which is centring feminist discourses. The excitement of a woman *Doctor Who* was perhaps limited to die-hard fans of the franchises (myself included), but though I gave a cheer for the announcement of Whittaker’s casting, the real feeling was that ‘its about time!’, as opposed to any sense of daring or subversion on the part of the BBC.

There is an undeniable trend towards producing complex, female-and-queer-centred narratives across the board, but Netflix has stood out as leading the way on this front, producing content that I believe has the most to reveal about the current moment of sexual politics, and it is for this reason *as well* as its presence in double the number of UK households

²² As a side note, Tambor has himself become the subject of #MeToo allegations of his own, see (Abramovitch, 2017)

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as its nearest rival Amazon Prime (BARB, 2018) that I have opted to conduct my analysis on programmes on its platform. Netflix has also pioneered feminist content outside of fictitious feminist worlds of *Litchfield* and *Greendale*. *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby's recent stand-up comedy special for Netflix, places its feminism front and centre, daring to use the 'F word' rather than to evoke and dispel its sentiments as the post-feminists of yore might once have done. This strong language is typical of the hour-long non-comedy show, in which Gadsby offers unusual imaginary, takes men to task for their niceness as well as their violence, and assails the audience with the shrapnel of her life:

There is too much hysteria around gender from you gender-normals. You're the weirdos. You're a bit fucking hysterical. You're a bit weird, a bit uptight. You need to get a grip. You gender-normals. Seriously, calm down, gender-normals. Get a grip. "No, a man in a dress, that's fucking weird!" No, it's not. You know what's weird? Pink headbands on bald babies! That's weird. I mean, seriously, would you put a bangle on a potato? No, that's organic. I paid a lot for that potato. Of course I understand why parents do it. Clearly they're sick and tired of their beautiful baby girl being mistaken for a boy baby because of the no hair situation. I understand that. But the thing is, I don't assume bald babies are boys. I assume they're angry feminists, and I treat them with respect. How about this? How about we stop separating the children into opposing teams from day dot? How about we give them, I dunno, seven to ten years to consider themselves... on the same side?

(Gadsby, 2018a)

John Leguizamo's one-man tour de force, *Latin History for Morons*, has also been adapted for Netflix which, along with shows like *Dear White People* and documentaries such as *13th and Time: The Kalief Browder Story*, displays a conscious de-centring of whiteness in the platform's content and the proliferation of challenging post-colonial narratives. As such, the platform can even be regarded as representing a return to an idealised conception of television's purpose to educate, inform and entertain, which feels like a marked departure from the over-saturation of cheaply made, hyper-reality TV which has defined much of the last 15 years of screen time.

Just as there is a tangible sense of a gulf between the moments of *Raunch* and #MeToo, and between feminism's third and fourth-waves, so too is there an instinctive difference between two of the most notable woman-led cultural products of these two moments: *Sex and the City* (SATC) and *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB). Much has been written about both shows by feminist and cultural scholars (Akass and McCabe (Eds), 2003; Gerhard, 2005; Arthurs, 2004; Hermes, 2007; Farr, 2018; McKeown and Parry, 2017; Enck and Morrissey, 2015; Frankel, 2015), so I'm conscious not to dive into re-hashing existing narratives about the post-feminist nature of the former, but what I do want to acknowledge is that in the fifteen years between

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first airings, something – culturally and politically speaking – has changed, the zeitgeist has shifted. As Zeba Blay, writing in the *Huffington Post*, muses, 'could "Orange Is the New Black" have existed 10 years ago? Or even five?' (Blay, 2015). 'It's doubtful' she concludes, and I am inclined to agree. Johnson et al encourage researchers to always ask: 'Why *this* text now?' or even 'Why this text *now*?'(Johnson et al., 2004, p.161) and these questions of the cultural and political climate which might have facilitated the creation of my texts remain paramount in my textual analysis.

SATC's sexpert extraordinaire, Kim Cattrall, said of her character Samantha: 'I don't think there's ever been a woman who has expressed so much sexual joy [on television] without her being punished' (Williams, 2002), and it's certainly true that when the show first hit our screens in 1998, it was genuinely remarkable and exciting to see women talking so openly and frankly about sex. However, as Skeggs notes, 'the middle-class foursome's transgression of bourgeois codes of sexual decorum and thus their challenge to patriarchal structures are recuperated via their creak control of the commodified body that makes the text's ideological positioning compatible with capitalism' (Skeggs 1997 cited in Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p.359). My interest is in what has happened culturally speaking to allow for the creation of a show like *OITNB* whose characters do not appear to have to compromise in this way. Moreover, I also wonder if it is really the case that such fourth-wave texts are able to subvert patriarchal structures more boldly, or whether their 'challenge' is just 'recuperated' elsewhere? Buffy Summers²³ was another undoubtedly feminist icon (and will be forever a firm favourite of mine, even as I wrestle with that most fourth-wave of dilemma's – finding out a show/artist/musician you love is a creep like Joss Whedon (Harel, 2018)), but there was always a sense that there had to be 'something for the boys', too, some form of eye candy, or in the case of *SATC*, some other capitulation to the patriarchy. When I think about the new Netflix generation of characters, I don't perceive that same sense of compromise. The most notable things about them aren't whether Piper Chapman is a babe or where I could buy shoes like Kimmy Schmidt.

Though the focus of my research is on the current moment *now*, reflection upon what has filled that gap between Raunch and #MeToo and between *SATC* and *OITNB* is interesting. Gledhill and Ball note a period of 'Male Soap Operas' (Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p.377) such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, carving out a space for male characters to have more sophisticated narratives, moral dilemmas and three dimensional personalities. Perhaps then there was a subtle acceptance that men might be interested in good stories and complex dynamics- it is absolutely the case that *OITNB* is not regarded as solely a women's programme in the othering way that *SATC* certainly was. There have also been what I am conceptualising

²³ Of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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as 'in-between-shows', which have acted as stepping-stones in the shift between my moments of interest. Lena Dunham's *Girls* launched just one year before OITNB, but yet feels as though it is from another (micro)era. Certainly, an update on the SATC format, *Girls* showed four twentysomething friends, trying to scratch out a living in New York *millennial style*. It was grittier, less glamorous and had shaken the frivolity in favour of storylines featuring abortion and questions of sexual consent. However, after the initial fanfare of the first season, popularity plummeted and viewing figures by the end were just a fifth of what they were at launch (Berg, 2017). Blay states that *Girls*' 'Hannah Horvath and her friends were unapologetically written, self-obsessed, unlikable, and yet still relatable to many women' (Blay, 2015), arguing that shows like *Girls* were crushed by the weight of expectation and responsibility. Though she might be right to touch upon the borderline sport of feminist critiquing today, I think she is wrong to regard it as being responsible for the show's undoing. The characters of *Girls* were so unlikable, and contrary to what Blay says, so unrelatable that it became impossible to identify with any of them. The most interesting things about the show quickly became the controversy seeking, and often bizarre off-camera comments of the show's creator Lena Dunham. Moreover, the show began to receive heavy criticism from precisely the 'woke', fourth-wave feminist types that it had tried to court. Trashed for its repeated whitewashing of multi-cultural Brooklyn (Stephens, 2016) and for portraying a level privilege (frolicking around in a New York apartment without ever actually undertaking any paid labour) that lacked the required levels of self-awareness feminists now expect of each other and themselves, it felt to me as if *Girls* was dated before it even began.

It is worth noting here that the object of my inquiry into sexual politics in Netflix programming is *not* to assess whether the shows discussed *are* or *are not* 'feminist', or for that matter, to critique their relative artistic merit (I'll save that for my blog and pizza-based conversations with friends!). As Farr notes, 'rather than considering a representation's authenticity, or whether it is "good" or "bad", we can ask what kinds of common sense the representation (re)produces or makes most visible' (Farr, 2018, p.160). My academic interest is peaked in the very fact that they are being widely *labelled* as feminist artefacts by academics (McHugh, 2015; Enck and Morrissey, 2015; McKeown and Parry, 2017), cultural critics (Ellis-Petersen, 2016) and feminist organisations themselves (Bust Magazine, 2018), and I am compelled by what I might be able to discover about the sexual politics contained within these texts.

In researching this chapter, I kept a cognitive comparison running in the back of my mind, between what passed for feminist TV 15 or so years ago in the time of *Raunch*, and what is celebrated as such now. As I read critiques, both academic and popular, of post-feminist texts, I realised that there has been an historic interest in how women were *represented* on screen – were they 'objectified?', 'sexualised?' 'patronised?' etc. A huge amount of incredibly valuable

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work has been done in this vein²⁴, but I came to realise that part of what characterises current feminist texts and marks them as sufficiently different from their predecessors was that they feature more diverse, complex and three-dimensional women characters, and that perhaps, meaningful analysis of the current class of feminist content has moved beyond questions of representational politics alone. Questions about whether the women of *Orange Is the New Black* display agency, exist solely for male gazes (Mulvey, 2009) or pass the Bechdel test seem somewhat moot, or at least the answers feel much more obvious. Furthermore, as Farr notes,

Representational politics can begin to feel like an echo chamber, where the calls for (and representations of) diversity exist as answers in themselves to the problem of racial inequality. It takes more than just representation to explode common sense – from the inside or out – but occasionally representations can light the fuse.

(Farr, 2018, p.167)

This is not to say that questions of representation are no longer important, or that we now have perfect, representative and egalitarian depictions of women and other oppressed groups on our screens, but that perhaps more complex and sophisticated tools are required to deconstruct the ever more diverse cultural products and modes of meaning-constructing before us. As Stuart Hall argues:

Representation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue – it is, as they say, dialogic. What sustains this 'dialogue' is the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever – though attempting to fix meaning is exactly why power intervenes in discourse.

(Hall, 2013a, p.xxvi)

Representation will play a factor in my analysis, but it can no longer be examined in a vacuum that seeks to understand what messages are conveyed within a given image; rather, the emphasis is on how representations and narratives intersect with power structures to create meaning discursively. Moreover, such a stance allows for an analysis which recognises that power is not always "transmitted in a 'top down' manner but can 'circulate' in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1988), and this is particularly important when thinking about myself as an individual, and the characters who are the subject of my analysis as being simultaneously sites of both privilege and oppression. Such power, Hall argues, 'cannot be captured by thinking exclusively in terms of force or coercion: power also seduces, solicits, induces, wins consent' (Hall, 2013b, p.250), and it seems apparent that the presence of such seductive

²⁴ See Chapter Two, for critical context

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powers is perhaps more easily deduced from the critical analysis of discourses and narratives than from the appeals to what a given image might be transmitting.

Limitations

So far I have offered a rather optimistic view of Netflix programming. Yet I recognise that in keeping with traditional discourse around new technologies, Netflix has been unscientifically heralded as both a modish healthy habit (Chu, 2017) and maligned as the latest 'opium of the masses' (Mahdawi, 2018). Whilst deciding on which end of the spectrum the social impact of streaming really falls is not the goal of this thesis, and neither is attempting to reconcile the almost inevitable dialectic that has arisen, I do want to discuss the potential problems with and limitations of Netflix as I give further rationale to my decision to focus my research on its content.

It is probably to be expected that more commentary exists surrounding the potential dangers of services such as Netflix than its aforementioned benefits. For all the fluffy marketing and talk of the 'Netflix Culture Deck'²⁵ (Netflix does not measure employee holiday, sick days or expenses), it is important that we never forget that the company is also one of the foremost data giants, akin to cyber bogeymen Google and Apple. Sarah Arnold adeptly describes what she calls Netflix's 'algorithmic determinism' (Arnold, 2018, p.56), explaining that data is mined about what you watch, from this, suggestions of what to watch are made, you then watch from those selections, more data is mined, more suggestions made – but in making suggestions, the process of observing viewing habits is contaminated. It is interesting (terrifying) to note that apparently Netflix users only bypass their algorithmically gifted recommendations 25% of the time (Arnold, 2018, p.59). Neta Alexander evokes the creepy metaphor of a 'one-way mirror' (Alexander, 2018, p.87) with Netflix watching our every move from behind the glass, and it struck me as odd, too, when I began researching this piece, how little biographical or demographic information the company asks for when we sign up. The truth is that it simply doesn't care that I am a queer, white, woman in my thirties... it will figure all of this and more out in its own time and adjust its suggestions for me accordingly. This is further illustrated by the fact that Netflix's algorithms cannot, and do not want/ need to understand me as a person at all. I am a user, a type, a set of clicks and pauses in a string of content absorption. Recommendations such as 'shows with a strong female lead' or 'emotional African-American dramas' address our differences whilst simultaneously and quietly assuming that that which deviates from the perspective of white male, is ergo one of its 19 umbrella genres, 400 sub genres, and 75,000 + micro genres (Smith-Rowsey, 2018, p.64). As Lotz explains 'portals'

²⁵ See www.jobs.netflix.com/culture

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such as 'Netflix pursue a 'conglomerated nice' strategy. The company services multiple audiences, but this is very different from a 'mass' strategy. It does not license or develop a series with the expectation that *all* Netflix viewers will value it, but develops offerings with distinct segments of subscribers in mind' (Lotz, 2017, p.26).

All of this has far-reaching consequences, 'while the online world seems to propose the possibility of identity as fluid, transformative, and self-determined, the use of algorithms (by media corporations) established identities as fixed and stable' (Arnold, 2018, pp.56–57). Adorno and Horkheimer spoke in terms of a 'culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1943) in order to lay bare what they saw as the true, mechanistic nature of the media, and to dismiss any misplaced notions that mass popular culture, is even remotely rooted in the 'mass' or populist in nature, and it seems prudent, and perhaps even healthy to view big-data giants like Netflix through such a lens.

It's not just on a corporate level that we might be wary of Netflix's sumptuous offerings. The concept of a Netflix 'binge' has entered common parlance. Mostly contextualised in irony, the obsessive watching of episode after episode is facilitated beautifully by the platform and its deadly 'auto-play' feature. I reflected on my own relationship with the platform following an emotional break-up when my dependency on the service became more pernicious:

I've realised now in hindsight that in the twelve months following 'the breakup', I watched every single documentary I could find on the platform, as well as those on iPlayer and Channel 4's on demand services. Everything from the foundations of Islamic art, to the invention of mathematics (my least favourite subject), the American fast-food industry, the Plantagenets (yawn) and the History of Hip-Hop, I consumed. Constant streams as I slept, cooked, showered, did housework, caught the bus or even went to the toilet, Netflix was with me keeping the silence at bay. We shared a bed as I became dependent on it, thinking that I would not be able to fall asleep without it and anxious that I would be left lying awake tormented by my thoughts if I switched it off. I panicked when I thought I might be running out of content and breathed a sigh of relief when I 'un-earthed' more hours I hadn't yet viewed.

(Personal journal entry, 2017)

At that time, Netflix filled a void and even kept me 'safe' in the sense that it became a marginally healthier coping mechanism than others I could have employed. The language of Netflix commentary is steeped in the lexicon of food and metaphors of gluttony. As subscribers, we 'consume' and 'binge', 'devour' and 'cram' our way through hours of televised goodness. Our 'tastes' must be algorithmically navigated, and 'catered' to, and we have developed a co-modality of consumption in discussing and 'regurgitating' the content and our

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‘addictions’ to it, and it remains unclear what impact this might be having on us in the long term. Certainly, there have been claims about a link between Netflix and depression (Gregoire, 2015), but from my own experience as discussed above, it has been difficult to resolve the chicken-and-egg paradox that arises: do I watch because I am depressed, or am I depressed because I watch? Snider further argues that binge watching ‘creates confusion when viewers process these narratives too quickly, which ultimately hinders viewers’ real-world judgements and interpersonal relationships’ (Snider, 2018, p.117) but offers little evidence for this, and the perspective doesn’t resonate with my own mixed experiences.

Furthermore, McCormick points out that although “binge’ evokes notions of shame, guilt, gluttony, and addiction, the cultural attitudes toward binge-viewing complicate its negative connotations, as viewers engage in self-aware, often ironic discourse regarding this ‘lack of control’ (McCormick, 2018, p.104). She argues that bingeing can be a ‘productive’ and ‘transformative’ mode of viewing in that it includes an element of planning and deliberation, and is often a group activity – the thoroughly modern concept of ‘cheating’ on one’s partner by sneaking an episode without them is now culturally ingrained— thanks in part to the very ‘meta’ references to such discretions in its own shows (Kohen, 2013e). That said, she is not naïve to the fact that Netflix and its shows, are geared towards encouraging users to binge. In addition to the aforementioned ‘auto-play’ feature, McCormick also explores how the content of Netflix shows play host to inbuilt addiction facilitators. In *House of Cards* for example, she argues that Kevin Spacey’s direct addresses to the audience, coupled with the presence of ‘surrogate characters’ who stand in for the viewer, all function to keep the viewer tuned in. The unexpected death of Zoe Barnes in the second series’ first episode, rather than more predictably as a cliff-hanger at the end of season one, McCormick argues, is a clever device to ensure that anyone who hasn’t been bingeing receives their just punishment in the form of the addict’s worst nightmare – a spoiler!

I have stated here that one of my key reasons for choosing Netflix and its programmes as the subjects of my fieldwork has been its considerable offerings of ‘feminist’ content. However, in the context of my focus on #MeToo, I can’t avoid one of the bleaker sides of Netflix: that the company has exhibited a penchant for hypocrisy and inconsistency in the values it demonstrates. When allegations came to light in 2017 that up-until-then Netflix poster boy, and winner of the platform’s first Emmy nomination Kevin Spacey, was the latest in a long line of celebrity sexual predators, Netflix took decisive action, suspending filming on *House of Cards* and removing Spacey from the cast and his role as executive producer. Their swift and unapologetic treatment towards Spacey, which also saw them scrap the release of his upcoming film for the platform, *Gore*, seemed entirely appropriate for a network which had put feminist cultural production front and centre in its offerings. However, they did *not* opt to

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remove the existing content featuring Spacey, nor did they remove noted coercive masturbator Louis CK’s 2017 special or any of his back catalogue when allegations about him began to surface. What at first appears somewhat paradoxical makes perfect sense when we think back to Netflix’s mantra of offering something to everyone – but not necessarily the same thing. In firing Spacey, Netflix were able to maintain eye contact with users like me, as they offered me ‘programmes with a strong female lead’, whilst simultaneously recommending Dave Chapelle’s recent duo of comedy specials, presumably to people who enjoy programmes that make light of trans people and the #MeToo movement (Logan, 2018) – a fact that was apparently not lost on Jim Jeffries, whose own Netflix comedy special remarked on the apparent irony of Spacey being fired as fake president for sexual misconduct whilst Trump remains pussy-grabber in chief.

Aside from stating the obvious technological leap that Netflix represents, I want to review Netflix’s hybrid potentialities, because they have transformed our relationship with content providers from a public one based around communal screens, to an at times private one. Netflix is often referred to as a ‘convergence’ culture (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (Eds), 2018) in that it arose from an almost serendipitous confluence of several critical social and technological developments. Though the internet itself can no longer be regarded as novel, Netflix was born out of a period witnessing the spread of high-speed broadband and fibre optic connections, which make the everyday streaming of high-resolution content possible. Simultaneously, the march of progress delivered ever smaller and more sophisticated mobile devices, meaning that the ways and spaces in which we can now consume content have shifted drastically. Such technological revolutions have occurred within a broader socio-political context which has seen the coming of age of a generation who are less romantic about ownership of physical media. Amazon’s Kindle launched in 2007, displacing (partially at least) the tactile and bodily pleasures of paper books; likewise, iTunes (2001) and Spotify (2006) replaced the logic of carefully curated CD and record collections with one of limitless possibilities and discoveries. What is interesting for my research about all of this is how Netflix has displaced former modalities of watching both in terms of physical presence and also psychological attachment.

My reflections above exhibit how my own practices of watching have become more intimate and I don’t think that I am alone in this. Many of us now not only cohabit with flat screens and plasma TVs, but share our intimate spaces; our beds, clothing, workplaces and commutes with our mobile devices. Netflix greets me by name when I load it up, and the spread of the ‘internet-of-things’ (which now includes wi-fi enabled sex toys for long-distance intimacy) and voice recognition means that people are now talking (albeit, slowly) to their devices. The same spread of mobile technology which has facilitated content streaming has also allowed for

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further 'transformations of intimacy(s)' (Giddens, 1993) as people find love and sex online and conduct sexual, romantic and familial relationships via Skype and FaceTime. A phenomenon further exploded by the recent lockdown conditions under Covid-19. I will explore this theme in greater detail when I move onto the textual analysis proper later in this thesis, but it's worth a pause here to reflect on the idea that if we accept the semiotic principle that meanings are not created in content itself, but in our practices (Hall, Evans and Nixon (Eds), 2013), protocols (Gitelman, 2008) or discourses (Foucault), then as those practices change and evolve, so too might the meanings encoded within them. Alexander argues that asking someone to share their Netflix password with you is a 'surprisingly intimate – and therefore socially tabooed—act.' She points out that 'a look at one's "personal profile" is supposedly a glimpse into one's soul, desires, fantasies, and obsessions. 'Share your Netflix password with me – and I'll tell you who you are, who you share your life with, and who you wish to become' (Alexander, 2018, p.91), highlighting perhaps new forms of intimacy that are being constructed not only with the technology itself, but between users IRL.

One limitation to Netflix's democratising powers that I have encountered is that they are notoriously enigmatic in sharing their viewing figures and ratings. I am conscious already that the scope of my research is limited to exploring the cultural politics of sex in the predominantly British and US contexts, and that in cultivating an understanding of the cultural shift from Raunch Culture to #MeToo that co-coincides with the political shift from third to fourth-wave feminisms, I am potentially further narrowing the subjective focus of my research to one which emphasises younger, internet-dwelling feminists. Such a focus inevitably will skew my research towards overemphasis of white, educated experiences, and I was concerned that in opting to analyse pay-to-view content such as that provided by Netflix I would be further excluding the valuable discourses available in front of, as opposed to behind, a paywall. In truth it is difficult to find much demographic information about Netflix's subscriber base at all, aside from reports boasting about its ever-growing user base, reliable and specific information about *who* is watching its shows is notable in its absence. Therefore, I have been left to ponder somewhat unscientifically about the accessibility of subscription to the service. Amanda Lotz argues that at \$7.99 (and £5.99 UK) for its cheapest packages, which give access to all of the content, but on only one screen at a time, Netflix is substantially cheaper than any of the major cable and satellite subscription packages available and I note that a UK TV license now comes in at £13.20/ month. This somewhat crude observation is complicated in the UK context in

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which many channels are available for free via Freeview, but does at least suggest that the cost barrier to subscription is minor when compared to other alternatives.²⁶

It seems fair to reason that an entirely online service such as Netflix, is more likely to appeal to millennials and younger consumers who grew up with the internet existing in their lives in a common sense way, rather than to those who have had to learn, or who have opted not to engage with it at all. This notion is further underscored by the programming available on the platform which emphasises new, cutting-edge content production over the promotion of cultural classics and established favourites. To some extent, these concerns represent a circle that cannot be squared, and thus I must simply accept the implicatory consequences for my research if I wish to focus my analysis on Netflix – and, having weighed the positives and negatives above, I have concluded that the discursive potential offered by the platform means that I do. However, in the case of an age bias, there is something which borders on mitigation in that any study of current cultural trends, almost inevitably requires focus on younger subjects for whom the trend in question is both likely to be driven by and effect, and so perhaps the best that I can realistically aim for here is an awareness of the limitations to how representative my study will actually be.

Valid concerns about Netflix’s business model, user base and seemingly irresistible content notwithstanding, Netflix is at the top of its game in producing the most subversive ‘feminist’ content, whilst simultaneously acting, consciously or otherwise, to change the very parameters of the game itself. Because it is both a producer and distributor, and because of the programmes that it is making, it is thus the most fascinating and critical place to locate my field work on the cultural politics of sex.

A Few Of My Favourite Things – Notes On Text Selection

Having settled, eventually, on Netflix as the primary site for my research, I began to think and agonise over which specific texts and episodes I would choose for my deep reading. After significant deliberation, and a lot of time in front of my TV, I decided on *Orange is The New Black and Sense8*, so will now offer some explanation for these choices.

I considered feminist Netflix comedies such as *Grace and Frankie* and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* as they both contain interesting content in relation to sexual politics: the former

²⁶ At the time of writing, the cheapest available Sky TV subscription was £20.00/ month, and Virgin Media starts at £26/ month, though both offerings are cheaper if coupled with other services such as telephone and internet subscription.

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in particular offers some genuinely subversive discourse around the sexuality of older women. However, I found that upon my preliminary re-viewings of a few episodes of each show, there was simply not the depth of narrative or character development that is present in *OITNB* and *Sense8*. The 25-30 min run times for the comedy shows mean that the dialogue is always geared around the next gag, and though they both contain story arcs which transcend individual episodes and even seasons, the primary plotline for each episode is always resolved within the 30-minute slot. This means, that despite moments of genuine tenderness and thoughtful character exploration, neither show offers the cultural profundity of my chosen programmes. Throughout the process of contextualising and methodology plotting, certain criteria arose: my chosen shows must have been made for and distributed on Netflix; they must also be regarded within popular culture commentaries as having explicit feminist content, and must also have plenty to say about the topics of sex, sexuality and sexual politics, or what Giddens referred to as ‘institutional reflexivity of sex’— providing examples of society talking to itself about sex (Giddens, 1993). Nussbaum notes of *OITNB* that ‘sexuality is at the centre of ‘Orange’: the creators pluck mere hints from the memoir and spin them into full, splashy plots. Sex operates as comfort, as currency, as romance, and also as punishment, with male guards using security frisks to bypass consent’ (Nussbaum, 2013). Sex and sexuality are also at the heart of *Sense8* in its explorations of polyamory, empathy and sensuality.

I now want to discuss a number of other elements which added to the appeal of selecting my chosen texts in general, before offering an overview of how each fits the criteria outlined. Both programmes have, in addition to their feminist and sexual reflexivity, also been regarded as culturally ‘ground-breaking’. This hard-to-pin-down adjective could be dismissed as so vague it lacks meaning altogether, for in an age of internet-driven hyperbole, what now *isn’t* ground-breaking? However, in both *OITNB* and *Sense8*, there is a very real feeling that we were being offered something novel and exciting as evidenced by their almost immediate entries into pop culture fandoms. By 2017, *OITNB* had the cultural prestige of being parodied on *Sesame Street* (Vivian) and *Sense8* was granted a finale after being axed following fan campaigning (Ellis, 2018). Neither show fits neatly into an existing genre (even the tens of thousands of micro-genres deployed by Netflix). At the time of writing (May 2020), *OITNB* is listed on Netflix under only three, somewhat enigmatic genres; ‘Award-winning TV Programmes’, ‘TV programmes based on books’ and ‘TV comedy Dramas’ whilst *Sense8* is categorised under ‘Award-winning TV programmes’, ‘American TV Programmes and’ ‘US TV Dramas’— none of which are particularly illuminating categories, but all of which hint at the tendency of these shows to defy genrefication in the traditional sense. This is important because

[A]s Bakhtin (1981) argues, genres are made up from ‘thousands of living dialogic threads’ that are woven together in a cultural encounter.

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*They thus work to organize and interrogate our understanding of social identities by formalizing both what can be represented and how it can be configured. Although the codes may be played with, shifted, reinvented or subverted, genres are also culturally, temporally and spatially specific. Make this a primary source if possible ... the Johnson book is fab, but you do overuse it... try not to *show* you overuse it!*

(Johnson et al., 2004, p.162)

That both shows are difficult to locate within existing genres is evidence of their novelty. *Sense8* in particular offers an enticing object for examination in that it would not fit under the mainstream heading of 'science fiction' (*Ironman 2*, it ain't!), but does fit with a legacy of queer science fiction, speculative gender and sexually queer narratives, from the novels of Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin and Storm Constantine et al, to the subversive history of *Star Trek* (home of the first bi-racial on-screen kiss, and of numerous queer characters over the years, an even queer fan-fictions).

As I began thinking about texts I might use, I was struck by a sense that there was a particular queer look or feel emerging in some texts. In Chapter 7 I discuss the notion of a 'trans aesthetic' and 'trans temporalities', but at this stage of the research such ideas had not yet become so coalesced. I was struck by an observation by Adharshila Chatterjee:

In the age of Photoshop, YouTube and Instagram, the physicality of the body is no longer absolute. It is deconstructed and decimated within a matrix of cyber-generic modifications and enhancements. As mainstream show business transitions into these new gender-fluid representative media, popular trends like the "coming out" videos among the current queer youth generation is a vital indicator of the possibility of a bodypositive visual mode that can facilitate an uninterrupted vocalization of queer bodies without normative censorship. The future of the visual culture, therefore, is now being determined by a concurrent wave of alternate media which serve as accessible and amenable portals that can properly accommodate and celebrate body diversity and gender fluidity, granting visibility without the panoptic regulation of the heterosexist gender/body images.

(Chatterjee, 2016, p.219)

Here, Chatterjee seems to strike upon some hybrid moment of visual culture, intersecting with the internet (of course) but creating new forms of bodies and desire. I thought about the queer foundational notions discussed earlier of 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990), 'gender outlaws' (Bornstein, 1994) and 'deliciously problematic' (Bornstein, 1994) gender identities and what sorts of programmes might feature them as opposed to the stale, or unrepresentative forms I had problematised on *Transparent*. *Sense8* is produced and directed by the Wachowski sisters who are both trans women themselves. Kate Bornstein notes that 'Lana and Lilly Wachowski bring us into their films' (Bornstein, 1994, p.16) which resonated with my desire to

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work with a text that was *for* queer communities, not simply *about* us. Smythe documents the importance of this distinction:

One of the most significant aspects of queer is address. It is not telling the straights how we live and love to gain their acceptance, as the campaign for positive images attempted in the 1980s, but speaking to ourselves with our own self-referential humour and irony, regardless of whether they 'get it' or not. It is not coming out to them, but on to ourselves.

(Smythe, 1998, p.84)

Moreover, the work of the Wachowskis was already beginning to be examined under a queer lens (Currin et al., 2017). In their infamous 1999 film *The Matrix*, the main protagonist (Neo) is offered a choice between a blue and red pill. He chooses the latter which permits him to see the reality of the world (matrix) and accept his identity as 'The One'. His choice of truth and authenticity, over returning to his old life, happy but oblivious is read here as metaphor for the trans experience and evidence that the work of Lilly and Lana might provide fruitful ground for my explorations.

Michel Foucault discussed the importance of discourse for sexual minorities, and for me, science fiction provides one avenue in which different possibilities of what can be 'played' (Foucault, 2000) in terms of love, sex and intimacy can be explored. *Sense8* offers a clear illustration of this possibility thinking in that it explores themes around gender transition, polyamory and intimacy (which I will explore in Chapters 7 and 8). Moreover, as a piece of queer science fiction, *Sense8* can be read as a form of future history. Johnson et al argue:

It is possible for fiction to be a form of history and for history to be a kind of fiction as both will offer a story of some kind, operate in a particular register or idiom that is itself constructed and will inevitably articulate a range of discourses that are ideological in one way or another.

(Johnson et al., 2004, p.181)

In this sense, my critical context gave a historiographic reading of the Sex Wars, Raunch and #MeToo, and *Sense8* offers a historic potential. Johnson et al cite the example of Thatcherite heroines in the cultural products of the eighties pushing themselves to the top of business etc (Johnson et al., 2004, p.187). I posit that the heroes and villains of my texts are produced from both a current moment and a future possibility. In some ways, this two-way reflection of society in culture might be understood as a form of Gramscian hegemony – a transmission of ideology, but this doesn't feel quite right to me. Hegemony suggests too simplistic a flow of power; I talk more about a #MeToo *sensibility*, which is no less important, just less absolute or sure of its assertions, it is less of a one-way system of power, ideology, hegemony and more a symbiotic, to and fro of ideas, politics and potentials.

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The final criterion I used when selecting my texts for analysis is perhaps the most important one – both *OITNB* and *Sense8* are meaningful to me. Barry Gunter argues that ‘just as with any other form of qualitative research, the results of the analysis depend heavily on the qualities of the researcher as a competent member of a culture’ (Gunter, 2000, p.86), and as discussed earlier, it has become increasingly apparent to me that I cannot provide the most meaningful analysis of that which I do not understand on the level of consumer. Though of course I could have familiarised myself with other texts by prolonged study, secondary research and primary interaction, I don’t think I could ever truly know which the most important facets were to explore, which themes might arise or why these objects *mattered* culturally speaking because I would only ever have been approaching them as an outsider; an ethnographer examining some mystical culture for its novelty rather than its resonating with its truth. An honest familiarity or competency with my key texts was not just a matter of convenience, but an epistemic necessity if I was to conduct the kind of research that I am committed to, both in terms of the academic merit of my work, and that of my personal, ethical convictions by where I recognise the need to acknowledge and understands my own situatedness as a researcher in my work.

I initially resisted picking *OITNB* and *Sense8* precisely *because* they are important cultural texts to me directly. I felt that there was something ignoble about focussing so close to home, or that doing so might be seen as an ‘easy’ option, although I think the opposite is actually the case, because I had to be prepared to subject artefacts of considerable sentimental value to the critical judgement that my research required. Moreover, I need at times to separate my close emotional ties to these products in order to examine them more objectively, and at other times, to explore my intimate relationships as a site of knowledge in itself. Being both a fan and an investigator of my texts thus posed certain advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, my familiarity with the texts made selecting episodes, or remembering certain plot lines, much easier, and meant that I ‘understood’ them in a visceral way. However, it also meant that I would need to work hard to ensure that I produced an adequately critical reading of the material. Gledhill and Ball note that:

As cultural media analysts, we must avoid both fixing meanings and deciding the ideological effects of representations on the evidence of the textual product alone. Rather, primed with an awareness of the semiotic and social possibilities of a film or television programme, what we can do is establish conditions and possibilities of gendered (or other) readings and open up the negotiations of the text in order to understand the state of the contests.

(Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p.383)

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A fundamental approach which I adopted to try and maintain a balance between my fandom and my academia was to think about how, and under what circumstances I 'read' my texts. As Johnson et al note 'we need continually to remind ourselves of the emotional and cultural investments that are always at stake in popular formations and, crucially, in critical work itself' (Johnson et al., 2004, p.154). When watching as a fan, I noted that I was usually relaxed, and on the sofa or in my bed. When I 'read' as an academic, I would sit at my computer with a notepad. This might seem like an insignificant difference, but it meant that I was able to make a psychological, as well as practical distinction in how I read for my thesis, and I believe that this in turn changed the discursive production of meaning that occurred as I read. One important aspect of my academic readings was an awareness of the need to critically engage with the material, and what it means to 'critically engage'. Johnson et al explain that 'visual and non-representational signs produce meaning,... by identifying and critically interrogating such techniques, we can begin to see how meaning, far from arising naturally in a scene, is itself wholly constructed or put together' (Johnson et al., 2004, p.159). I decided I needed something systematic, something tangible, and for the third or fourth viewings of my texts I designed a proforma (See Appendix for an example) which acted as a prompt sheet for my note taking, reminding me to think about *all* of the textual, narrative and cinematic elements which were taking place. Moreover, Johnson et al also note that 'reading..., is not simply about the mechanistic identification of formal elements or functions: it is also about tracing the ways in which textual formations are linked to larger cultural formations' (Johnson et al., 2004, p.161), and this is where my readings shift from observations to analyses, thinking specifically about what each element I had noted meant for the broader cultural politics of sex and the #MeToo moment I was exploring.

To say that I completely separated my fandom from my academic reading would not be true or even possible, but I also think it would not be desirable to have done so either for the reasons mentioned. What I have endeavoured to do throughout is be honest about when I am talking about or reflecting on my emotional or political connections with my subject matter. I frequently use phrases such as 'on first sight', or 'at first appearance' where I make the initial observations that I as a fan might have done upon first viewing the material, before going on to offer a more critical, second or deeper reading of the material. It's in the combination of both, or indeed many, forms of reading – embodied and more distanced – that my method finds shape.

In addition to questions about the relative utility and academic merit of analysing my fandoms, I came to understand that it is precisely in the elements of these shows which have made them suitable for my theoretical exploration that my own personal fandom is rooted. That they both explore narratives around sexuality and intimacy which more closely reflect my own

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experiences as a queer woman, and that they wear their feminisms on their sleeves, are reasons that I have come to identify with them so strongly. That they offered me perspectives which I had never seen explored so thoughtfully elsewhere on screen has gifted me a kind of representational empowerment, the meaningfulness of which cannot be understated. Moreover, although my research is not a critical audience effects study, as Fiske points out ‘people are not merely consumers of texts – the audience rejects this role ‘and becomes a producer, a producer of meanings and pleasers’ (Fisk 1989 c:59 cited in Gauntlett, 2008, p.24). Thus, no matter how objectively one attempts to view a text which they are analysing, we automatically become not just viewers or observers, but active participants in the creation of the text’s meanings. In selecting shows which I have an affinity with, I was able to explore first-hand the intricate process of knowledge creation as it was happening within my own mind and that my closeness to the texts offers a unique, insider perspective as it happened.

All of this said, however, this does not mean that I view these texts as perfect. As I have commented before, critique, assessment and evaluation has become part of the enjoyment factor for fourth-wave cultural activists, myself included, and throughout my analysis chapters, there will be commentary on where these texts have fallen short on their intersectional and transformative promises.

Prisoners, Empaths, Dildos And Orgies – Some Background Discussion On My Chosen Texts

Having discussed now the general criteria that I used in the selection of *OITNB* and *Sense8* as my cultural artefacts within which to explore the cultural politics of sex on Netflix, I now pay attention to the specificities of each text and offer an overview of their content in order to further demonstrate their utility in my research and to help the reader familiarise themselves with salient elements of these two complex narratives.

Orange Is the New Black (Kohen, 2013d)

This isn’t a show about women for women: it’s a show about people. It humanizes a population society often pretends doesn’t exist and addresses universal problems like racism, money, addiction, love, betrayal and sexuality.

(Dockterman, 2014)

OITNB is a show created by Jenjii Kohen (*Weeds*) which launched in 2013 and is now into its sixth season, with a seventh anticipated in 2020. The show is loosely based on Piper Kerman’s

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autobiography of the same name (Kerman, 2010), and initially follows Piper Chapman (renamed for the show), a middle-class white woman who is sent to prison for drug-trafficking offences conducted a decade prior to her arrest, and whilst she was in a same-sex relationship with Norma Jansen (the character renamed Alex Vause on the show). The show utilizes the 'fish-out-of-water' trope to explore themes around race, class, sexuality and incarceration, initially from Piper's perspective, before broadening out as she tries to adjust to her new reality inside the walls of the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary, a minimum-security women's prison. As the show progresses, it deviates further and further from the source material, and begins to focus on the lives and backstories of the numerous women inmates that Piper encounters, and she becomes a member of the ensemble cast as opposed to the show's lead protagonist. Kohen herself has stated that Piper was utilised as a 'Trojan Horse' (Gross, 2013) in the sense that in using a white protagonist, Kohen felt she was more likely to succeed in selling the show, which is ostensibly focussed on the narratives of queer women and women of colour, than she would have been had she opted to pitch a prison show about Black women.

Belcher notes that casting on the show was notable in that it marked a departure from so-called 'blind casting', which had been favoured by creators like Shonda Rhymes in *Grey's Anatomy*, and whereby roles were advertised without specification or pre-determination of race. *OITNB* however utilised 'Diversity Casting' (Belcher, 2016, p.495) in that the show specifically sought out a racially diverse range of actors of different sexualities and gender identities to play specific roles. However, Farr notes that although '*Orange is the New Black* is breaking new representational ground with its diverse, woman-led cast and scenes illustrating some of the harsh realities of prison life, 'in a televisual era where the driving economic logic is that diversity sells, these ground-breaking representations are not quite as revolutionary as they may initially seem' (Farr, 2018, p.155), highlighting again perhaps that diversity in terms of representation does not an egalitarian society make.

However, the diversity in casting and centralising of the narratives of women of colour has not been without criticism. Farr argues that 'blackness is an overdetermined symbol in U.S. visual culture; blackness and/or black body can stand for sexuality, aggression, criminality, passivity, weakness, pathology, coolness, authenticity, and the list goes on' (Farr, 2018, p.160) and that *OITNB* utilises this by its understanding of Blackness as highly profitable and marketable. She asks: 'what do the narratives about the success of the show teach us about the value of racially marked bodies, particularly black bodies, within racial neo-liberalism?' (Farr, 2018, p.156). Although this question is not the primary subject of my research, it requires consideration when assessing the claims made about the feminist and ground-breaking nature of the programme. Farr further argues that 'by humanizing everyone, from the inmates, to the guards, to the warden's assistant, *Orange* obscures the power dynamics operating within the

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prison and minimises the inequalities that are actually at play within the prison industrial complex' (Farr, 2018, p.158). For her, the very narrative depth which appeals to me on a personal and academic level, is also responsible for creating on-screen struggles which are in Herman Grey's words 'visible but emptied' (cited in Farr, 2018, p.158). She argues that *OITNB*'s creators 'rely on well-worn stereotypes about the intersection of blackness, Latinidad, poverty and femininity in order to explore the dangers of incorrectly participating in capitalism' (Farr, 2018, p.157).

Sense8 (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015b)

Visions of the future and alternate universes are inherently political, because change is political. So often, it can feel like sci-fi fans fall into two camps: People who want to imagine a future in which we've solved intractable institutional problems, and people who want to watch alpha bros going Rambo with an Orion slave girl on each arm.

(Ellis, 2018)

Sense8 was a two-season series created by the Wachowskis (*The Matrix*, *V for Vendetta*, *Cloud Atlas*) and Jacob Michael Straczynski (*Babylon 5*) which debuted in 2015. The show was cancelled after only its second season with Netflix commenting that, although passionate, its fans were not plentiful enough to mitigate its enormous production costs²⁷. The show was brought back by popular demand (fan petition) for a two-and-half-hour finale special in 2018, demonstrating the power of 'a generation of fans who had fought for shows and who had learned to use the internet the way one of your sensates uses their connections to their cluster, to act collectively and to be stronger for it' (Ellis, 2018).

The show's premise is that eight random strangers from across the globe, who were all born at the same moment, are actually 'sensates' – an evolutionarily advanced sub-species of human beings who are able to share each other's thoughts, feelings and experiences through something akin to telepathy. The group of eight sensates is a 'cluster' and there are many clusters, though we follow the lives of one particular cluster. The series begins with the sensates being 'born' – coming into their powers as adults and trying to make sense of their new experiential positions. As the show progresses, the sensates learn to 'visit' one another, controlling when they appear to each other's consciousnesses, and a conspiracy plot begins to emerge whereby the sensates are being hunted by a faceless corporation called BPO. BPO and its enigmatic agent 'Whispers' wish to capture the sensates to utilise their powers for military applications. The cluster themselves are

- Nomi Marks – a transgender computer whizz from San Francisco

²⁷ Wikipedia lists these as rising to \$9million dollars per episode in the second series (Wikipedia, 2018b)

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- Capheus "Van Damn" Onyango – a bus driver from Nairobi
- Sun Bak – A South Korean businesswoman and daughter of a business tycoon
- Kala Dandekar – an Indian chemist
- Riley Gunnarsdóttir - an Icelandic DJ
- Wolfgang Bogdanow - a safe-cracker and criminal from Berlin
- Lito Rodriguez – a closeted tele-novella actor from Mexico City
- Will Gorski – a Chicago policeman

In addition to the eight sensates, there are several important supporting characters who make up the ensemble.

- Amanita Caplan – Nomi's girlfriend
- Bug – a mysterious computer hacker friend of Nomi and Amanita's
- Zakia Asalache – Capheus' girlfriend who encourages his move into politics
- Kwon-Ho Mun - a South Korean detective and love interest of Sun
- Rajan Rasal – the husband of Kala and the owner of the business where she works
- Felix Berner – best friend and accomplice of Wolfgang
- Hernando Fuentes and Daniela Velasquez – friends and lovers of Lito
- Diego - best friend and police partner of Will
- Whispers (Milton Brant) – A BPO operative who hunts the sensates and who is also a sensate himself
- Angelica Turing – The mother who 'births' the sensates, and is also a sensate herself in another cluster
- Jonas Maliki – A sensate in Angelica's cluster who is also her lover and a helper to our main cluster
- River El-Saadawi – whose mother was a founder of BPO and who helps the cluster from the inside
- Bodhi – a spiritual member of the Lacuna – a group of sensates who live separately from others and preserve the history and integrity of the species.

It should be apparent from the sheer cast list alone that *Sense8* offers a level of narrative sophistication which is perfect for unpicking to reveal cultural meanings. However, this is not the only benefit which arises from having a large ensemble cast. When there is no lead protagonist whose perspective we automatically default to, narrative must be created in the interactions between characters. In the case of *Sense8*, this gives rise to a multiplicity of different, familial, intimate, romantic and sexual relationships to explore, or as Kaiser suggests:

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Perhaps the easiest metaphor to make, with Sense8 ending on a poly, queer, kinky orgy, is that the core metaphor is for the international queer community, or perhaps anyone who’s pushing against the boundaries of patriarchal norms.

(Kaiser, 2018)

However, what is truly special about the show is the way in which it is able to create nuance in such queer possibilities, and I wonder if this is due to the Wachowski’s own lived experiences as transgender women. For example, Keegan notes that ‘Sense8 seeks to aesthetically translate transgender as a form of consciousness—a way of perceiving or knowing that occurs between and across bodies, cultures, and geographies’ (Keegan, 2016, p.606) and discusses how the show creates a trans ‘aesthetic’ which is more complex than typical narratives about transitioning from one thing to another in a linear fashion. He further argues that *Sense8* is substantively different from other progressive trans narratives (such as those on *OITNB* or *Transparent*) on TV at the moment, arguing that ‘unlike these programs, which aim to “teach” transgender to liberal cisgender audiences through universalist metaphors or through pedagogical forms of affect, *Sense8* offers different routes into trans as an aesthetic practice or as a set of narrative strategies for simultaneously representing and replicating hypermodern globality’ (Keegan, 2016, p.606). *Sense8*, then, doesn’t merely *represent* aspects of queer culture, but allows me to investigate the current cultural and political narratives.

Just like *OITNB*, however, *Sense8* has also had its fair share of criticisms, but unlike *OITNB*, it has struggled to achieve commercial success. Ellis notes that

It’s really a show about the power of radical empathy, but the impossibility of conveying that in less than 90 seconds meant that Sense8’s trailer made it seem like a confusing action show with good-looking characters and nice sets.

(Ellis, 2018)

It is precisely because of its ‘radical’ content that I have decided to stick with the show for my research despite its relative lack of commercial success. Moreover, though not a box-office smash, the show has established itself a kind of cult-classic within the queer community, so it should not be regarded as a quaint obscurity wither. As Light notes, the show’s ‘failure is far more interesting than the success of almost anything else happening at this moment’ (Light, 2015) and I would argue it has had significant cultural impact, which can be evidenced both in the number of pieces written exploring the show’s transformative themes and in the successful fan-driven campaign to bring it back. Kaiser even hints at the show’s un-tapped potential for cultural analysis by semi-joking that ‘there’s probably a remarkable essay to be written about

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Sense8 as the transition between Obama-era hope and Trump-era disaster' (Kaiser, 2018) – a sentiment which I share, though will refrain from acting upon at this time!

The most meaningful criticism of *Sense8* was been levied by Claire Light, who argued that in its quest to create television from a truly, global and international perspective, *Sense8* has in actuality fallen victim to what she calls the 'failure of global imagination' (Light, 2015). Light argues that the places most vividly depicted on the show, are those closest to the Wachowski's own habitats— San Francisco during Pride for example. For her, the other locations featured on the show 'display a profound lack of recognition of local pop cultures even when they would definitely have influenced such characters. In the show, 'American' pop is specific, non-American pop is generalized and clichéd, as in the Bollywood dance, or entirely absent' (Light, 2015). Charitably she argues that the programmer's failures in this respect were somewhat inevitable 'because the very act of conceiving a global imagination is itself a function of the specifically American imagination' (Light, 2015). Perhaps an opportunity was missed by the Wachowskis to invite directors or producers from each of the locations and cultures filmed in to contribute to the show's global aesthetic.

Because of the centrality of a radical 'US-global' perspective in my chosen texts, the markers of this culture are prominent: narrative nuance, feminist credentials, racial diversity, intersectionality, queer possibilities and sexualities. These themes invite cultural debate and evaluations of their contributions to creating a politically subversive cultural moment, and adds to the notion that *OITNB* and *Sense8*'s narratives, characters and surrounding discourses are important sources of knowledge in relation to the cultural politics of sex.

Conducting 'Feminist Research'

Having given an in-depth exploration to *what* my textual analysis will examine, I now discuss *how* I will go about conducting my analysis and under which epistemological, ontological and ideological frameworks and assumptions it was undertaken.

Lizbet Van Zoonen argues that Feminist research is 'characterized by a radical politicization of the research process, internally as well as externally. Internally, by interrogating the power relations inherent in doing research, externally by aiming at producing results that are relevant to the feminist endeavour' (van Zoonen, 1994). Feminist research fundamentally sets out to challenge historic (masculine) assumptions about how research should be conducted (Harding, 1991). It seeks to break from the viewpoint that the social sciences should adopt unequivocally the standards of the physical sciences which demand that the researcher must

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remain unbiased, and invisible in the research and that the inclusion of personal, emotional or experiential data must be avoided at all costs for the sake of academic rigour. Feminist research posits that such assumptions have the tendency to reproduce patriarchal knowledge, as Letherby argues, 'men have used their positions of power to define issues, structure languages and develop theory' (Letherby, 2003, p.20). Such knowledge ends up being either wilfully ignorant of, or culturally blind to the struggles, of marginalised people and the political and social forces which they experience. Moreover, scientific appeals to avoid bias in research are in themselves political in nature. The researcher is always present in their work, whether this is acknowledged or not, their preferences, ethics and ideas affect the choices they make, the questions that they ask, and the conclusions they draw, so to claim perfect objectivity is at best naïve, and at worst, fraudulent. I strongly believe that we can take the work out of the researcher, but we cannot take the researcher out of the work and nor should we want to, so long as we are able to clearly understand and articulate our 'salient' (Spry, 2001, p.706) part in it and our cultural and political position.

At the heart of this thesis is a fascination with sexual freedoms, representations and politics. At the heart of this researcher is a lifelong commitment to feminist and social justice activism. It is therefore the case that the questions pursued herein are of a political nature. They seek to understand the forces at work, the material dynamics and the structural powers present within the subject matter I am exploring. This thesis has the dual goals of adding to existing knowledge, but also aiming to bring about, in some small way, social change, as Letherby describes 'feminist researchers start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives through social and individual change. They are concerned to challenge the silences in mainstream research both in relation to the issues studied and the ways in which study is undertaken' (Letherby, 2003, p.4). My voice will be ever present in its pages. This I make no apology for, and my views, experiences and struggles will always be documented and declared up front. Feminist research requires a re-evaluation of what constitutes knowledge, where it might be located and how it can be accessed, so I will now explore a little further about what these feminist assumptions mean for *my* research and the kinds of knowledge I am aiming to create.

Stories, Narratives And Discourses

My fieldwork has been conducted under a discursive epistemology which recognises that meaning, and therefore knowledge, is constructed within the practice of language. In the context of analysing televisual texts, the locations of this construction are two-fold: initially in

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the practice of language and discourse between characters on screen, and then within the discursive practices of watching, digesting and discussing the content encountered on the part of the audience. My interest in such discourse is especially concerned with examples which illustrate the connections between language and the exercise of social power— particularly in relation to gender and sexual politics. My study can thus be understood as a form of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), whereby the 'critical' part is that which is particularly concerned with questions of power within discourse. As Gunter explains, '[t]he method asserts that underlying ideological positions, perceptions of power relations and producers' level of interest and authority, can therefore be determined from the textual structure of media content' (Gunter, 2000, p.88). Furthermore, Stuart Hall argues that CDA 'saw knowledge as always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice (i.e. to particular bodies)' (Hall, 2013c, p.32).

Gillespie and Toynebee posit that as the word 'narrative' has Latin origins in 'knowledge' and 'wise', there is therefore a pivotal and 'intimate connection between narrative and knowledge.' (Gillespie and Toynebee, 2006, p.82). There is thus important discursive work at play in the process of storying and creating narrative, and as Gillespie and Toynebee further argue, stories are themselves not only about plots or what we 'see and hear', but the sum of all the events which are presented to us, inferred, or explicitly and between the characters themselves (Gillespie and Toynebee, 2006, p.89). As Gunter suggests, 'it is not so much the characteristics of the plain text as the characters themselves that are crucial as well as their acts, their difficulties, their choices and the general developments' (Gunter, 2000, p.90). Narrative also feels like a pertinent starting point, because the goal of this thesis is to explore the cultural and social-political shift that has led to the #MeToo moment; a moment which is fundamentally about the power of women's personal narratives of sexual harassment and violence. Consequently, the presence of particularly complex and sophisticated narratives has been a key criterion in selecting my two Netflix texts for further analysis— *Orange Is the New Black* and *Sense8*. I posit that cultural products such as Netflix programmes can be and *are* stories told by real people. Even when those stories are fictitious in nature, they can speak of lived experiences, political standpoints and personal struggles, and even, as I demonstrate later, move beyond them, to create possibilities and potentialities which are of crucial import.

Both my selected texts feature large, diverse ensemble casts in which the narrative does not centre around a particular 'lead' character, but in the complex relationships and interactions between all characters. In the case of *OITNB*, the narrative initially focusses on Piper Chapman – the moniker for Piper Kerman on whose autobiography (a personal narrative itself) the show is originally based, but she is quickly decentred as the show progresses and

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ultimately becomes one piece of the broader collective. In the case of *Sense8*, the interactions between characters are particularly important because of the telepathic/ empathetic link between them. Arising from both of these premises are narratives of considerable interest and multiple layers. I was astounded to observe that following my first critical viewing of an episode of *Sense8*, I had made more than fifty bullet points summarising plot elements alone in the course of a 1 hour show – this was double the number recorded for *OITNB*, itself a narratively multiplex creation.

Furthermore, I have also selected these two texts because of their deliberate and sophisticated uses of narrative devices. For example, *OITNB* is predominantly set within a women's prison, but uses frequent flashbacks to explore narrative elements in the inmates' lives prior to incarceration. The effect of this is threefold in that it creates a more vivid viewing experience than that which could be achieved if all of the activity took place within the stark walls of the federal correction facility. Secondly it functions to incarcerate the viewer alongside the inmates by creating a reality in which the only escape from the prison context is through memory and imagination or, as David Gauntlett explains, providing 'stories [which] are not only about the desires of characters but also our desires as audiences. They invite our identification' (Gillespie and Toynbee, 2006, p.85). Thirdly, and most importantly, the use of flashbacks in *OITNB* give the characters real depth by exploring their backstories, desires and motivations for action, thus elongating the parameters of its characters' stories.

In addition, the prison context of *OITNB* gives rise to the thematic notion of 'time': inmates are 'serving time' and time itself can pass incredibly slowly for them throughout the duration of their incarcerations. This theme is alluded to in several ways, most notably in the show's theme tune— '*You've Got Time*' by Regina Spektor. The dual meaning of 'You've Got Time' being a reference to both serving time and having time on one's hands, is further underscored by the lyric 'taking steps is easy, standing still is hard' (Spektor, 2013), which evokes the mental and emotional struggle of the inmates in coping with prolonged stretches of having little to occupy their time. Moreover, the slow passage of time is demonstrated through further narrative devices such as in season 1, episode 9 when Piper is sent to the SHU (solitary confinement). The shots show her in the small, empty cell, pacing around, lying down, standing up, but the framing of the shot remains static, and it is the image of Piper herself who is faded in and out from one position to the next (Kohen, 2013c). 'Time' in a sense becomes a character in the show because it is ever present thematically, and it interacts with the other characters, often driving or slowing the narrative pace of an episode for dramatic effect.

Sense8 too, is notable for its use of narrative devices, primarily to help the viewer to keep up with its complex plotlines in which space and time themselves have evolved a narrative

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plasticity. As well as flashbacks, the show employs verbal nods in the characters’ speech which are really for the benefit of the viewer. For example, in the final episode *Amor Vincit Omnia*, several linguistic devices are utilised to assist viewers in following the increasingly convoluted narrative. The character of Rajan is not a sensate himself and thus cannot communicate telepathically like many of the other characters do, so is seen asking his wife Kala what is going on, she then explains to him (and us) what we might have missed. Other devices are deployed to help situate the viewer in the broader plot arcs themselves. For example, Mr Hoys says: ‘this is it, this is the end’; Jonas later comments ‘so here we are, the end, no more secrets no more lies’, and when the characters are on the train to undertake the final battle in Naples, an announcement can be heard stating poignantly ‘Naples, the end of the line’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). Such narrative devices are not only created using dialogue, however, a ‘false dawn’ is created when all of the characters are finally united around a large dining table, eating, drinking and laughing, the scene is brightly lit and evocative of biblical ‘last supper’ tropes only to be interrupted by the telepathic arrival of Bodhi, whose presence alerts us to the fact that matters are far from yet resolved. Moreover, humour is used occasionally, in the most tense and important action sequences, to create a breathing space and break in mounting suspense. As the team plan for the final assault in Naples, Bug is heard marvelling ‘I can’t believe I’m actually in one of those planning scenes!’; though not quite breaking the cinematic fourth wall, this metanarrative acts as a little nod to the assumed nerdiness of viewers and as a method of inviting them to share in his disbelief at what is unfolding. Later too, Shakespearean farce is deployed when the team are disguised as tourists on their makeshift trojan horse, where they ham up acting as gormless international tourists and take on the roles of stereotypical Brits and Americans abroad. This use of farce creates space for a return to the suspenseful main plotline allowing for an even more exciting build to the final climactic crescendo. Such choreography of pacing demonstrates a mastery of storytelling and narrative construction occurring outside of the relative confines of dialogue.

These examples then are illustrative not only of the narrative complexity of my chosen texts, but of their creators’ awareness of this complexity. That narrative plays such a major part in these texts, makes them prime material for me to explore how new meanings and cultures are developing in relation to the politics of sex—a theme which features significantly in both texts and which shall be explored further in the analysis Chapters themselves.

Situations And Standpoints – On Where I Am Coming From

As an academic with a background in political theory, I was familiar with Standpoint Theory (ST), and particularly the much-quoted work of Sandra Harding, who extended ST into a

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feminist arena (following Dorothy Smith 1974). ST emerged as a way to challenge historic notions about the location of meaningful knowledge and acceptable ways of obtaining such knowledge. It sought to challenge the assumption that knowledge could only be acquired via 'scientific', 'objective' inquiry by showing that there was really no such thing as objective inquiry. All methodologies, subject matter choices and analyses are conducted from a particular standpoint. Historically, this standpoint has been that of the upper/middle class, white male, and so his approach came to be taken as the normative or correct one. ST showed that important knowledge existed in locations not only denied by men, but invisible to them, and moreover argued that the experiential knowledge of oppressed people actually offered a truer, more complete perspective.

The revelations of the #MeToo movement offer a useful example of this, if an oversimplification of #MeToo interactions might be permitted for the sake of illustration. Many men were shocked to learn of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the lives of women. What became apparent in many of the examples unveiled was that in each case, the woman had knowledge that she did not consent to the sexual advances of the man. In some cases, the man surely knew this too, but in many more, it would appear, that even in the face of protests to the contrary, the man 'knew' that the woman was really consenting or 'asking for it'. None of the #MeToo perpetrators saw themselves as rapists or molesters, the women did. ST argues that this is because the women's standpoint allowed them to see the fuller picture, because their experiences as an oppressed group 'gives them fewer interests in ignorance' (Harding, 1991, p.125). Men, whether perpetrators of sexual violence or not, have benefited from not being able to 'see' women's non-consent, while women on the other hand have a vested 'interest' in being able to recognise consent (or its absence) in themselves and other women, because it can help to protect them from, or at the very least help them to understand, harm. As Harding explains, 'if human activity is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups (such as men and women), "one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse"' (Harding, 1991, p.120).

Because ST is able to shine the light on power dynamics and hierarchies, and because it acknowledges hitherto invisible experiential and emotional knowledge, it is of crucial import to feminist researchers, myself included. However, it is another of Harding's claims that I found most important for my own research.

It is not the experiences or the speech that provides the grounds for feminist claims; it is rather the subsequently articulated observations of and theory about the rest of nature and social relations-observations and theory that start out from, that look at the world from the perspective of, women's lives.

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(Harding, 1991, p.124)

Here, she is explaining the necessity of analysing experiential knowledge and the potential political benefit of doing so. My own research was not conducted with participants, but as discussed elsewhere in this thesis, it focusses on narratively dense texts. It is within the narrative density of my texts that ST was a most useful perspective to hold as it helped me to think about what each of my characters 'knew' that the male characters in particular didn't. This was particularly important in my analysis of the repeated rapes experienced by Tiffany Doggett in *OINTB* which I explore in Chapter Six, as it became apparent that in focussing on *her* narrative and experiences, the show was able to say the most about sexual violence, and I was able to draw the most meaningful analysis.

Although ST was a useful influence in my analysis, it is not without its drawbacks. Donna Haraway highlights what she views as the risks of privileging the knowledge of the less powerful. She argues that there is a risk that we might end up romanticising such knowledge, or worse, claiming to be able to see what disadvantaged people see, when we cannot. She also argues that 'there is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions' (Haraway, 1988, p.590). She also exposes the problem in ST of claiming to see and be seen simultaneously. Such positions can be regarded as a problem for feminist epistemologies, because they essentially claim that we can only ever aspire to partial knowledge. However, Haraway, rather than viewing this as a problem, embraces and even privileges such partiality:

So, I think my problem, and "our" problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.'

(Haraway, 1988, p.579)

Haraway argues that partial positions can be 'stitched together' (Haraway, 1988, p.586) with others and for

Politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden.

(Haraway, 1988, p.589)

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The 'god trick' mentioned above, is the fallacy of claiming to be able to see 'everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988, p.581) as non-feminist research often claims to. Instead, she posits a more individually situated, embodied position as not only the most honest form of knowledge, but the most desirable, because of the 'connections and unexpected openings' (Haraway, 1988, p.590) that such a situated knowledge makes possible. One such example of this in my work has been in the changing of my perspective from viewing my texts as inanimate objects to subjects in themselves. Haraway states that 'situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource' (Haraway, 1988, p.592). This has been a revelation for my work, because it has allowed me to treat my texts not simply as representations of a culture but as sites of knowledge about the culture. Moreover, situated knowledge (SK) has allowed me to both build on the power dynamics of epistemology exposed by ST, but also be aware of its limitations. SK has meant a real interrogation of my embodied self as a researcher, by 'understanding how these visual systems work, technically, socially, and psychically, ...[as] a way of embodying feminist objectivity' (Haraway, 1988, p.583). As well as influencing, how I have read my texts, and the analyses I have given, I think that the most notable result of adopting SK has been my decision to adopt an autoethnographically informed approach to my research, in an attempt to further tease out my own embodiments.

Me, Myself and I – Conducting An Autoethnographically Informed Study



Fig 12 Nicotine and Caffeine: Fuel for the researcher in her 'natural' habitat 19/09/16

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Autoethnographic performance is the convergence of the "autobiographic impulse" and the "ethnographic moment" represented through movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity.

(Spry, 2001, p.706)

As I have already discussed, this research project is of real personal and political interest to me and I firmly believe that it is essential that I acknowledge this in my work. Before I commenced my work in the field, and also throughout the duration of this project, I carried out reflexive examinations into my own understandings and experiences of the subject matter and how they might impact my research via my personal and academic journals and through blogging. As Jennifer Mason points out, this 'means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see' (Mason, 2002). Van Zoonen discusses the notion of a 'double consciousness' (van Zoonen, 1994) whereby feminist researchers integrate into their research an understanding of both their own oppression and privilege as women. She argues that this allows researchers to recognise their '*Betroffenheit*' – 'that is their position as victims, their outrage analysis, criticism and motivation for acting' (van Zoonen, 1994), which is a concept that I have centred throughout the duration of this project.

I came to realise that my own personal '*Betroffenheit*' or 'situation' (Haraway, 1988) is the product of several core strands of my identity: my Marxist, Socialist and Feminist political position, my fat, queer (pansexual), working class, femme identities, and my lived experience of chronic mental illness – namely lifelong struggles with generalised anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. Some of these 'strands', like my sexuality and feminism, are quite obviously linked to the subject matter of this research, but others, such as my mental illnesses, are less so. However, as I began to consciously document my academic reflections, I quickly came to understand that my work as a feminist researcher is inextricably linked with all of these facets, and that my mental health in particular would be present in the work I produced whether I wanted it to be or not. It has been responsible for some of the practical realities of the project, such as the periods of leave I have taken. It has been a profound third wheel in my relationship with Netflix – on the one hand, explaining *how* I have been able to consume so much television, and on the other, explaining perhaps in part where my analytical abilities are located. I have always said that my analytical mind was a double-edged sword, maybe my strongest asset for academic research, but also the deadliest weapon when internalised and applied to critique of the self. In addition, my mental health has affected some of the less tangible qualities, such as the optimism or pessimism present in my analyses and the constant

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shifting of methodological focus. This thesis then was always going to feature a degree of reflexivity, in part because it is an academic and political cause that I am committed to and firmly believe has value, and in part because of who I am as a person, the experiences I have had, and the way in which I research by choice and instinct.

The manner and form of that this reflexivity would take in the final thesis however has shifted as the project has evolved. Initially, and as I commenced research around autoethnography – that is ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)’ (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011a, p.1) as a method, I thought that it would form a core part of the data itself. I envisaged a thesis that would be interwoven with diary excerpts throughout, which would provide a kind of ‘director’s cut’ whereby my personal voice would be given in italics alongside my academic voice which narrates the thesis proper. However, as the thesis began to crystallise, I recognised that my writing style and academic voice are quite naturally reflexive anyway, and that much of what I thought would be given as supplementary text was already present in the primary content. Moreover, there were practical considerations such as the fact that my ‘director’s cut’ would add tens of thousands of additional words, words which I wanted to spend on the critical context for, and textual analysis of, the #MeToo moment I had identified. Though some journal and blog entries have survived the brutal editing process, these are given only where I have felt they really add value in terms of understanding my thinking, choices or argument, and are therefore much more prevalent in the chapters dealing with formulating and situating my research than in the analysis of the data itself. It is also true that the largest ‘chunk’ of research that I conducted, but haven’t directly used in the final product, was around autoethnography as a method itself, and though not directly present or cited here, what I learned has undoubtedly influenced my work in subtle and unavoidable ways which I feel the need to acknowledge. I am particularly grateful for the writings of Bochner and Ellis, Spry, Moro, Muncey, Denzin and Jago (Ellis, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011b; Ellis, 1999; Muncey, 2005; Denzin, 2003, 2006; Moro, 2006; Jago, 2002). Thus, this thesis should be regarded not so much as employing autoethnography as a core methodology, but as being ‘autoethnographically informed’ throughout.

‘Moments’ and ‘Snapshots’– Devising And Adopting Frameworks And Terminologies

I now move on to discuss how I framed my analysis, and some of the key themes and terminologies I devised.

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I mentioned earlier that once I'd made the decision to shift the focus of my PhD away from Raunch Culture, to create an observational study on the current developments I was witnessing unfolding in front of me, I opted to start with an informal approach of unguided curiosity; lifting up the rock. This proved to be a useful strategy in allowing me to develop a picture of the whole field, such as it was, and to intuitively follow various cultural, political and technological strands to see where they might lead. In so doing, it became apparent that ideas and patterns were beginning to coalesce, forming thought clusters that I would need to try and conceptualise. The most significant of these were around 'moments' and 'snapshots' and it is to these concepts that I would now like to give a little further discussion.

The notion of 'moments' arose from the realisation that from my contextual reading, I had identified three distinct periods of note in the recent(ish) cultural politics of sex. The Sex Wars of the late seventies and 1980s, Raunch Culture from the end of the nineties through the first six or eight years of the 2010s, and finally #MeToo, which first came to my attention in 2017. Though each period contained significant historical events; (the Barnard Conference, the closure of *Page 3*, the #MeToo movement), it was becoming clear, that these periods were more significant than the sum of their parts. Each stood, not simply for an event or series of events, but for a convergence of several important political, cultural and technological strands, and each had sparked a renewed output of commentary, response or media. During the Sex Wars, we saw the political force of second-wave feminism, drawing up battle lines within itself, over the issue of pornography and following the preceding decades' 'free love' sexual revolution. This coincided with the expansion of the home VHS market, making pornography an ever more prevalent issue. Raunch Culture represented a move to feminism's third-wave and the explosion of discourse around lad culture, hypersexualisation and sex work, and was accompanied by the proliferation of high-speed internet into people's homes. Lastly, #MeToo has arisen from the increased agitation around sexual harassment and assault and fourth-wave feminism's birth into a world of seamless technological integration, voice assistance, internet television and fibre optic web, and all of this relocated to the pockets and palms of the population.

I played around with a few terms in an attempt to accurately describe the pictures I was beginning to build; talk of 'epochs' and 'eras' didn't quite capture the ephemerality that I perceived, nor the spontaneity and serendipity, the by-chancedness of the factors intersecting at the apex of each period. 'Concepts', 'notions' and 'phenomena' felt too theoretical whilst 'movements' and 'trends' seemed too deliberate or manufactured, when what I was sensing was more organic than that. 'Moments' therefore appeared to capture both the dynamism and weight of what I was trying to describe, the zeitgeists and the power plays, the distinctions and the contradictions.

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Having settled upon two key terms to describe the conceptual work going on in this thesis, I started to think more formally about how I could begin probing my chosen ‘moments’ more deeply. The very notion of ‘moments’ is predicated on the fact that they represent *huge* collision points in history, politics, culture and technology. The idea of trying to depict such moments accurately, critically and in their entirety was absolutely terrifying and in reality, impossible. I already knew that within these identified moments, I wanted my focus to be on the cultural politics of sex, that was a given, but even when narrowed down to that focal point, the field remained vast and unwieldy. Thus, I established the need to find some way of providing a flavour of what was happening. Something that would give adequate depth but within a specific framework, a slice of the action that could be held still for long enough to study and explore, like a sample under a microscope. I rested on the idea of creating a ‘snapshot’ – yes, a still image, but one which feels spontaneous, dynamic and un-posed. A picture that reveals the essence of its object without seeking to change or shape it too much whilst still allowing it to tell a story.

The ‘snapshot’ idea moved quickly from being an analytical tool to becoming the goal of this exercise. From it I was able to start formulating the ‘proper’ research questions as documented above, and make serious inferences about how the project would need to proceed. I realised that one way to focus my research would be to examine cultural artefacts produced under the conditions that the #MeToo moment, as I conceived of it, embodied.

Themes Emerging

My intention upon commencing my field research was to work within a framework of critical discourse and narrative analysis, peppered throughout with the use of a pleasure/danger hypothetical lens. What I didn’t particularly envisage doing was any kind of deliberate thematic analysis, and as I began the process of viewing, re-viewing and noting and examining my chosen texts, I was not specifically looking for content around any predetermined themes, other than the broader concept of the cultural politics of sex.

However, as I conducted my analysis, I vaguely became aware of certain themes arising time and time again within my texts, but I did not give much thought to what role this might play in the presentation of my findings until I began writing the plans for the analysis chapters. As I copied and pasted my observations from various digital notebooks, textual analysis proformas and research notes into my chapter plans and began the process of trying to organise these thoughts, a set of themes and sub-themes arose. By the time I had finished the plan, dragging and dropping ideas around the page multiple times, I had a roadmap entirely

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structured on the thematic output of my work, without ever having tried to achieve such a thing as I conducted it. The core themes which emerged became chapters in themselves as follows

- Feminism and Femininity (Chapter 5) – the tendency of my texts to be overt in their feminisms and to utilise and subvert the iconography of the feminine was coupled with a meaningful 'embodiment' of feminist politics, whereby women's bodies became the sites of feminist political meanings.
- Toxic Masculinities (Chapter 6) – It became apparent that neither of my texts had anything positive to say about 'traditional' forms of masculinity. So much so that I came to argue that they tended to present all the (straight) men present as being either puerile, disgusting or dangerous. Such categorisations felt particularly apt in the #MeToo moment whose politics had coalesced from the exposure of violent and sexually dangerous men.
- Identity Politics (Chapter 7) – I established the importance of identity politics to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo moment in my contextual chapter, but as I began organising and writing my analysis, it became clear that they were very much present in my texts themselves. This chapter explores the themes of 'feminist' in the potential utopia created during *OINTB*'s prison riots, and the politics of identities such as 'butch', 'trans', 'lesbian' and 'bi'.
- Queer Possibilities (Chapter 8) – *Sense8* in particular deploys a fascinating and exciting aesthetic to posit possibilities for new forms of love and intimacy, which again feel familiar within the #MeToo context.

The core theme which has been pivotal in my work is the dichotomy of 'pleasure vs danger'. Its presence was notable right from my earliest research on the Sex Wars, and its presentation merged time and again as my research progressed. It was, thus, the only theme I had in mind when I commenced the textual reading. The others, discussed above, emerged from the texts themselves and were reflective of the broader context. David Gauntlett in his discussion on advertising suggests an approach whereby 'the strategy of structuralist interpretation is to begin with an initial observation of an advertisement, to create a hypothesis (unusual vs usual) about it, and then to test this hypothesis against other advertisements' (Gunter, 2000, p.87). I have explored in previous chapters the ubiquitous presence of the pleasure/danger dichotomy in discourses around the cultural politics of sex; freedom of expression vs objectification, pornography vs erotica, coercion vs consent in #MeToo, and there appeared to be a constant dialectic at work. However, as I moved on to the textual analysis component on my thesis, I

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also noticed their presence in the discourse around Netflix itself as either a democratising force for liberation or a Big Data baddie to be wary of. In this sense, the pleasure/danger dialectic presents a two-fold hypothesis for my research as it apparently appears both within the sexual politics I am investigating, and the artefacts of such politics which I am now seeking to explore. It is for this reason, that I decided to include the pleasure/danger conundrum within the framework of my textual analysis. I utilise it both as a specific theme explored within my material as well as, as a background lens applied as and where necessary. I am mindful of course that in including pleasure/danger in my framework—I needed to avoid approaching my analysis solely from this perspective I did not want to create a self-fulfilling prophecy/ or confirmation bias of seeing what I wanted to — see so it was a case of bearing this important thematic coupling in mind as I explored further.

It would be highly tempting for me to spend time discussing how I selected as above ‘the best tool for the job’, or to wax lyrical about its supposed methodological merits, but the truth is that I simply found that I was utilising the approach without realising it. This of course has its drawbacks. Because I was not consciously conducting content analysis, I did not devise any measured or considered set of criteria or method of encoding the themes that arose. Instead, I intuitively began to organise the ideas in my field notes around themes that just ‘felt right’. In many ways I can see how such an approach could be easily dismissed as irrational or unscientific, but the feminist scholar within me is inclined to marvel at and recognise the value of what has arisen from simply trusting my instincts and feelings as a researcher. I thus actively chose to accept a rare moment of fortuitousness in my work to see where it might lead.

I am not specifically pursuing an investigation into the *impact* of my media texts on society but am instead trying to examine how cultural, political and social changes have created an environment in which such texts *could* be produced. Hall posits, when discussing Foucault’s work on discourse and mental illness, that ‘it was only after a certain definition of ‘madness’ was put into practice, that the appropriate subject ‘the madman’ ... could appear’ (Hall, 2013c, p.31), and part of the *raison d’être* of this field work is to examine what ‘definitions’ have allowed the moment encapsulated by #MeToo, and demonstrated in texts like *Orange Is the New Black* and *Sense8*, to arise. For Foucault, discourses are ‘bearers of various historically specific positions of agency and identity’ (Nixon, 2013, p.311) and I wonder what further ‘madmen’ (or women) might arise out of the #MeToo discourse itself; what currently unimaginable possibilities might it discursively conjure? Sean Nixon raises the concept of ‘subjectivization’ as ‘the process by which individuals come to inhabit particular discursive subject-positions’ (Nixon, 2013, p.311) and illustrates it via the example of the ‘new man’ who arose from the monied yuppie culture of the 1980s— sophisticated, well dressed, Patrick Bateman without the homicide, or perhaps Christian Grey without the kink. The ‘new man’

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represented how new forms of individuality emerge from new bodies of knowledge and power networks, and I wonder what the #MeToo woman might look like when she emerges.

5. No Longer A Ghost In The Machine – Feminism Front And Centre

Orange Is the New Black doesn't take time to bask in its overt feminism. It's too busy telling interesting stories to pause and remind you that women are doing things you don't usually see women do on TV.

(Dockterman, 2014)

I discussed in my methodology chapter that what first attracted me to using Netflix programmes in my research was the apparent paradigm shift from post-feminist representation to marked-feminist discourse that they exemplify. The late 1990's and early 2000's offered a dizzying array of appealing, powerful and kick-ass heroines. Carrie Bradshaw taught a generation of women that they could live beautiful lives, packed with sexually empowered friends, satisfying erotic encounters and creatively fulfilling careers whilst maintaining closets full of *Manolo Blahnik* shoes, *Dolce and Gabana* handbags and *Prada* dresses. Ally McBeal offered a sharp-talking, witty role-model whose most deadly weapon was her intelligence, and Buffy Summers reminded us that a woman could be a high-kicking, vampire-slaying, ass-whooping diva whilst maintaining that most de rigueur of all 90s accessories – the midriff.

Varied as these representations were, they shared a number of things in common. Firstly, they felt at the time like fresh and exciting depictions of modern women who were living their best lives. Successful in their careers, fulfilled in their bedrooms and supported in their social networks, these women really did appear to 'have it all', and this marked a significant and meaningful departure from a long line of domesticated on-screen women and 'soccer moms'. However, what was also notable about these women was the extent to which their very existences were predicated on the progress of the women's movement without ever actually acknowledging it. The moniker of 'post-feminist' was coined to describe the ways in which such cultural specimens so evidently evoked the gains of the feminist movement whilst simultaneously dismissing it as no longer required. Implicit in the aforementioned representations was the notion that the battle for women's liberation was won, and we had the Rampant Rabbit to prove it!

A decade or so later, however, and the transformative sexual politics of *Sex and The City* came to feel blasé. The promise of being able to have a career to die for was not met with substantive enough changes in cultural attitudes that would allow women to pursue their sexual and vocational prerogatives instead of regarding them as additional pressures under

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which to strain. As it turns out, the road to self-actualisation and never-ending shoes was paved with many of the same structural and material barriers that had always existed: access to childcare, education, reproductive autonomy and healthcare remained limited and the dream of a working environment free of harassment or a familial setting emancipated from the horrors of sexual and domestic violence was short-lived.

As the Bradshaw generation (myself included), and our younger sisters stepped out into a world, not of colourful, quirky tutus and glamorous weekly columns but of economic depression and patriarchal oppression, where the only vampires we encountered wore suits and worked as hedge-fund managers, where the toxic mix of hyper-capitalism and austerity meant that a 'career' inevitably came with a call-centre headset or a zero-hours contract, and where the real science fiction was the prospect of buying our own property, we became acutely aware of the gulf between what had been advertised and what the future actually held for us. And we were pissed.

(Personal journal entry 2018)

The rage of millennials is often maligned as little more than an over-entitled collection of first-world problems concerning the availability of avocados and the perma-cultural impacts of quinoa, but we are perhaps the first generation in modern history to be facing a set of material conditions demonstratively worse than that of our parents. For many of us, the 'property ladder' is some kind of mythical wooden structure that our parents used but no longer exists in our realities, much like the record player or VCR: kitsch but no longer a practical reality. This is true of people of all genders, not just women. However, just as women have witnessed the evaporation of their mortgage ambitions and shouldered 86% of the cost of austerity (Keen and Cracknell, 2017), we have also continued to experience levels of sexual violence and harassment not at all compatible with the hetero-romantic aspirations on which we were raised. Women today have come to the stark realisation that in the real world, Mr Big might well be simply another Harvey Weinstein in better tailoring. Just like our mothers before us of course, we have continued to resist, but unlike them, we grew-up hoping that we wouldn't have to. The hashtag campaigns of #MeToo, #TimesUp, #YesAllWomen and #EverydaySexism are evidence of this resistance, but so too are our cultural artefacts, and I will begin this section by examining the broad themes of 'feminism' and 'femininity' themselves as they are radically reconceptualised and positioned under the #MeToo moment.

Shows like *OITNB* and *Sense8* wear their feminisms on their sleeves, their characters explicitly name their feminist politics and boldly utter rhetoric which centres rather than dismisses feminist logic and sentiment. In Series 1, episode 3 of *OITNB*, Litchfield's Executive Assistant Natalie Figueroa (Fig) muses on an inmate's gender transition stating, 'why would anyone ever give up being a man, it's like winning the lottery and giving the ticket back?'

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(Kohen, 2013c). On the surface, there is of course a decidedly, un-fourth-wave misunderstanding of gender identity in this statement in that Fig regards the inmate as having *opted to change*,²⁸ genders as if this was some kind of inexplicable choice. What is revealed, however, is an explicit commentary of the power imbalance in patriarchy— the crux of all feminist politics: that power is gendered. Furthermore, her over-simplification of gender transition represents a process in reasoning that many trans-inclusive feminists themselves go through as they develop more nuanced understandings of gender identity— the process of re-imagining transition not as a choice but as an imperative— a life-or-death issue.

Fig is a character in *OITNB* who possesses a level of moral ambiguity – on the one hand a self-interested corporate entity (and someone in a position of economic privilege), but on the other, one who eventually does the right thing. There is a certain level of knowingness in her statement about giving the lottery ticket back that understands that the audience view her politics as not entirely compatible with their own. (Frankel, 2015) notes that even her name ‘Fig’ evokes a sense of innate femininity due to the historical metaphorisation of figs (the fruit) as wombs and fertility symbols— an observation that I would argue can be read as a nod towards the dated gender-essentialism she utters. We are not laughing at her over-simplification, but, reading it as symptomatic of a corporate culture that doesn’t quite ‘get it.’ The fact that her chosen metaphor is that of a lottery win, tacitly posits her embodiment of a logic whereby wealth is the most desirable asset one could possess or ‘win.’ Fig is thus a character who has been on HR equalities and diversity training and accepts a trans person’s right to self-identify but does not really understand it; the flip-side of this being that we as the audience do.

This recognition and naming of patriarchal structures is further demonstrated in season 2, episode 9 of *OITNB*. Piper Chapman has been sent to the prison’s solitary confinement unit – the SHU²⁹ and has the following exchange with an anonymous voice coming from the cell next door.

Piper: *They take these insecure, and frustrated men and they put them in charge of a bunch of powerless women and they become these predatory creeps...I mean, all of that condescending "I know what's best for you" bullshit.*

Voice in the SHU: *You can rage, but they always win. They're the ones with the keys.*

(Kohen, 2013a)

²⁸ A more fourth-wave informed would acknowledge that a transgender woman was not *born* a man but has always been a woman, just one whose gender was incorrectly identified at birth.

²⁹ Secure Housing Unit – a mode of solitary confinement, often used as punishment.

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In its most literal sense, 'they're the ones with the keys' is a reference to the fact that both speakers are prison inmates, locked in solitary cells from which they do not have the means to escape. However, Piper's preceding comment about 'frustrated' men and 'powerless' women tells us that this exchange extends beyond the context of prisons and guards and into that of men and women as political classes. It is an explicit expression of frustration with the power dynamics of the patriarchy and the privilege or 'keys' of masculinity.

The critique is further strengthened by Piper's evident disgust with 'frustrated' men as their frustration can be understood in two ways. Firstly, Piper is alluding to the discourse of so-called Men's Rights Activists (MRA's) who regard the gains of the women's movement as causing a crisis in masculinity by displacing the traditional roles of men as breadwinners and protectors— here their frustration is a cultural and political one, and one which we as a feminist audience are likely to have little sympathy for because the solution, as the MRAs would have it, would be for women to simply quieten down and get back into our kitchens. The second reading relates to Piper's disgust with men. Here, their 'frustration' is sexual, and symptomatic of a pathetic masculinity which can't even get laid. This theme of masculinity as disgusting will be explored more fully later in the thesis, but this example signposts us to the broader political point which is being made. Moreover, in referring to the 'condescending' way in which men speak to them, Piper is providing an example of patronisation – literally the act of behaving as someone's father. In so doing, she is attacking patriarchal behaviour head-on and highlighting its hypocritical nature, or that it is 'bullshit' – in this sense, meaning 'false'.

Later in the series, this dual bankruptcy of masculinity is illustrated in a conversation by two male correction officers (CO's):

CO1: I'm headed back into the lady lions' den, and they're out for blood.

CO2: It's actually the female lions that do the huntin'. The guys just sit around lickin' themselves!

(Kohen, 2016)

The sentiment of this exchange is that women are capable of looking after themselves (and everyone else), and that the gendered assumptions on which patriarchy is predicated are erroneous – like assuming that the male lions do any of the heavy lifting. There is also an underlying suggestion that the guards feel that it is the women prisoners who hold the *real* power, and though this seems unlikely given the prisoner/officer power dynamic, it reveals an ephemeral sense in which the men and their masculinity feel threatened by the kinds of women who inhabit the prison.

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As in the SHU example above, there is also a secondary reading about the perceived nature of masculinity at play in this exchange. The reference to sitting around ‘lickin’ themselves’ is a crude innuendo in which ‘themselves’ means ‘their genitals’. Just as in the SHU example above, we see critical discourse on the gendered nature of power, and the relative utility of men under patriarchy, underscored by a view of masculinity as something deeply unpalatable. Moreover, the exchange is played for laughs as there is a subtle assumption that they don’t quite understand the irony of their conversation; that *they*, like the male lions, are only good for licking themselves. The comedy is utilised primarily to present the guards as unintelligent, or at least, lacking self-awareness, there is a brief pause at the end when the three COs present share an uncomfortable eye contact with each other before moving on, back to work. Humour also plays an important role in the pacing of the drama, suspense and tension in the show, but the use of irony can be read as a nod to the ironic retro-sexism of post-feminism. Post-feminist texts often claimed irony as a defence against allegations of sexism in their content and implied that viewers offended by such material simply didn’t ‘get’ the joke. In the lion exchange above, it is the male prison officers who don’t ‘get’ the irony at play and thus cannot see themselves as the audience does.

It is worth noting here that although there is a paucity of demographic viewing information for Netflix content, *OITNB* is not regarded as solely a women’s show. Anecdotally, I know many straight and queer men who have watched the programme, and discussions taking place on forums such as Reddit (Reddit, 2013) seem to support the broader gender appeal of the show, and thus it is safe to assume that men make up a sizeable portion of the audience. This is significant in my analysis because when I discuss themes around the dangers, unpleasantness, or ridiculousness of men and masculinity in my texts, it is a particular *type* (or *types*) of masculinity that are being pilloried. In the parlance of fourth-wave feminism, the masculinity that is the butt of jokes and subject of condemnation is ‘toxic masculinity’, which is rooted in normative gender thinking, machismo and bravado. The men watching my feminist texts can be, perhaps, comforted by their real or perceived departures from such repugnant iterations, and we as feminists are mollified by our knowledge that our fathers, brothers, boyfriends and friends are not like ‘those guys’— and by ‘those guys’ I mean not only the actual or hypothesised subjects of condemnation in my texts, but the Weinsteins and Cosbys who have given rise to the #MeToo movement in the real world. Hannah Gadsby discusses her frustration with men who expend much time performatively distancing themselves from toxic masculinity’s creeps— ‘The Jimmy’s’:

If only these bad men just knew how not to be creepy! Is that the problem? Men are not creepy. Do you know what’s creepy? Spiders, because we don’t know how they move. Rejecting the humanity of a woman is not creepiness; it is misogyny. So why can’t men monologue

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about these issues? Well they can, and they do. My problem is that according to the Jimmys, there's only two types of bad men. There's the Weinstein/Bill Cosby types who are so utterly horrible that they might as well be different species to the Jimmys. And then there are the FOJs: the Friends of Jimmy. These are apparently good men who misread the rules—garden-variety consent dyslexics. They have the rule book, but they just skimmed it.

(Gadsby, 2018b)

She goes on to discuss how the ‘Jimmys’ draw a line in the sand between themselves, and the *real* bad guys, a line which distinguishes between Trump-esque ‘locker room talk’ and sexually predatory behaviour, a line I call the ‘#not-all-men-line’. The #not-all-men-line also exists between the men in *OITNB* and the men who *watch OITNB* and is important to this discussion, because it is this line which allows the show to maintain a feminist presentation, and make jokes about men licking themselves, without alienating male viewers. Moreover, though not the focus of this thesis, the presence of the #not-all-men line also calls into question the authenticity of the feminism which is on offer during the golden age of feminist TV: like fourth-wave feminism itself, it invites debate about whether this is really feminism in action, or in name only for the purpose of selling things.

In addition to presenting us with characters explicitly *talking* about feminism and gendered power structures, *OITNB* also offers depictions of characters *doing or performing* feminism in their daily lives by including micro-narratives which focus on the inmates’ small and varied ways of practicing their feminisms. In season 3, episode 10, some of the inmates come to believe that Norma, a non-verbal prisoner, is some kind of spiritual oracle and comedy arises as the trappings of religious cults are parodied (Kohen, 2015a). Part of the practice of the Norma cult is to form a pseudo prayer circle each morning, in which the members hold hands and take it in turns to scream their truths and frustrations at the top of their lungs, the idea being that they can then spend the rest of the day in relative silence to counteract both the literal and metaphorical ‘noise’ of life in a women’s prison. The scene is, typically for the show, played for laughs with individual inmates shouting ‘I hate papaya’ or threatening suicide if the prison food is not improved. The role of comedy is particularly important in this episode because, as I will go on to discuss later, its central plotline revolves around the lifetime of sexual violence experienced by one of the characters, and the narrative is in parts highly intense and emotional. However, in addition to the scene’s deliverance of comic relief, it also contains within it some truly tender moments. Inmate Gina Murphey uses her turn to vocalise that she is ‘tired of being a burn victim’ (Kohen, 2015a) and another inmate explains to a CO the ritual’s importance in allowing them to ‘vent our frustrations now, so the toxic feelings won’t eat away at our vital organs’. This minor sub-plot is significant because it exemplifies the

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feminist prerogative of creating arenas in which the voices, lived experiences and truths of women can be expressed.

Moreover, in telling us little stories *about* feminist practice, *OITNB* also depicts the inmates *policing* each other's practices in a way which feels distinctly familiar to feminists of the fourth-wave. Take this exchange from the same episode as the Norma cult, where Suzanne 'Crazy-Eyes' Warren approaches Lorna Morello for advice on sex. Warren thanks Morello for her wisdom but calls her 'a real slut' (Kohen, 2015a). Sexually inexperienced, Warren means this as a compliment to Morello's worldliness, but the tone between the inmates immediately shifts:

Morello: *That's not nice...it is not nice to call somebody a slut.*

Warren: *Then why do girls like it when men call them sluts during sex? Or bitches? Or dirty whores who love cum?*

Morello: *Oh, dear, well, that is a complicated question.*

(Kohen, 2015a)

As ever, there is a comedic element, but there are also more interesting issues at play. Firstly, there is another reference to that form of toxic masculinity, which is aroused by the sexual degradation of women. As Morello herself confirms, however, this is a 'complicated' issue and an entire thesis could be written about S&M dynamics, power, masochism, kink and kink-shaming, but in the context above, the comment is meant as a joke at the expense of masculinity.

What is perhaps more interesting in this exchange, however, is that, in addition to educating Warren about the ways of sex, Morello is also teaching her about slut-shaming and demonstrably practising a feminism which does not pass moral judgement on a woman's level of sexual experience. The word 'slut' itself has been reclaimed by third and fourth-wave feminists, and the discourse of slut-shaming has been present in the #MeToo moment as feminists have expressed their outrage that the sexual histories of harassment survivors and even their underwear choices have been used to discredit them in both the courts of law and public opinion. This exchange thus demonstrates characters using the vocabulary of fourth-wave feminism to educate each other, and perhaps even their audiences— though I think a certain familiarity with the issue of slut-shaming is probably assumed.

However, although this exchange can be said to illustrate a cultural politics of sex which does not make normative value-judgements about sexual practice, it is worth noting that there is also a somewhat contradictory message at play here as well. Morello chastises Warren for using a derogatory term for her sexual experience, but the scene is ultimately a comedic one, in which in addition to the men who call women sluts during sex, Warren and her sexual naivety are also the butt of the joke. The subtle message here then is that a woman should not be

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judged on the basis of how much sex she has had, unless that amount is zero or not very much.

The reciprocal feminist policing in *OITNB* is also demonstrated in the below exchange from episode 10 of the most recent series (6), in which Morello and Nicky Nicholls discuss the nutritional merit of their commissary snacks:

Morello: *Well at least mine has trace amounts of calcium. What does yours have?*

Nicholls: *Oh, it has me, licking the honey out of the buns. Oh, you know, also I enjoy licking, uh, honey out of pots. If you happen to know any honey pots in the area, I'd love to lick them.*

Morello: *You know what? If you was a man and you was on the outside, you'd be having a real hard time right now. 'Cause I read they're cracking down on this sexy talk. Like, for real, it's gonna be illegal, which I think is a pity 'cause I always found it very flattering.*

Nicholls: *Oh, yeah, I'm sure it's all meant in the, uh, spirit of flattery, and not in the spirit of being the worst kind of misogynistic pig.*

Morello: *Caramel/ karamel [pronounced slightly different, as in tom-ae-to/ tom-ah-to] It's all how you wanna see things.*

(Kohen, 2018a)

There are several interesting things about this exchange. Firstly, the scene depicts a conversation between a bisexual woman (Morello) and a lesbian (Nicholls), in which oral sex is fairly graphically discussed by way of the honey pot metaphor. I will talk later in the thesis about the queer possibilities that are suggested in my texts, but this provides a good example of the normalisation of queer sex in the show's script.

In relation to the on-screen practices of feminism, Morello's comment that 'sexy talk' is being made illegal makes clear reference to the #MeToo movement and the recent series of celebrity harassment stories which it has exposed. On the one hand, she is chastising Nicholls for her crude sex talk, displaying an awareness of a cultural zeitgeist which is currently highly focussed on how we talk about and perform sex. In this regard, she can be read as espousing a feminist sentiment about respectfulness in sexual politics, which she does not feel Nicholls is demonstrating. This view is further strengthened by her warning that Nicholls would not be able to get away with talking and behaving the way she does if she were a man – she is essentially scolding Nicholls for behaving like the type of man that both the show and #MeToo movement find unacceptable. In this reading, it is Morello who is schooling Nicholls, but her feminist credentials are quickly undermined by her afterthought that she always found the 'sexy talk' 'very flattering.' In this moment, she becomes the ultimate patsy— the post-feminist who believes that wolf-whistling is at worst harmless fun, and perhaps even complimentary. Once more, the comedy is grounded on an assumption that the audience will recognise her error in thinking and appreciate the irony of her uttering the kind logic usually spoken by men.

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In the above example, it is women speaking the logic of men as opposed to sexist imagery that is being used to create irony, and thus it can be understood as a form of reclaiming irony for feminism, demonstrating a key shift in the cultural output from the moments of post-feminism and raunch, to fourth-wave feminism and #MeToo.

Furthermore, the logic ironically expressed by Morello is rooted in a belief that #MeToo has created an environment in which men are no longer safe to flirt with women or even pay them genuine compliments. Morello, like the men and MRAs who espouse such logic, have mistakenly conflated sexual explicitness with sexual harassment by failing to understand the critical role of consent. To over-simplify grotesquely, Lorna has failed to understand that although the #MeToo moment condemns the sending of unsolicited dick-pics, it is not the dick-pics, but the 'unsolicited' element which is the problem. Thus, in the honey-pot exchange, a complex narrative on the cultural politics of sex is explored as the roles feminist and (internalised) misogynist are switched from Morello to Nicholls. This point is further illustrated when Nicholls sarcastically asserts that 'I'm sure it's all meant in the, uh, spirit of flattery, and not in the spirit of being the worst kind of misogynistic pig' – creating a clarion example not only of a character using the vocabulary of feminism explicitly in her use of the word 'misogynist', but also practicing her feminism for all to see.

Morello's lack of feminist understanding is also alluded to in contrast to Nicki's more sophisticated grasp of gendered power relations, because Nicki, like the audience, understand that as a woman, even if she were to utter such crude remarks to a man, they would not have the same, violent effect because of the structural power imbalance between men and women.

Another way in which *OITNB* consolidates its feminism is by utilising and reclaiming irony, as discussed above, to play the patriarchy at its own game and turn the tropes of misogyny and post-feminism on their heads. In season 1, episode 11, the show's ultimate creepy bloke³⁰, George 'Pornstache' Mendez, utters the line:

These fuckin' bitches [the inmates] look at me like a piece of meat, like a sex toy? Does anybody ever ask me how my day is going? Do they ever for a second think about our life outside of work?

(Kohen, 2013e)

On the surface, the line can be read and dismissed as a parody of feminist critiques of sexual objectification, but when the line is contextualised within its broader narrative, its true meaning is revealed. As mentioned, Pornstache is portrayed throughout the programme as the worst kind of sexist douchebag. He ogles at and objectifies women from the moment his character

³⁰ Though, perhaps as Gatsby points out, 'creepy' is really an understatement when we are discussing a character who not only objectifies women, but commits the statutory rape of an inmate.

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is first introduced to us and at least in the first season, his character is simply the comical personification of misogyny and the object of disgust for both the women inmates on screen and the audience at home. Part of the comedy lies in *knowing* that nobody is sexualising George Mendez— he is too repulsive, and so his impression that the inmates treat him like a piece of meat is rendered entirely ludicrous. Furthermore, that he is set up as a comedic presence enables us to understand that even if it was conceivable that the inmates were sexually objectifying him, his displeasure can never be taken seriously and his objection, or lack of consent to such objectification becomes 'unspeakable' (Langton, 1993) or devoid of meaning in much the same way as Nicholls' imagined harassment of a man would be. The 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 2009) is thus parodied and subverted and the gender roles reversed. Such a reversal can be read as an example of creating what Judith Butler dubbed 'gender trouble' by creating female objects who 'inexplicably return the glance, reverse the gaze, and contest the place of authority of the masculine position' (Butler, 1990, p.xxix).

This raises some important theoretical questions about the gendered nature of sexual objectification. When the kinds of words usually spoken by women are put into the mouths of men, their discursive meaning is inevitably changed because discourse arises in the context of gendered power dynamics. Though it is possible for a man to be sexually objectified³¹ or even assaulted by a woman, it is factually impossible for his assault to be the consequence of sexism, because sexism is by definition rooted in systemic power structures in which women are marginalised. Just as a white person can be individually discriminated against by a person of colour but cannot be the victim of 'reverse racism' because the concept of 'reverse sexism' is a contradiction in terms. Even when individual power dynamics mean that a woman has a degree of power over a man, say in the case of a woman boss over her male worker, or a woman prison guard over a male prisoner, this flow of power exists only between the two individuals and not within a broader system of social, cultural, economic or political power thus meaning that the sexual assault of a man by a woman can occur but the presence of patriarchy remains. George's protest that he is being objectified is thus doubly erroneous, because he holds both the systemic position of power as a man and the individual power position as a prison guard. The episode title *Tall Men With Feelings* is a continuation of the gag, poking fun at men who attempt to co-opt the language of feminism to assert that men have feelings too – something which fourth-wave feminism and the audience of *OITNB* already know and accept.

³¹ And for the purposes of this argument, I mean in this most basic sense of being treated by another as a sexual object.

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This ironic role-reversal and linguistic play is further demonstrated in episode 3 of season 1. During family visitation, inmate Sophia Buset and her wife Crystal get into an argument, and Crystal tells Sophia that she needs to 'man up' (Kohen, 2013c). Historically of course, the phrase has been used to insult the masculinity of men perceived to be acting in a cowardly manner. However, in using the phrase in an exchange between two women, *OITNB* reclaims the gendered utterance, using it to simply mean 'be brave' or 'toughen up' – the usually implicit qualifier of 'be more like a man' is negated as the conversation is not about someone's masculinity, but their courage. Once more, however, we can glean a deeper understanding of these words by situating them within the narrative of the show. Sophia Buset is actually a transgender woman, played by trans actor Laverne Cox, and thus the irony is redoubled because the two-word command is both simultaneously about, and not about, being masculine. In both nullifying and evoking the gendered dimensions of the phrase 'man-up', multiple meanings are being discursively produced, which again demonstrates the show's ability to invert, reverse and play with gender in a way which feels decidedly subversive and explicitly feminist.

In my discussion so far, I have offered a number of readings which are predicated on the audience having a familiarity with current feminist sexual politics which allow them to understand certain in-jokes and ironies. Such politics are based in the discourses of #MeToo, trans-inclusivity and slut-shaming. I hope to have shown that in doing this, *OITNB* firmly places feminist sexual politics at the centre of its narratives in a way which is significantly divergent from the post-feminist texts of Raunch Culture.

In season 2, episode 4, Litchfield's incarcerated activist Brook Soso bemoans that lack of sisterhood in the prison, stating that 'everyone in here is in such a bad mood all the time, I mean I always thought that women's prison would be a lot more about community and girl power and stuff' (Kohen, 2014a). Educated and middle-class, Soso definitely identifies as a feminist, but she is guilty of what third-wave feminists have been accused of doing – buying into pre-packaged feminist slogans such as 'girl-power' on a superficial level without any critical understanding of gender politics. The qualifier 'and stuff' implies that her feminism is somewhat performative because she doesn't actually know anything about feminism beyond the slogans. The fourth-wave has been accused of doing this, too, but as I argued in my critical context, I think the accusation is unfair, as for me, the fourth-wave represents a move beyond the slogans to a more authentic, critically aware and savvy position.

In comments like the one above, two things are made apparent. Firstly, there is a knowing, tongue-in-cheek joke in that *OITNB* knows its audience are themselves made up of educated class-conflicted, feminist activists like myself. The stereotypical character of Soso can thus be

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understood as the kind of good-natured micky-taking that occurs between close friends. Rather than alienating its feminist audience, *OITNB* uses Soso as a kind of in-group designator in a shared joke. Secondly, and more importantly, however, Soso is also an example of doing feminism wrong. Her background and privilege, and utter lack of self-awareness, mark her out as politically naïve and at times clueless. This is demonstrated by her apparent bewilderment that the residents of a women's prison might have serious problems causing their bad moods. The in-joke, is made more sophisticated by this, because although we might recognise some of the clichéd foibles in ourselves, the crux of the joke is that although we're all feminists, we're not like her. There is a kind of tribalism at work in that the show understands the power of exclusion in uniting people, even those of us who like to think we are inclusive to the nth degree. I read the Soso example as drawing a line in the sand— a line between the superficialities of third-wave 'girl power' and post-feminism, and the more politically substantive fourth-wave feminism of the #MeToo moment.

Though Soso's feminism is narrated as being somewhat superficial, she is not portrayed as a bad person, just a little misguided. As such, the feminist audience are still able to identify with her and participate in the in-joke because it is not made in malice. We can perhaps see in Soso younger versions of ourselves, earlier in our feminist journeys; hearts in the right place, but without all of the tools and nuances required of intersectional feminists. She feels like a fond memory, and thus when the show makes fun of her and its feminist audience, we feel as though it is done lovingly.

Brook Soso is thus an identifier of the assumed feminism of *OITNB*'s audience, as well as a marker of the kinds of feminism which are and are not acceptable. However, there are some important issues with her character as well. Soso is often guilty of what might in other contexts be labelled as 'white feminism' – that which lacks an intersectional perspective and self-awareness of privilege. Her educated background and attempts to bring about change in the material conditions of the inmates at Litchfield could be read as examples of the 'white-saviour' trope, which regards white people as being the only ones capable of recognising the reality of oppression and possessing the power or inclination to challenge it. However, Soso is of mixed Japanese and Scottish heritage and is played by Japanese-American actor Kimiko Glenn, so applying the labels of 'white feminist' and 'white saviour' is not really appropriate. Her character perhaps therefore, invites a criticism of academic or middle-class feminism which rests on an uncomfortable supposition about East-Asians and academic attainment, a problem which is explored thoughtfully in Maxine Builder's article for *Hyphen-Asian American Un-abridged* (Builder, 2015).

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The explicit recall of feminist ideology is also present in my other chosen text, *Sense8*, though it is often subtler in its presence. However, this does not mean that its role is any less important. The presence of feminist logic is laid out from the very start of the show and though less of a song-and-dance is made of it in *Sense8*, this creates a discourse in which feminist principles are a matter of fact that does not require additional explanation.

For example, at the start of the series, a supporting character is shown commenting on the impressive DJ skills of Riley 'Blue' Gunnarsdóttir: 'She can spin for a girl', to which his friend replies 'she can spin, period' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a). The scene quickly moves on, demonstrating the fact that the show takes the idea that a person's musical prowess is in no way related to their gender, as a given. Later in the episode, Kala Dandekar, dismisses her father's excitement about her upcoming wedding by reminding him: 'you sent me to university to get a degree, not to find a husband' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a). In this interaction, the audience recognise the familiar frustration of dealing with a parental generation whose politics are felt to be less progressive than their own. Here, Kala does not feel oppressed by patriarchal misogyny, just mildly irked by her father's old-fashioned world view. These two examples are important indicators of the feminist sensibility of *Sense8* in that their very understatedness contributes to a process of world-building in which gender equality is assumed to such an extent that it barely requires comment. This is crucially different, however, from the post-feminist texts which regarded the feminist project as largely completed. Post-feminism made assumptions about gender equality only to dismiss them as obsolete as quickly as possible. *Sense8*, however, assumes such equality but rather than dismissing it, places it gently to one side, to be called upon as a subtle reminder when required. This change might appear too trivial to be significant, but to me, it represents a move beyond post-feminism, to a kind of post-post-feminism to which we might aspire socially; a future in which the feminist battles are not dismissed as already won, but actually *are* already won, in part because understanding of the struggle remains.

Such is the implicitness of gender equality in the world which *Sense8* creates, occurrences where it is not adhered to seem all the more poignant. In the same episode as discussed above, we see business tycoon heiress Sun Bak meeting with two of her father's business associates. Upon realising that they are meeting with Sun, and not her brother, they refuse to enter negotiations with her, stating that 'women don't close things, they open them' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a). The primary reading is of course located in the lexicon of business by where 'close' refers to closing a deal, but the secondary reading, which is firmly signposted to by the tone and facial expressions of the businessman, refers to the opening of women's legs for sex. Whereas in *OITNB*, the revulsion at toxic masculinity is the source of repeated, crude and over-the-top comedy, in *Sense8* such revulsion is still

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implied, but the methodology is different. I will discuss later in the chapter the importance of Utopia building in science-fiction such as *Sense8*, but it is worth noting here that the inclusion of occasional feminist transgressions by characters in the show create harsh breaks in its utopian vision, which act as reminders that the continuation of feminist ideals requires a degree of upkeep. If post-feminism was guilty of creating a world in which gender politics was complete and thus obsolete, *Sense8* creates one in which a gender politics is realised but must nevertheless be sustained.

Thus far I have explored the broad and generalised themes of 'feminism' and 'feminist sexual politics' as being explicitly demonstrated and named in my texts, focussing on feminism as a set of values or as an ideology. I have shown that the political shift from Raunch Culture to #MeToo has converged with a cultural shift in the role of feminism in popular media whereby the spectral 'ghost in the machine' that was represented by the simultaneous evocation and banishment of gender politics from post-feminist discursive cultural artefacts has given way to a new form of objectively and explicitly feminist-informed media. The next few sections will explore themes *within* current feminist discourse and their exhibition in my source materials, starting with the concept of 'the body' as a critical site of feminist sexual politics.

Embodying The #MeToo Moment

The body - the cyborg body that's produced in this informatics of domination is a semiotic body. It's a body made of signs - a body made of light. A body made of bits.

(Haraway, 1996)

One of the most important themes to arise from my textual research on *OITNB* and *Sense8* was that of 'the body'. Issues relating to bodily functions, practices, aesthetics and of course physical intimacy appear to illustrate that the very notion of 'the body' is being transformed, and new meanings discursively created. This is of critical import for my research into the cultural politics of sex, because the body is one of the places in which sexual discourse and practice is located. If the narratives and representations of our 'semiotic bodies' (Haraway, 1996) are changing, as the very notion of bodies as discursively produced, dictates they must, then it is imperative for me to examine what such changes look like, and what the implications for the cultural politics of sex might be, as new meanings and embodied stories are created³².

Both of my chosen texts offer tangible and salient examples of radical re-imaginings of the concept of the body. However, just as in the case of their discourses around feminism as a general theme, their approaches to these re-imaginings differ in interesting ways. In the case

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of *OITNB*, new understandings about women’s bodies are created by a process of demystifying and democratising them via graphic narratives and representations of bodily functions and practices. In the case of *Sense8*, novel meanings are created in relation to intimacy, desire and sex and are located in a somewhat Cartesian exploration of relationships between minds and bodies. Moreover, the wholehearted embrace of a trans epistemology and aesthetic on *Sense8* creates a possibility where the notion of binary genders, or gendered bodies, becomes nonsensical. This latter subject will be discussed later in the thesis under the umbrella of ‘queer possibilities’, as will sexuality on *OITNB*, so this next section will focus on the graphic realities of bodies as sites of political meaning in *OITNB*. Starting with the bodies of women and corporeal sexuality (as opposed to other forms).

TV Titties And Defamed Pot-Plants —Sexy Bodies On OITNB

These girls don’t realise I am here to provide food, not dildos, I’m all out of cucumbers, carrots, beets... god knows what they’re doing with those. I can’t hold onto anything cock-shaped!

Red Reznikov, *Lesbian Request Denied* (Kohen, 2013c)

The above quote is primarily included in this discussion to provide colour, context and fun, but it also epitomises a central tenant of corporeal sexual practices on *OITNB*: the normative assumption that, shock horror, women masturbate too! The theme of women masturbating crops up time and again in the show and is usually played for laughs as in the above example. However, the transformative power of including narratives of women’s self-pleasure, no matter how trivially, cannot be understated.

Post-feminist texts such as *SATC* broke through boundaries by allowing women to talk about masturbating, and *SATC* was even credited with driving sales of Rampant Rabbits and the popularisation of sex toys and the shops that sold them. It is also reasonable to argue that *OITNB* would not exist in its current form were it not for the earlier show, but there are two key ways in which *OITNB* represents a departure from the masturbatory narratives of *SATC*. The first is a subtle one in that in *SATC* conversation would revolve around the benefits of a particular toy in such a way as to create a sense of the novelty of seeing such conversations between women on screen. In *OITNB* however, the references to masturbation are largely by-the-by. That women masturbate is an accepted fact of this new cultural politics of sex, and as such does not require lime-lighting in quite the same way. Moreover, like the show itself, masturbation on *SATC* was intrinsically linked to the notion of consumerism: to be *truly* sexually empowered, one must be willing to invest in the latest in designer vibrator technology. In *OITNB*, the same emphasis on shopping is entirely absent. This is partly due to the fact that the scenes primarily take place within the setting of a women’s prison, where access to Ann

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Summers is pretty limited. However, the lack of consumerism even in story arcs and flashbacks which take place outside of Litchfield is notable and suggestive of a sexual culture which cannot be pre-packaged due to its diverse and personalised nature. Masturbation on *OITNB*, as alluded to in the above quote, is much more of a do-it-yourself affair.

OITNB centres the human body right from the opening sequence of its first episode with the image of a baby joyfully being bathed at home in a kitchen sink. The mood is upbeat, the lighting soft and the baby's curious gaze is on the stream of water that its outstretched hand is exploring. The Staple Sisters' *I'll Take You There* (The Staple Singers, 1972) provides a sexy funk vibe as the narrator (Piper Chapman) literally takes us 'there' through her life story told thematically through water and cleanliness. She tells us: 'I've always loved getting clean. I love baths. I love showers. It's my happy place. *Was my happy place*' (Kohen, 2013b). The scenes cut in quick succession from the baby in the sink to a young girl in the bath, grinning as she enjoys the tactility of bubbles, to a naked adult Piper in the shower, breasts prone, head tipped back in sensual pleasure as she is joined by a lover (Alex Vause) who cups her breast and pulls her in for a kiss, before moving on again to show Piper sharing a bubble bath with another lover (her now fiancé Larry Bloom) who sits behind her, nuzzling her neck and meeting her gaze in some implied shared joke. All the while, the music plays, the lighting creates a series of warm 'happy places'.

Suddenly though the idyllic sequence is interrupted by the contrapuntal sound of a buzzer as the scene cuts to a naked Piper shivering under the flow of water in a dingy lit communal shower (contrapuntal because the buzzer sounds a fraction of a second before the scene changes). The sound of women's voices replaces the smooth Motown sounds, and the camera pans down the side of her body; she is 'exposed' and vulnerable covering her breasts with her goose-pimpled arms. The camera rests on her feet, comically encased in some sort of makeshift footwear concocted from menstruation towels and elastic bands. The camera switches to the entrance of the shower room where another woman is naked aside from her standard-issue large white prison briefs and the towel she is in the process of knotting around her wet hair. Over a loudspeaker, a voice advises: 'all inmates in D dorm must be checked for lice' (Kohen, 2013b). A Black woman (Tasha 'Taystee' Jefferson) walks in and approaches Piper's cubicle, hurrying her out of the shower, before 'peaking' through the already translucent and holey shower curtain, exclaiming 'Damn, you got some nice titties. You got them TV titties. They stand up on they own all perky and everything!' (Kohen, 2013b). Jefferson sticks her tongue out as she tugs at Chapman's towel revealing her breasts, and the scene ends with a look of alarm on Piper's face, melting to a coy smile, secretly glancing at her bosom and flattered by Jefferson's 'compliment'.

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We are now one minute and twenty seconds into the show and a lot is going on. The primary function of the sequence is to lay-out the ‘fish-out-of-water’ narrative on which the show is premised. The juxtaposition of the warmth and intimacy of Chapman’s previous relationship with water with the cold, dirty mise-en-scene of her new environment tells us immediately that this middle-class blonde woman has somehow, unexpectedly, ended up in prison.

The shots of Chapman’s previous water-play are glamorised and feel like a continuity with the warm luxury and shiny legs of *SATC*, but this continuity is quickly disrupted, as the sexy, smooth bubbles and bodies are replaced with goose-flesh, menstruation pads and granny panties; the tone for bodily narratives in *Litchfield* is set, grounded in the authenticities of women’s flesh, and menstruation. The sequence also sets out Chapman’s bisexuality by depicting her with lovers of two different genders. Later in the episode, Chapman performs a sexy striptease routine for Vause. The scene is cleverly edited so that the theme of stripping is carried through as the scene cuts to Chapman being booked into *Litchfield* and told to ‘strip’ for a cavity search. As the sexy striptease continues, Chapman and Vause embrace and Vause tells Chapman that she wants her to ‘come’ to Bahli with her, she *really* wants her to ‘come’ (Kohen, 2013b) and the double-entendre is left hanging as a teaser. Wordplay is then further used between the pair when Vause meets Chapman at the airport, whispering playfully in her ear ‘I am going to eat you for dinner’, telling us from the off that this will be a queer narrative which centres women’s sexual pleasure and creates intrigue to sit alongside our musing at how she might have ended up incarcerated in the first place.

The ‘fish-out-of-water’ theme is further underscored by a dichotomy of purity and deviance (pleasure and danger). In all of the pre-prison shots of Chapman, the lighting is soft and romanticised and the inclusion of plant life creates a tone of freshness and vitality, which is carried throughout the episode; luscious plants feature in Chapman’s garden, where her going-away barbeque takes place, and leafy green foliage can be seen through the window as Chapman sits nervously in the prison waiting room ahead of her self-surrender into custody. The greenery connotes the outside world, freedom and life. This link between purity and vitality is reiterated towards the end of the episode, when after meeting with Chapman, Joe Caputo, the prison warden, is seen telling her to close the door behind her as she leaves. He reaches for an industrial-sized bottle of lubricant. The shot pans away from him as his desk begins to vibrate as a result of his implied masturbation—the screen focusses on a pot-plant, its purity defamed by his exploitative male sexuality (as it is suggested that he will use the image of Piper, who is in his care, as inspiration).

Moreover, the purity/deviance narrative is further emphasised and physically embodied by a number of other visual cues. In the pre-prison shower scene between Vause and Chapman,

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Vause displays a tattoo on her left shoulder of a salt shaker tipping over, evoking the superstition that if salt is spilled, one should throw a pinch of it over the left shoulder, into the eyes of the devil to dispel the evil that is unleashed. This creates a sub-textual hint that Piper's bisexuality, or Vause herself, represent some kind of devil or deviance. More problematically, the purity dichotomy is also affirmed by the racist employment of the Black body of Jefferson. Her crude comment that 'they some TV titties' is used as a class marker and the African-American Vernacular (AAVE) omission of the word 'are' after 'they' further accentuates racial and class differences. Jefferson intimidates vulnerable Chapman by exposing and commenting on her white body, her out-stuck tongue evocative of stereotyped, racialised, animalistic or savage Black sexualities. As Nair notes, 'while *Orange* does relatively well with queerness, and is careful to showcase racial diversity, it fails in its use of stock narratives about race and, to an even more devastating extent, class' (Nair, 2013).

This troubling theme of how Black bodies and sexuality are handled in *OITNB* is continuous throughout the show. (Nair, 2013) notes that the bodies of white characters are always treated more artfully. For example, in the same episode, Morello and Nicholls (both white women) have sex in the prison chapel, but Lorna

[M]anages to hide her breasts with, first, her hands, and then her bra, which stays mysteriously well-positioned. There's barely a nipple in sight as she pulls herself together. It's as if the invisible hands of Christ had reached down and carefully held up the straps

(Nair, 2013)

Moreover, she argues that in addition to the nudity of white women being treated differently from that of women of colour, it is also the case that even despite the show's racial and queer diversity and authentic portrayals of women's bodies, it still remains the case that on-screen nudity is only permitted for those bodies possessed with 'TV titties'. The lack of parity between *OITNB*'s treatment of white bodies and bodies of colour reveals an important conceptual notion in that it underscores the limitations of purely representational TV and cultural analysis. It is not enough that the show features bodies of colour, their presence alone is not sufficient to indicate a radical overhaul in gender and racial politics on screen. We must probe deeper and more critically into the representations, asking which narratives are told, and which are not, and in what contexts.

Further to Nair's pertinent observations on the problematic intersections of race and body in *OITNB*, it is also the case that although butch, fat and older bodies are present in *OITNB*, they are never nude, and their sexuality is only ever alluded to in dialogue. What all of this tells us about the cultural politics of sex on the show is that despite the fact that on some levels, it offers divergence from the glossy glamour of post-feminism to a more diverse, authentic

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realism, there remains a continuity of the historic dichotomy of purity and deviance (pleasure and danger) which is perpetuated through the racist appropriation of bodies of colour as shortcuts to telling other thematic stories, such as that of the fish-out-of-water.

In addition to being an important source of information about the role of the body in the romantic domains of sex and nudity, *OITNB* also offers an intriguing situation of meaning in relation to the more mundane practices of bodily function and maintenance, to which I now turn my attention.

Bleeding Women – Menstruating Bodies On OITNB

‘It seems like all of the symptoms of the change are also symptoms of incarceration’

Gloria Medoza, *State of The Uterus* (Kohen, 2018b)

As in the case of nudity in the prison, *Orange* concocts a methodology of truthfulness and authenticity in its narratives around body upkeep which is again present from the start. I posit that such authenticity is demonstrative of the #MeToo aesthetic, in that stories are told about body hair and fluids which, although once regarded as taboo, are now brought out into the light as shared realities.

Perhaps the most commented upon scene in the show’s debut episode is when, after inadvertently insulting Litchfield’s head cook and fellow inmate, Galina ‘Red’ Reznikov, Chapman is shown unwrapping a specially prepared breakfast muffin only to discover a piece of white string, the source of which is revealed to be a used tampon, placed ceremoniously in the sandwich (Kohen, 2013b).

As is often the case in *OITNB*, the scene is played for laughs. Red is a Russian woman, incarcerated for involvement with the Mafia and the scene is evocative of a Godfather-esque, horse’s head revenge trope: bloody, gory, shocking and meticulously executed. On some levels, the scene does the feminist cause of period positivity no favours – the tampon is ‘disgusting’ and the audience’s revulsion is essential. However, as Frankel notes, ‘the episode one tampon shocks viewers but also alerts them that they’re entering a feminised private space. As the series progresses, the show continues into the feminine world, even forbidden zones like bathrooms’ (Frankel, 2015, p.70). This revelation of the ‘private’ spaces occupied by women’s bodies is important in that it takes us a further step away from the pristine bodies of the post-feminist era, and in so doing, creates micro-narratives that feel genuinely subversive. I cannot recall another occasion on which a bloodied tampon has been shown in photo-realistic detail on a mainstream television programme, and its inclusion certainly makes

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a welcome departure from the curiously blue liquid present in advertisements for menstrual products.

The realities of menstruation are revisited later, in season 3's *A Titin' and A Hairin'*, when a flashback reveals the young Tiffany 'Pensatucky' Doggett experiencing her first period. Bewildered, she goes, soiled knickers in hand, to her mother, who explains that she now has 'life coming out' of her (Kohen, 2015a). Once more the menstrual blood is shown but the tenderness of the moment is interrupted when her mother adds: 'I don't want you bleeding all over the couch, let's get a Kotex on you' (Kohen, 2015a). On the one hand, her mother's matter-of-fact concerns for the family sofa represent a continuation of unhelpful narratives which equate menstruation with uncleanliness, but on the other, there is a certain truthfulness of this micro-narrative that creates a sense of identification among the menstruators in the audience. This identification with Pensatucky's childhood self is of paramount import as the episode continues, revealing her personal narrative of sexual violence.

As her mother talks to her fairly pessimistically about the birds and the bees, and the inevitability of unwanted sexual advances, light filters through the thinning curtains (still drawn, even during the day) casting a shadow over half of the be-pigtailed Tiffany. Her illumination under both light and shadow of course represents her position on the cusp of bodily sexual maturity (as signified by the start of her menses), but is also a metaphor from her imminent transition from the light innocence of childhood to the dark danger of sexual violence.

This appeal to the familiar embarrassment of childhood menstruation is again recalled in series five, when Suzanne Warren remarks: 'I am having some of the bad feelings. Like when you're at the swim party and all the kids are playing Marco Polo, but you have the menstruation in your yellow bathing suit' (Kohen, 2017a). *OINTB* paints a vivid and recognisable picture, which is used narratively to signify Warren's emotional and sexual nativity by showing that she is still haunted by this childhood memory. In both cases, the micro-narratives of early menstruation become components in broader narratives of pleasure, purity, danger and deviance.

Shit Gets Real – Functioning Bodies On OINTB

Fuck D-Block and their shitty jobs. You know what I want? What? I want to make their shitty jobs even shittier. I shit you not, I want to make their shitty everything shittier. Shit's about to shit the fan for those shit-for-brains Shit-Blockers. They're not gonna know what shit 'em! Yeah, they are. That's the point. Here we go. I need volunteers to drop trou and shit on D-Block's nice clean unis.

Maddison Murphey (Kohen, 2018b)

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As Frankel suggests, the sacred feminine spaces of the bathroom and toilet also feature frequently in *OITNB*. In the first episode, there is a shot of Chapman on the toilet at home. She is crying, and the scene is dimly lit, light comes through the windows casting premonitory shadows like prison bars. She is wearing black underwear and a black vest top denoting that orange is *literally* going to become the new black for her as she is moments away from her entrance to Litchfield and the orange jumpsuits therein. Piper is shown reaching for toilet paper and wiping herself before flushing.

The theme of toilet taboos is ever present in *OITNB*, from the weaponised use of defecation on Chapman's pillow and in the D-block tumble dryers in series 6, to the graphic scenes of Blanca Flores' protest piss in series 4, and Warren's urination on Chapman's floor in season 1. Although lavatorial content is often little more than toilet humour in the show, it is also used as a narrative device. In the latter example, the scene is accompanied by Bo\$\$'s *I Don't Give a F**k* and the apt lyrics 'I don't give a fuck, not a solitary fuck' (Bo\$\$, 1993), communicating both Chapman's pivotal acceptance of her new living situation and Warren's revenge for her unrequited romantic interest in Chapman. In using the lexicons of bodily functions, *OITNB* once more redefines women's bodies in all their graphic and authentic glory, and in so doing creates an unfamiliar story of feminine embodiment, breaking social taboos as well as the TV myth that women do not defecate or urinate. This myth is itself alluded to in the prison's urban legend, that the inmate known as 'Miss Claudette' does not defecate and has not been seen doing so in all the time she has been in prison³³.

The dialogue of bodily functions is also used for more sophisticated purposes, the below conversation between inmates being a particularly memorable example:

[Poussey Washington joins the others in the prison canteen. She is carrying a contraption she has manufactured out of bits of pipe.]

Watson: *What the fuck is that?*

Washington: *It's a pee funnel.*

Watson: *A what?*

Washington: *I'm tired of trying to pop a squat over them nasty-ass toilets. This rig is gonna make it easy.*

Hayes: *Girl, that's crazy. How you gonna use that?*

Washington: *Yo, with this, I can pee standing up. Like a dude. Take this part, put it over my stuff. Take this little tube part, put it in the toilet.*

³³ The length of her sentence is not revealed in the show, but we can assume it is a long one as she is in for murder and people trafficking.

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Or, you know what I'm saying, right over it. It's genius, yo! I'm gonna call it the "stand and deliver".

Hayes: *Hey! You should call the patent office right now and make a million dollars.*

Washington: *Really?*

Hayes: *Hell, no! That's the stupidest idea I ever heard.*

Washington: *No, it ain't, man. Them toilets be cold as fuck in the morning. You'll see. Everybody gonna be wanting one of these to piss in.*

Parker: *Please. We're eating.*

Washington: *Yeah, I just gotta find me some waterproof tape or something to get these two parts together.*

Jefferson: *I don't see why you need the funnel. Like, can't you just put the tube up in you?*

Washington: *Uh, no. 'Cause that's not where the pee comes out.*

Jefferson: *Uh, yeah, it do.*

Hayes: *Out of the big hole.*

Jefferson: *Yeah.*

Washington: *No, y'all. There's a different hole.*

Hayes: *For pee? - Yeah.*

Jefferson: *What? You crazy.*

Washington: *Y'all, there is the main coochie hole and then there's, like, another little hole just for pee. Didn't y'all take Sex Ed?*

Warren: *She's right. There's an eeny-meeny-weeny-weeny pee hole.*

Jefferson: *Man, you trippin'. It all come out the same hole. The vagina hole.*

Washington: *All right, then how come you can still pee when you got a tampon in? Mmm? I'm telling you, there's two holes.*

Warren: *Three holes...The butt!!*

Washington: *All right!*

Parker: *You are all disgusting. I'm out. I am not even gonna entertain this conversation. Suzanne! You coming? Put my order in.*

Jefferson: *I am so confused. Where is it at?*

[In the bathroom stall with a handheld mirror]

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Jefferson: *Yo, I still don't see what the hell you talkin' about!*

Washington: *You know, your hole, like, your sex hole.*

Jefferson: *The vagina hole. Yeah, I got that.*

Rice: *Y'all are crazy. Man, I wish I had a phone to record this shit.*

Washington: *Now, look underneath your clit, before the main hole. Or like, just inside the top of it.*

Jefferson: *Man, I still can't see shit down here. It's like too many, like, flappy-flap thingies. - Oh, God. - How do you know all this?*

Washington: *Yo, I've been up close and personal with my share of pussy. Yeah, you want me to just show you?*

Jefferson: *No! No, no, no. I can do it. Just, just tell me where.*

Washington: *Okay, right inside the big ol' hole there's another hole. Like, a little one.*

Jefferson: *Wait, what? I thought you said it was a whole other hole.*

Washington: *It's a hole in a hole.*

Burset: *For the love of God, girls, the hole is not inside the hole. You have your vagina proper, then you have your clitoris. The urethra is located between the clit and the vagina, inside the labia minora.*

Jefferson: *For real? - For real.*

Burset: *I designed one myself. Had plans drawn up and everything. I seen some funky punani in my day. I'm not gonna leave that shit up to chance. Here. Take a long look, honey. You'll see what I'm talking about.*

Jefferson: *Oh, my God. Holy shit! Yo, y'all, she's right.*

A Whole Other Hole! (Kohen, 2014a)

Aside from being an excellent piece of comedy scriptwriting, and a personal favourite, the 'pee funnel' sub-plot can be regarded as a deeply subversive piece of television in that it shows a bodily discourse occurring between women which is reminiscent of fabled second-wave anatomy-exploring and consciousness-raising actions. Gillespie and Toynbee describe a script-writing technique of narrative 'thinning' (Gillespie and Toynbee, 2006, p.167) whereby plotlines focussing on the minutiae of everyday life are stretched out across the course of an episode or film. They cite the British sitcom *The Royle Family* (Aherne and Cash, 1998) as an example of this method, which often featured recurring conversations about what the characters were having for dinner or would watch on the television. In utilising narrative

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thinning in the 'whole other hole' sketch, Kohen is able to create both a sense of the slow passage of time in prison and a balance for the more dramatic and often emotional plotlines in the show.

In bringing the discussion of women's genital structure out of the private context of personal homes and intimate relations, *OITNB* re-writes what it means to be a woman. Moreover, the power of women talking to each other about their bodies cannot be understated, and the above conversation is pertinent not only because it narrates a story of bodily empowerment, but because in so doing, it re-appropriates women's bodies as belonging to women, and not men who have historically sought to dominate, violate, sexualise and objectify them. This in turn is relevant to my research on the cultural politics of sex because it contributes to a discourse in which women's bodies become more than the sum of their sexual functions.

Moreover, in addition to providing comic relief and the creation of new bodily narratives, the storyline also offers an educational potential. Later in the episode, Sophia Burset is seen teaching an anatomy class (the excitement over the 'whole other hole' has spread across the prison's population). She stands at the front of the class with an anatomical drawing of a vulva:

Now, don't be so juvenile, ladies. Listen up and learn, okay? Now, this is your vagina. This is your labia minora, this, this is your clitoris, and this is your urethra. This is where you pee from. Ah! Now, ladies, I want each and every one of you to go back to your bunks tonight and get to know your own cha-chas, okay?

(Kohen, 2014a)

The scene ends with Hayes exclaiming 'no fucking way! I got a mons pubis' and Burset replying 'yes, you do. And you also have a labia majora and a clitoral hood. Now for those of you who are having trouble finding your clitoris, or your partner is having trouble finding your clitoris, you might have to pull back the clitoral hood to expose it' (Kohen, 2014a).

As the start of this plotline, we are laughing at the naivety of a group of women who do not realise that their vaginas and urethras are distinct orifices, but by the end, we are witnessing a genuinely instructional dialogue about genital anatomy and sexual pleasure, and in so doing, a narrative of women's sexual pleasure is evoked, predicated on the reality that knowledge of one's anatomy is imperative to the pursuit of sexual fulfilment. By juxtaposing anatomically correct terms such as 'clitoris' and 'mons pubis' with slang words such as 'cha-cha' and 'punani', the storyline here both educates the audience on, and normalises the exploration of, women's bodies, which is important for both feminism in general and sexual politics.

The subversion in this episode is also furthered by Kohen's cunning narrative sleight of hand. As the episode begins, there is a troubling sense that the conversation is primarily occurring between the women of colour, giving rise to a concerning implication that the educated (white)

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characters like Chapman and Vause would never be so unintelligent as to not understand the function/presence of 'the whole other hole'. However, this implication is thankfully resolved when it becomes apparent that the most knowledgeable person on the subject is Burset – herself a Black woman.

Moreover, the subversion is furthered when we are reminded, that as a trans woman, Burset 'designed' her own vagina. This simple revelation, primarily for comedic effect, is important because it helps to dispel gender essentialist narratives which do not regard trans women as 'real' women on account of their genital arrangements. Burset's wisdom here is important because as a trans woman, she is actually *more* knowledgeable about genital anatomy than any of the other, cis-gendered women in the prison. That Washington coins her invention the 'stand and deliver' further underscores this, because in addition to providing a crude analogy of allowing women to urinate standing up, it also evokes the 1988 Ramon Menendez film of the same name, and based on a true story, which explored issues relating to race and educational attainment in America's public school system. Moreover, the expression is said to originate from the vernacular of highway robbers who would order travellers to 'stand and deliver' their money or their lives, thus providing an example of the re-appropriation of bravado by women on the show. That the device allows the women to urinate 'like a dude' is a further example of the transformative politics at play, in which women characters are permitted to speak, and behave, in a manner that we are more accustomed to associating with men.

Full Bush, Half Snickers (Kohen, 2017b) – Hairy Bodies On *OITNB*

Gonzales: *This is the perfect end to a sucky day. Having a strange man check out my unscaped, ungroomed conchita.*

Hayes: *Ay! "Conchita!" That's what you call your party room?*

Gonzales: *For real. My poozy hair is so long down there, it's like I got a Wookiee sleeping on it.*

Hayes: *Mine ain't like that. The muffro takes more of a horizontal approach. I mean, I'm basically wearing a pubic short right now. Doc gonna be like - "Damn! Where it at?" - I'm gonna be, like, "Good day, sir. My best to you on your journey! Watch out for teeth!" "Leave some breadcrumbs, so you can find your way on out!"*

State of the Uterus (Kohen, 2018b)

In addition to the sexual and lavatorial functions of women's bodies, *OITNB* also pays close and frequent attention to their maintenance. The technique of utilising comedic content to subversive ends continues when Chapman describes the 'pubey' hair that she keeps getting on her chin (Kohen, 2014a), or when Hayes and Gonzales joke about their 'ungroomed' pubic

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areas (above). There is a 'me too' component in the above dialogue, which once again is an embodiment of the solidarifying politics of the fourth-wave and #MeToo moment.

However, the inclusion of realistic narratives about beauty regimes is also used more tenderly at times to the same political ends. In season one, episode three, Rosa Cisneros, an inmate with terminal cancer, expresses her bemusement at having no hair on her head (as a result of chemotherapy) but hairs sprouting from her breasts. Meanwhile, Nicky Nicholls can be seen cleaning out her ears with a cotton-wool bud. Once more, the taboo minutiae of women's bodies are explored to set the scene; the mood is relaxed and time is passing slowly. As a result, the conversation is remarkable in how un-remarkable it is, and it creates a normalisation of body hair, with which the audience can identify despite not sharing the same material locality as the inmates on screen.

In *Full Bush, Half Snickers* (Kohen, 2017b), an enterprising inmate has set up shop offering pubic braiding at the tariff indicated in the episode title. A superficial reading of moments such as this, or of Gonzales' fretting over the tidiness of her pubic hair, might be regarded as furthering a normative assumption about the need to tame and maintain women's body hair. However, the comical nature of many of the 'hair' scenes actually creates a sense of the preposterousness of the lengths which women are expected to go to in this field, and under this reading can be regarded as culturally subversive, once more illustrating the show's taboo-busting departure from the smooth embodiments of post-feminism.

Moreover, the sharing of intimate bodily practices is also used to create tender narratives about female friendship. In the show's second episode, Red is seen lying down with her trouser legs rolled up as Norma shaves her legs, Tchaikovsky playing in the background—the music, like 'Red', is Russian and she reminds Norma not to forget to do her toes. The primary purpose of this scene is to convey Red's relative position of power at the top of the prison's internal food chain: she is feared/ respected enough that she has minions performing even the most personal tasks for her. Ever-present is the realism highlighted by the presence not just of legs which need shaving, but toes as well. However, there is a deeper meaning when we situate the scene once more in the show's broader narratives. Norma and Red are extremely close: family. Red is suffering from chronic and debilitating back pain, exacerbated by the flimsy prison mattresses, and so Norma's role becomes not that of underling but of carer. Such scenes are repeated time and again: the inmates paint each other's nails, maintain each other's hair. Moreover, the inmates are often shown manufacturing their own makeshift beauty products, such as Morello's tinted lip-balm made from Kool Aide or her toilet-paper hair curlers. Often given as gifts to each other, as is the case with Chapman's chilli-pepper back

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rub for Red, these accoutrements of body maintenance act as signifiers of both friendship and ingenuity.

One of the show's most poignant moments, however, is created by inverting its typical approach of putting body upkeep out in the open. As the prison attempts to make ever deeper budget cuts in season one, Sophia sees her oestrogen prescription reduced and she begins to grow facial hair again. She is seen at the end of an episode alone in the dark, delicately tweezing her chin. In framing Sophia's body narrative differently from the others, we are reminded that even as fourth-wave body politics throws the doors wide open on women's beauty practices, there are still some topics still too taboo to be handled this way. Though feminist women today are rightly free to shave or not shave, pluck, wax, thread or epilate however they choose, the complex body politics of 'passing' for transgender folk means that their practices remain unspoken, and to be conducted, as Sophia is, – alone and behind closed doors.

What the narratives of body hair, menstruation, urination and defecation in *OITNB* highlight are not only the show's feminist (and demonstratively not *post-feminist*) credentials, but its capacity to re-conceptualise the bodies of women. This has far-reaching consequences for the cultural politics of sex, which are located both within and around the bodies we see on screen.

Another way in which the show's storying of bodies marks a departure from the *Buffys* and *Bradshaws* is in that its depictions ascribe women characters with a greater sense of self-awareness in relation to their bodies and sexualities. Though the post-feminist heroines were implicitly sexually liberated, they also possessed a certain level of naivety. The *SATC* women were bold and brash in their sexualities, but not manipulative, and *Buffy* and co enjoyed sex, but within strictly PG-13 parameters. The women of *OITNB* however understand their bodies and sexuality have currency and power. In the most literal sense, they are seen trading various confectionary items for tampons, and Morello is able to cut the queue for her smear test by trading on her status as a pregnant woman/ body, but there are also more complex sexual narratives present too.

Following the devastating 'accidental' death (manslaughter?) of Poussey Washington at the hands of CO Baxter Bailey in season five, the Litchfield inmates decide to create a monument to celebrate her life and aid themselves in the grieving process. Tragedy is of course met with comedy as a stream of dubious ideas are suggested: 'and the clams at the bottom of the mural represent Poussey's past lovers. So she dives in search of them. Always reaching. Always searching. Yearning to unlock - the mysteries of their pearls' (Kohen, 2017b).

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On the surface, this is simply a thinly veiled and comedic nod to Poussey's lesbianism and the symbolic relationship between the vulva and oysters. However, a more important message is revealed as Chapman attempts to salvage a meaningful idea from the naff pitch, stating 'they're [the clams and pearls] representational here, right? Do they symbolize pleasure? They're orgasms' (Kohen, 2017b). What this story reveals is that Poussey's friends are keen to memorialise part of what made her special – a life lived in sexual fulfilment and honesty. Thus, we can see how *OITNB*'s characters explore sexuality in more sophisticated ways than their predecessors.

This sophistication, however, also takes a darker turn at times. Episode 7 of season 5 provides an interesting exchange between Red and 'Blanca' Flores. Previously known for her grubby and unkempt appearance, Blanca has undergone a makeover during the prison riot and is supporting a new look. Her trademark mono brow has become 'plural' (Kohen, 2017b) and Red recruits her in a plot to distract the prison's doctor, enabling her to complete the macabre task of severing an unconscious CO's thumb in order to use his print to unlock a mobile phone. She tells Blanca: 'you're a woman now, use your sexuality' (Kohen, 2017b). Once more, the comedy is used to deflect the moral dubiousness of their actions, but what is telling about this scene is how the characters understand the power of their own bodies, vis-a-vis the weakness of male resolve.

This manipulation is taken to an even darker place in series three, when Daya Diaz becomes pregnant after having sex with CO John Bennett. I will give further discussion of this statutory rape later in the thesis, when exploring the role of sexual violence in the series, but what is of note here is that, in desperation to protect Bennett's career, Daya tricks Pornstache into having sex with her, so that she can later accuse him of rape and pin the pregnancy on him. This ordinarily despicable act of making a false allegation is mitigated on the show by two key factors, which are made sense of by appealing to the broader narrative dynamics. Firstly, as previously discussed, Pornstache is the prison creep. In this instance, he didn't force Daya into sex, but he has manipulated other inmates into performing sex acts in exchange for drugs and is, until this point, very much a one-dimensional moral reprobate. Secondly, though Pornstache doesn't forcibly rape Daya, he has committed the same crime (statutory rape) as Bennett in having sex with her as a prisoner under his control.

There are some important and somewhat contradictory messages at play here. That Daya is self-aware enough to manipulate Bennett and shown to have the moral complexity of committing such an act is an example of the theme of women's sexual power in action.

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Moreover, the taboo subject of sexually predatory women³⁴ is raised here in a way which has the potential to shed light on the often overlooked reality of men’s survivorhood. However, I feel that this reading is ultimately negated by the fact that Daya, though manipulative, is portrayed as a sympathetic character, facing a desperate situation, and is also the victim herself of two counts of statutory rape.

More problematic, however, is the notion that wins out: that despite the grey area covered, Daya is ultimately presented as having made a false rape allegation. Later in the series, we come to see Pornstache re-invented as a sensitive soul who really loved Daya and who is heartbroken to learn that the baby is not his. The attempted moral redemption of Pornstache isn’t, I don’t think, very successful, but the fact that the narrative bends in this direction is important. This false-allegation narrative feels particularly unhelpful in the context of #MeToo when we have witnessed countless women disbelieved and denigrated for uttering their own narratives of sexual abuse. President Trump himself has contributed to this culture of disbelief, Tweeting derogatively of Stormy Daniels who claimed of an illicit affair with him, ‘great, now I can go after Horseface and her 3rd rate lawyer’ (Trump, 2018), and referring to legal predator Brett Kavanaugh as a ‘good man’ (AP, 2018). There has also been a deafening silence in relation to allegations made about Joe Biden.

The story of Daya is an excellent example of the way in which meanings are discursively produced in the watching of television shows. The storyline is not encountered in a vacuum but in a patriarchal system in which women are all too often subject to accusations of making false allegations, or, when they are believed, are accused of ‘asking for it’. In running with this story arc as it does, *OITNB* is complicit in reproducing and perpetuating these harmful narratives. Frankel notes of Fig: ‘she refused to call Daya’s affair with Pornstache a rape (though legally it is) and pushes Daya to admit she “led him on” in a moment that makes feminists cringe’ (Frankel, 2015, p.41), highlighting that the show is not always faithful to, or at least successful in its deployment of fourth-wave produce.

Abortion Demonised -*OITNB*’s Dirty Un-Feminist Secret

‘I pray for all the dead babies’ souls’

Tiffany Doggett, *F*cksgiving* (Kohen, 2013a)

³⁴ Once more, whether her actions can be considered ‘predatory’ in the context of the prisoner/ guard power dynamic and in relation to a statutory rape that she herself has sought out, is a complex issue, but what is of interest is that the show at least *portrays* her as predatory and manipulative.

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So far, I have explored the role of bodily functions and aesthetic practices as sites for a new feminist politic, but now come to a discussion of bodily health, and in particular, reproductive health, which I posit is conceptualised not as a site of possible pleasure, but of consequence and danger. Though scenes like season six's *State of the Uterus* (Kohen, 2018b) shows inmates queueing up to receive their cervical smear tests, in keeping with a feminist politics of normalising and demystifying corporeal practices of femininity, and promoting the importance of regular smears, the show has a notable feminist blind spot on the subject of abortion, which seems to represent an unexpected cognitive dissonance in the show's generally feminist content, and one which sadly represents a kind of sexual moralising, not usually present in the series.

Abortion as a subject matter is in and of itself inherently linked to narratives around the dangers and consequences of sex. It is not possible to tell an uplifting abortion story or one in which abortion is a desired consequence of sex: but as a plot device, it has historically been conceptualised not just as sad but as punishment for unfettered female sexual pleasure. The abortion stories present in films such as *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972) and *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1987) were important taboo-breakers of their time, but were tinged with a sense of sadness and shame, which served as a warning about the dangers of women's sexual promiscuity.

There has, however, been a more recent shift towards narratives in which access to abortion is at least normalised. Netflix's own *Sex Education* featured a storyline in which lead character Maeve seeks an abortion (Nunn, 2019). The storyline was treated with tenderness, humour in parts and in a somewhat matter-of-fact manner, but importantly showed Maeve being given a range of options to *choose* from. In addition, the episode showed another woman at the clinic undergoing the same procedure, but her narrative was one of a woman who has already had children – a storyline which is often entirely absent in discourses about which people have abortions and why. Narratives such as these have created a positive trend towards destigmatising a previously taboo subject, but *OITNB* appears to diverge from this trend in its abortion storyline, in a way which not only risks pushing abortion back into the realm of sexual danger and consequence but feels decidedly *un-feminist* in its approach.

I have already alluded to some of the moral complexities and grey areas which are explored in the Daya rape and pregnancy story arc, but the tale also features a discourse around reproductive rights which is of particular import to my explorations around the show's feminism, and the dual notions of pleasure and danger in relation to the cultural politics of sex. As Daya tries to make sense of her predicament, she is shown across several episodes wrestling with a decision about whether to keep her baby. That, for her, abortion is at least on the table is encouraging, but this progressivism is quickly undermined as the story unravels.

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In series one, episode nine, Daya is seen preparing to take a prison-brewed potion made by Mendoza in order to induce a miscarriage. What should arguably be a deeply emotional and intense moment is treated with a coldness which borders on contemptuous. Unsure, she asks Mendoza to confirm that 'this is gonna kill it?' (Kohen, 2013a). Mendoza answers in the affirmative and adds: 'please, it don't even have a brain yet' (Kohen, 2013a). On the one hand, Mendoza's utterance, over-simplified though it is, appears compatible with a pro-choice perspective which does not regard a foetus as a life. However, this seems somewhat nullified by Daya's use of the word 'kill', which in addition to not being the kind of euphemism that might ordinarily be used, infers a belief that in taking the potion, she *will* be ending a life. There is also a subtextual message that people like Daya who have abortions are callous and cold.

This anti-choice rhetoric is revisited later in the episode when it is revealed that Daya's mother (who is also an inmate at Litchfield) had arranged for Mendoza to mix up a harmless blend of herbs and spices from the kitchen and present it to Daya as the termination-inducing potion. Confronted by Daya, her mother Aleida retorts: 'you think I'm gonna let you ice my grandbaby?' (Kohen, 2013a). Once more the delicate topic of abortion is handled with a level of dispassion which feels out of place, but my sense of unease with the plot is really exacerbated by the portrayal of Aleida's actions in taking away her daughter's right to choose as seemingly reasonable. Aleida, though shallow, and at times selfish, is, like most of the characters on the show treated with compassion and humanised, particularly in the subsequent storylines which depict her struggles as she leaves the prison, a single mother with a criminal record, and thus she is not conceptualised as a bad person, despite doing something that most feminists, and most people generally, would regard as morally reprehensible.

My sense of unease became one of betrayal, as Aleida is narratively vindicated by Daya going on to have the baby. Let me be clear, it is not the notion of Daya's choice to have the baby that I have a problem with here; part of being *pro-choice* in my feminism is an acceptance that *choosing* to go through with a pregnancy is as valid an option as any other. My resentment is at the fact that Daya's choice was taken away from her, and the show opted to present this as a reasonable enough outcome. I am disappointed that the show did not display its usual standards of nuance and empathy in this plot and angered that the invalidation of this woman's choice has been tacitly condoned. It seems as though there is a narrative desire present in the show to see Daya 'punished' for her sexual encounter with Bennett, by being forced, against her will, to live with the 'dangerous' consequences of her actions by carrying the baby to term.

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It is fair to say that the topic of reproductive choice on *OITNB*, as in life, intersects in complicated ways with that of religion. An argument can be made that as Latin-American women, Daya and Aleida are assumed to be at least nominally belonging to the Catholic faith (the Catholicism of the Latina women is encoded throughout the show), and thus the decision to continue with the pregnancy can be regarded as commitment to the authenticity of character development on screen. However, this apparent tolerance for religiously motivated conservatism doesn't permeate outside of this particular narrative arc. Characters like Tiffany Doggett and Sam Healey are exposed time and again as bigoted zealots in respect to their religiously sanctioned homophobia, and one can't help but wondering why, if the show is confident and content to challenge religious dogma in relation to sexuality, it appears to refrain from doing so on the topic of abortion.

It is true that when Doggett expresses, as above, that she will 'pray' for the dead babies' souls' (Kohen, 2013a), the dogma is challenged by Alex Vause, who mocks and dismisses Doggett as the 'defender of the unborn' (Kohen, 2013a) by commenting that the moniker 'sounds like a bad X-men movie' (Kohen, 2013a), but there is a sense in the scene that Doggett, misguided as she may be, is for a change acting from a place of compassion. Vause, on the other hand, comes across as an elitist snob.

It is important to note here that despite its global audience, Netflix *is* an American brand, and *OITNB* an American cultural product, and I am aware that the issue of abortion is much more contentious in the States than here in Britain. It is also true that the more progressive abortion storyline in *Sex Education* may have developed because it is a British production. However, given my earlier discussion on the creative freedoms permitted by Netflix's lack of dependency on ad revenue, I remain somewhat perplexed by its apparent lack of courage in handling this matter. Is it that Kohen and the show's producers harbour their own anti-choice positions? Or were they perhaps frightened of alienating conservative viewers both at home in the US and overseas? One of the show's stars, Kate Mulgrew, who plays Red Reznikov, has spoken publicly on her pro-life position (Feminists For Life of America, 2001), but it is difficult to offer any more than speculation as to what level of input she might have had on the creative direction of the show.

Perhaps my own prejudices are showing here and my identities as a pro-choice, British feminist, atheist, academic and activist are interfering with my critical judgement, but as I conclude this section, I am left with a lingering sense that, culturally speaking, there is something I am just not getting. I will of course mediate further on this, as my reflexive practice dictates I must, but there are a couple of further points to be added for now. Firstly, though my own politics and prejudices might be a limiting factor, I was surprised, given the show's

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widespread fandom amongst fourth-wave feminists, that I wasn't able to locate any critical work discussing its handling of Daya's abortion, either within the academic press or feminist pop culture blogs. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I am, at the time of writing, still unsure what this covert anti-choice discourse means for the broader picture of transformative, feminist-informed, cultural politics of sex which I posit the show, epitomizes. I acknowledge that declaring my uncertainty on the subject in the final draft of my thesis defies conventional wisdom, but I think that the fact that I remain, unsure is in itself interesting. I certainly don't believe that 'the abortion problem' undermines or detracts from the countless other ways in which the show is a radical example of #MeToo cultural output, but perhaps it highlights the moment's limitations, or a way in which the moment is still unfolding, still progressing.

In this chapter, I have reviewed how both of my texts utilise the concepts of feminism and femininity in distinct but important ways. In the case of *Sense8* a world is created whereby traces of sexism are anachronistic and stick out against the show's queer, gender-diverse paradigm. In *OITNB*, the sensibilities of fourth-wave feminism are woven into the text; feminism is explicitly named, articulated and enacted. *OITNB* also demonstrates a process of feminist cultural politics becoming *embodied*, as the bodies of women metamorphose into sites of feminist struggle and discourse. In so doing, the possibilities for and presence of women's sexual pleasure are connoted and centred. Though the notion of pleasure is more thoroughly explored in chapters seven and eight, its presence above should not be overlooked. Furthermore, although in the abortion example the struggle appears to be still ongoing, its situatedness amongst other bodily narratives is telling of a continuity with earlier moments whereby women's bodies represent the front lines of political sexual discourse.

In Chapter Six, I move on to looking at how my texts handle the darker side of sexual politics, which I argue my texts locate in the concept of masculinity. In contrasting this with the operation of femininity/ feminism explored above, I provide another critical lens with which to gather and understand information about the current cultural politics of sex in the #MeToo moment, thus adding further depth of field to the snapshot I am creating.

6. Puerile, Disgusting and Dangerous – Toxic Masculinity On *OITNB* And *Sense8*

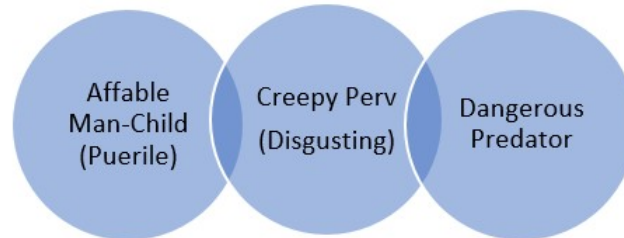


Fig 13 – Overlapping Tropes

In Chapter Five, I outlined the ways in which my chosen texts conceptualise ‘feminism’ and ‘femininity’ in radical new ways which are both in keeping with the #MeToo moment and demonstrative of a new cultural politics of sex playing out. In this chapter, I will argue that this new cultural politics of sex is further advanced by my shows’ conceptions of masculinity, and in particular male sexuality. I posit, that in *OITNB*, male (hetero)sexuality is *always*, and without exception, portrayed in one of three ways: puerile, disgusting or dangerous. Though the sexuality of individual male characters on the show often migrates between these three categories or inhabits one or more of them simultaneously (as in **Fig 13.0** above), it never escapes them entirely. It is worth noting here that, although I will argue that the show portrays male sexuality as gross, this doesn’t explicitly mean that *OITNB* is a de facto feminist production; what it does do is illustrate how the show is deliberately signposting itself as feminist media - it is employing recognisable signs. These tropes are also present in *Sense8* but much more nominally, perhaps owing to the fact that notions of a specific ‘male’ sexuality(s) are rendered less meaningful in narratives which treat gender as fluidly as the show does. For this reason, the primary emphasis of this section will be on *OITNB* but examples from *Sense8* are given, too, where they complicate, expand and help to develop my argument and the meanings of male sexuality that I posit are being created.

For the purposes of this discussion, and to facilitate the exploration of sexual trends on the show, I employ an over-simplified definition of the term ‘male sexuality’ to mean, sexuality as performed by characters who are men. I adopt this approach because the performance of sex and sexuality by characters on the show is, without exception, presented in a (binary) gendered fashion. Though the show is notable for its inclusion of queer narratives, featuring lesbian, bisexual and trans characters, there remains at all times a notable distinction between

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the manner in which sexuality is produced by men and women, and this is something noteworthy in itself. To structure the discussion in this section, I will examine male sexuality under the lens of three, generalised sexuality tropes which emerge: the affable man-child, the creepy perv and the dangerous predator.

Trope 1: The Affable Man-Child

The affable man-child is the tamest of male sexualities offered on *OITNB*. He is portrayed, for the most part, as a ‘nice guy’ who occasionally gets things wrong. Much like Hannah Gadsby’s conceptualisation of ‘the Jimmy’, the affable man-child is sweet and sensitive, aware of feminism, but perpetually partially trapped in adolescence. He maintains childish interests and is clumsy and unsophisticated when it comes to sex. The trope has existed in popular-culture parlance under various guises, from the autobiographical Blink 182 song *What’s My Age Again?* (Blink 182, Hoppus and DeLonge, 1999) to the childish man-nerds of *Waynes World* and *The Big Bang Theory*. He is nearly always non-threatening, and this helps to again perpetuate the demarcation of the #not-all-men line by creating a man who is acceptable (if sometimes frustrating) boyfriend/ male friend material for the women on the show and in the audience.

The man child is epitomised by the character of Larry Bloom— Piper Chapman’s gentle but immature fiancé. Bloom is played by the actor Jason Biggs who, appropriately for many of the core *OITNB* audience, first became a household name when he starred as Jim Levenstein in 1999’s infamous sex-comedy *American Pie* (Weitz and Weitz, 1999). Bloom is Levenstein grown up. No longer inserting his genitals into warm baked goods, he is a kind-hearted goof-ball. His male sexuality is quietly disarmed by his lingering adolescent immaturity in relation to sex and his position as beta to Piper’s alpha.

The immaturity of this type of male sexuality is often demonstrated in the show when the man-child’s inability to verbally articulate sexual desire is reduced to banality for comedic effect. In season 1, Chapman’s brother Cal (another affable man-child) attempts to ask Larry if they have been permitted a conjugal visit but ultimately ends up miming sex with a series of boorish hand gestures, as if he can’t actually say the words (Kohen, 2013c). When men *do* discuss sex on the show, a number of interesting things happen. Take this later exchange between Cal and Larry in the same episode, Cal is suggesting that Larry try Tantric masturbation whilst Chapman is in prison:

Cal: *You gotta try edging, man.*

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Larry: *What is that?*

Cal: *It's where you jerk off, okay? Right to the point of orgasm and then stop.*

Larry: *And you do this because...*

Cal: *Because your jizz is your power, man. It's spiritual, it keeps your Chi inside. Especially if you got writer's block. You gotta walk right up to that line, bro, and not cross it.*

Larry: *And this is something you do?*

Cal: *Yeah. Welder chick taught me. See, you gotta you gotta grab right underneath your balls, like, right here, you really gotta get up right up in there.*

Larry: *Okay, yeah.*

Cal: *And it creates, like, a whole body thing. Kind of like a female orgasm. You know, most dudes, they don't know what women got, but trust me, bro, it is way, way better. A lot of creative people do it. In fact, they say that John Lennon wrote Imagine right at that sweet spot.*

Lesbian Request Denied (Kohen, 2013c)

In some regards, it is quite refreshing to see men on TV talking about sex in a serious way. Instructing and educating each other and discussing sexual technique not out of bravado or for a joke, but to learn and share with each other. Though comedy is created by Cal's use of crude slang terms like 'jizz' and 'jerk off', this scene offers a reading of 'masculinity' which, though childish, is safe, and in doing so makes plausible the fact that one of our heroines would be intimately involved with this man.

The depiction of healthy male bonding in this scene also feels important in the context of the 'locker room talk' revealed by the *Hollywood Reporter's* secret recording of Donald Trump and Jeb Bush, in which the former discusses 'grabbing women by the pussy'. Though the HR recording did not come to light until 2016, several years after the episode in question, the episode nonetheless feels like part of a broader trend to concertedly present alternate forms of masculinity which are in keeping with current feminist cultural politics. This trend is exemplified by the repetition of on-screen 'bro-mances' present in texts such as *Scrubs* (2001), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) and *Master of None* (2015).

The immaturity of the man-child can also be observed by looking at elements which are present in 'guy talk' and absent in 'girl talk' in the show. Firstly, Cal repeatedly calls Larry 'man' and 'bro'. In part these designators are simply part of his hippy-dude vernacular (in this context, a signpost to his immaturity, and middle-class whiteness) and are terms of

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endearment and in-group designation. However, they also demonstrate an unwritten assumption that if two straight men are going to discuss intimate sexual practice, they will feel the need to include signifiers that their relationship is platonic, fraternal and between 'bros', so that nobody gets the impression that they might be gay. This is also underscored by Cal's claim 'your jizz is your power man' (Kohen, 2013c) which evokes a perception that he feels the need to re-assert his sexual power as a man. Moreover, though Cal is obviously knowledgeable about the practice he is describing, there is evidence of a sense of childish insecurity in him which is illustrated by his need to lend credence to his advice by claiming that John Lennon himself practiced the method. Both of these inclusions serve a feminist logic that mocks 'fragile masculinity' but also highlight something about the cultural politics of sex as on *OITNB*, in their absence from women's dialogue about sex. The implicit connotation is that the women on the show are much more comfortable, and perhaps empowered in their sexualities, than the men.

In addition to sequences like the one above, there are also numerous, smaller, but no less significant references to the immature 'nice guys' in *OITNB*. In Season 5, episode 7, Lorna Morello attempts to communicate to her husband Vinnie that she is pregnant, by holding up a sign during the prison riots which says 'The lasagne is in the oven'. The lasagne reference is an in-joke in relation to their shared Italian heritage, but as Vinnie sees the sign and it dawns on him what it means, he is shown literally running away from the prison. Vinny's fragile masculinity is also parodied in season 3, episode 10 when Morello tells him 'that is something that I really like about you. 'Cause you are sensitive, but you're also strong... There's something about a man in a gold chain that makes me feel [inhales deeply] protected.' This joke relies once more on the feminist sensibilities of the audience recognising that, although Morello is sincere in her comment, the joke is at her and Vinnie's expense, because it is implied that Vinny is so insecure in his masculinity that he must wear a macho gold chain to display it. This theme of paternal irresponsibility is also present in Larry and Piper's friend Pete, who immediately following the birth of his child decides to go to Alaska for a month to 'find himself.'

It is worth noting here that, although the affable man-child is constructed as the *least* dangerous of the male sexualities presented in *OITNB*, he is, like the Jimmys and Friends of Jimmy, not without his toxic elements. In the same episode where Larry and Cal bond over Tantric sex, Larry is shown attempting to instigate phone sex with Piper when she calls from the prison:

Piper: *Did you go to Whole Foods? What did you get?*

Larry: *A bunch of stuff.*

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Piper: *No, no, no. Be specific. Tell me everything. In detail. Just take me away.*

Larry: *Okay, I got some crispy snap peas, I got some cherry juice for my smoothies.*

Piper: *God, smoothies.*

Larry: *Then some purple kale, Uncle Eddie's vegan cookies.*

Piper: *I can feel them in my mouth.*

Larry: *Then I got, you know, those bulk roasted almonds. You know, with the sugar coating on the top?*

Piper: *Yeah, yeah, the crack almonds.*

Larry: *The crack almonds. And, well, then I got some heirloom tomatoes. Last of the season, you know? Super plump and ripe. Engorged almost. With some wet, juicy buffalo mozzarella. And some sweet, sweet-ass organic blueberries. My cock is hard. And I'm rubbing it against your ass.*

Piper: *What? What? - What? - Are you trying to have phone sex with me?*

Larry: *I thought that's what we I'm confused.*

Piper: *There are guards listening. They sit in a bubble and they listen.*

Larry: *I'm sure people do it all the time.*

Piper: *And there's a woman weeping next to me.*

Larry: *Okay. Well, I'm just gonna go jerk off then. For the 500th time today.*

Piper: *Sweetie, I'm sorry.*

Larry: *No, it's okay. I'm reliving my youth. I'm 14 again.*

Lesbian Request Denied (Kohen, 2013c)

Several interesting things are happening in the above exchange. Firstly, the casual references to shopping at Whole Foods for heirloom tomatoes function as a continuation of the 'fish-out-of-water' theme by depicting Chapman's privileged former existence. That she is hankering, not for sex with Larry, but to hear about the food she is missing out on is an early example of how food and sex are frequently linked together on the show: often one is traded for the other, food is used as a token of love, as a currency or as in the above scene, the sensual desires of sex, which are absent from Piper's prison life, are relocated in the enjoyment of food.

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Of more relevance to my research on the cultural politics of sex, however, is what the above scene tells us about the affable man-child as personified in Larry. Once more, his immaturity is highlighted, both directly, in his comment that he feels like he is fourteen again, and indirectly in his misunderstanding of what Piper wanted from the conversation. His failure to recognise that it was fine food and not sex that she was missing whilst incarcerated initially feels forgivable: he has got the wrong end of the stick, and we as an audience are able to laugh at his haplessness with the rules of sex. However, his response to realising that he has made a fool of himself is more concerning. He essentially begins to sulk, which reifies his immaturity but also crosses the line into trying to make Piper feel guilty for his lack of sexual fulfilment whilst she is in prison. There is an assumption here that Larry feels that Piper owes him phone sex, and that her incarceration is causing *him* to suffer, and this serves as a gentle reminder that even the #NotAllMen can exhibit toxic behaviour.

This darker side of 'good-guy' masculinity that the show postulates also offers a reflection of real-world discourses in the cultural politics of sex following the #MeToo movement. What Laura Snapes has dubbed 'beta male misogyny' (Snapes, 2019) refers to a number of high-profile cases of 'good guys' like Moby, Ryan Adams and Aziz Ansari being exposed as sexual predators (see Anthony; Filipovic, 2018; Friedman, 2018; Koehler, 2018; North, 2018; Way, 2018 for discussion of male feminist icon Aziz Ansari). This is important for my conceptualisation of the #MeToo moments, as it shows the direct correlation between the politics of #MeToo and the cultural output.

This said, the presentation of the affable man-child is usually as a non-threatening entity in *OITNB*, and thus functions once more to draw up the #not-all-men line by creating a form of masculinity that is acceptable to both the audience and the on-screen women alike. By showing what are essentially tender, if immature, moments between characters such as Cal and Larry, a stark contrast is created to the predatory, toxic masculinity of both the Trumps and Weinsteins of the real world, and of the predatory men in *OITNB*, whose sexualities are less benign as I shall now examine.

Trope 2: The Creepy Perv

The only sicko here is you. And under different circumstances, what? I'd be your girlfriend, is that it? Did I make you jealous? You put me in this hellhole for no reason. Wake up, Healy! Girls like me? We don't fuck ignorant, pretentious old men with weird lesbian obsessions! We go for tall, hot girls, and we fucking love it! So that leaves you on the outside, living your sad, sad little life.

Piper Chapman, *F*cksgiving* (Kohen, 2013a)

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For some of the men in *OITNB*, their immaturity levels are such that they cross from being naïve dopes like the man-child to occupying the more sinister space of the creep. This form of male sexuality is more highly and overtly toxic, and its presence elicits a response of disgust rather than empathy and patience. Although some of the men who are initially presented as creeps go on to commit sexual crimes and move more concretely into the predator category, the majority exist as subjects of revulsion whose performance of masculinity is so unacceptable as to warrant revulsion, but not fear.

Minor references to the disgustingness of men are made throughout the series, from Larry wafting away a fart in bed to the use of crude innuendo on the part of Pornstache — ‘Looks like we’re at a cold war standoff, rooskie, and I’ve got a bigger weapon, you wanna see it?’ (Kohen, 2013a). However, the clearest examples of the creep trope in *OITNB* are found in the male prison guards such as prison warden Joe Caputo, whose masturbation following an encounter with Piper I have already mentioned.

Season 3, episode 11 opens with a shot of a shaking headboard and the sound of people having sex. The camera pans to Caputo penetrating Fig, who is on all fours, from behind.

Caputo: *Say it! Say it!*

Fig: *You’re the man! You’re the man!*

[They climax and immediately the tone changes to shame, they collapse on the bed. Fig looks at Caputo]

Caputo: *Eugh, gross*

Fig: *Your place depresses me. The walls are sticky with loneliness.*

Caputo: *I’m disgusted with myself every time. Why am I fucking you?*

Fig: *You fancy yourself a nice guy, Joe, but you’re not. You’re a deeply angry and resentful man because the world hasn’t appreciated you the way you think you deserve. And right now, there’s no one you resent more than me. So, in fucking me, you get a small leak in that overinflated resentment balloon and it gives you some relief.*

[Caputo ties a knot in a used condom and discards it]

We Can Be Heroes (Kohen, 2015c)

This scene has a lot to say about creep sexuality, and the theme of disgust is immediately apparent and even named when Caputo himself reflects on the sexual encounter: ‘Eugh, gross’ (Kohen, 2015c). The ambiance of sleaze is further alluded to in Fig’s use of ‘sticky’ ‘balloon’ and ‘leak’ – although ostensibly she is referring to the décor in Caputo’s apartment

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and his apparent resentment towards her, the sexual subtext of these words is underscored by the shot of the used condom, and it is implied that the walls being 'sticky with loneliness' are due to Caputo's solitary masturbation sessions. In referencing both directly and indirectly, the bodily fluids associated with male sex in Caputo's home environment, his sexuality is painted as crude and unpalatable.

Moreover, the role of power/ fragile masculinity in constructing Caputo as a creep is central here. In the above scene, he is clearly deriving sexual gratification from hearing Fig re-affirm his masculinity out loud. The sex is 'doggie-style' to further his imagined dominance over her, and as she explains to him when they finish, his reason for having sex with her has nothing to do with an attraction to her personally but is because she is his senior at work. In fucking her³⁵, he perceives himself as re-claiming a power and masculinity that he feels has been taken from him. The theme of Caputo's emasculation continues throughout the episode as we are shown flashbacks of him in high school, losing his opportunity to become a professional wrestler due to doing a good deed, and later on, abandoning his dream of becoming a musician in order to support his girlfriend and her child, born of another man, only for her to ultimately leave him for the father of the child.

What this tells us about the cultural politics of sex, is that there is something decidedly sad about the creep. He is a 'loser' in life and sex, and his masculinity is threatened by powerful women like Fig, all of which makes him and his sexuality objects of disgust, sometimes tinged with pity. In the case of Caputo, this element of sympathy is created by the 'nice guys finish last' storyline, and the fact that, in general, he does the right thing when it comes to caring for the inmates. In warden Sam Healey, however, the fragility of his masculinity is not only disgusting, but much darker as he straddles the tropes of creep and predator.

Healey's masculinity is so toxic that it defies pity, and is given as an explanation for his overt misogyny, racism and homophobia as illustrated in this exchange with Black prison officer Birdie Rogers in season 1, episode 9:

Birdie: *What exactly is your real issue? See I can't quite pin down whether you're a misogynist, or a racist, or a winning combination of the two.*

Healey: *You foster inappropriate relationships, you walk around here like you own the place. You come in here every week with a different hairstyle, and your class is a festering incubator of deviance!*

Birdie: *You're a vengeful little man, aren't you? But I'll be back. Because I am good at what I do.*

³⁵ In his mind, they are not 'having sex' together, or even 'fucking each other', he is 'fucking' her and this is important.

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*F*cksgiving* (Kohen, 2013a)

There are several interesting things at play here. Firstly, Healey demonstrates his obvious misogyny by equating Birdie's changing hairstyles with her ability to do her job, but more importantly, Birdie calls him on it. She names his racism and misogyny overtly, which once more shows the paradigmatic shift from the feminist disavowal of post-feminist texts to the centring of intersectional feminism within the series. In the case of Healey, it is his bigotry which makes him disgusting, and this is highlighted when Birdie calls him a 'vengeful little man', which draws attention once more to the fragility of his masculinity. Additionally, by categorising her working relationships as 'inappropriate' when we, as the audience know that this is not the case, he displays signs of jealousy that she is able to get the inmates to open up to her when he is not, and this further underlines the ways in which he feels threatened and undermined by her.

Healey's status as a creep and a bigot is further underscored in a later episode of the same season, when he summons Piper to his office to counsel her and offers the following monologue:

We do not choose roommates around here. This type of hanky-panky is against prison regulations. I warned you about this when you first came in. I don't know what you're talking about. Warren just informed me that you'd like to be bunked together... This is not gonna fly around here. Not on my watch. Lesbian request denied!

Sam Healey, *Lesbian Request Denied* (Kohen, 2013c)

In this monologue, Healey's old-fashioned homophobia is given texture by his use of the outdated term 'hanky-panky', a technique which is also deployed when he refers, as above, to Birdie's creative writing class as a 'festering incubator of deviance'. As well as highlighting the preposterousness of what he is saying for comedic effect, his archaic lexicon also shows that Healey, like many of the other men on the show, struggles to articulate on the topic of sex and his bigotry is used to signal that he is one of the bad guys.

In the episode *F*cksgiving*, he further scolds Chapman after catching her dancing suggestively with Vause. The inmates are celebrating Jefferson's upcoming release from Litchfield and are twerking to Kelis' iconic song *Milkshake* (Kelis, 2003). In addition to the song's extended innuendo, it literally 'brings the boys to the yard' as Healey bursts in screaming 'you think it's appropriate to violate your fellow inmate... that looked like attempted rape to me, take her to SHU' (Kohen, 2013a). Healey is reduced to using legal terminology such as 'violate' and 'attempted rape' to express his bigoted outrage at their consensual Sapphic performance. This has the dual effect of not only further revealing his prudish/ old-fashioned sensibilities, but also illustrating that the women's actions are literally unspeakable to him. Interestingly, this theme

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is further underscored by the episode's title *F*ksgiving*, in which the obscenity is censored by an asterisk, which might be a requirement of content on the Netflix platform but also reflects the notion of certain words being un-sayable. The obscenity in question, as well as marking the sense in which the inmates do not *give* a 'fuck' can also be read as relating to the act of sex (fucking), which Healey is too prudish to speak out loud.

Importantly, the use of dialogue uttered by or to men on screen is not the only kind which is utilised in the framing of male sexuality. We can also make deductions from the way women on the show speak to each other about male sexuality, as we can see from the below conversation between the 'Golden Girls' in the prison:

Berlin: *I've always been more of a girth gal, myself. Don't like them long jobbies that poke your cervix.*

Mendoza: *Amen to that.*

DeMarco: *Ain't nothin' like a Fat Albert.*

Jones: *Those fatties stretch you out. I like to stay tight.*

DeMarco: *Ain't yoga good for that?*

Jones: *No, but it does make the dirty wheelbarrow position a lot easier.*

Berlin: *How 'bout you, Norma? What's the dirtiest thing you've ever done?*

[Norma, who is non-verbal, writes something down]

Mendoza: *Damn! I didn't know you ladies got down like that.*

Berlin: *They didn't call it the sexual revolution for nothin'. Come on, squirt. What you got?*

Mendoza: *There was this one guy I dated. He had a foot thing.*

Berlin: *Like high heels and all of that?*

Mendoza: *No. Foot jobs. Like hand jobs, but with your feet. Whoa...Imagine picking up a hot dog - with your toes, and then massaging it with your arches. It gave me calves like a speed skater!*

Full Bush, Half Snickers (Kohen, 2017b)

Exchanges like this are commonplace in *OITNB*. Remarkable for their crudity and frankness, the way in which women talk to other women about sex and bodies in the show is particularly important when trying to ascertain the feminist potentialities of the show and for examining the cultural politics of sex encapsulated.

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The above exchange is between the older members of the prison, the 'Golden Girls', as they sit around, sharing what appears to be a marijuana joint during the Litchfield riot. As mentioned before, *OITNB* fails to be truly transformative in relation to age and sexuality in that it never depicts the older characters having sex or being naked. However, their inclusion in the show's many conversations about sex does at least go some way to push the boundaries on normative cultural assumptions by providing an alternative narrative in which older women, far from being pruders or 'past it', enjoy, discuss, and even revel in sexual discourse. Comedy is of course created by the unexpected way in which these women discuss the 'wheelbarrow' position and foot fetishes, but the tone is very much one of laughing *with* them and at the *expense of* men, and their creepy sexualities and 'hot-dog' genitalia.

The Golden Girls conversation, in addition to bringing comic relief to the tense prison riot scenes, is also telling about how men are viewed by the women characters on the show. The hot-dog gag is a cheap laugh, but also represents a subversive use of some of the techniques which have historically been used to demean women. That a piece of cheap meat is used as a metaphor for a penis represents a literal objectification of the male anatomy – the penis is being viewed as, and substituted for, an inanimate object. That Mendoza comments on how the footplay improved her calf muscles hints at her using of his body for her own purposes. Further to this, Mendoza's recollection of this sex act cuts the rest of the man's body, and indeed the man himself, out of the equation entirely, which represents a linguistic equivalency to historic images of women where only the breasts or behind are shown (as described in Chapter Two **Fig 2**, The Reebok ads). This reclamation of patriarchal tools functions to both objectify and denigrate male sexuality in a manner that is in keeping with the hitherto discussion on the role of feminism and the framing of masculinity in the show.

Furthermore, my first reading of the Golden Girls scene made me question what the role of sexual pleasure was for the women in Litchfield. As male sex is framed as puerile, disgusting or dangerous, the above dialogue seemed notable for its narrative absence of women's pleasure, especially when contrasted with the sensual eroticism I was viewing in *Sense8*. However, as I began to dissect this scene more carefully, I realised that female sexual pleasure *is* present in it, it is just presented more crudely and less delicately. Berlin's expressed preference for 'girth' and Jones' for 'tightness' *are* frank expressions of their sexual desires and sexuality; it is just easy to miss them because of a socially constructed tendency to think of feminine sexuality as softer and more tactile. We must also acknowledge the factor of social class in the discursive forming of understanding in that the cruder vernacular used by the Golden Girls which is at odds with 'classier' depictions of women's sexual pleasure found in advertising, thus render it more difficult for us to 'see' the pleasure narrative in front of us.

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In addition to her use of dialogue to denote differing kinds of masculinity on the show, Kohen also employs several other techniques. The general disgustingness of men and their sexualities is often alluded to through visual pastiche and suggestive editing. In episode 3 of season 1, Pornstache is shown whispering to Bennett about receiving oral sex from inmates, a double entendre is created as the audio from the next scene starts a fraction ahead of the shot changing, and we hear the word 'swallow', which acts as a crude non-sequitur in the Pornstache scene, and as a routine part of the dialogue in the next scene when the inmates are being given their medications. In the same episode, a white towel that Larry grabs after he has masturbated becomes, via editing and camera movement, the towel that Piper picks up as she steps out of the prison shower. The subtle suggestion that she is wrapping her hair in the towel he has just ejaculated into becomes a further reminder about the grossness of men.

Though there are many ways in which the framing of male sexuality in *OITNB* can be viewed as in keeping with an intersectional, fourth-wave feminist ontology, there are nonetheless two areas in which conceptualisations of male sexuality as disgusting are at times problematic: when deployed in relation to Black and butch sexualities.

In season 2, episode 1, Piper is transferred to a prison in Chicago and is sat near to a Black male convict on the plane. Right from the start, he is racialised and painted as predatory, saying to her,

I got a seat for you, mommy. Got it all warmed up for you. You a bad girl, huh? You think the suburbs over there can pop her puss like a sister? Black men get all snow blind. Don't know how good they got it with a cinnamon queen that knows how to handle her business. I got plenty for you too, boo.

Thirsty Bird (Kohen, 2014b)

Later on, she encounters the same man at the new prison and needs him to run an errand for her. She offers him a handjob but he wants a pair of her underwear. Implicit in this exchange is that his sexuality is not just, as with the white men, gross or predatory, but deviant too, and Nair explains why this distinction is consequential when contextualising his position as a Black man in a racist visual economy:

But of course, the show could never show its central white female prisoner actually blowing or being fucked by a black man, whose sexual proclivity is then mocked when Piper says "They hire hit men with underwear fetishes?" So first he's caricatured, bringing to life the fear that undergirds this country's history of lynching black men: that one might sexually assault a white woman. And then, he's mocked for his predilection.

(Nair, 2014)

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The problem here arises for two key reasons. Firstly, in painting the sexuality of the nameless Black inmate with the same strokes as the white men on the show, *OITNB* fails to recognise that identical tropes when performed by different bodies will create differing discursive meanings because of the differing cultural, political and social contexts within which they exist. When a Black character is framed as predatory, the imagery is intrinsically linked to and enmeshed in, as Nair points out, a long history of racism which has treated the Black male as particularly deviant and predacious, *especially* when positioned in relation to the bodies and sexualities of white women. Secondly, and moreover, even if it were possible to read these images without the weight of context, and as the show applies the same tropes to the inmate as to the white men, it also applies additional layers of meaning by alluding to the deviance of his underwear fetish, and as a result conceptualises him not simply as equally repulsive and dangerous as the white men, but more so.

It is not just the issue of Black masculinity which is handled poorly by the show, and shoved under the same umbrella as the other masculinities to disastrous effect, but 'butch' too.

A historically important and subversive identity, butch is most notably embodied in Carrie (Big Boo) Black. Fat, tattooed (with the word 'BUTCH', obviously) and sporting cropped Black hair Boo can be read as either a lazy stereotype or as a celebration of butch identity. Personally, I think she falls into the latter for the most part. There are some fantastic scenes of a dapper-looking Boo courting Linda Fergusson, who has got caught up in the Litchfield riots of season 5 (and I will explore the potentiality that she represents in Chapter Seven), but in the treatment of her sexuality there are causes for concern.

As mentioned before, a notable failure of the show is that, although it evokes the sexualities of a diverse cast of women, it only ever displays the bodies and sex of skinny white ones, and this is true in the case of Boo. Occasionally, she is seen fully clothed, pleasuring a more beauty-standard compliant body, but her own is never shown naked or enjoying sex.

Moreover, when Boo's sexuality *is* alluded to in the dialogue of the show, it is usually as a crude joke at her expense. For example in season 3, episode 10, when discovering Flaca has joined Chapman's dirty panty business, Boo, in mock prayer exclaims 'Dear Chapman, thank you, thank you for the wonderful gift of new jerk-off material that you have bestowed upon me' (Kohen, 2015a). Boo, like the man-child, uses the crass and juvenile term 'jerk-off' to imply that she will be masturbating over the image of Flaca in her underwear. In season 2, episode 4, Boo is seen rubbing Piper's favourite blanket on her crotch and then sniffing it, which mirrors the frequent disgust-inducing toilet humour gags usually made about the men on the show. It can be argued that in both of these cases, it is not actually Boo who is the butt of the joke, but an imagined person who might find her sexuality disgusting, but I would find this line of

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reasoning more convincing if, like the thin, femme women in the series, her sexuality was treated with greater reverence elsewhere in the show. The fact that it isn't seems to suggest that, although she is a woman with a masculine identity, her sexuality is simply lumped together with that of the men on the show and as a result, the potential to truly celebrate the butch subversion of gender normativity in her character is not fully realised; she comes to rest somewhere between the banality of the man-child and the revulsion of the creep, which to me at least feels like a missed opportunity, but one which is useful for further contextualising the cultural politics of sex present in the show.

What is clear from these examples of creepy male sexuality in *OITNB* is the extent to which men are regarded as possessing greater insecurity in their sexualities than the women. Whilst Cal and Larry must remain firmly 'bros', Healey's seething sexual repression marks him out as sexually frustrated and potentially even castrated, in a way that none of the women characters are. Even Tiffany Doggett, who begins the show as a homophobic religious zealot, is revealed to have a complex and traumatic sexual history, but not one founded in repression. The 'creep' can exist as both 'good guy at heart' (Caputo) and bad guy (Pornstache, Healy), but there is a sense (from the depictions discussed) that his toxicity, though often sad and repugnant or rooted in extreme bigotry, poses less of a threat (at least physically) than that of predatory male sexuality, to which I now turn my attention.

Trope 3: The Dangerous Predator

That's a weird subtlety of the show [OITNB], that they normalize sexual violence in a way that doesn't dismiss it, but ultimately comments on how we culturally normalize sexual violence.

(Henderson cited in Frankel, 2015, p.71)

If Cal and Larry are 'Jimmys' – hapless good-guys, dopey, but not disgusting or predatory and Healey, Pornstache and Caputo occupy the creepy middle ground encompassing masculinities ranging from mildly disgusting to outright toxic, then Litchfield's most dangerous masculinity, that of the predator, is most clearly typified in the character of prison officer Charlie Coates. This is not to say that there are no other predatory male characters in the show. As discussed earlier, Bennett commits the statutory rape of Daya - that their relationship is played as a romance is problematic, though perhaps deliberately discomforting. Officer Desi Piscatella is a sadist who clearly derives gratification (though not specifically characterised as sexual) from his physical torture of Red and the other inmates, but it was the storyline surrounding Coates' courtship and eventual rape of Tiffany Doggett that was explored in the greatest narrative depth on the show. It also contained, for me, the most difficult and heart-wrenching scenes in the series to date. It is therefore because of the narrative depth and

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emotional resonance of the storyline that it will provide the main lens for my exploration of the darkest form of male sexuality in my analysis – the dangerous sexual predator.

A Lifetime Of Violence: The Repeated Rapes Of Tiffany Doggett

Tiffany Doggett has been a core member of the ensemble throughout the entirety of *OITNB*. Though introduced to us in season one as a zealous, homophobic redneck addicted to Methamphetamine, her character is arguably the one which undergoes the greatest transformation and evolution during her time in Litchfield and on our screens. By season three, she has become a gentler soul, more likable, even striking up a touching and important friendship with the prison's most notable lesbian, Big Boo. Her migration from villain to protagonist is crucial narratively speaking, because it is essential that she become an empathetic subject as the storyline involving her violent sexual past and present is revealed.

Charlie Coates makes his first appearance in episode six of season three. A newly recruited guard at the prison, Coates immediately hits it off with Doggett. They appear to share a similar sense of humour and are shown in episode eight bonding over their shared love of doughnuts and ice cream. Initially he is painted as another man-child, sweet enough but not overly bright; when out in the van on prison errands together, Doggett is the one who explains to him that he is not supposed to leave her alone, unattended in the van. The relationship, however, quickly turns sinister when, at the end of episode nine, their flirting is escalated during a forbidden trip to the duck pond. Doggett points out a duck she thinks looks like Coates, and he jokes that she must be the brown duck who is swimming around in circles. The exchange becomes unsettling, however:

Doggett: *I'm not a stupid brown duck. I'm a hot green duck.*

Coates: *The green ducks are males, dummy. You wanna be a man duck? It's a man's world. Name like Doggett, maybe you're not a duck. You're a dog.*

Doggett: *Well, I can swim good. I can fetch even better.*

Coates: *Oh, yeah? Let's see about that. Fetch!* [he throws a piece of bread] *Fetch, Doggett, fetch.* [she runs after it playfully] *Good girl. Good Doggett. Fetch with your mouth this time. Go on. What's the matter, girl?*

Doggett: *It's all wet here and muddy.*

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Coates: *Sorry, I only understand dog talk.*

Doggett: *You're a dog playing fetch with a dog? That doesn't make any sense!*

Coates: *I said, "Fetch," inmate! Good girl. Good Doggett. It's okay. There's no one around.*

Where My Dreidel At? (Whedon, 2002)

In a matter of moments, Coates is shifted from the safe, man-child box to the more worrying creep category. His bizarre dehumanisation of Doggett is made all the more disturbing by the fact that he refers to her as 'inmate', underscoring the power imbalance inherent in their prisoner-guard relationship. Further still, he states that there is nobody else around, on the surface to re-assure Doggett that nobody will see her messing around and being silly, but there is a sinister subtext to his (and our) realisation that they are alone and out of view (and accountability).

Having moved from man-child to creep in episode nine, the character of Coates is firmly placed in the category of predator, when at the end of episode ten, he drags Doggett into the prison van and rapes her.

There has been a problematic, historic trend in on-screen rape narratives whereby sexually violent acts are utilised either entirely or predominantly as plot devices for male characters. Spike's attempted rape of Buffy Summers in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 2002) functioned for the sole purpose of facilitating his narrative of redemption, and more recent productions such as *Game of Thrones* have also come under fire from feminist cultural critics for using sexual violence as pivot points for male character development— so much so, that in 2015, the feminist media website *The Mary Sue* announced that it would no longer be promoting, re-capping or reviewing the show (Pantozzi, 2015).

It is true to say that we do learn more about Coates through his rape of Doggett, and, as I have suggested above, we bear witness as his sexuality is transmuted through each of the progressively darkening masculine tropes. However, what makes this narrative noteworthy for my discussion on the cultural politics of sex is that it is Doggett's narrative that is centralised here, and that in doing so, *OITNB* offers a marked departure from the on-screen rape narratives which preceded it. Moreover, in centralising the survivor and her brutal, lived experiences, the episode creates a space for a broader discussion on the normalisation of sexual violence and proliferation of rape culture, which fits comfortably within the feminist ontology of the show and the cultural #MeToo moment:

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The episode in question, *A Tittin' and a Hairin'*, opens with the previously discussed scene in which a young Doggett comes on her period for the first time, and is given the disparaging advice by her mother

Now that you're a-tittin' and a-hairin', boys are gonna see you different, and pretty soon, they're gonna do you different. Best thing is to go on and let 'em do their business, baby. If you're real lucky, most of 'em be quick, like your daddy. It's like a bee sting, in and out, over before you knew it was happening.

A Tittin' and a Hairin' (Kohen, 2015a)

Her mother's words sadly set the tone for the rest of the episode in which Doggett's backstory is explored via a number of flashbacks, starting when the extension of the bee-sting metaphor is made literal.

Flashback 1

At a party, a teenage Tiffany is wearing pig tails and short skirt, which a boy (Abe) comments on. He then tries to instigate sex with her, asking 'Are you down?', to which she replies, 'I told you I only accept Visa, MasterCard or Mountain Dew!'. The next shot shows Abe approaching her later on at the party with a pack of Mountain Dew soft drinks in his hand before the scene cuts to them in an abandoned building somewhere near the party having sex. Abe is having sex with Tiffany from behind and they are viewed through a stable door, she looks bored. Suddenly, she screams, saying that she has been stung or bitten by something. The camera pans out to him with his trousers down and her pushing him away to tend to her sting.

Abe: I was almost there, Tiff.

Doggett: Oh, fuck you and your blue balls.

Abe: You gonna leave me unfinished?

[He spits on his hand and reaches down to finish himself off]

A Tittin' and a Hairin' (Kohen, 2015a)

Although in this flashback, Doggett is (nominally) consenting, we are given several clear messages about her formative sexual experiences. Though her age during the flashback is not given, her pigtails and adolescent outfit are indicators that she is not old, perhaps fourteen or fifteen. The implication that she is willing to perform sex in exchange for soda tells us that she has already learnt to see sex as a commodity. It is worth a pause here to say that what is telling about this scene is not that she is essentially selling sex, it is that her doing so is clearly not from a conscious position of empowerment but as something that is going to happen to her anyway, so she might as well try and profit in some way from it – the bored expression on

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her face during the sex tells us that she is deriving no sexual gratification here and the exchange of Mountain Dew tells us that this is not a particularly fiscally motivated transaction either.

Abe displays the same sense of sexual entitlement that we have seen elsewhere by chastising her for not finishing the job. He pays no attention to her distress and pain at the bee sting, which tells us loud and clear that Doggett has not come to expect much from the men she has sex with.

Flashback 2

Later at the same party, Doggett is approached by another guy (Nathan), who is carrying a first aid kit and offers it to her for her sting. She eyes him quizzically, asking if he is 'a faggot or something?' As they chat, and he explains that he is new in town, Nathan asks her out on a date to the movies, to which she asks, 'what do I gotta do?'. Both of her comments again delineate her expectation that kindness from men should be treated with suspicion (on the assumption that they are either gay, and thus not sexually interested, or expecting something in return).

Flashback 3

The scene opens on a 1990s style TV set showing pornography. Doggett is giggling at the noises the woman on screen is making and is bemused, asking 'why she smiling?', suggesting that it has never occurred to her that sex could be enjoyable for a woman. She and Nathan are laid on a bed together, fully clothed and relaxed, suggesting that some time has passed since flashback 2, and that they are perhaps now dating.

Doggett then explains that she is 'grossed out' by the man performing oral sex on the woman in the porno. Nathan begins undressing her, she is not wearing a bra and she goes to remove her underwear, but he tells her not to. He tells her she looks beautiful and kisses her. He puts his hand between her legs, and she says she is unsure if she likes it and thinks he's trying some kinky 'porn shit'. He explains he's just 'taking care' of her and she begins to show her enjoyment squealing 'who are you, you magical man!', implying again that nobody has ever considered her pleasure before.

Flashback 4

Nathan and Doggett are sat on a porch. Inside the house, another party is underway. Nathan's family are leaving town and he has come to say goodbye to Doggett. She begs him to take her with him. They kiss and she says she loves him, he says it back and promises that he's coming back for her.

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Doggett reluctantly goes into the house to join the party and is seen in the bathroom grabbing a bottle of beer from the ice-filled bath. Abe approaches her and informs her that he has some more soda for her. She explains 'I don't do that anymore.' He tells her that 'technically' he was being nice in bringing the soda for her, because she still 'owes' him. He closes the bathroom door and she tries to leave. He grabs her, overriding her attempts to resist him. As he begins to rape her, the camera pans to her face, no longer fighting or angry, not even crying, simply resigned.

Back In Litchfield, Present Timeline

Coates is angry at Doggett, blaming her for the fact that he has been put on probation. She touches him on the shoulder, and he grabs her, forcing her into the back of the van saying:

What do you want from me? What? This? Is this what you want from me? This? This is what you're asking for? This is what you're begging for, isn't it? You just lay there and keep still and keep quiet. You keep quiet. This is what you wanted, isn't it? Isn't it? This is what you asked for, isn't it, Doggett? This is what you wanted, huh? This is what you asked for. Doggett, Doggett, Doggett. Oh, Doggett, Doggett. I love you, Doggett. I love you, Doggett. Doggett.

A Tittin' and a Hairin (Kohen, 2015a)

She is heard saying 'no' on three separate occasions. It doesn't matter, for her, the word is unspeakable and the withholding of consent impossible. The shot remains on her face as she is pushed on her stomach onto the seat of the van and raped. She looks sad, resigned, mirroring exactly her expression during the rape in flashback 4 (this 'mirroring' technique is also used subtly in that both Abe and Coates are played by men of similar slender builds, who are approximately the same amount taller than Taryn Manning who plays Doggett). A single tear runs down her face. The music plays — *Good Old Mountain Dew* by the Womenfolk (The Womenfolk, Lunsford and Wiseman, 1964) as the episode credits roll.

There are several interesting and poignant things going on in this scene and in the narrative in which it is contextualised. Perhaps, most notably, is the utterly disturbing sense of inevitability that the formerly budding romance with Coates would invariably end up no different from other violent and exploitative relationships she has had in the past. The earlier episodes see a sense of tentative hope in Doggett as she and Coates bond over seemingly innocent commonalities. Doggett is heard employing the language of romance when she describes Coates to her friend Big Boo 'the cute one with the scraggly goatee...I really like him and it's not just because of all the donuts [he brings me], we talk about things and stuff. Deep shit' (Kohen, 2015a).

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However, as an audience, we view the relationship with more suspicion. As discussed elsewhere, we are aware of the fact that even if the relationship had not turned violent, the inherent power imbalance between inmate and guard nullifies the possibility of Doggett's consent. However, as the relationship at first becomes creepy and then ultimately brutal, we are reminded that the issue of consent between inmate and guard is a moot point for Doggett, because she is going to be assaulted anyway. The exact mirroring of her facial expressions and resignations during both of the rapes underscores the inevitability, though her solitary tear in the Coates rape hints at the fading hope within her that this time, it would be different. Her mother's words at the start of the episode about how, now she is coming of age, men are going to 'do her different', become prophetic as we see how her words, which initially seemed deeply disparaging and pessimistic, come to represent sage wisdom as their depressing truth is revealed.

The final scene with Coates would be horrifying in any narrative, but its location within the broader context of sexual violence which has been explored in the preceding flashbacks serves to add a level of devastation and darkness that cannot be underestimated. The unexpected cut to the up-beat country music at the end creates a dark irony. That the song references 'Mountain Dew' is of course a nod back to Doggett's past experiences with Abe and the soda, and a reminder that for her, nothing has really changed. Moreover, the juxtaposing of her single tear with the happy tone of the song creates a poignant irony, almost suggesting that the situation would be laughable were it not so damn horrific.

The employment of flashbacks and irony here do more than just facilitate the deeper exploration of Doggett's character; they make an important statement about the proliferation and normalisation of sexual violence, not just in Doggett's life, but in the lives of women generally. As Henderson notes 'That's a weird subtlety of the show, that they normalize sexual violence in a way that doesn't dismiss it, but ultimately comments on how we culturally normalize sexual violence' (Henderson cited in (Frankel, 2015, p.71)). The Doggett storyline subverts cultural norms on sexual violence in a number of ways. As I mentioned earlier, that it is *her* narrative which is centralised and not his is an important departure from historic canon, but there are other techniques employed towards this end too. For instance, the relatively un-graphic depictions of the rapes. In a televisual era that is saturated with explicit imagery around sex, violence and sexual violence, the rape scenes in *OITNB* initially appear quite tame in that there is almost no on-screen nudity, the violence is forceful but not particularly vicious (she is not beaten and there is no blood) and no weapons are used. As well as providing a stark contrast with consensual sex-scenes on the show, which are often quite explicit, this lack of gratuitousness ensures that there is no way in which the scenes can be read as titillating and also serves to make the scenes *more* shocking as our attention is focussed on her emotions

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and not her flesh. That the show opts to strip away many of the tropes and cultural signifiers of normative rape narratives allows us to view the bare bones of what is happening to Doggett whilst also (in their absence) highlighting the ways in which such tropes have oftentimes acted to normalise sexual violence on screen. The narrative is able to explore the extent to which sexual violence has been normalised for Doggett, without falling into the trap of perpetuating and normalising certain cultural tropes about sexual violence itself.

In presenting us with a culturally and visually un-cluttered depiction of the rapes, *OITNB* creates space for the audience to see what is *really* going on for Doggett. We can see how, contrary to typical rape myths about the stranger-rapist, Doggett's lived experience (like that of the 87% of rape survivors whose rapists were known to them (Office of National Statistics, 2017, p.15)) is one of violence by known perpetrators. That there is no Hollywood glamour or gratuitousness here calls attention to the fact that Doggett's story is not particularly unusual. The pacing of the episode also plays a role here. Though the history of sexual violence and coercion as experienced by Doggett is present throughout the episode, the two rapes themselves (in flashback and present day) both occur at the very end of the episode within about three minutes (running time) of each other. As a viewer, one is hit by the harrowing apexes of her violent narrative in quick succession, meaning that, for us, as for Doggett, there is little time to process the first rape before the second begins to unfold. We are shown that for Tiffany, sexual violence has been 'one thing after another'; normal, inevitable, inescapable.

In addition to dispelling the parable of the stranger-rapist, the flashbacks in this episode call out a number of other rape myths, namely that once consent has been given, it cannot be revoked. There are two clear examples of this in Doggett's interactions with Abe. Firstly, in the scene with the bee-sting, Abe's frustration that Doggett withdraws consent before he has climaxed is palpable; it is further underscored by his assertion later on that she 'owes' him; having consented (albeit unenthusiastically) to sex with him, Abe believes that she no longer has the right to change her mind. The repercussions of this fallacy of thought are seen frequently in a culture which asserts that consent only need be obtained once, and not affirmed continuously. This fallacy has been demonstrated in a number of recent high-profile rape cases, such as those of Amy Guy and Aaliyah Palmer in North Carolina, who have sought to challenge the state's 1979 *Sate vs Way* assertion that 'if the actual penetration is accomplished with the woman's consent, the accused is not guilty of rape' (Supreme Court of North Carolina, 1979), and perhaps even more worryingly, the third of men who felt a woman could not change her mind after sex had stared in a 2018 YouGov poll (YouGov, 2018). *OITNB* challenges this myth by creating in Abe an unpleasant and ultimately dangerous symbol of the kind of man who might hold such a view.

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The second fallacy around consent which is challenged is the notion that, as Doggett has treated sex with Abe as transactional in the past (she has agreed to intercourse in exchange for Mountain Dew), she has somehow forfeited her right to say no in the future. This is perfectly underscored when we see her telling Abe 'I don't do that no more', only to be raped anyway. Once more, we do not have to look far to find examples of how this myth has had dangerous consequences for women in the real world, particularly sex workers who have been either assumed by the law as consenting to any and all acts by a paying customer, or who have sought to withdraw their consent after intercourse when the agreed payment has not been made (see coverage around the so-called 'New-Zealand model' McGowan and Knaus, 2018; McClure, 2017).

Consent as a theme is actually alluded to earlier on in the episode by Coates himself, who approaches Doggett to apologise for things getting 'weird' at the duck pond. He says

I'm really sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable or did anything you didn't wanna do but maybe you also did want to? 'Cause I could be misinterpreting. Women are difficult to read sometimes. I mean, not, like, for everyone. That's not a generalization. I'm a feminist. I just meant for me, specifically.

A Tittin' and a Hairin (Kohen, 2015a)

Like many a performatively 'woke' man before him, Coates employs and even explicitly names the language of feminism and consent, but demonstrates his complete lack of understanding by implying that it is in some way *Doggett's* fault that he has acted badly. Moreover, his comment that 'women are difficult to read sometimes' displays his perpetuation of the myth that consent is difficult to understand. That he tries to back-track his implication that women are at fault by stuttering that it is him specifically who struggles with this, paints him as someone who is haplessly trying to navigate a politics that he fundamentally doesn't understand.

We can see evidence of his 'messed up' thinking around consent taken to its logical and dangerous conclusion in the rape scene itself too. The words he utters, 'What do you want from me? What? This? Is this what you want from me? This? This is what you're asking for? This is what you're begging for, isn't it?' (Kohen, 2015a), are spoken for his benefit alone. Their purpose is two-fold. Firstly, there is a part of him who needs to believe that Doggett is *really* consenting, despite her utterances to the contrary. In order for him to achieve sexual satisfaction from the rape, he needs to position himself (in his own eyes) as something *other* than a rapist. The second function is to depict for the audience the brutal realities of the rape myth that women secretly want sex even when they do not verbally consent to it. The scene is not ambiguous. As viewers, we *know* what is happening and our knowing is evidence of the fallacy of such a myth.

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Interestingly, we are also shown how Coates and Doggett exist in a system (patriarchy/ prison industrial complex) in which the ‘rules’ of consent are applied differently to them on the basis of gender. As we have seen, the option to refuse consent is not, and has never been, a meaningful option for Doggett, but when she approaches him earlier on in the episode and attempts to place a comforting hand on his arm, his uttered response ‘don’t touch me’ is heeded and she withdraws. Once more, the showing of *her* experience of his predatory masculinity offers us a fictional rendering of a #MeToo narrative, and the fourth-wave feminist politics which have emerged from such narratives.

As if to further emphasise the conversation about consent which is present in this episode, it also provides an illustration of consent working in practice. In a scene elsewhere in the prison, Chapman is seen talking to her new love-interest Stella about her relationship with Vause. Chapman explains that she puts up with Vause’s attitude because they have been through a lot together, to which Stella replies ‘A person shouldn’t do something out of obligation. If you’re gonna do it, do it ‘cause you want it’ (Kohen, 2015a), Piper leans in and they kiss. Though the conversation is not about sexual consent per se, and has nothing to do with Coates and Doggett, it occurs just a few minutes before the rape scenes and acts to draw a clear line in the sand about how sex and relationships *should* be, and provides additional contrast to what happens next. There is a thematic continuation throughout the episode. When Vause complains to the guards that another inmate (Laurie) is stalking her, she is not taken seriously, and we see a mirroring of Doggett’s own silencing.

Toast Can’t Ever Be Bread Again — The Aftermath

It is apparent then that Doggett’s rape narrative is told with complexity, context and nuance, and initially, this is an approach that is followed through in the ensuing episodes. Notably, in episode eleven (season 3), Boo goes to visit her friend Doggett, who is lying down on her bunk, listless and withdrawn. Doggett explains that she has a stomach-ache and doesn’t feel like talking about snack foods, but the realisation soon dawns on us that she is in denial about what has happened with Coates as she tells Boo that she is getting ‘real presents’ (as opposed to contraband confectionary) from him now – in the form of a bracelet, which she proudly shows Boo. Boo examines the bracelet, teasing that it is ‘some cheap, ninety-nine-cent-bin shit’ that is already turning Doggett’s wrists green, but as she pulls Doggett’s hand towards her, she realises that her wrist is not discoloured by the cheap bracelet but by bruising.

Boo: *What the fuck? - What happened?*

Doggett: *Nothing. You’re just jealous ‘cause it’s gold-plated with real gold.*

Boo: *Did he hurt you?*

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Doggett: *No! You know, sometimes when men get around boobies, they don't know how to act. Okay? It's called hormones and stuff. But I don't know if you know about that 'cause you're a muff muncher.*

Boo: *Did he force you?*

Doggett: *Well, I'm not gonna lie. I mean, I could've used a bit of a warm-up. Doesn't feel really good when you're not ready.*

Boo: *You know there's a word for that, right? No.*

Doggett: *Nah, it's not his fault. I was the one. I was flirting too much, I was smiling, and I was really confusing.*

Boo: *Take that shit off your wrist right now.*

Doggett: *He made a special trip to the mall for me. It's not his fault! Fuck.*

We Can Be Heroes (Kohen, 2015c)

The exchange encapsulates the extent to which Doggett's lived experiences of sexual violence have led to her internalisation of the rape myths previously discussed. What is not clear is whether she knows deep down that what Coates did is wrong but is trying to save face for herself and in front of Boo, or whether she really does think that this is just how men are.

For me, the most notable moment in this episode is Boo's assertion that 'there is a word for that'. There has been a problematic historic tendency in on-screen rape narratives not to name sexual assaults and rapes but to utter euphemisms or talk about men 'going too far' or 'coming on too strong'. On the surface, the fact that Boo doesn't say the word 'rape' might be construed as a continuation of this trend, but what is really happening is that she evokes the word without actually uttering it, forcing Doggett to think it, even if she cannot say it and drawing attention to the running theme of unspeakable acts for Doggett.

Later on in the episode, it becomes apparent, however, that Doggett still isn't 'getting it', and that Boo's initially tender attempt to get her friend to recognise what has happened has been unsuccessful. Later in the episode she adopts a more 'tough love' approach as seen in the uncomfortable exchange below.

[Boo approaches Doggett and dumps a pile of confectionary down on the prison bunk bed next to her.]

Boo: *There you go.*

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Doggett: *What's all that for?*

Boo: *Well, I, uh I want you to go down on me.*

Doggett: *What? Hell, no. That's disgusting.*

Boo: *Yeah, but I'm feeling horny, so I'm buying you. Look, there's some M&Ms in there. So let's go. Get me off.*

Doggett: *That's not funny.*

Boo: *I'm not joking. You're for sale, so I'm purchasing your services. Just, you know, check out, go to your happy place. I'll be quick.*

Doggett: *Stop that.*

Boo: *And maybe I'll sodomize you while I'm at it. You know, stick a hairbrush up your ass. Hold you down, pull your hair, maybe bite your neck. Wouldn't that be fun? You might like that. Why don't you try it, huh? Why don't you try that? Just let me have my fucking way with you. Hey, I could tie you up. We could maybe use your fucking T-shirt as a gag, huh? Would you stop it? I'm gonna do whatever I fucking want to you, and you're gonna lie down and you're gonna take it, because that's the way this works, isn't it? Isn't that it?*

Doggett: *Stop that. Stop it. I wanted to stop. I wanted to stop so bad. I wanted him to stop.*

Boo: *Good. 'Cause we're gonna get that motherfucker.*

We Can Be Heroes (Kohen, 2015c)

It's a disquieting exchange to watch. The explicitness of Boo's pretend proposition (especially when compared to her earlier omission of the word 'rape') feels at once utterly cruel and distressingly necessary. Boo has realised that she needs to shock Doggett into accepting what has happened to her. It is fair to say that harassing a rape survivor in this manner does not feel like a typically feminist approach, but it is clear from the fact that Doggett eventually is able to speak about what has happened to her that Boo's method has 'snapped' her out of her denial. Perhaps what is most important about the aftermath scenes here is that they offer an alternative, and thus more subversive narrative on survivorhood. Doggett's experience of her rape(s) does not match what we are used to seeing from survivors on screen. In depicting the aftermath in this way, *OITNB* is showing us that, much like grief, there is no such thing as the 'right' way to deal with something like this; that different people will react differently to sexual violence and that sexual violence stories are many and varied.

It is fair to say that up until this point, *OITNB* treats the Doggett storyline in a way which is in keeping with its feminist sensibilities. It offers a real exploration and critique of prominent rape

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myths whilst centralising *her* in a narrative, which highlights the pervasive nature of sexual violence without re-creating it in the process. However, by the end of season four, a marked departure has commenced.

Big Boo provides continuity with the audience's disgust at Coates. As he is sent to guard Poussey Washington's dead body until the coroner arrives, Boo is heard snidely remarking 'how perfect for you, and inmate you can totally control' (Kohen, 2016). This comment has the dual function of telling Coates that she knows what he did and has his card marked, and reminding us as the viewers that, despite the shift in the emphasis of the drama following Washington's death this season, Coates' deeds have not been forgotten; as the episode title underscores 'Toast Can't Ever Be Bread Again.'

Despite this, however, the episode marks something of a turning point in Coates' and Doggett's relationship, and the show begins to paint Coates in a decidedly more complex light as this exchange in the prison kitchen demonstrates.

Coates: *I'm gonna quit my job. - You're not saying nothing.*

Doggett: *Yeah, 'cause I don't want you to go.*

Coates: *No?*

Doggett: *Uh No. I mean, I mean, I want you to do what's right for you, and you should always do what's right for you, but now that we're cool I mean I think we're cool, right? Toast can't never be bread again. But I like talking to you.*

Coates: *But I hate being here. It's awful.*

[Doggett kisses him, he kisses back but then breaks the kiss and moves away, clearly aroused]

Coates: *You can't do that. It's not safe. It'll get me all... I might... You can't do that... You know I'm attracted to you.*

Doggett: *No, I don't.*

Coates: *You don't?*

Doggett: *No.*

Coates: *Are you still scared of me?*

[Coates leans in close, towering over her she is leaning away and then gets up, pushing his arm out of the way]

Doggett: *A little.*

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Coates: *Yeah? You know you should be. 'Cause it's taking everything I got not to throw you down and fuck you right now. But I don't want to be what I was to you and I don't want to ruin where we are now.*

Doggett: *Me either.*

Coates: *I might have to quit.*

Doggett: *Okay. Well think on that, and I'm gonna think on that, too. And, um I won't tell Boo that you had your boner on my leg.*

Coates: *I appreciate that.*

Toast Can't Ever Be Bead Again (Kohen, 2016)

The above scene significantly muddies the water in this narrative. Given the events in *A Tittin' and A Hairin'*, the notion of Doggett and Coates resuming a romantic relationship is utterly horrifying and I confess to screaming internally at my laptop the first time I watched *Toast*: 'Nooo Doggett, how could you?!'. That Coates has somehow gained a degree of self-awareness regarding his rape of Doggett appears positioned to act as narratively redemptive. He is presented as remorseful for his actions and genuinely frightened of hurting her again. I feared that *OITNB* was about to commence on a storyline that would undermine all of the meaningful and subversive work achieved in season three by falling into the trap of centralising the perpetrator in the storyline and even presenting a dangerous message that the passage of time might be enough for a rapist to be redeemed.

However, on closer examination, I don't think that this is what is happening here. When Coates tells Doggett that it is taking everything he has not to assault her again, we are shown that this remains a dangerous man with violent sexual urges. Far from being redeemed, Coates is *conflicted*; his feelings for her are quite possibly genuine, but at odds with his evident desire to possess and assault her. This development represents a more sophisticated and ultimately more realistic, if discomfiting, view on sexual violence which recognises that rapists are often not anonymous, unfeeling psychopaths or bogeymen, but deeply troubled men who exist in all walks of life and are usually known to their victims. That *OITNB* is able to create a three-dimensional character in Coates, and explore his inner conflict, without ever excusing his actions, feels subversive precisely *because* it is so uncomfortable to watch. The show reminds us that there is nothing particularly special or even unusually demonic about Coates, and this in turn reminds us of that old adage that *all* men are potential rapists. In the #MeToo era, it feels particularly important to recognise that male sexuality might not be *inherently* dangerous, but under the contradictory socialisation processes of patriarchy, the sexualities of 'normal' men can become warped and threatening.

There is also an interesting point of note in the above exchange in that Doggett says she will not tell Boo about Coates' 'boner'. Primarily included to offer a little comic relief to the scene,

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it is telling that Doggett knows that Boo will not approve. There is a sense that Boo's reaction to her friend's plight represents a kind of feminist solidarity that is actually alienating to Doggett. Though Boo is undoubtedly on Doggett's side, Doggett has come to feel ashamed of her feelings for Coates and as though she must hide them, and this raises difficult questions about Doggett's agency. We, like Big Boo, want nothing more than to protect Doggett from Coates not only because he has already raped her, but because as a prison officer, the possibility of a mutually consensual relationship has always been a moot point for them, but nowhere in our instinctive urge to protect Doggett are her desires actually considered.

The relationship between Doggett and Coates is explored further throughout seasons five and six, and the show creates a subversive kind of moral ambiguity as the 'couple' are shown playing house in an abandoned guard's residence during the prison riots. There are moments when the viewer is caught out rooting for the couple and feeling that Doggett just deserves some happiness in her life, interspersed with the continuing feeling of uneasiness and wish that she would just leave him. Once more, I think that it is *because* of the conflicted unease that this narrative evokes that it is so important and ultimately so devastating. *OITNB* lifts the lid on why some women fall in love with and remain in relationships with 'monsters', and witnessing it is *supposed* to be unsettling. Without ever wanting to make excuses or apologies for rapists, our failure to grasp that they are ordinary men and boys contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence.

(Straight) Men And Only Men Are Dangerous

I hope to have illustrated in the above discussion that the way *OITNB* portrays male sexuality, illuminates something of the current cultural politics of sex which aligns with the fourth-wave political zeitgeist. In pointing out the hypocrisies, absurdities and dangers of certain forms of masculinised sexuality, *OITNB* offers a critical and complex commentary on the toxic and harmful forms of masculinity, which have also been exposed by the concurrent emergence of the #MeToo movement. However, there is one area in which the show displays an uncharacteristic *lack* of nuance and exploration, and that is in cases of sexual violence and harassment by women characters.

In series one, episode 9, Alex Vause approaches Tiffany Doggett (still in hated religious zealot form at this time) and passionately kisses her. Doggett pushes her off, spitting as if to purge herself and Vause proclaims 'thanks for last night, baby. That shit was amazing. Nobody's ever licked my pussy like that' (Kohen, 2013a). As an audience, we know that Doggett and Vause have not had sex, and that Vause is trying to embarrass Doggett and expose her

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homophobia. The scene is played for a laugh at Doggett’s expense, and that fact that Vause has essentially grabbed and assaulted Doggett passes without comment.

This seeming double standard is also present in the third episode of the same season when Piper Chapman is trying to explain to her mother (Paula) her discomfort and the un-wanted romantic attention she has been receiving from Suzanne ‘Crazy-Eyes’ Warren. Paula asks ‘did she rape you’ and when Piper says no, Paula is visibly relieved, and appears to shrug off Piper’s discomfort with Crazy Eyes’ infatuation with her, saying it’s ‘kinda sweet’ and that she wishes her husband held her hand (Kohen, 2013c).

It is interesting that in both of these examples, we witness how *OITNB* does not acknowledge that sexual harassment and violence by women perpetrators is an issue, and in the latter case, it might even be characterised as ‘kinda sweet’. For a show which explores in such depth many facets of women’s’ experience and identity, its lack of engagement with this issue feels slightly at odds with its ethos. One reading of this might be that *OITNB* centres women’s stories of survivorhood and raises awareness about male sexual violence, and it is typical in these discussions to experience an element of derailment in the form of ‘not all men’ statements or reminders that men can be survivors of abuse too. Whilst it is fair to say of course that *women* perpetrators do exist, feminists often feel frustrated by calls to treat sexual violence as a problem that is equally gendered when research consistently shows that women are only accountable for around 10-12% of sexual assaults (National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010). It can thus be argued that *OITNB* has made a choice not to ‘report’ issues of female perpetration in a conscious effort to avoid being drawn into creating a false equivalence in how this issue is understood. However, whilst I can understand the impulse not to give equal weight to such narratives, given that the show is set in a women’s prison, where statistics *do* tell a different story about sexual violence, it feels odd that the matter of female perpetrators is not addressed at all.

Sexual Danger On The Outside

I have focussed the vast majority of my discussion on sexual danger and dangerous masculinised sexuality on *OITNB* because, out of my two shows, it is the one which has the most to say on the subject and which explores it in the greatest depth. However, this is not to say that there is not thematic continuity in other *Netflix* shows, and it is to dangerous masculinity outside of Litchfield that I now turn my attention in order to demonstrate that there is something of a trend within this new feminist media on the platform to conceptualise certain forms of male sexuality as dangerous.

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I have alluded throughout this piece to a certain kind of fourth-wave feminist sensibility which has become prevalent on Netflix's own productions. Sometimes, as in *OITNB*, it is a recurring theme, other times it is a passing comment or one-liner such as in the newly launched show *The Order* (Doyle, 2009). The first episode shows a young man being shown around his new college halls of residence. His guide points out the locations of the female, male and non-binary bathrooms and issues him with a rape whistle and a 'how to not rape' pamphlet (Heaton, 2019). Nothing else is said and the scene quickly moves on. On the one hand, the comedy in this exchange is rooted in poking fun at the feminist sensibility I have described – a notion that the pamphlet and multi-gendered bathrooms are funny examples of a political correctness gone too far. However, the words are uttered by someone who goes on to become a main character who is respected as 'one of the gang'. He is not portrayed as some uptight feminist killjoy, and his induction is accepted without comment or eye roll from the newly arrived freshman. Furthermore, and as I have alluded to elsewhere, the joke is dependent on a certain level of assumed knowledge. In order to 'get it', one must have knowledge of university campuses and their movements towards gender-neutral bathrooms and consent classes, which were a direct response by feminists to the 'lad-culture', campus-rape culture and frat mentalities of the previous cultural moment. Their inclusion, in passing, on *The Order* thereby represents a normalising of such facilities in the current cultural politics of sex.

Elsewhere, references to dangerous forms of masculinised sexuality are more prevalent. *Sense8* explores the sexuality and genders of its main ensemble cast in truly remarkable and transformative ways as I shall explore further in due course. The sexualities of the male heroes of the show are marked as fluid and transcendent, but the sexualities of the villains are more traditional and fixed.

The character of Whispers is an older man, shrouded in secrecy, whose relentless pursuit and violent torture of the Sense8s provides the programme's darkness. His sexuality, like many of the guards in *OITNB*, is shown as seedy and nauseating; and notably in *Sense8*, heterosexual. When the Sense8s have him captured in season 2, episode twelve (the programme's finale), he revels in mocking Amanita and Dani and as they approach him: 'Ahh Miss Caplan, come to play doctors and nurses?... Aren't there more convivial ways for two pretty ladies to occupy their time in gay Paris?' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). His words are a double entendre as Amanita is holding a hypodermic needle filled with serum to block telepathic communication with his cluster, but the meaning of his words is rooted in the sexual role-play of doctors and nurses; he is implying that despite having him bound and captured, he is the one in control and he is revelling in his perceived subjugation of her. His question to the 'two pretty ladies' is meant to reduce them patronisingly to the way they look, and to imply that he is turned on by his mental image of their queer identities. As an audience, we already

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know how dangerous Whispers is, so his words are not only unnerving but menacing, a point which is underscored by Danni’s whispered response to him: ‘I know your kind, men who mistake cruelty for strength, living your petty little lives, so limited, we both know that if I was to pull this trigger not a single person would shed a tear’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). Danni’s response, much like Piper Chapman’s to Sam Healey, is to highlight how his form of masculinity holds no tract with her. She and her Sense8 friends have evolved past such misogyny and, rather than finding it revolting, she thinks it, and he, are sad.

A similar sense of outdated toxic masculinity is used in the creation of Wolfgang’s father (Anton) — a man who raped his own daughter, resulting in Wolfgang’s birth. In a flashback to Wolfgang’s childhood, Anton is shown chastising Wolfgang’s mother to ‘stop teaching my son to sing like a fucking queer’. When Wolfgang punches his father, Anton delights, claiming ‘I knew there was a man in there, a man like me’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). His father’s cruelty is always rooted in attempts to attack Wolfgang’s masculinity (by implying that Wolfgang is queer or acting surprised that Wolfgang would have the courage to punch him). Whilst to Anton, it might appear that Wolfgang’s masculinity is thus slandered, it is his own which comes off looking repulsive.

In Wolfgang, the Wachowskis construct an alternate form of masculinity. Still strong and brooding at times, but not threatened by homosexuality (as shown in his participation in the polyamorous relationship with Kala and Rajan and the orgy with the cluster) or to show his platonic feelings for another man as he does with both Lito and Felix. The contrast between Wolfgang and men like his father and Whispers is stark. When we see Wolfgang later refer to the chairman as a ‘cockless fuck’, we as an audience, understand that it is Wolfgang in all his queer, butch, brooding glory that is the ‘real’ man here, and not the bigots and sadists whose performances of toxic masculinity mark them as both repulsive and dangerous.

Danger Concluded

By now, I hope to have shown that the #MeToo moment and its associated cultural artefacts mark a significant and sustained departure from the earlier period of Raunch Culture. The current cultural politics of sex contains at its very heart, both an aesthetic and a set of sensibilities which are not only informed by, but which actively name, the fourth-wave feminist ambitions of intersexuality, sex-positivism, consent and queer. However, though much has shifted on this landscape, there remains continuation of the pleasure vs danger dialectic. In both of my chosen texts, but especially in my reading of *OITNB* we can see how danger is conceptually presented both as a consequence of sex (in the case of pregnancy and abortion) and as a prominent part of sexual politics in the form of dangerous and toxic masculinities. The toxic hetero-masculinities created here appear to be both informed by the #MeToo

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movement, and be contributing to a cultural politics of sex of the #MeToo moment, which rejects such masculinities.

Much of my discussion up to this point has acted as a fairly damning indictment of the cultural sexo-political paradigm and painted it as one which is fraught with predatory masculinised sexualities, both on screen and in the real world of personalised #MeToo narratives. Despite this, my view is not a pessimistic one. The inclusion of these more nuanced and sophisticated narratives in the cultural conversations of our time is cause for optimism; after all, it is not toxic masculinity that is the new force here, but the responses to it. That feminism is gaining a voice in the mainstream media without feeling the need – as was once the case — to disavow itself, offers the possibility of a radical transformation in the cultural politics of sex. That the ‘dangers’ remain pervasive is maddening of course, but they are no longer invisible, and as more women come together to say #MeToo, we can perhaps begin to turn our attention to the possibilities for pleasure that a cultural politics of sex which is free of violence and toxic masculinity that the #MeToo moment might offer. Chapters seven and eight are dedicated to exploring such possibilities.

7. A Feminist Utopia And The Potentialities of Identity

Sense8 is the galaxy brain of queer media..., it depicts queerness through a variety of viewpoints. It tells stories about romantic love and self-discovery but also explores the political choice to dismantle heteronormative expectations. The eight sensates share a collective journey that ends with them finding a new, better way to live. A way that involves polyamory and a ride-or-die attitude to platonic friendship, abandoning the restrictions of their previous lives. It's both a free and joyful choice and a response to being hounded by patriarchal oppressors.

(Baker-Whitelaw, 2018)

As previously discussed, both of my texts have important things to say about the current cultural politics of sex, and about the seemingly ever-present pleasure vs danger dichotomy. At times my analysis has emphasised one show over the other as I have adopted an exploratory approach which attempts to weave in and out of my canvases, pulling odd threads out and entwining them thematically as I go. This next part of my analysis will be no different in this respect, but the attention will shift away from the analysis of the dangers of the here and now to the imagined pleasures and possibilities which both shows evoke. Conceptually speaking, and in their own very different ways, both *OITNB* and *Sense8* offer portals into potential feminist and queer utopias. Sargisson describes a utopia as 'the good place which is no place' (Sargisson, 1996, p.1), and this speaks to my methodological approach of viewing Netflix's utopias as sites of possibility and potential. In *OITNB*, the suggestion is made through its construction of an (albeit enforced) matriarchal society in the form of a women's prison, and in *Sense8* through the supernatural conjuring of a set of radical relationships founded on love, connection and sensual empathy.

Before diving in to explore what these utopias look like, and what they might mean for the cultural politics of sex, I want to spend a moment just examining why I have opted to utilise a 'utopian' framework for this part of my analysis. I have mentioned previously that science fiction has long been a tool for the exploration of alternate ways of social organisation. From the Afrofuturism of Octavia Butler and N K Jemisin, and most recently *Black Panther* (Coogler et al., 2018), to the feminist utopias of *Herland* (Perkins Gilman, 1915) and *Woman On The Edge of Time's* Mattapoisett (Piercy, 1976), the act of imagining possibilities is fundamental for exposing the problems of the present and inspiring action in the future. Pamela Sargent describes utopianism as a form of 'social dreaming' (Sargent, 1975), which adds a layer to our conceptualisation of the term in that it speaks to a social, or cultural project, as opposed to solely an individual daydreaming. Utopias too are also routed in desire and wish-fulfilment. Luisa Passerini describes how

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The subjects of history were understood not only as subjects of action and knowledge, but also of desire. Emotions, desire and the body were linked together in a knot which was sometimes confused and contradictory, yet impelling in both a theoretical and practical way.

(Passerini, 2002, p.12)

So in addition to being social projects, utopias also represent deeply personal, embodied narratives. This is particularly important for queer communities, as Gross explains that, unlike other marginalised groups, queer folk do not usually grow up in communities of people who look or are like them. This 'initial invisibility' (Gross, 1994, p.64) explains why for many of us, the realisation that we are not the only person who experiences same-sex attraction or whose gender doesn't seem to 'fit' is often a pivotal moment in our developments. Cultural queer utopias go some way to lift the veil on that initial invisibility that so many of us experience by showing us that, though we might be the only one like us in our immediate vicinity, there are others out there — and the personal, cultural and political importance of this 'me-too' utterance of our own cannot be over-stated. This was important for Foucault, who discussed the role of lifestyle magazines as instructive but not prescriptive, especially to LGBT people for whom less readymade lifestyle templates are available (Gauntlett, 2008, p.133). Utopias offer a space to experience, to hypothesise and to fantasise, and Netflix has been particularly good at employing them in its cultural output, perhaps because it exists alongside other online queer communities, YouTube channels, fan fiction sites and Tumblr pages which have made the internet their own in this regard, and it appeals to a similar demographic.

Moreover, in addition to providing visibility for marginalised folk, speculative utopias can offer the opportunity to subvert dominant narratives in radical ways. The writer and journalist Kuchenga explained on a recent podcast;

What if you have a mum who's really supportive and really loving?... I would rather write into that space. What does it mean for a black trans girl to grow up feeling loved? What does it mean for a black trans girl to fall in love, to be loved to be resourced, to go to university and have a wonderful experience...what if what she goes through just doesn't conform to what we were taught to consider the lot of black trans women through Jerry Springer and The Crying Game? I need to write stories that completely refute everything we were told our lives were going to be about.

(Kuchenga, 2020)

For her, speculative fiction offers a route to imagine things being different politically, socially and culturally by providing an arena which is free of the constraints of other forms of writing such as journalism or autobiography. Leslie Feinberg explains that writing in this way is, for her, a form of activism in itself;

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My writing is an extension of my activism and helps to develop my commitment to win real change: I'm a person who is part of a historical movement for liberation. I have heartfelt political beliefs born of my life's experience. I am a grass-roots organizer. I stand with everyone I meet in my travels — At every reading, every event, every interaction — who is ready to struggle for change. Together, we are shaping a society that does not exist.

(Feinberg, 1996, p.167)

That both of my texts can be viewed as creating utopian visions or alternate realities is part of my reasoning for selecting them, and it is with their utopian potentialities in mind that I will commence this next part of my exploration.

‘What’s not to like, there are no guards, freedom from the male gaze!’

Piper Chapman in *Full Bush, Half Snickers* (Kohen, 2017b)

When I first began my research on the cultural artefacts on Netflix, I had an initial sense that the notion of women’s sexual pleasure was entirely absent from *OITNB*. As we saw in Chapter Six, male sexuality on the show is always either disgusting or downright dangerous, and the lesbian content (be that visual or narrative) seemed rather crude or comedic. In contrast to the sensual, softly lit pleasurefest that is *Sense8*, *OITNB* and its talk of ‘fat Alberts’ (Kohen, 2017b) and ‘Pee Holes’ (Kohen, 2014a) felt crass and unrefined. This, for a while, led me to the erroneous conclusion that, for all its strong-female characters and feminist critiques of toxic masculinity, the show did not contain anything of note about pleasure. However, as I began to examine the narratives and character interactions more carefully, I came to realise that this is not actually the case. Women’s sexuality on the show *is* present, it is just not dressed up and glamorised as it is in *Sense8*. The material realities and class/ culture backgrounds of many of the characters on the show mean that the way they talk about, and at times perform, sex is different from what we are used to seeing in mainstream narratives of sexual pleasure, but this does not mean that pleasure has been thematically omitted, rather that it is offered up in a way which feels genuinely subversive and original.

I will explore examples of this in more detail throughout this section, but it is worth returning to my conceptual notion of ‘utopias’ here, because for the purposes of this analysis, I posit that *OITNB* actually offers *two* examples of transformative feminist realities. However, unlike the supernatural parameters of the alternate reality offered in *Sense8*, the utopian potential of *OITNB* is less obvious, though no less important.

Firstly, as alluded to above, the fact that Litchfield is a women’s prison materially dictates that most of the main characters are women and most of the on-screen relationships and speech

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are between women. Though these women live their lives within the constraints of a patriarchal power system in that the prison is mostly run and staffed by men and exists within a broader patriarchal American culture, the women of Litchfield form a woman-only society within this system that permits radical forms of sex, relationships and identity *in spite* of the men present. Moreover, in the episode *Full Bush, Half Snickers* (Kohen, 2017b), we are given a glimpse of what such a society might become were the men no longer present at all. This, and the surrounding episodes which take place during the prison riot when all of the guards have been locked out, offers the second form or phase of utopian thinking present in the show. During *Full Bush* we bear witness to the women living their lives free from the patriarchy. We see them develop bartering systems to exchange services ('full bush' braiding) for commodities (half a Snickers bar) and cultivating subversive identities such as that adopted when Big Boo dons the 'men's' dress suit and her full, glorious butch is unleashed. As is typical of the show too, the feminist possibility present during the riots is explicitly named in the below exchange between Boo and her prison-officer love interest Linda and in Piper's observation above about the male gaze:

Linda: *It does feel oddly calm today, must be the heat*

Boo: *Or the absence of the patriarchy*

Full Bush, Half Snickers (Kohen, 2017b)

The imagined utopia of a world without men is alluded to at various other points during the riots, too. A beautiful hanging memorial library for Poussey is created with a 'take one, leave one' tariff (See Fig. 13.0 below), the different racial groups are seen bonding in the newly established coffee shop (complete with Hipster baristas and slam-poetry events) and there is subversive role play present not only in Boo's dapper gentleman outfit and the muumuu being worn by one of the male hostages, but in the switch in roles between some of the guards who are taken hostage and the inmates who are now guarding them. The sun is shining as the women sit and even camp out in the fields and there is a groovy kind of 'Woodstock' vibe present.



Fig 14 Still from Full Bush, Half Snickers (Kohen 2017b), 47mins 50 seconds

Suddenly, however, the relative peace and harmony is cut short, when at the end of the episode a fight breaks out, which quickly grows into a free-for-all. The screen fades to orange as Pet Clarke's *My Love* (an ironic choice for both its lyrics and its 1960s hippy style) plays over the credits and is drowned out by the women screaming at each other (Clark, 1965). One reading of this ending might be that the utopia created by the inmates was only ever a fantasy; that utopian thinking is always naïve and unrealistic, and that the need for order, structure and hierarchy always wins out. The episode might be regarded as a fable, the moral of which is that women cannot function in a society without men. The narrative structure of the show necessitates a return to the 'normality' of prison life at some point and was never going to be stretched into following the ongoing trials and tribulations of the now feminist commune at Litchfield. As the screen fades not to black, but to orange – the colour used to represent prison on the show both the viewer and the inmates are dragged from the bright, hazy sunny days of their freedom literally and metaphorically back behind bars.

However, I think that there is more to it than that at play. The fact that, as viewers, we are disappointed when the riot ends and normal service resumes, tells us that we were meant to connect emotionally with the possible new culture being created. Fictional utopias are not supposed to offer blueprints or constitutions for new societies, but to offer powerful, speculative 'what if' moments; glimpses at what might have been, or could be, and to highlight the absurdities and contradictions that exist but are accepted as common sense within the

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present. For me, *Full Bush* absolutely delivers on this front as it creates a space for imagining, like a half-finished painting, begging to be completed. In fact, life came to imitate art when Black feminists, in conjunction with the show set up the Poussey Washington Fund for prison reform on GoFundMe (Strause, 2019).

Who Do You Think You Are? Identity Politics On Netflix

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.

(Giddens, 1991, p.54)

Having spent some time discussing the socially transformative and politically subversive role of utopian thinking in general, I now want to delve a little deeper into the utopias represented by both of my chosen texts. As before, I will do this via the examination of a series of themes present in the texts, starting with the umbrella of ‘identity’ under which I will explore the possibilities created by ‘lesbian’, ‘butch’ and ‘trans’ before moving on to look at the queering of relationships under which I will investigate ‘family and polyamory’, and ‘new frontiers of intimacy’ in Chapter Eight. It is worth noting here that the following discussions of terms such as ‘lesbian’ are about lesbianism as an idea, a concept or an identity, and not as a rigid definition or adjective. As such, many of the characters discussed might not fit into a neat box of ‘lesbian’ being oftentimes queer, bi or pansexual or identifying in some other way, but engaging temporarily in sexuality with another woman (as is the case with *OITNB*’s Lorna Morello, who insists that she is straight despite casually sleeping with Nicky Nicholls), or with many of the *Sense8*s whose own labels and gender identities are often not explicitly named in a utopia in which labels have been rendered irrelevant. Instead, concepts such as ‘trans’ and ‘intimacy’ will be regarded as possibilities and potentialities: lenses through which new ways of being, feeling and experiencing might be explored to pleasurable and transcendent new ends.

In Chapter Three, I explored the importance of so-called ‘identity politics’ to fourth-wave feminism and ultimately the #MeToo moment, so I am not going to re-hash those theoretical and political ideas here. What is worth noting, however, is that, as I shall explore below, the various ‘identities’ cultivated and constructed in my texts represent cultural emanations of these ideas by offering vivid depictions of how they might play out in reality. My shows not only reflect the current #MeToo zeitgeist, but expand it and contribute to it symbiotically by creating potentialities as the ideas and concepts of #MeToo are brought to life.

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Identity is a particularly pertinent theme for me to explore in this analysis as it fits so comfortably as a concept alongside 'narrative'; after all, what is identity if not a form of self-narrative? As David Gauntlett explains, 'self-identity... is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person's own reflexive understanding of their own biography' (Gauntlett, 2008, p.99). It is also important with respect to sexuality. Anthony Giddens argued in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens, 1991) that sexuality becomes hidden in the 19th century, not due to prudishness but due to its movement into the realm of intimacy, partnerships, love and trust. 'Sexual development and sexual satisfaction henceforth became bound to the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p.164) and in so doing, the link between self-identity, sexuality and sexual identity becomes forever forged. It is, Gauntlett argues, for this reason that our sexual orientations become much more important elements of our self-identities than our tastes in music or food for example, so it is with all of this in mind that I now turn my attention to the examination of some of the key identities presented in my texts.

It is worth noting that in both of my chosen programmes, the concept of identity is itself often centred particularly in the case of *Sense8*, where the discovery of, and coming to terms with, their new empathetic powers forces the characters to re-examine their very notions of self. Nomi muses out loud to Amanita that she is unsure if what she is experiencing with her fellow sensates is more comparable with having ADD³⁶, in which case she may be able to find a drug which will allow her to tone down the 'noise' of what she is experiencing, or whether it is more akin with Alzheimer's where 'that sense of 'me-ness' will slowly, inevitably disintegrate' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016): a thought which is echoed by Lito, who explains that 'I can feel my ideas of self, expanding' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016). Identity itself becomes so important in *Sense8* that it is even treated as a commodity at times. Miss Facchini trades her help for knowledge of the chairman's identity, to ensure that he doesn't give backward on their deal, and the chairman underscores the utility of identity by telling Wolfgang that 'my kind have subjugated yours, do you know why? Certainty. There is only one voice telling me what to do' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016).

Lesbian Request Approved: Sapphic Love On Netflix

Oh! That feels good. Do you ever feel like you're in your body, but you can really feel, like, the space around you, like, air suddenly becomes, like, really heavy, and you can feel, like, the atmosphere, and the molecules, just hanging around your head?

Brook Soso, *A Whole Other Hole* (Kohen, 2014a)

³⁶ Attention Deficit Disorder.

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As I have mentioned previously, the lesbian possibilities of *OITNB* are centred right from the opening scenes of the first episode. As the Staple Singers' *I'll Take You There* (The Staple Singers, 1972) plays, we quickly realise that the 'there' in question is an orgasm, as a naked Piper and Vause are revealed kissing in the shower. Their relationship becomes arguably the most important on the entire show and is the only one which remains intact (despite its highs and lows) to the end. From the moment they first meet, in the flashback shown in season one, episode three, their chemistry oozes from the screen. The couple share lingering eye contact and Piper is shown biting her lip sensually (Kohen, 2013c), and their intimate scenes together always depict a tangible passion and pleasure. This is important in forging the authenticity of their relationship and of Chapman's queerness. As Nair notes, '*Orange* doesn't evade the complexity of Chapman's queerness or suggest that her lesbianism is simply a phase or experimentation, and it repeatedly points out that sexuality is 'fluid' (Nair cited in Frankel, 2015, p.105). Though engaged to a man at one point, we learn fairly quickly that Chapman's sexuality is not fixed. Her relationship with Alex is as real as her one with Larry and they are treated with the same import. She is also never pigeon-holed as being either straight, gay or bisexual, which feels like a departure from earlier lesbian narratives. For example, I, like many a queer teenager of a certain generation, was delighted when it was revealed on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* that Willow was in fact a lesbian, but I have remained baffled ever since that the show's narrative for her was 'well, she's gay now', as if her previous relationship with Oz was less authentic.

Decarvalho and Cox argue that because Piper and Alex's relationship experiences various ups and downs throughout the series, it can be read as enforcing 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Decarvalho and Cox, 2019). The term was popularised by Adrienne Rich to refer to the social or textual assumption that the default position of all women is heterosexual. Moreover, Rich argued that compulsory heterosexuality is utilised by patriarchal forces as 'a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access' (Rich, 1980, p.647). For Decarvalho and Cox, the fact that Piper is at times hurt by Alex represents a kind of punishment for her lesbian transgressions. Additionally, she is at times literally punished (by being sent to the SHU) for her lesbian interactions with Alex by Sam Healey, who embodies the heteropatriarchy. However, I posit that as discussed above, the fact that their relationship shows many tender moments, and ultimately goes on to survive their time in Litchfield, actually represents a kind of wish fulfilment for queer audiences by providing us with a 'happy ending' for Piper and Alex, and thus rather than enforcing compulsory heterosexuality, their relationship is a radical subversion of it: their lesbian love wins in the end.

This is not to say that *Orange*'s handling of lesbian identities is always one-hundred percent on point. As Frankel argues:

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She [Poussey]'s attractive but doesn't spend hours caring about her appearance with the elaborate makeup other characters prefer. She feels genuine. But the others [queer characters] are a bag of overblown stereotypes in a television culture starting to move beyond them.

(Frankel, 2015, p.107)

I have discussed previously my frustration that, when it comes to sex and nudity on *OITNB*, it feels as if only certain bodies and identities are deemed acceptable enough to show on screen. Fat, butch and older bodies appear to remain a taboo too far for a show which has centralised menstruation, boob hair and rape myths in its time, so I understand what Frankel is saying here. However, I think to say that queer characters on the show are largely 'overblown' stereotypes is a little unfair, and more importantly risks glossing over on the fact that the show presents a myriad of different forms of queer, which to me remains refreshing. Some lesbians on the show *are* caricatures of Butch [Boo], some wear lipstick [Lorna], some are bookish [Soso], some are worldly [Poussey] some are naïve [Suzanne]: but this to me is true of lesbians in the real world too – it demonstrates the plurality of lesbian identity. Frankel also argues that

Taystee, Boo and Nicky objectify women, encouraging male heterosexual viewers to join in. The camera itself inspects naked women, more often non-white than white, suggesting a male point of view even in this female of sanctums.

(Frankel, 2015, p.80)

I could not disagree more here. Frankel's analysis seems to be based on the important work of Laura Mulvey in describing the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) of cinematic audiences. However, in simply adopting a copy-and-paste approach of this theory to apply it to queer women on *OITNB*, something is missed. Mulvey's framework does not account for a 'Lesbian Gaze', or what Halberstam has called the 'Butch Gaze' (Halberstam, 1998b, pp.175–176) – either between lesbian characters or from lesbian viewers. The possibility of a sapphic gaze is important because it radically subverts the traditional male gaze. As explained by Halberstam below when discussing the August 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair* cover with k. d lang and Cindy Crawford;

It calls for many different identificatory strategies from viewers: A heterosexual male must access his desire for Crawford only through the masculinity of a lesbian; the straight woman might identify with Crawford and desire lang; a queer viewer finds that dyke desire is mobile here and may take up butch, femme, masculine, or feminine spectator positions.

(Halberstam, 1998b, pp.175–176)

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In lumping the articulations of lesbians in with the male gaze, Frankel is missing the important subversive work that is done and the queer potentialities that arise from such scenes. Moreover, as I discussed earlier, there is a substantial queering effect when women are depicted adopting the language and behaviours of men.

OITNB not only offers more than a series of one-dimensional lesbian characters by providing a variety of different characters who might occupy lesbian space, it also calls out certain tired tropes and stereotypes which have historically been applied to women who explore their sexualities. For example, in the below exchange, Taystee is chastised for her friendship with Poussey by season two villain, Vee:

Vee: *'What? Where's your little cuddle bunny? What? I saw what went down in here. You all cozied up with your little girlfriend.'*

Taystee: *I ain't gay.*

Vee: *Looked pretty gay to me.*

Taystee: *We just friends.*

Vee: *Yeah? Just friends? And you're lonely. You wanna be touched. Need a hug. Maybe even more than a hug. Need all that drama of someone to call your own. Let me tell you something. Gay-for-the-stay is for punk ass bitches who aren't strong enough to be true to themselves.*

Taystee: *I told you, I ain't like that.*

Vee: *I know that. And I also know that when you get out of here, you don't want people on the block talking about how you went that way. That's why I'm telling you, do not let her drag you into that shit. She is not your real friend. She is only your friend in here. She doesn't know you like I do.*

A Whole Other Hole! (Kohen, 2014a)

The above remarks not only expose Vee's homophobia, they show how she attempts to manipulate Taystee by evoking a cultural fear that if you have queer friends, people might think that you are queer. Initially, Taystee is taken in by Vee whom she knew on the outside and who attempts to fill the role of mother who has been absent in Taystee's life. However, Taystee eventually comes to see Vee's true colours and the subtle message is that people who dismiss women who enter lesbian relationships whilst in prison as simply 'gay for the stay' are too weak to tolerate the loneliness of prison life, are narrow-minded at best, and in the case of Vee, dangerously so.

In addition to Vause, Chapman and Poussey, the show also explores the cultural politics of sex through the lesbianism of several of its other characters. The budding romance between

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Suzanne and Maureen is treated with a tenderness and care, as both characters battle with their nerves and insecurities. In season three, episode 10, we hope that the pair will finally get together when Maureen extends an invitation to Suzanne to meet her in the cleaning closet. Ultimately, the closet proves to be somewhat of an apt metaphor for Suzanne, not for her lesbianism but for her virginity, as she ultimately loses confidence when she approaches the room in question (Kohen, 2015a).

In Suzanne and Maureen, we see yet another form of sexuality explored. In this case, we witness Suzanne wrestling with her past and present trauma's and mental illness in order to be able to have a relationship with Maureen. Though only a sub-plot in this episode, the inclusion of this storyline demonstrates an acknowledgement that sexual experiences vary and are oftentimes complicated by mental illness, disability and trauma. It also serves a glimmer of hope as the horrors of the rape story between Coates and Doggett are revealed concurrently. The dangerous and aggressively toxic heterosexuality of Charlie Coates exists in stark contrast to the tender and tentative sapphic explorations of Suzanne and Maureen.

It is not only *OITNB* which utilises lesbian possibilities to explore alternative modes of female sexuality. *Sense8* too focusses on the long-term relationship and eventual marriage of Amanita Caplan and Nomi Marks. So important in fact is the pair's relationship that the series finale concludes with a lingering close-up shot of their (by this point in the show) infamous dildo, used and discarded on the floor. The shot offers a nod back to the first, (of many), sex scenes in the show, from season one, episode one. Amanita is wearing the dildo in a strap-on harness and they are in the 'missionary' position (Nomi on her back with Amanita between her legs), both fully naked. It is daytime and soft light comes through the venetian blinds. They are locked in eye contact, Nomi is groaning to climax then they kiss tenderly. Amanita asks if it was good— 'did that help honey's headache?' Nomi replies 'I can't answer that because you literally just fucked my brains out!' Amanita removes the strap-on and drops it on the floor, the camera sees the wobble of the glistening dildo as it hits the floor. Amanita wishes her a happy Pride as they lay in bed, and the camera offers a point-of-view perspective, just catching their nipples (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a).

The above scene between Nomi and Amanita is perhaps more like what I had in mind when I began looking for evidence of women's sexual pleasure in my shows. Their locked eye contact throughout tells us that they are madly in love and completely irresistible to one another, and Amanita's inquiry as to whether the sex has eased Nomi's headache reveals a tenderness and concern which is not present in the heterosexual sex scenes of *OITNB*. For me, however, perhaps the most important thing about this scene was that it was the first mainstream lesbian sex scene that I can recall seeing in graphic, yet realistic, detail. Though the lighting and the

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trendy San Francisco apartment, coupled with the model-like beauty of the protagonists, keeps the scene firmly in the realms of Hollywood, there is much here which can be regarded as subversive and as a departure from earlier narratives of this ilk.

Though as mentioned, the bodies of both Nomi and Amanita fit within conventional definitions of female beauty (they are slim, hairless and made up), there are also significant deviations. Amanita (played by Freema Agyeman) is Black, whose hair is dyed blue, partially braided and partially under-cut, and Nomi is (as we learn later) a transgender woman (played by Jamie Clayton, who is herself trans). The way in which they have sex appears to be for their own and each other’s pleasure as opposed to fulfilling the lesbian fantasies of heterosexual men. The graphic inclusion of the wet dildo tells us loud and clear that there is no need for male genitalia in this scene, and the fact that the dildo is itself multi-coloured and smooth, bearing no resemblance to a penis (as some do), further underscores this. Moreover, the dildo is of a typical size and shape, which appears actually conducive to vaginal pleasure and at odds with the hyperbolic rubber phalluses of porn aesthetics. All of this tells us that Amanita and Nomi’s relationship is one of mutual care, passion and attraction, and adds an air of authenticity which is important for queer audiences who do not often get to see sex scenes that resemble their own experiences.

Later on, the episode returns to the San Francisco Pride flashback. Amanita introduces Nomi to an acquaintance who comments cruelly to Nomi ‘I know you, you’re the tranny that blogs about politics... you’re just another colonizing male trying to take up any space left to women.’ Amanita responds by calling the woman ‘A loud mouth Berkeley bitch’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a). As Amanita and Nomi walk away, Nomi is crying – not because of what the woman said about her, or because of her use of the transphobic slur, she explains, but because no one has ever defended her before. The scene cuts back to the present and Amanita gives Nomi little kisses; Nomi says that that’s the day ‘I knew I’d always love you’.

This brief scene accomplishes a great deal narratively speaking for the show. Firstly, it signposts its trans-inclusive feminism loud and clear. The anti-trans sentiment uttered by Amanita’s acquaintance is shown as hurtful and bigoted, and Amanita’s ‘Berkeley bitch’ rebuttal acts as an in-group designator for the audience, who it is assumed will understand that this reference to the University of California Berkley (and its internationally renowned Department for Gender and Women’s Studies³⁷), which is short-hand for a particular kind of

³⁷ Interestingly, I decided to visit the department’s website as I was writing this and noticed that they have a specific section entitled ‘Misconceptions about GWS’ which tries to address the perception that the department and gender studies as a discipline are only concerned with middle class white women, see <http://womensstudies.berkeley.edu/about/misconceptions-about-gws/>

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academic, second-wave feminism from which the show clearly wants to display its divergence. Moreover, in these few lines of dialogue, we are shown the warmth and depth of Nomi and Amanita's shared history and thus given an insight into their powerful relationship.

Gloriously Butch And Playing With Gender

When people speak admiringly of a butch, what I see is someone who has taken on the best gendered characteristics of both woman and man, left a lot of the stuff born of misogyny and heterosexism behind, and walked forward into the world without apology.

(Bergman, 2010)

Having explored some of the varied lesbian identities and aesthetics featured in my chosen texts, I now want to look specifically at 'Butch' as an identity. My focus instead is on the narratives and depictions of butch in my chosen texts, starting with Litchfield's most notable butch Carrie Black, aka Big Boo (played by Lea DeLaria). I have discussed previously how the show has a frustrating tendency to lump Boo's sexuality together with the other masculinised desires and how it ducks out of offering a truly radical character by often playing Boo's sexuality for laughs and never actually depicting it corporeally. At first, this represented a real opportunity missed for me; how glorious it would have been to see a fat, butch woman indulge her sexual desires graphically in a mainstream production. However, a closer reading reveals Boo's queer potential if we think about her in relation to the 'Stone Butch' lesbian. Most infamously rendered, in loving and beautiful detail by Leslie Feinberg in his novel *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993), the stone butch is a lesbian who does not let her partner touch her sexually. She has been the subject of ridicule and derision by the LGBT community at times, disavowed as a myth or heterosexist 1950's throwback (Roof, 1998; Gomez, 1998), or pathologised as a broken product of sexual trauma (Halberstam, 1998b, p.125). However, as Cvetkovich notes, the truth of the stone butch is much more complex and subversive;

Butch untouchability or stoneness can be an emotional, as well as sexual category. Butch emotional untouchability is actually a form of vulnerability, but we can only recognise and be touched by it if we understand the expression of emotion to be a matter of style, a performance of interiority in which the display of feeling can take the form of not showing it.

(Cvetkovich, 1998, p.159)

Though Boo is not specifically identified as stone, I read her as such for several reasons. Firstly, as previously mentioned, we do not ever see Boo being touched sexually, though we do see her pleasuring other women. In *Finger in the Dyke* (Kohen, 2015b), she is shown wearing a strap-on dildo whilst her femme partner rides on top, which tells us something about the kinds of sex she engages in. Moreover, in his essay *Dinge*, Robert Reid-Pharr notes that

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certain queer differences are made visible in the depictions of graphic or specified sexual practices (Reid-Pharr, 1996), so in addition to it being nice to see more diverse representations of queer people on screen, the graphic depiction of Boo’s sexuality actually produces new, queer meanings which were previously invisible.

Secondly, as Cvetkovich explains above, stone can also refer to an emotional untouchability. We see at numerous points throughout the show that Boo is tough and not afraid of confrontation, however she does struggle to show weakness and vulnerability. In her flashback to childhood in *Finger in the Dyke*, we see how her parents tried to enforce femininity on her when she was growing up – but we do not hear her talk about this pain or her feelings of rejection herself. This is *not* to say the Boo is unemotional, however. I discussed in Chapter 6, how she supports Tiffany Doggett following her rape, and we come to love her as a character who though tough, is loving and protective of her femmes – be they romantic interests or not. I wonder if this is her form of emotional stone butchness; that she gives love and support, but does not allow herself to receive such? For me then, Big Boo is much more than just a stereotype or punchline. She is complex, and as such a subversive character in the show.

It is during the season five prison riots, and perhaps aptly during Litchfield’s most utopian moments, that Boo’s character is able to explore her butchness to the greatest extent. This is exciting because, as Halberstam notes, ‘as a culture, we seem to take so little interest in female masculinity and yet pay a considerable amount of attention to male femininity’ (Halberstam, 1998b, p.xi). They argue that female masculinity is too often dismissed as the ‘rejected scraps’ (Halberstam, 1998b, p.xi) of dominant masculinity, so to see butch celebrated in this way reclaims space for masculine women.

In addition to the butch aesthetic which was created fairly lazily with her ‘butch’ tattoo and shaven undercut at the start of the show and added to when she begins wearing a ‘men’s’ tailored suit and tie that she has found somewhere during the riot, Boo is seen playing the role of gentleman as she begins trying to woo Linda (the prison’s HR person who has got caught up in the riot and is attempting to blend in as an inmate to avoid being treated as a hostage). Boo haggles to buy a necklace made by one of the other inmates as she and Linda walk arm in arm through the prison, as if strolling along a sunny boulevard somewhere. When another inmate attempts to steal the necklace, and threatens Boo with a small shank³⁸, Boo is seen rebuffing the attack to which the aggressor goads her ‘oh look, butchy wanna play?’ Boo responds by pulling a large kitchen knife from her suit jacket and exclaiming ‘anybody ever tell you that size matters?’ As the aggressor backs off and walks away, Boo makes a final assault

³⁸ An improvised blade

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yelling after her 'Yeah! And it's MR Butch to you!' (Kohen, 2017b). As well as adopting the traditional masculine role of protector, we can see the playfulness with which Boo explores butchness. Her joke that 'size matters' is of course an obvious reference to both her larger knife and to social conventions about penis size. In these scenes, we see Boo simultaneously both adopt a tender, protective masculinity and parody a form of male 'willie waving' in a manner which is more sophisticated than the humorous nature of the scene might suggest. Moreover, her affirmation of the 'Mr' pronoun is a nod to fourth-wave trans inclusivity, which has elevated discussion around pronoun choice as a form of both political resistance and social acceptance and is entirely in keeping with #MeToo sensibilities.

The parodying and play are furthered as the fantasy of Boo and Linda as a heterosexual couple is then continued when they are seen being shown around various possible plots in the makeshift commune-come-camp by Ramos, who explains (as if selling real estate) 'as you can see, it's, like, way less crowded out here than it is in the dorms. And also, we have a thriving artistic community, which I know is so important to you gays' (Kohen, 2017b). Here, in addition to the obvious gender role playing, there is an in-joke about artistic lesbian communities and the whole piece serves as a brilliant parody of the butch/femme trope and of heterosexuality as a social construct. Later in the episode Linda and Boo's relationship is finally consummated as we see Boo enthusiastically performing oral sex on a euphoric Linda. As ever, Boo remains fully clothed, and the 'giver' of pleasure as opposed to the recipient, but there is a not-too-subtle message here that Linda's apparent ecstasy is not what she has become accustomed to in her hitherto (presumed) heterosexual relationships. Scenes such as these are important, as Halberstam explains;

It is precisely the stereotype that can access pleasure: the juxtaposition of two stereotypical images — the butch in drag and the femme in hyper-feminine costume — resonates with a particular queer history of representation and simultaneously upends the conventional scene of hetero-normativity that the picture mimics.

(Halberstam, 1998b, p.176)

Munt also describes how the adoption heterosexual imagery can be played with and queered 'We have adopted heterosexual iconography, but we reproduced it in masquerade, as a knowing copy, thus as an analogy which cannot simply return to a reidolized, retrenched, original' (Munt, 1998, p.11). It is in the very *performance* (in the Butlerian sense) of queer gender identities that radical possibilities can be produced. Roof argues that by the 1980s, power dynamics were understood from a more postmodern perspective in that power is not simply a dynamic of oppressor/oppressed, but rather is dispersed (Foucault, 1998). 'If power is dispersed then instances of oppression can be addressed in terms defined by the instance;

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parody, performance, and perversions of dominant formations become more viable modes of countering dominant discourse of gender and sexuality' (Roof, 1998, p.34). In this sense, Boo and Linda's relationship can be read as a challenge to heteropatriarchy because they illustrate with clarity that masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality are not the stable categories they are often taken to be.

It should be noted at this juncture that Boo is not Litchfield's only butch character. As I have touched on before, though Nicky Nicholls adopts a more femme aesthetic, her vivacious sexuality and crude language can be viewed as a form of butch performance. Their shared butchness is a source of both bonding and competition for Nicholls and Boo, as seen in the following exchange:

Boo: *'why you pickin' all the peaches?*

Nicky: *I have no idea what you're talking about.*

Boo: *Yes, you do. Hascowitz? I've been trying to get bumper-to-bumper with that for a month. And now, she feels used and doesn't wanna sleep around because you got there first.*

Nicky: *Ah. Used, eh? She wasn't exactly new when I rode in her, eh? A little dented actually, right? The upholstery was worn.*

Boo: *You knew I was after that.*

Nicky: *Well, what can I say? Not everyone wants a diesel dyke.*

Boo: *Lay off my marks. Seriously. Enough with the cliterference. What's this?*

[Boo hold up a notebook]

Nicky: *Put that back, please. Would you give it back?*

Boo: *Who is Brook? Oh, yeah. That's the new girl, isn't it? Hot one of the Asian persuasion? Oh, my God! I found your fuck book? Right.*

Nicky: *So what if it is?*

Boo: *Oh, you fuckin' junkie.*

Nicky: *All right.*

Boo: *No, I get this. Better pussy than smack. Right?*

Nicky: *It's not an addiction. It's a collection, all right? Some people collect buttons or Taco Bell Chihuahuas, I collect orgasms. See, I'm all about giving. Look, I am like a bean-flicking Mother Teresa.*

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Boo: *You know what? This here is my kind of competition.*

A Whole Other Hole! (Kohen, 2014a)

Perhaps one of the most successful things about *OITNB* is the extent to which it creates deep and complex characters. The frequent use of flashbacks has been discussed elsewhere, as has the centring of women's narratives and experiences, but another way in which this narrative and character depth is created is through the many characters' varied relationships with each other. In the above exchange we can see how Nicky and Boo have adopted the language of men from their crude talk about their sexual conquests, to the use of extended car metaphors. In placing this conversation into the mouths of women, we see again a subversion of gender norms, firstly in the act of the gender play itself, and secondly in that the absurdity of their conversation seems somehow more apparent when uttered between women. The women also adopt their own private lexicon of 'bean-flicking' and 'cliterference' which hints at the possibility of butch in creating new identities and modalities of sexual politics.

Moreover, Sedgwick cautioned about the tendency of homosociality between men to uphold and replicate patriarchal standards (Sedgwick, 1985), but Halberstam has argued that the relationships and interplay between butches does not necessarily operate in this way (Halberstam, 1998a, p.65). Whilst Boo and Nicky offer differing presentations of butch, the inclusion of their friendship creates a previously under-documented space.

OITNB also offers an alternate rendering of butch with the season six introduction of Dominga Durate (aka Daddy). Daddy is a smooth, stylish young Latin-American woman, shown in her flashback surrounded by beautiful women who are revealed to be working for Daddy's high-class escort agency. Daddy is modelled on the culturally familiar 'pimp' aesthetic, where masculinity is encoded through wealth, drugs, clothing and luxury. Whilst Boo offered us a more traditional view of the 'diesel-dyke' butch, Daddy displays a decidedly 21st century butch. Her playboy identity is as much about the commodities with which she surrounds herself as her bodily and internal sense of self. Designer white suits, up-market condos and a bedroom adorned in stylish masculine leathers and modern art define her pre-prison existence, but a certain swagger and poise is carried with her even after she is incarcerated for covering up the death of one of her escorts at the hands of a wealthy client. She is D-block's protector, proclaiming that 'nobody fucks with Daddy and nobody fucks with Daddy's girls' (Kohen, 2018b).

As a character, Daddy demonstrates how butch has been culturally made and remade. Her possessive reference to 'her' girls represents an appropriation of the traditional male role of protector and hints at a reclamation of the historic power imbalance which saw women regarded socially and legally as property. In Daddy's world, subjugation and dominance are

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not based on assigned sex but on performed gender; a revelation which is as enticing as it is problematic. Though she performs masculinity differently from other butches on the show, she maintains a continuity with them in that she does not disregard all aspects of her femininity. There is a scene in the above episode when her vulnerability is exposed as she crouches fully clothed under a running shower, weeping in fear of retribution from one of the prison’s drug bosses after a tactical mis-step on her part.

Moreover, Halberstam notes the potential for butches of colour to ‘defamiliarize white masculinity and make visible a potent fusion of alternative masculinity and alternative sexuality’ (Halberstam, 1998b, pp.180–181). They argue that historically, white manhood is located as the epitome of power, so when masculinity is removed from this context performed by women of colour a powerful, even radical subversion occurs.

Trans*

I have selected the term ‘Trans’ for this book precisely to open up to the unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. As we will see, the asterisk modifies the meaning of trans-sensitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a designation, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis, it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender form may be and perhaps most importantly it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations.*

(Halberstam, 2018, p.4)

I have already discussed the novel ways in which both *OITNB* and *Sense8* feature important trans characters in Sophia Bursett and Nomi Marks, both of whom were pivotal in setting the standard that trans characters should be played by trans actors. However, despite their similar contributions to the mainstreaming of trans on screen, there are also crucial and marked differences in the narratives portrayed.

Sophia’s storyline in *OITNB* conforms more closely to what has been regarded as the ‘typical’ trans narrative in that she had lived much of her life presenting as male before undergoing gender confirmation surgery and living henceforth as a woman. Though the narrative itself is fairly familiar now to modern audiences, its telling is undertaken with a greater level of depth and honesty than others in the same vein (*Transparent*). As ever, the adoption of flashbacks is utilised by the show to reveal various turning points in her journey from ‘male’ to ‘female’. She is shown initially with the support of her wife Crystal trying on dresses and exploring her femininity, and later watching as Crystal tries to understand the importance of Sophia’s

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hormone medication when she is asked to consider smuggling hormones into the prison for her.

Crystal: *what so I can get locked up too, all so you can have your smooth skin and your lady curves? ... How fucking selfish can you be? I married a man named Marcus, I cry for him all the time, but I stayed and supported you because I could see how much pain you were in, I could see it was saving your life. I figure it better that my son had two moms than a dead dad. At least he'd be around, which is more than my dad ever was... I put up with you becoming a woman, but I never signed on for a life with a criminal.*

Lesbian Request Denied (Kohen, 2013c)

Crystal is also shown struggling to come to terms with the fact that for Sophia, transition will mean the loss of her penis. Crystal pleads with her ‘please keep it. I’m fine with the rest of it, the hair, the makeup, I’ll teach you all of it, you’ll be a pro, just please keep your penis... for me’ (Kohen, 2013c). In both of these scenes, we are confronted with the reality of transition; the impact that it can have on the people whom the person going through it loves, and how difficult it can be for even supportive friends and family to *truly* understand what gender dysphoria feels like. Crystal’s narrative is importantly never placed above Sophia’s as the protagonist actually going through this process, but its inclusion felt like a glimpse into a more complex paradigm of trans narratives. All the narratives I had seen up until this point were of relationships breaking down entirely due to one partner transitioning, or of couples purporting to have had no difficulties going through the change— none of which spoke to the anecdotal experiences that were starting to emerge during the #MeToo moment.

Sophia’s transition is also alluded to in more subtle ways. For example, when she teaches Piper how to make flip-flops from menstruation towels because the commissary didn’t carry flip-flops in a size thirteen, or when she is trying on clothes with Crystal during a flashback and explains her somewhat garish choice of outfits by describing the fact that she never really got to be a teenage girl. These are small things in comparison to the broader plot-lines present on the show, but they create a delicate tapestry of Sophia’s trans experience, which feels authentic and full of missteps and contradictions, which I posit have been allowed for by the politics of the #MeToo moment.

This rich tapestry is also added to by clever pieces of cinematography. In the episode described above, there is a shot when Sophia’s reflection in a mirror during the flashback fades into her reflection in a mirror in the prison’s bathroom, delineating the way in which transition can feel at once slow and subtle and yet like an instantaneous transformation. The linking and repetition of dialogue is also used here. As Sophia worries about not being able to access her hormones due to funding cut-backs in the prison, Red suggests that she may be

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able to approach Pornstache to smuggle them in for her. Sophia says: ‘I really don’t think you want to go down that road’, and is transported into a flashback of her shopping for trainers with her son. The shop assistant echoes her words, starting his pitch: ‘if you wanna go down that road, these are Jordans...’ (Kohen, 2013c). This latter example highlights the somewhat repetitive nature of on-screen trans narratives and the notion of ‘going down a road’ is evocative of the lexicon of ‘journeys’ which are often used, sometimes to clichéd effect in trans narratives.

Not all of the references to Sophia’s transition are so poignant, however, and there are plenty of occasions when she uses her trans experience to comedic effect. As mentioned earlier, the irony that as a trans woman she knows *more* about vaginal anatomy than the other inmates is a laugh, not *at* Sophia but *with* her. We can also see how humour around her transition is used to show familiarity and friendship when Red is complaining to Sophia about her vegetables being stolen to be used as Dildos, she picks up a courgette and aggressively cuts it in half before saying ‘sorry, too soon?’ (Kohen, 2013c). Here, she is making a crude reference to the cutting of a phallic object (the courgette), and her ‘apology’ is meant as a joke, because she knows that Sophia will not have been offended by her chopping into the vegetable. It should of course be noted that one must tread lightly and sensitively when using a topic such as this in humour. The old comedic wisdom that it is ok to ‘punch up’ but not down is really just a simplified version of our fourth-wave understanding that the appropriateness of jokes such as these are about context as opposed to content: who is saying them, to whom, and for what effect. *OITNB* seems to be largely regarded as getting this judgement correct in that there have not been any wide-spread reactions or backlashes to any of the jokes in the show, unlike those used by ‘comedian’ Dave Chapelle, which I won’t repeat here but have garnered considerable criticism from the trans community and their allies, which is explored in Brian Logan’s piece for the *Guardian* newspaper (Logan, 2018) amongst others.

Laverne Cox undoubtedly offered a loving and important addition to on screen trans narratives in her portrayal of Sophia Burset. That she was the first transgender person to be nominated for an Emmy award speaks volumes not only for her acting performance, but to the extent to which our cultural politics of sex is evolving and diversifying. However, as I have mentioned above, though elements of her storyline are truly progress in their openness and honesty, the overall story arc of ‘boy becomes girl’ does not in itself rock many boats. This *is* fine, Sophia’s storyline is emblematic of the narratives of many trans people; the problem only arises when it is taken to be the sole, or de-facto, trans narrative. Stone explains the problem with not challenging the typical ‘wrong body’ narrative:

Neither the investigators nor the transsexuals have taken the step of problematizing “wrong body” as an adequate descriptive category. In

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fact “wrong body” has come, virtually by default, to define the syndrome. It is quite understandable, I think, that a phrase whose lexicality suggests the phallogentric, binary character of gender differentiation should be examined with deepest suspicion. So long as we, whether academics, clinicians, or transsexuals, ontologize both sexuality and transsexuality in this way, we have foreclosed the possibility of analyzing desire and motivational complexity in a manner that adequately describes the multiple contradictions of individual lived experience.

(Stone, 1992, p.166)

As I discussed in Chapter Three, the #MeToo moment is very much defined by fourth-wave feminism’s more complicated and nuanced understandings of gender and the influence of transfeminism. It is becoming more common to see criticisms of the ‘wrong body’ trope and the trans children’s charity Mermaids recently ran a ‘no child is born in the wrong body’ campaign (Mermaids, 2020). It is important not to completely dismiss ‘wrong bodies’ or stories of ‘becoming’ a woman, as for many in the trans community, these were important modes of describing, in the best language available, their experiences. However, I posit that such narratives like those explored through Sophia on *OITNB* are starting to feel a little old-fashioned, and not in keeping with the #MeToo sensibility. It is not so much that they are regarded as wrong, but simply limited.

By contrast, I now want to explore how in *Sense8*, both the character of Nomi Marks and the show’s generally queer ontology offer a radical departure from this narrative by tearing the possibilities afforded by ‘trans’ wide open: something which it has to be acknowledged, may very well not have been possible without the likes of Cox leading the way in terms of mainstreaming the trans experience.

Perhaps the most notable thing about the character of Nomi Marks in *Sense8* is that she is a trans person whose gender history is not really explored. That she is trans is pointed out at various points, but the show never felt the need to make her narrative revolve around her transition. This is not to say that she is not given depth as a character with a fully explored back story; far from it. As mentioned above, her relationship with Amanita is shown as having deep and important roots and her parents appear in the series finale, explaining a little more of where she has come from. What is truly subversive about Nomi is that it is not her trans history which is important, it is where and who she is now that matters to the show and to her narrative. For me, this marks a leap forward towards a view of identity as possibility, rather than limitation as envisaged by Butler — ‘because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normal goal’ (Butler,

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1990, p.21). By refusing to explicitly label Nomi's gender identity (and the sexualities of several other characters), *Sense8* creates the possibility for the kind of expansion Butler desires. By dispensing with the need to explore her trans journey, the show not only posits Nomi as more than the sum of her trans experience, it also allows for a fuller exploration of what trans might mean as a possibility for her and the other characters on the show, as well as the audience at home.

Trans Aesthetics and Queer Temporalities

This may be the age of artificial genitalia in the wake of surgical reproduction, or a posttranssexual era, and our sexual present is marked by bodies with multiple organs, virtual bodies, even posthuman bodies

(Halberstam, 1998b, p.118)

Cáel M Keegan's article 'Tongues Without Bodies for *Transgender Studies Quarterly* offers perhaps the most profound exploration of this potentiality. He argues that *Sense8* is not simply a show that is about, or featuring, a prominent trans character but one which adopts a 'trans aesthetic' throughout as he explains below:

Sense8 marks a number of unprecedented moments in televisual media that have been largely overshadowed by the success of more culturally mainstream and palatable transgender identity narratives, such as those in Orange and Transparent. Unlike these programs, which aim to "teach" transgender to liberal cisgender audiences through universalist metaphors or through pedagogical forms of affect, Sense8 offers different routes into trans as an aesthetic practice or as a set of narrative strategies for simultaneously representing and replicating hypermodern globality.

(Keegan, 2016, p.606)

For Keegan, *Sense8* takes the trans narrative to a new, previously uncharted level, which not only subverts the dominant paradigm on trans experience but opens up new and exciting possibilities for the cultural politics of sex. In practice, he argues that 'this multiplication of subjectivity is a direct challenge to the manner in which gender transition is narrativized in medicine and popular culture as a departure from a 'wrong body' and an arrival at a gendered 'home' or 'true self' (Keegan 2013 cited in Keegan, 2016, p.608). In offering character narratives which are so entwined in each other, but which transcend time and space as we typically understand it, new forms of connectedness and identity are created.

This concurrent centralising and de-stabilising of identity are illustrated beautifully in the character of Nomi herself. Keegan explains that the name 'Nomi' can be translated as meaning

'One who is marked by knowledge' by possessing an organ of special insight... For Nomi, this "organ" is her sensate power, which is represented as an aestheticization of trans consciousness—of

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“knowing” something is there when no one else can perceive it. Nomi Marks is “marked” by her knowledge in ways that will move her toward a pluralization of self that challenges the ideal of autonomous personhood embedded in identitarian narratives of transgender. In becoming sensate, Nomi will become a ‘we’—in other words, a ‘no me’.

(Keegan, 2016, p.608)

Further to this, I would add that her name ‘Nomi’ is phonetically the same as ‘know-me’, which notions at an implicit kind of self-knowledge which, though de-stabilised by the plurality of self which arises from her connections with the rest of the cluster, also hints at a level of comfort with, or self-assuredness of who she is.

We can start to see a particular kind of trans aesthetic emerging from *Sense8* and this is a concept that I want to explore further. My hypothesis is that ‘trans’ as a category, and as rendered in *Sense8* contains within it a productive power, a power to cut across, or TRANSgress and TRANScend the limitations of heteropatriarchy, gender binaries and perhaps even reality itself. Leslie Feinberg documents how trans-type identities have come to represent just such a productive power. ‘Among the Lakota people, a “*heyoka*” was a cross-dresser, a unique person...respected because he brought a reality change when you saw him’ (Feinberg, 1996, p.166), for me, this hints at how, when taken outside of the more rigid approaches to gender that are dominant in our culture, ‘trans’ offers an invitation to explore in that when presented with it as a concept, one is inevitably changed and destabilised. Kate Bornstein reflects on their enjoyment of queer theatre ‘I want the very act of my assuming another identity on stage to call into question the identity of each and every audience member. Accordingly, when I attend theatre: I want my own rigid notions of identity to be shaken up’ (Bornstein, 1994, pp.204–205). For Bornstein, queer theatre both literally and figuratively creates a ‘third space’ in which something almost magical can occur: the calling into question of rigid identities. My argument is that in being free to cater to queer audiences in radically new ways, Netflix is also creating such a space where shows like *Sense8* can be rendered. Moreover Bornstein uses their own fashion sense as an analogy for trans style:

The link between fashion and identity begins to get real interesting, however, in the case of people who don’t fall clearly into a culturally recognised identity — people like me. My identity as a transsexual lesbian whose female lesbian lover transitioned to gay male is manifest in my fashion statement — both my identity and fashion are based on collage. You know — a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing... And that’s the style of this book. It’s a trans style, I suppose.

(Bornstein, 1994, p.5)

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Whilst clearly discussing the visual aspect of her fashion and trans style, she is also alluding to a non-fixed and DIY sort of aesthetic which is created by trans. She playfully writes that 'instead of imagining gender as opposite poles of a two-dimensional line, it would be interesting to twirl that line in space, and then spin it through several more dimensions. In this way, many more possibilities of gender identity may be explored' (Bornstein, 1994, p.148). It is these 'possibilities' that she alludes to which I think are also present in *Sense8* and its very fluid handling of sex and gender. Moreover, such possibilities are not just wondrous and exciting for being new; they also have liberatory properties. The performance artist Travis Alabanza wrote in a recent Facebook status:

When I say trans, I also mean escape. I mean choice. I mean autonomy. I mean wanting something greater than what you told me. Wanting more possibilities than the one you forced on me.

(Alabanza, 2019)

In addition to creating a trans aesthetic, *Sense8* also evokes a certain queer temporality. Like *OITNB*, *Sense8* tells its story through the deployment on non-linear narratives. In itself, non-linear story-telling is not a particularly queer modality, but when it is utilised alongside characters who purposefully defy identitarian boundaries and in a context which does away with geographical borders and constraints (as the sensates' empathetic abilities permit), something quite subversive is produced. Dinshaw et al., (2007) offer us a fascinating roundtable discussion of this concept. Dinshaw herself notes that she 'focused on the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then, and I suggested that with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time' (Dinshaw et al., 2007, p.178).

Admittedly, though this concept sounds wondrous and full of amazing possibilities, it can be difficult to envisage what a queer temporality might actually look or feel like, outside the context of the imaginings of a group of queer scholars. Halberstam's contributions to the roundtable really helped to solidify this for me:

Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity.

(J Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., 2007, p.182)

In addition to the non-linear narrative of *Sense8*, it produces queer time in *Sense8* in a number of other ways. Firstly, it is notable that none of our main protagonists appear to follow the

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'narrative coherence' that Halberstam cites, or what we might think of as the hetero timeline. None of the sensates have children or childcare responsibilities and only Kala and Rajan are married. Secondly, Halberstam posits that as a result of not having the obligations of childcare, attending family functions and weddings etc, parts of the queer community are free to engage in prolonged periods of adolescence, facilitated by their relative abundance of free time and disposable income. They argue that as a result, LGBT people often create radical and longer lasting sub-cultures than their hetero counterparts. I estimate that all of the sensates are in their late-twenties to mid-thirties, and they are frequently depicted DJing in nightclubs (Reiley) or flamboyantly dancing in pride parades (Nomi + Amanita). This is *of course* not to suggest that LGBT people never have children or responsibilities, or that they are all financially well-off, simply that because a significant number of us have 'imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices'³⁹ (Halberstam, 2005), the notion of 'queer time' is intelligible, and from it, new formulations of living, loving and existing are created.

This notion of queer-time reflects my own experience of existing within the queer community; most of my friends are child-free, do not own their own homes, many are freelance or in precarious employment arrangements and all of us are frequent, active participants in various subcultures (gaming, music, sci-fi). Moreover, my close friendship group comprises of people who possess a range of gender identities and age from around 25-65, which I suspect is not typical of straight friendship circles. In this respect, both the sensates and my own friendship circles represent 'found families' which are familiar in the queer community (as often times we are rejected by own blood relatives) are exemplary of what types of arrangements might spring from the trans aesthetics and queer temporalities discussed here. It may seem obvious to state, but the identification in my own life, and in those represented in *Sense8* is important for bringing queer theory into reality. As Feinberg notes:

Today, a great deal of "gender theory" is abstracted from human experience. But if theory is not the crystalised resin of experience, it ceases to be a guide to action. I offer history, politics, and theory that live and breathe because they are rooted in the experience of real people who fought flesh-and-blood battles for freedom. And my work is not solely devoted to chronicling the past, but is a component of my organizing to help shape the future.

(Feinberg, 1996, p.xiii)

In some ways, programmes like *Sense8* are virtual realities, in part because their science-fiction components necessarily deposit them in alternate realities. However, though the worlds they offer may not be scientifically possible (as we understand it at present), 'virtual realities allow for more opportunities to play with gender, as well as more sophisticated methods of

³⁹ Euphemisms I like and will be utilising!

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playing, but any virtual reality is a playing field on which we can rehearse for the future' (Bornstein, 1994, p.178).

Moreover, in addition to creating more places to 'play' with gender and sex – brilliant objectives though these are, Steinmetz also argues that the increased visibility or 'transparency' which is afforded 'is improving the lives of a long misunderstood minority and beginning to yield new policies, as trans activists and their supporters push for changes in schools, hospitals, workplaces, prisons and the military' (Steinmetz, 2014).

Both *OITNB* and *Sense8* therefore offer not only varied and sophisticated narratives around the key identities of 'lesbian', 'butch' and 'trans', but examples of how these identities can also be understood as potentialities creating new experiential possibilities within the Utopian frameworks in which they are situated. With this potentialising force in mind, I will now move on to looking at how the shows offer new possibilities with relation to forms of love, sex and relationships.

8. Queer Possibilities And Heterosexual Mundanities

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. Their here and now is a prison house. We must strive in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.

(Muñoz, 2009, p.1)

There are many ways in which both of my texts offer new possibilities: as we have seen in the previous chapters, their ability to expand the scope of previously fixed identities offers what I have come to think of as a 'queering' of queer. The queering of queer happens in my texts in two key ways. Firstly, there is an obvious sense in which the mainstreaming of queer characters and narratives onscreen represents a literal process of making increasingly queer content on television. However, there is also a Butlerian process of queering by which I mean breaking open the conceptual understandings, the very fabric of which queer ideas are understood. Just as for Butler there was a progressive and tangible benefit to creating 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990), I posit that my texts, and in particular *Sense8*, create a form of sexuality trouble. As explored by Muñoz above, they offer readings which call into question the very ideas of lesbian, butch, trans, sex, romance and intimacy. In this section I will explore how this is achieved in terms of redefining both relationships and sex itself.

Re-defining Romantic And Familial Relationships

Both of my shows offer a considerable queering of familial and romantic relationships. *OITNB* does so more subtly, but no less importantly, by depicting multiple arrangements of ‘found’ families and cultivated motherhoods. Many of the women on the show have difficult family histories, from Doggett’s mother’s ominous advice about dealing with men ‘doing you different’ as explored in Chapter Six as she approaches womanhood⁴⁰, to Taystee’s childhood as a ward of the state. Upon entering prison, the women are forced to live with, work alongside and ultimately form bonds and relationships with women who are strangers to them.

We learn right from episode one that Red regards the women in her group as ‘family’, and she makes numerous references to the other women being her ‘children’ who are juxtaposed against her strained relationship with her biological sons. This familial bond is also present in the other groups in the prison; after Poussey’s death, inmates from outside of her immediate friendship group are seen bringing offerings of food and other commodities to the ‘grieving family’ – Poussey’s inner circle (Kohen, 2016). The notion of found family is a consistent one, and one which feels particularly familiar to queer audiences, many of whom have experienced familial rejection (a report by the Albert Kennedy Trusts estimates that 77% of young homeless LGBT people cite familial rejection as the primary cause of their homelessness (The Albert Kennedy Trust, 2014)). In *OITNB*, family is not necessarily about blood but about bonds, loyalty and shared experiences. So much so, that upon leaving the prison, Taystee finds it difficult to function in the outside world where she has no support network, and ultimately ends up re-offending, in part it seems to return to the relative safety of her prison family.

Moreover, the ‘families’ on *OITNB* do not just represent found families, they are also sites of important relationships between women. Adrienne Rich used the term ‘lesbian continuum’

To include a range — through each woman's life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.

(Rich, 1980, pp.648–649)

⁴⁰ See chapter 5 Toxic Masculinities and Serious Consequences – Naming the Dangers in the Cultural Politics of Sex.

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Here then, the matriarchies, bonds, sexual, familial and platonic relationships between the women on *Orange* become much more important because they create visibility for the concept of female friendship which is often only depicted in the media as bitchy or superficial.

Sense8, on the other hand, is more overt in its queering of family. The very notion of the cluster is a form of found family — a group of non-blood relatives who share a unique and unbreakable bond, the strength of which is evident in the group’s ongoing battle with Whispers and BPO. Moreover, the language of motherhood and childbirth is employed throughout the show. Angelica is said to have given ‘birth’ to our core cluster, and in the series finale, the Lacuna is revealed to be a trinity of mothers — an actual mother, mother of the Lacuna and mother of her cluster. The Lacuna mother explains that ‘mothers and children retain a connection, an umbilical cord that remains uncut until death’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018).

In addition to the newly forged familial bonds, *Sense8* also includes passing reference to several pre-existing relationships which defy convention. At Nomi and Amanita’s wedding, Amanita’s biological mother and three fathers arrive. It is implied that she was conceived by arrangement between her mother and one of the three gay men, but it is not known whose sperm actually resulted in the pregnancy. Though this arrangement is unusual, the show almost glosses over it entirely and certainly without batting an eye, which represents a normalising of the queer aesthetic of non-nuclear families. This notion is also subtly evoked when Bug thanks Nomi for being his ‘family’ at the wedding, and more overtly as Rover officiates the wedding, addressing the gathered families, friends and sensates:

No one thing is one thing only, how people endow what is familiar with new, other ever evolving meaning and by doing so release us from the expected, the familiar into something unforeseeable. It is in this unfamiliar realm that we find new possibilities, it is in the unknown that we find hope.

***Armor Vincit Omnia* (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018)**

The notion of ‘how people endow what is familiar with new’ offers an example of the discursive meaning production which I argue is present in both my texts, but is also pertinent to the ways in which the #MeToo moment is comfortable with a greater degree of fluidity in labels and identities. The cluster, then, depicts this concept by offering not only a collection of connected individuals, but a further connection to both the cluster and Lacuna mothers.

However, it is in the romantic bonds and relationships formed between members of the cluster, and, at times, their non-cluster romantic partners which offers the most subversive re-imagining of family, as we come to see two polyamorous groups emerge.

Kala is conflicted by her feelings for both her husband Rajan and her newly found love interest Wolfgang. At times, she is portrayed as feeling as though she is cheating on Rajan when she

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indulges her desires for Wolfgang. She confides in Bug that she does not know what the rules are for her new situation and he pragmatically advises her: 'since you can in fact be in more than two places at the same time, defying the laws of physics, I would suggest that there are no rules' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018), which leads to a period of experimentation as she slips in and out of her mind and body as she is intimate with at first one of the men and then the other: through initially, her physical, corporeal connection to Rajan, and then her empathetic sensate connection to Wolfgang.

However, as the finale episode progresses, Kala, Rajan and Wolfgang are shown making peace with their arrangement, though not fully understanding what it might mean for them (as illustrated by Wolfgang's sheepish grin and shrug of his shoulders). Moreover, he explains to his best friend Felix that the relationship is 'complicated', which is a nod to one of the three original relationship statuses that could be selected on Facebook⁴¹. This is a small but typical example of the changing and digitising of sites of intimacy and politics that the show and the #MeToo moment represent, and of an assumed familiarity in the audience with this reference. By the end of the episode, we see the three of them go into the bedroom together in shared physical space as Rajan makes love to both Kala and Wolfgang in the final group sex scene (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018).

Lito, Danni and Fernando also embark on a polyamorous relationship. At the start of the series, Lito and Hernando are in a relationship together but trying to keep it under wraps as Lito fears what the consequences might be for his film career if his homosexuality is discovered. Danni is a close female friend of the pair, but their relationship is revealed to be more complex as Lito and Herndano display their comfort being intimate as a couple whilst she watches them, masturbating at the sight of them together (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016). The exact nature of the threesome's relationship is never really made clear. Danni is often present when Lito and Fernando have sex, and shares a bed with them, but is never shown being physically intimate with either of them herself. Lito and Fernando's sexualities are also never explicitly named, but it is assumed that they are gay rather than bisexual as they do not include Danni in the physicality of their love-making. The polyamory here is thus up to interpretation: perhaps Lito and Hernando find the exhibitionism of making love in her presence arousing, and perhaps Danni, who has fled an abusive relationship with another man, enjoys not experiencing any pressure to have intercourse or perform a particular sexual role. Moreover, that Dani is in the position of watcher, can be read as a genderqueering of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 2009). The beauty of their arrangement, and of *Sense8* more broadly, is that it defies explanation or labelling. In finding a mutually enjoyable and consensual

⁴¹ 'Single', 'In a relationship' or 'It's complicated'.

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arrangement that is based on both sexual and non-sexual intimacy, the three of them have found what works for them, no more need be said. This once more represents a radical abandonment of labelling, which invites viewers to make sense of what they are seeing for themselves and in accordance with their own lived experiences.

Sexual Possibilities, Group Sex On *Sense8*

Deepening the concept of radically redefined sexual politics, the most memorable scenes in the show on this front are the two instances of group sex which occur and offer what I posit are the most hedonistic and pleasure-charged sequences across both shows.

The first occurrence of group sex arises in season one, episode six *Demons* (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016). The scene is visually complex, comprising the cutting and overlaying of multiple shots of the group in multiple locations as they are intimate with each other— some in body, some through empathic ‘visiting’, and others through both. The episode’s title ‘Demons’ is evoked in the soundtrack, which is Fatboy Slim ft Macy Gray, ‘*Demons*’ (Fat Boy Slim and Ft. Macy Gray, 2001). Both the episode and song title fit within the show’s broader aesthetic of religious iconography, which is discussed later in this chapter⁴², and the notion of ‘demons’ could be said to allude to the deviant or taboo sex which will take place. However, this message of ‘deviance’ is undermined by the song’s lyric, ‘all of your demons will wither away’, which is repeated throughout the scene, suggesting that the concerns of those who might view the group sex as deviant will ‘wither away’ as the group are sexually liberated and elevated sensually to new forms of pleasure and connectedness.

The first group sex scene is incredibly complex and warrants a detailed description to illustrate not only the multitude of connections which are being forged but the cadence of the scene which builds and builds to an orgasmic crescendo which is also a sexual revelation for the characters. The scene starts with shots of Will and his police partner, and Lito and Hernando, working out in the gym (hundreds of miles apart). Wolfgang is in a public bath (presumably somewhere in Germany still), beads of sweat form on his naked body, which is shown full frontal, and naked women walk past in the background. The shot reverts back to Lito’s rippling muscles as he passionately kisses Hernando and the shot melts away so that he is then kissing Will, who is bench-pressing weights in the gym. Hernando is then stood in front of Lito, who is kissing up his back and grabbing the top of his head, he reaches behind him and grabs Lito’s behind as they caress each other’s faces. Danni is taking pictures, she is wearing a crop top and shorts and reaches into her shorts and begins masturbating, she is biting her lip. Elsewhere, Nomi removes her top, she is kissing Amanita on the bed and says ‘I am going to

⁴² The cluster mother is named ‘Angelica’ and the series opens in a ruined cathedral

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make love to you'. Lito removes Hernando's glasses and says: 'I remember the first time we kissed'. Then Nomi is kissing Hernando. Wolfgang lays prone, naked in the public bath, eyes closed. Nomi begins performing oral sex on Amanita and is then shown approaching Wolfgang in the bath, then kissing Will, before Lito comes behind Amanita in the baths, she is between Wolfgang and Lito. Next, we see Lito having sex with Hernando from behind, we can't see their faces but there is erotic art on the walls watching us watching them. We are part of this, perhaps even encouraged to 'visit' the scene, through the portal of Netflix and as a result of our assumed identification with the characters and their embodiments of queer. Next, Will is in the bath, then in a threesome with Nomi and Amanita, then back to the bath kissing Wolfgang. There is a mass of bodies entangled, mirrors, ecstasy, sudden gasping as they climax. The climax ebbs away as Wolfgang is shown once more alone in the bath. His penis is not erect, and it is unclear whether this is due to censorship rules on the platform or because the group sex has essentially been all in his mind. The scene ends with Amanita and Nomi nuzzling, out of breath, and Lito exclaiming: 'I just had one of the best orgasms of my life!'.

My attempts to describe the first group sex scene do not do the sequence justice. The way in which the sounds and visuals are woven together, panning in and out, is incredibly sophisticated and artfully achieved by the Wachowskis' trademark dexterity of cinematography. Keegan describes more eloquently how 'the camera and musical scoring work in ingenious ways that decentre our notions of discrete embodiment, linear spatiality, and temporal causality, attempting to pluralize our perception of how a narrative or self can take place' (Keegan, 2016, p.608). Thus, again, we are drawn in as our own discrete identities 'wither away'. What is important about this scene is not only how the tools of visual media are deployed to create an incredibly beautiful queer aesthetic, but the extent to which such an aesthetic opens up utopian possibilities of sexual pleasure. The episode feels genuinely radical in that I can think of no other scene to match it in televisual history to date.

However, though to me the scene represents almost cinematic perfection, there has been one notable criticism of it. The fact that Capheus, Kala, Rajan and Sun are not featured has led to a reading of the scene as white-washed. The critique being that bodies of colour have been excluded or not deemed acceptable to be shown in this way. As Lothian argues, 'the scene leaves out the Black and Asian characters (we catch a glimpse of Capheus's arousal, but his body does not take part), highlighting the racial limitations of dominant queer representation as well as of the white liberal fantasy that we are all the same under the skin' (Lothian, 2016, p.95). Though I am keen not to discard this criticism too quickly, I am really not convinced that it is valid. That Amanita is present and shown nude seems to counteract the idea that this is a whites-only scene, and the absence of the other sensates, including Reiley (who is white) as well, appears to be down to the fact that their narratives had not yet been so fully explored in

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the season. Certainly, however, this criticism was taken on board by the producers, as the second and final group sex scene of the show in the series finale *Amor Vincit Omnia* features *all* of the sensates and their assorted non-sensate lovers.

The second and final group sex scene is just as visually stunning as the first, but even more complex due to the sheer number of characters involved. The scene begins with fireworks at Nomi and Amanita's wedding, the ambient sound is removed, just fireworks and music remain, faces lit up in the light of rockets. There are explosions in the sky and champagne corks popping, which conjure images of sexual eruptions. The music begins (*Nothing Matters When We're Dancing*, The Magnetic Fields, 1999). Nomi and Amanita's wedding dance pans out to show the various cast members dancing, smiling and laughing. The first track fades out as the strings begin on Ludovico Einaudi's *Experience* (Einaudi, 2013) and the shots fade in and out of the various couples and triples taking each other to bed in slow motion. At first the sequence fades in and out of the individual pairings and triples having sex in their respective rooms before showing the sensates start to 'visit' each other's bedrooms. Hands trace body parts, there is nuzzling as the music builds to crescendo slowly. There are gentle intimacies, the kissing of fingers, eye contact, fingers digging into skin. Rajan and Kala find Wolfgang on the bed inviting them in. Nomi pulls out the dildo. The shots change every second gently in time with the music. All of the cast members are shown fully naked, heads tipping back, bodies arching. Rajan and Wolfgang kiss, then the shot zooms out on the whole cast in one tangle of bodies of all colours, shapes and sizes entwined with flashbacks to moments in all of their relationships. Rajan climaxes, exclaiming 'My god! I didn't think such things were possible!' and the scene closes on a shot of the wet dildo (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018).

Like the first group sex scene, it feels subversive and genuinely novel. There is also a sense that this one is 'for the fans'. After all, the season finale was created after the show was cancelled and on the back of fan demand, so there is a sense that *Armor* offers the fans the happy ending that they desire for all of the sensates and their lovers. Such a happy ending represents a significant queering of happiness itself, as well as of the traditional heterosexual narrative of weddings, which subverts typical narratives in which queer results in punishment or heartbreak. Sara Ahmed describes how the unhappy queer ending was once a 'political gift' (Ahmed, 2010, p.88) for queer communities in that, in acting as a form of censorship, it at least permitted the publication of queer stories about queers. I posit that *Armor* is evidence of a major shift in the cultural politics of sex which demonstrates that queer narratives and queer audiences have moved beyond the need to capitulate to stories which show them always as returning to heterosexuality, going mad or dying (Ahmed, 2010, p.88). That *Armor* offers its audience a kind of queer wish fulfilment is progressive in the utmost and illustrates not only

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that the cultural politics of sex is queerer in content during the #MeToo moment than under its predecessors, but that it carves out space for queer imagining and potential which spills off-screen, too, and has broader ramifications, as Ahmed notes, for what are regarded as ‘good’ or ‘bad lives’.

Moreover, we witness a completely hedonistic centring of sexual pleasure, which is notable in that, though hedonistic, it is entirely consensual and nobody is being harmed in the pursuit of such unimaginable levels of sexual gratification. The corporeality is raw and focussed on by the absence of ambient sound, only the music can be heard, but the facial expressions, muscular clenches and toe curls tells us all we need to know about the state of ecstasy that is being experienced. The utopian potentiality is created not only in the queer nature of bodies of all genders engaging in sex, but in the empathic ‘visits’ by which the sensates experience not only their own bodily pleasures but the vicarious pleasures of the others in the cluster. This new form of pleasure and gratification is perhaps best described by the term ‘compersion’, which is ubiquitous in the polyamorous community and refers to the experiencing of pleasure in witnessing the pleasure of a loved one.

Such a concept feels almost alien in a visual culture which even in LGBT communities tends to centre serial monogamy. Our visual and media culture is saturated with stories of infidelity, jealousy and romantic deception, so to glimpse a form of sexuality which transcends these constraints shows how *Sense8* is forging a new form of sexual cultural politics.

Radical Empathy, Hyper-Sensuality And Intimacy Re-defined.

Though *Sense8* radically re-imagines both relationships and sexual pleasure, it is also able to destabilise and expand our ideas of what constitutes *intimacy*. We have seen already how the empathic link between the sensates allows them to experience non-corporeal forms of sexual pleasure, so I will now examine the other forms of extra-bodily intimacy which the show creates.

It is important to note here that we are already living in a time of unprecedented transformations in intimacy. Fourth-wave feminism has diversified in its perception of valid sexualities to include aromantics, asexuals, demisexuals and sapiosexuals as part of the queer umbrella. Just as the internet brought with it new ways to communicate, to shop and to protest, so too did it facilitate new forms of intimacy. From the adults-only chatrooms of its early years to the sexting and sexy-skyping of today, there is a remarkable level of human ingenuity when it comes to thinking of new and exciting ways to combine technology and intimacy. I fondly recall the shared novelty of being able to video call my long-distance girlfriend, watching each other as we fell asleep in our respective beds, hundreds of miles

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apart, and echoed on *Sense8* when Capheus is shown video-calling Zakia, claiming that ‘even pixelated you’re beautiful!’ (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). A 2015 study by Campbell and Murray found that video-calling not only allowed couples to feel more connected but to feel more confidence in their shared communication and emotional connections (Campbell and Murray, 2015, p.256). That we see such technologies utilised in romantic pairings on *Sense8* not only reflects their increasing prevalence in modern relationships but further opens up possibilities for novel and enhanced forms of intimacy.

In addition to novel forms of intimacy, the #MeToo moment has seen the emergence of technofied forms of sensuality. 2018 marked a rise in the online ASMR⁴³ video trend in which content creators film videos of themselves making noises such as whispering, crunching or scratching, which are reported to create a relaxing sensation, sometimes called a ‘brain tingle’ or ‘brain orgasm’ in the viewer. Curious about the phenomenon, having learnt about it at work (a mental health unit for children and adolescents), I decided to investigate ASMR myself. I initially found the videos slightly bizarre and quite baffling, but I did also experience the ‘tingling’ sensation that is widely reported. For me it was akin to that feeling of having the proverbial hairs on the back of one’s neck stand up, or the sensation of rubbing one’s scalp after a long day. Smith and Snider report in their research with the ASMR community on Reddit that it is often described as ‘sounds that feel good’ (Smith and Snider, 2019, p.42), and such a description speaks to the sense in which ASMR is regarded as transcending pre-existing notions about the operation of bodily senses.

So popular has ASMR become that *Medium* reported in 2018 that there were over 11 million videos on YouTube alone (Sponsokit, 2018), and a cursory search at the time of writing revealed that the most watched ASMR video on the site has been viewed some 779 million times. Moreover, the craze has resulted in a flurry of academic research projects into the phenomenon (Barratt and Davis, 2015; Smith and Snider, 2019) which aim to prove definitively if it actually exists, and what therapeutic benefits it might have if it does.

There is also a raging debate going on within the ASMR community as to the role of sexuality in ASMR videos (Reddit, 2017; Plante, 2015). On the one hand, many of the videos feature attractive young women, whispering or engaging in sensual play in a manner which doesn’t feel un-sexual. On the other, many ASMR performers argue that they are struggling to have their artform taken seriously and don’t want to be categorised as some form of mild pornography. To me, what is interesting about ASMR is not whether it is real or not, nor whether it is inherently sexual or not, but that it represents a new form of intimacy, which even if entirely non-sexual is rooted in a perceived form of technofied sensual pleasure which has

⁴³ Autonomous sensory meridian response

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become especially popular with young people. Smith and Snider suggest that the intimacy of the practice is located in the fact that the sounds used are usually those which can only be heard when in close proximity to the source; whispering, rustling etc. The notion is that recordings of such sounds are able to evoke memory and sensory response in ways which are pleasurable to the listener (Smith and Snider, 2019, p.45). Probably coincidental, but that the Villain of *Sense8* is named 'Whispers' echoes this sentiment. Whispers are private, designed to get under the skin. In the case of ASMR this takes the form of a physical sensation, but in *Sense8* it represents Whispers' attempts to penetrate the minds of the cluster against their will.

Moreover, Julia Serano discusses her own personal experiences of commencing female hormones and the impact that this had on her physical and emotional senses.

The change in the intensity of my emotions is paralleled in my sense of touch as well. I cannot say for sure that my sense of touch has improved — that I am able to feel things that I couldn't before — but it surely plays a greater role in how I experience the world. Whenever I am interested in something, whether it's a book, a piece of artwork, an article of clothing, or an object or material of any kind, I feel compelled to touch it, to handle it, as though my understanding of it would be incomplete without the tactile knowledge of how it physically feels to me. In contrast, when hormonally male, I generally felt satisfied with simply seeing an object of interest... I noticed that when I would kiss Dani or nuzzle my nose into her neck, it felt as though fireworks were going off in my brain. I was barraged by amazingly sweet, soothing, and sensual smells that not only sexually stimulated me, but also made me feel closer to her, as if I were connected to her in a way that I hadn't been before.

(Serano, 2007, pp.68–69)

What Serano describes can be understood under the rubric of 'trans aesthetic' which I discussed in Chapter 7. Her example is a very real, literal way in which her transness allows her to experience the world in new and particular ways. I wonder if it is possible that because of their lived experience as trans women, the Wachowskis consciously or unconsciously allude to this in *Sense8* through their inclusion of radical empathy and different sensual modalities of intimacy?

In *Sense8*, these new modalities of intimacy are most vividly explored through the reconceptualisation of empathy. In episode six of season one, there is a touching 'visit' between Sun and Riley (physically positioned on opposite sides of the globe from one another). Riley is surprised to 'see' Sun commenting 'I thought I was alone'; 'Me too', Riley replies. Perhaps a little nod to the #MeToo movement, we once again get a glimpse of the unifying power of these two simple words. Riley and Sun's perceptions of being 'alone' are both physical, in that each is the only body present in the vicinity and metaphorically in that

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they were not consciously 'visiting' with other sensates when they happened across one another. There is also a sub-textual interpretation of 'alone' as meaning lonely, as both are wrestling with their own personal problems, and as I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis, there is something intrinsically powerful and connecting in the words 'me too'. Riley is sat at a large sun dial with the words 'I have conversed with the spiritual sun' engraved on it and the sun sets behind her and Sun. Once more, the meaning of the words is poignant in that, in addition to being a quaint little quote, Riley is literally conversing with Sun, who is in some respects 'spiritual' in relation to her, in that she is not materially present. Sun observes that she can 'taste' the hash that Riley is smoking but adds that it is 'more like a memory' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2016). This shared sensual experience of taste represents a new, platonic kind of intimacy between the pair and acts as a manifestation of the ways in which their lives appear to be intersecting and mirroring each other: both Sun and Riley are in trouble for the crimes of others, both lost their mothers young, both are safer elsewhere (Iceland, prison) than where they are. Thus, we see how their newly acquired empathic connection allows them to forge novel connections both sensually, as with the taste of the hash, and emotionally in their shared life experiences.

It is not just through taste either. Music and sound play a pivotal role in the world-building and ambiance of *Sense8*, so much so that the theme tune itself was composed by digitally rendering in sound the brain wave patterns of eight random strangers (Pilat, 2015). Such a recording feels in keeping with the ASMR ethos explored above, but also speaks to a sense in which the show's very ontology is one in which consciousness transcends individuality. As much as the #MeToo moment centres identity politics and the embrace of difference, examples such as this suggest ways in which we also possess a profound, and perhaps even divine (in the sense of defying science), commonality. As I explored in my discussion of identity politics in Chapter Seven, the notion that intersectional approaches are antithetical to solidarity is a misnomer, and the *Sense8* theme tune represents a cultural depiction of coalescing but not erasure of individual strands (brain waves) into something much more powerful: a political polyphony which feels allegorical for the #MeToo moment which I am presenting.

Sense8's centralising of empathy is apparent in more than just the supernatural connection between the sensates, which provides the main premise for the show. In her wedding vows to Amanita, Nomi remarks that 'we live in a world that teaches us to distrust feelings, over and over we are reminded that feelings are not as important as reason, that feelings are childish, irresponsible, dangerous, we are taught to ignore them, control or deny them' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). Kaiser notes that the show 'is about loving and trusting and believing in feelings, and not letting the hobgoblins of reason bring us down, forcing us into fear of loss of control' (Kaiser, 2018). This focus on feelings, be they physical sensations

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such as taste or emotional ones such as love, represent a subversion of modernity's emphasis on reason and logic. In some regards this can be understood as a sentiment with feminist undertones in that women's experiences, qualitative research methods and feminism itself have historically been dismissed as being too rooted in emotion and irrationality. Moreover, the notion of 'trusting in feelings' represents a further utopian possibility: a hint at an alternative way of living and loving and interacting which might transcend neo-liberalism's constraints of greed and individualism.

Kaiser also notes that there is a 'case to be made for the internet itself, and social media, as the metaphorical target of *Sense8*. After all, where else can you connect to your best friends' deepest or most inane thoughts, anytime you feel like it?' (Kaiser, 2018). Though added somewhat in jest, there is perhaps a deeper truth in this, which links back to my hypothesis that the #MeToo moment is situated in a period of extensive transformation in terms of our 'real' and online lives, relationships and intimacies. The empathetic connections of *Sense8*, for now, can exist only in the speculation of science fiction, but perhaps the internet the next best thing, in that it connects us in ways previously unimaginable which eliminate the confines of shared space and even time.

It is worth interjecting here that it is not only *Sense8* in which empathy plays an important role in redefining intimacy. There are examples of a similar approach present in *OITNB*, though these are often subtler and less overtly transformative. As Nussbaum points out, 'the theme of "Orange Is the New Black"...has always been empathy, a refusal to see anyone as inhuman' (Nussbaum, 2016), and we can see this in the show's tendernesses both large and small. The fact that each character's back story is presented in such narrative depth makes it difficult not to empathise with even its most morally abhorrent characters, but it is in the smaller actions which I think the show has the most to say on new forms of intimacy. Take for example this gentle exchange between Piper and Sophia as Sophia washes Piper's hair in the salon:

Sophia: *You ok hunny?*

Piper: *It's just being touched by another person*

Sophia: *I get it, your body gets lonely in here*

Piper: *Yeah, it's not even sex y'know, I miss contact*

Sophia: *Human beings are not supposed to live like this, huh, I been in here two years and there's still nights I reach out for my wife.*

*F*cksgiving (Kohen, 2013a)*

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The exchange highlights two sentiments. Firstly, the closeness of the women as they talk about their feelings of loneliness during their incarceration, empathising with each other's experiences; and secondly, the importance of human touch in wellbeing. As Piper points out, it is not even 'sexy' touch that she is missing, but the simple, intimate pleasure of feeling another person's body in contact with her own. The way in which prison life de-humanises them in this respect is also highlighted in episode two of season one, when a voice on the loudspeaker advises Larry, as he waits to be allowed to visit Piper in the waiting room, that 'two hugs only are permitted, one on arrival, one on departure' (Kohen, 2013f). We are reminded of the importance of little intimacies and how prisoners are denied this basic human contact. This observation came to feel even more pertinent in the process of redrafting the chapter during week 5 of the Covid-19 lockdown. I have not physically seen, let alone touched my friends or family during the lockdown period and have been struck by just how much I miss the platonic intimacies of my friendships, and by how we have been utilising the internet to try and recreate them.

It Tastes So Good – The Functionalities Of Food On Netflix

In addition to the exploration of sensation and emotion in relation to intimacy, there is also an important interconnectedness between the concepts of food, addiction, sex and love in my texts, which I posit denotes a further, utopian, opening up of the concept of intimacy.

Food plays a particularly prevalent role in *Orange Is the New Black*. In the very first episode, Piper makes the inadvertent mistake of insulting Red's cooking. Red retaliates by cutting her off – denying Piper access to food, and we see that as well as leaving Piper hungry, she is also alone. The other inmates will not risk Red's ire by breaking the embargo on Piper's access to food, and so this initially bodily denial becomes an emotional one as the comfort which is offered by both the food itself and the community in the prison is withheld from her. Moreover, the multifaceted functions of food are further underscored in episode two of the first season, when Red comments to her husband on the phone that 'there's the people who serve the bread and the people who eat the bread' (Kohen, 2013f). Her choice of a food-based metaphor for explaining socially entrenched power structures hints at the fundamentality of food not just as fuel but in human existence.

Perhaps the most significant role of food in *OITNB* is as a means of expressing love in all of its forms: romantic, platonic, familial. In episode 10 of season three alone, there are numerous examples of this:

- Tiffany's mother celebrates her menstruation with ice cream and pop.

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- Coates gives Tiffany some smuggled doughnuts to make up for the duckpond incident in the previous episode.
- Caputo notes that 'You can feed your souls with food' as he ushers the inmates back inside for breakfast.
- Norma brings Red fresh vegetables from the greenhouse as they are now eating boil-in-the bag meals due to the funding cuts.
- Tiffany and Coates bond over their favourite ice cream flavours.
- Red bonds with the Latina women as she makes ratatouille from the freshly grown vegetables in the prison garden, noting that doing so makes her 'feel like a person' (Kohen, 2015a).
- Tiffany says 'I only accept Visa, Mastercard and Mountain Dew' (Kohen, 2015a) – in exchange for sex.

We can see from each of these examples the ways in which food is frequently substituted or used as an expression of love, guilt, friendship or even as currency for sex, all of which demonstrate a re-imagining of what these very notions mean and how they can be performed.

Food is also used creatively in *Sense8*. In the first episode, Amanita and Nomi share a burrito, Amanita feeds Nomi and they talk about their first brownies (hash) and they reminisce over their first Pride, they are kissing, and a person dressed in a fairy costume sells them the brownies. This tender scene highlights the power of sensation, taste and food in connecting with both their memories and each other. The fact that the brownies in question were laced with marijuana also offers a hint of the themes of drugs and addiction which are present in the show.

In *Sense8*, recreational drug use is normalised and presented as being a means to open the mind to wondrous possibilities. In episode one, Riley is given DMT⁴⁴ by Nyx who describes it as 'a simple molecule present in all living things.' He explains that 'scientists talk about it being part of an eco-biological synaptic network. When people take it, they see their birth, their death, worlds beyond this one. They talk of truth connection transcendence' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a). The DMT is a way of experiencing a glimpse of the ego-death that the sensates perceive when they 'visit' each other and represents a further strand of the sensory experience and empathic connectedness that form the basis of the show's utopianism. In the same episode, we also see a shot of Nomi injecting herself with something. We are not told what, but the assumption is that it is a hormonal injection of some kind relating to her transgenerism. As mentioned previously, very little is actually made of Nomi's trans

⁴⁴ Dimethyltryptamine.

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identity (her trans aesthetic is left to speak for itself), but the inclusion of this shot further exhibits her queer potentiality in that she uses the hormones as a means of aligning her experience of gender with her bodily reality. In both of these cases, bodily constraints are transcended by the use of drugs and the message is that, rather than helping the characters to escape from reality, the drugs they use enable them to get closer to it.

One of the sensates' greatest weapons are the synthetically created 'blockers' which they inject themselves and their enemies with to prevent un-wanted 'visits' by other minds. The 'blockers' in *Sense8* are an important icon for this discourse for a number of reasons. Firstly, they act to further delineate a trans aesthetic, as 'blockers' is a term commonly used as an umbrella term within the trans community for a variety of hormone-blocking drugs. For many trans people, 'blockers' give a sense of 'balance' or 'comfort' (Sansfaçon et al., 2019) with their bodies, and this feels mirrored by the *Sense8* blockers, which give the characters a sense of control over their minds. Moreover, the sense of control is routed in the very #MeToo conceptualisation of consent. For the sensates, the blockers prevent mental incursions that they do not consent to, but it is also telling that it is only certain types of enemy who would ever dream of 'visiting' the thoughts of another without their permission. Lastly, the 'blockers' on *Sense8* act to further normalise drug use. This is important once more for the normalisation of pharmacological solutions to gender dysphoria, because it accepts a logic whereby such interventions are routine. In so doing, the utilitarian attitude towards the function of drugs is further demonstrated. This attitude is also more subtly alluded to throughout the show: Nomi refuses to work without coffee and Lito is heard exasperatedly begging the other sensates 'no more carbs in the house, please no more carbs in the house, I'll eat them all!' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). In the season finale, the sensates are seen enjoying an authentic Italian pizza. They are making groaning noises evocative of those made during sex, which illustrates the simple, sensual pleasure of the pizza, and Felix exclaims: 'if I was to have a final meal, it would be pizza' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018), denoting the important role of food and sensual pleasure on our human existences.

As in the real world of food and drugs, the related theme of addiction is also present in both of my chosen texts. In addition to broader commentary directly about drugs as possibility (*Sense8*), addiction in prisons (Nicky Nicholls, and Meth addicts) and mandatory minimum sentences (*OITNB*), both of my shows employ the language of addiction in ways which are quite telling in relation to relationships and sexuality. In season one, episode two, Piper is heard on the phone to Larry, saying 'promise me you're not watching *Mad Men* without me, that when I get out of here, we're gonna binge watch it, together, in bed, with take-out from - Gertie's?' (Kohen, 2013f) and in the *Sense8*'s finale, Amanita's mother explains to guests at the wedding how Amanita and Nomi met: 'Amanita used to go through girlfriends the way

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people binge TV shows' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). In both of these examples, the 'binging' of television shows is used to illustrate something about the character's romantic relationships. I discussed earlier, how the term 'binge' had been co-opted from the language of eating disorders and addiction and also the notion of 'cheating' on one's spouse by watching a favoured show without them, and the inclusion in both of these examples demonstrates the normalisation of these co-mingling concepts. In doing so, the shows reveal something about the current moment of intersection in terms of love, sex, intimacy and technology, which I posit represents a utopian possibility of a culture in which the boundaries of these concepts are blurred and even erased entirely.

This moment is further demonstrated in the new forms of techno-sex and techno-intimacy which the characters on my shows engage in. For example, in episode one of *OITNB*, Lorna says she has to look good on her wedding day because her first dance is going to go on YouTube (Kohen, 2013b), which illustrates the mediated ways in which we are now living our lives, including intimate occasions such as weddings. Her scene then cuts to a home holiday video of Larry proposing to Piper which has a smart-phone camera interface overlaid which further underscores this point.

In the season finale of *Sense8*, we learn that despite the security risk, Sun has not destroyed her 'burner' phone⁴⁵ because, secretly, she wants detective Mun to find her. In this instance, her private intimate desires are transferred into the technology, which acts to provide her with a means to express her innermost wants: a familiar phenomenon if we recall the ever more technified modalities of intimacy which have become widespread during the #MeToo moment.

Re-defining Romance

In both of my chosen shows, it is not just bodily and sensory pleasures which are centred and re-imagined, but also the concept of 'romance' itself. My texts represent a simultaneous continuation of and divergence from traditional romantic story-telling but this is perhaps most interestingly presented throughout *Sense8*.

I have discussed above the ways in which romance, sex, love and family are redefined by the shows' characters and represent a significant departure from traditional family and romantic structures. However, the show maintains a focus on romance which feels more familiar to television audiences. In the season's finale, Kala whispers to Wolfgang, 'I know what love is because of you' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018), and at one point threatens

⁴⁵ A temporary mobile phone or sim-card which is not registered to anyone and is thus difficult to trace.

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to jump from a balcony, evocative of scenes from the infamous tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Both of these elements evoke classic romantic imagery and are in keeping with historic romantic iconography. However, in the same episode, there are also examples of where this classic romance is not discarded but built upon to incorporate the new ways of understanding love and intimacy that the sensates experience. For example, Jonas is seen paraphrasing Proust 'the bonds that bind another person to our self exist only in the mind' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). This hundred-year-old quote from Proust's *The Captive and the Fugitive* feels, in the context of all that the sensates have experienced, profoundly modern. *Sense8*'s utopia is created in futuristic science fiction and the notion of radical empathy in which connectedness transcends materiality, but here is Proust, a century ago, evoking the very same kind of transcendence and empathy on which the show is predicated.

The episode finale's title, *Amor Vincit Omnia*, is perhaps the most telling example of the show's re-imagining of romance. Meaning 'Love Conquers All', the line written by Virgil (a fact which is pointed out in the episode by Hernando as he poses as a tourist guide) is also the name of a painting by Caravaggio (**Fig 15** below). The painting depicts Amor, a Roman cherub of romance. His angel wings are dark and the items in the background are said to represent the ruins of all human endeavours. There is also a speculated eroticism to the image, which may be a modern interpretation or an expression of Caravaggio's alleged homosexuality. I am no art critic, so cannot further comment on the painting itself, but the reference to its title in *Sense8* does warrant comment. To me, the theme or message of the entire show is that 'love conquers all', a notion which is repeated by River as she decrees that 'for all the differences between us and all the forces that try to divide us, they will never exceed the power of love to unite us' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018). The sensates' radical and shared love for each other in the end allows them to be victorious, and is arguably all that will remain when the sum of human endeavours has fallen, as in the painting.

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Fig 15 *Amor Vincit Omnia* (Caravaggio, 1601), image sourced from Wikipedia.com

Nomi's speech at the wedding further captures this timeless, invincible conceptualisation of romantic love:

I am pretending to be permanent when nothing is permanent. My life, especially these last two years is testament to the fact that things change, people change but with you that doesn't scare me it actually makes me happy, makes me excited because I can think of no better life than watching Amanita Caplan change, watching her love grow, I want to see everything you become, I wanna know what your hair looks like a year and decades from now. I may not be a tragically detached French girl, but I want to live in an attic apartment in Paris and bring you tea as you write your novel.

And when we're both wrinkled old ladies, with cellulite covering my ass, bunions all over your feet, both of us hogging the blankets, I know I will still remember this moment. I will still be wearing this ring. Because inside your arms is the only place I've ever felt like I was home.

Nomi Marks, *Amor Vincit Omnia* (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2018)

The speech is at once a continuation of classic romantic imagery of everlasting love and a more modern, utopian declaration of love which exists because of, and in spite of, and most importantly *beyond*, material bodies with their cellulite and bunions. As she speaks, Nomi and Amanita's hands are clasped tight, and they tenderly caress each other's fingers; their love finds intimacy in the sensual pleasures of touch and in the esoteric pleasures of radical empathy. Amor's darkened wings seem an appropriate metaphor for the way in which the sensates' sexual and romantic relationships may be viewed by some as deviant but are in fact transcendent; able to 'fly' above material constraints and bodies.

The choice of episode title thus represents a re-imagining of classical romance, which simultaneously evokes traditional romantic imagery whilst also simultaneously surpassing it, in a way which feels demonstrative of the queering and utopianising of love and sex which my texts exhibit.

A Stark Contrast – The Homonormativity Of My Queer Utopias

My texts provocatively re-imagine fundamental concepts such as love, sex, empathy, sensuality and romance in ways which create utopian possibilities for new, queerer, more open and more connected ways of being. However, I will now argue that the efficacy of the queer utopias evoked by my shows is not just mooted in the creation of possibilities but is also underscored by their contrasting depictions of heterosexual relationships and sex as chaotic, failing, or dull. Just as was the case in Chapter Six, when I explored the feminist potentialities of my texts by contrasting their presentations of feminised social and sexual arrangements with their tacit portrayals of masculinity as either puerile, disgusting or dangerous, so too can we explore the queer possibilities on offer on Netflix by appealing to their handling of the heterosexual condition.

In *Orange Is the New Black*, the primary heterosexual relationship on view is that of Piper Chapman and her fiancé Larry Bloom. Bi-sexual Piper is the ideal case study for the examination of homonormativity on the show because the show centres on her two primary relationships; one with Larry and the other with Alex Vauss, and in so doing, provides useful artefacts for comparison of the differences between hetero and homo love on the show.

Before moving on to examine the duality of Piper's romantic and erotic existence on *OITNB* I want to make a quick clarification. My intention is to utilise the character of Piper Chapman to provide a contrast between straight and gay relationships on the show by comparing the narrative and aesthetic approaches to her relationships with Larry (a heterosexual relationship) and Alex (a homosexual relationship). However, though I will be examining these relationships as two separate entities, each emblematic of either homo or hetero love, I am not positing here that Piper's sexual identity or sexual orientation should be understood as being in either one camp or the other. As a pansexual woman myself, I am all too aware of the tendency to define a person's identity on the basis of the gender of their current partner and identified strongly with the #StillBisexual campaign which rose to prominence in 2017 and exhibited a similar modus operandi as #MeToo (Gonzalez, Ramirez and Galupo, 2017). Piper is not straight when she is with Larry and gay when she is with Alex she is bi-sexual *all* of the time. In fact, the rendering of Piper's bi-sexuality in *OITNB* is one of the things which has given

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me such a great affinity with the show because it has always presented Piper as being Bi. Her romantic connections with Alex, actually pre-date her relationship with Larry in a way which marks an important divergence in the portrayal of bisexuality on screen with much of what has gone before (Richter, 2013; Gonzalez, Ramirez and Galupo, 2017).

Historically, bisexuality has all too often been utilised for the sole purpose of creating plot twists- the trope of the formally straight character who engages in an illicit, often adulterous liaison with a partner of the same sex is as tired and offensive as that of the predatory 'bisexual femme-fatale' (Farrimond, 2012) whose greedy sexuality does not discriminate on the basis on gender. Though, like many a turn-of-the-millennium teenage queer, I was beyond ecstatic when Willow Rosenberg fell head-over-heels for Tara Maclay on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, I have grown to develop a sense of sadness that from the moment her feelings for Tara were acted upon, her identity shifted inexplicably from straight to gay, rendering her previous tender and meaningful relationship with Oz, and the possibility of her bisexuality, moot. Of course, for some folks, the participation in straight relationships is a cover for their latent homo desire-conscious or otherwise, but the notion that all who engage in relationships with people of diverse genders were really gay all along is hurtful and damaging.

That Piper remains a bisexual regardless of her relationship status, and is never presented as simply 'gay for the (prison) stay' is thus incredibly important in the context of creating and imagining queer possibilities, visibility and though the following discussion will examine the presentation of her two key relationships as examples of hetero vs homo aesthetic on the show, her sexual identity should not be regarded as falling in to an either/ or binary dialectic. What I will argue however, is that *OITNB* constructs in Piper, two very different models of romantic relationship which can be read not only as examples of straight vs gay love, but as proponents of the latter over the former.

It is fair to say, that Piper's relationship with Alex represents passion, excitement and adventure, and as argued in chapter 5, a certain element of deviance or even danger. Alex is an intelligent, sophisticated, international drug smuggler who possesses a level of worldliness and intrigue which could have bordered on the caricaturesque had her relationship with Piper been depicted as entirely predicated on such intrigue. However, as the show progresses, we learn more of the complex and intimate bond which exists between the two, we see scenes not only of lusty desire, but of tenderness and ultimately a genuine and lasting love which as well as providing narrative substance, also acts to subvert the trope of the dangerous bi-sexual harlot.

The earlier focus of this chapter has been on the ways in which both *OITNB* and *Sense8* create spaces for queer utopianism and possibility thinking by examining the functions of

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queer sex and relationships on the shows, so this next section will shift the emphasis primarily on to the presentation and representation of heterosexuality which they contain.

If Alex, in addition to being Piper's true soulmate, represents excitement and queer possibility, the character of Larry Bloom epitomises the exact opposite. Naïve and dependable, gentle, but above all respectable, Larry offers the safety and normativity of heterosexuality. It is not just that Larry is a man, and Alex a woman, but that the kinds of relationships they offer Piper are so divergent. Had she stayed with Larry, Piper would have served her time and returned to a nice, middle class life, marriage, suburbia and a craft room for her home-made soap business. In another show, this dichotomy between the hetero and queer lifestyles might be read as performing a heteronormative function which seeks to portray queer love as deviant and ultimately unfulfilling, but for *OITNB*, the 'nice' life on offer by Larry represents only one thing; boredom.

Right from the first episode, even before we learn of the depth of feeling and history that Piper and Alex share, there are signs that heterosexuality and normative acceptance are ultimately little more than nicely furnished cages. As Piper sits on the toilet, tearful about her imminent surrender to prison, she hides her face behind her hand. It's dark, and an external light source enters through venetian blinds casting 'bars' of shadow across her face, ominously representing the impending prison bars of her future. However, the light also catches her enormous diamond engagement ring as she shields her face, showing us that she is, perhaps, already trapped by the weight of convention. To underscore this, the scene cuts back to Larry, naked in bed, apparently wafting away a flatulent emission, his masculinity as discussed elsewhere, fairly puerile and the prospect of a life with him utterly unappealing.

As Piper returns to the bedroom, it is apparent that she and Larry are going to force themselves to have sex. They feel obliged to 'make some memories' (Kohen, 2013b) ahead of her upcoming incarceration. As she begins to weep, Larry is hesitant, his reluctance to have sex with her when she is visibly distraught reminds us that he is a 'nice guy' and boyfriend material and once more delineates him as acceptable to #MeToo sensibilities.

This, however, is not what Piper wants. She urges him 'Just fuck me, please... please' (Kohen, 2013b). Piper's sexuality is thus rendered within a queer, feminist aesthetic as she takes control and asks for what she wants, leaving hapless good guy Larry to yieldingly and confusedly oblige. This theme is picked up again moments later during the flashback to his proposal to her. Rather than asking Piper directly 'will you marry me?', Larry opts for the more passive, 'you wanna marry me?' (Kohen, 2013b), showing once more that he cannot offer a partnership of equals, but only of tiresome deference to Piper which ultimately she rejects in favour of the physical and intellectual stimulation that Alex represents. Moreover, these subtle

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exchanges can be read within the context of the #MeToo feminist moment in that they counteract the notion that what feminists want, is weak, servile and arguably emasculated men, far from it, though women like Piper expect to be respected and treated as equals, they are not turned on by hapless capitulation to their demands.

In just a few short minutes, the tone for the show has been set. Piper does care for Larry, he is kind and dependable but he is dull and not what her heart, or her body, truly desire. The 'normativity' of heteronormativity is subverted by recasting normalcy and conformity as not just unexciting but unfulfilling; a stark contrast with the later flashback scene in which Alex encourages Piper to quit her waitressing job and go with her to Bali, which represents a materialisation of the 'queer possibilities' on offer.

Piper's relationship with Larry, especially when contrasted with her love affair with Alex, can thus be understood as forming part of a picture of heterosexuality which, though not violent or abusive, is nonetheless harmfully restrictive in its tediousness. However, though the relationship with Alex is presented as more passionate and exciting, *OITNB* does not fall into the trap of creating a view of queer love that is seedy or dangerous, just simply more engaging and fulfilling.

Such a notion is also echoed, if more subtly in *Sense8* in the relationship between Kala, Rajan and Wolfgang. Though Kala's attraction to both Wolfgang and her husband Rajan is a heterosexual one, her more traditional relationship with Rajan is revealed to be significantly elevated through the introduction of the other man to form a poly unit which represents a process of improvement through queering and engaging in alternate forms of intimacy.

The conceptualisation of heterosexuality on *OITNB* does not however begin and end with the view that 'traditional', straight love is nice enough but a bit 'naff', but through other examples, begins to paint a picture of heterosexuality as being inherently chaotic and often failed. Heterosex from Caputo and Fig to Pornstache and Daya, is routinely presented as not just boring, but a bit gross and unpalatable, and there are numerous references to the failed straight marriages and ex-wives of the male characters. So poorly functioning is heterosexuality it seems, that Sam Healey is unable to sustain a straight relationship with even a mail-order bride who ultimately decides that whatever he has paid her, was not worth being trapped in the dullness of a mainstream relationship with him.

More than just dull or failed though, heterosexual relationships are even, at times, depicted as chaotic or dangerous. Daya's 'relationship' with prison officer Bennett, though heterosexual, represents deviance and danger due to the questionable possibility of consent in their relationship and unwanted consequence of pregnancy as previously discussed. I have also explored at length in the previous chapter the danger that is represented by Charlie Coates'

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toxic masculinity which culminates in the eventual rape of Tiffany Doggett, but it is perhaps worth noting that their heterosexual relationship is perhaps the most dangerous one of all, for after the rape, Tiffany and Coates resume their relationship in seasons five and six, and we witness a number of disturbing scenes unfold between the pair as they play 'house', their absence going un-noticed during the prison riots. Just as the rape narrative revealed something of the show's view of masculinity, the post-rape relationship unveils a decidedly uncomfortable conceptualisation of heterosexual relationships by depicting the couple's apparent domestic bliss, as entirely phony and predicated on a violent and abusive past.

It is also important to note, that the failed, dangerous and chaotic nature of heterosexual relationships on *OITNB*, is not always constructed as being the unfortunate result of problematic forms of masculinity as explored previously. Perhaps one of the most interesting commentaries on traditional heterosexuality is found in the character of Lorna Morello. Like Piper, Morello has relationships on the show with both men and women, however, in her own mind, she is never really anything but heterosexual; her sapphic encounters with Nicky Nicholls, are for her, a practical solution to prison enforced abstinence. The narrative constructed around her own tendency to deny herself queer possibilities is ultimately, and repeatedly one which ends in heartache.

In the early stages of the show, Lorna is shown excitedly talking about her upcoming wedding to 'Christopher', planning their big day, and musing over wedding magazines. In the flashback in season two, episode four, we see her teenage bedroom, adorned with collages of celebrity marriages, a poster from *West Side Story* and other romantic iconography (Kohen, 2014a). She is a caricature of the heterosexual fantasy of big weddings and Prince Charmings. However, as her backstory is explored, her fantasy is revealed to be a sad delusion. Christopher is a man whom she went on a single date with, but became obsessed with, stalking him and even breaking and entering his house in season two when she was supposed to be waiting in the prison van for Rosa to complete her chemotherapy treatment. The episode culminates in a heart-breaking scene of Morello, naked, save the veil from the wedding dress belonging to Christopher's fiancé, bathing in their luxurious bathtub, enjoying for a moment, however brief, the life she believes she could have had with him. Her moment of bliss is ended abruptly as she hears the sounds of someone returning home, and she flees the scene wearing a stolen dressing gown and clutching a stuffed teddy bear that she has snatched from the couple's bed. The bear holds a tacky sign reading 'love lives here' (Kohen, 2014a), and represents the pinnacle of quaint heterosexuality which Morello craves and the audience is supposed to feel a little nauseated by. The narrative tone around Morello shifts in this episode as she evolves from being a slightly silly woman with a made-up fiancé, to being a desperately

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lonely and highly vulnerable victim of her own delusions and of the societal pressures on women to have fairy-tale happy endings; she is literally a victim of heteronormativity.

Moreover, though she played as an object of sympathy and quite probably also mentally ill, it should also be noted that as a stalker of Christopher previously, and as someone who has broken into his home, she also represents a danger to *him*. This is a fact, not glossed over by the episode which also depicts Christopher testifying against Morello. Christopher reveals that he had been forced to move house on two occasions, and that Morello had threatened both him and his fiancé, even placing an explosive device on his fiancé’s car.

Even when things look to be improving for Lorna in season four and she marries Vince, a goofy romantic like herself, who looks to be capable of fulfilling her fantasy of the perfect gentleman, she is left once more alone as he literally runs for the hills upon discovering that she is pregnant with his child. (Kohen, 2017b) We see once more, how her heterosexual fantasies have repeatedly let her down and left her heart-broken, and the message that heterosexual love is doomed to fail is only underscored by the audience’s knowledge that in Nicky, Lorna could have a truly loving, as well as sexually fulfilling relationship, if only she would allow herself to acknowledge such a possibility.

What the character of Morello shows us is that, although it is often the presence of varying forms of toxic masculinity which cause heterosexuality to fail, heterosexual expectations themselves can also be responsible for such dangers and failings.

Having demonstrated how heterosexuality in my shows is depicted as boring, chaotic or even dangerous, one thing becomes increasingly clear; it is not the preferred option for a fulfilling sexual or romantic life; so much so, that I posit that, both *OITNB* and *Sense8*, build further on their queer potentialities by creating a form of *homonormativity* with which to contrast them. The prospect of *homonormativity* in our ‘real world’ is rendered moot because a queer lifestyle can never be normative in a society in which heterosexuality remains privileged and queers are oppressed (in much the same way as previously discussed that ‘reverse racism’ is an oxymoron). However, in the imagined utopias of *OITNB* and *Sense8*, *homonormativity* becomes a possibility. Such a *homonormativity* is, like the more culturally prevalent, *heteronormativity*, created by the subtle but persistent messages which are encoded into the shows’ narratives and aesthetics, and offers an important dimension to the cultural politics of sex of the #MeToo moment that I am seeking to understand and explain.

Queertopia, Here We Come! – Some Concluding Remarks On Feminist And Queer Potentialities.

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Full Bush, Half Snickers

*Full bush.
Half Snickers.
Revolting women.
My sisters.
Stand united.
Better guards.
Yummy snacks.
Nicer yard.
Maxi Pads.
Cleaner showers.
Voices screaming.
Fight the power!*

(Skinhead) Helen Van Maele, *Full Bush, Half Snickers* (Kohen, 2017b)

It should now be clear, that the on-demand model of cultural production which is offered by services such as Netflix, allows them to create cultural products which can cater to more diverse and niche markets. Whether this represents a genuine commitment to progressive queer and feminist politics, or merely a cynical attempt to cash in on the lucrative fourth-wave and pink markets is to some extent, by the by.

Shows such as *Orange Is the New Black* and *Sense8*, create radical new spaces to explore both queer and feminist informed possibilities, which are significantly divergent in their outlook and potential to the cultural products which proceeded them. Cultivated in the political context of Fourth-wave Feminism, Queer Identity Politics and #MeToo, and intersecting with the spread of ubiquitous internet access and at the zenith of portable technology, these shows not only exhibit new possibilities for love, sex and relationships, but also demonstrate how our very notions of intimacy itself are evolving as they become increasingly mediated and technologised.

Though demographic information on precisely *whom* these shows are made for is sparse, there are clues littered throughout them which take the form of in-jokes and references to certain forms of popular culture. The make-shift coffee shop set up by the skinheads during *OITNB*'s prison riots creates the perfect parody of coffee shop culture. Inmates are seen performing slam poetry (above) and the audience click their fingers rather than applaud to show their appreciation. The parody can be read as a send-up for the Beatnik culture of Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Set against the backdrop of the prison riot and its new hippy-commune vibe, the send up feels appropriate. However, as an inmate begins covering Greenday's ubiquitous 1990's anthem (Good Riddance) *Time of Your Life* (Green Day et al., 1997) and iced coffees are served up to eager inmates (Kohen, 2017b), it becomes

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apparent that this parody is also of current Millennial Hipster culture. On the surface, this is a jibe at the perceived pretentiousness and self-righteousness of such culture, which of course still has its origins in the hippy and Beat cultures which preceeded it. However, the jibe also functions as an in-group designator which sheds a little light on the assumed audience of the show. The jibe is a friendly in-joke rather than a critical piece of satire, in order to 'get' the joke, one must be able to recognise the tropes being parodied. The inclusion of the Greenday track, tells us that this is a joke for/about Millennials; educated, socially liberal and predominantly white folk, who, like me, came of age during the turning of the millennium- to this day, the opening chord sequence of *Time of Your Life* remains the only thing that I can play on a guitar, and the scene evokes a warm sense of nostalgia and familiarity.

The use of shared understanding on *OITNB* however is not only limited to white Hipster culture. The below exchange between Taystee and Pousse as they impersonate white people talking about politics has become infamous.

Taystee: *You think this white people politics? Let's talk about health care, Mackenzie.*

Pousse: *Amanda, I'd rather not. It's not polite.*

Taystee: *Well, did you see that wonderful new documentary about the best sushi in the world? Of course, now that I'm vegan, I didn't enjoy it as much as I might have before.*

Pousse: *You know, I just don't have the time. Chad and I have our yoga workshop, then wine tasting class. And then we have to have really quiet sex every night at 9:00.*

Taystee: *But did you hear that piece on NPR about hedge funds? Amanda, let me ask you, what do you think about my bangs these days? I mean, do you like 'em straight down, or should I be doing more of a sweep to the side? Sweep to the side.*

WAC Pack, (Kohen, 2013g)

There are several key things happening in the above scene. Firstly, the aforementioned white Hipster audience will be able to recognise themselves as the subjects of this joke, but unlike in the coffee shop example, the tone is more culturally critical and so it acts as a political commentary on the misplaced priorities of this tribe; the implication being that such people are not interested in the material politics of 'real' issues such as health care, only in the performative lifestyle choices of identity politics, such as going vegan and listening to NPR (National Public Radio). Though this jibe is more poignant than the coffee shop parody, and as such functions more satirically, it still tells us something about the audience, some of whom are supposed to recognise themselves in 'Mackenzie' and 'Amanda', even if they weren't previously aware of the social stereotypes of themselves which are utilised here. Though the white Millennial might be able to see themselves as the butt of this joke, its success and

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subsequent cultural impact really rests on its function as an in-group designator for Black audiences. The aforementioned stereotypes fit within a current Black cultural trend epitomised by Beyoncé's creation of the ubiquitous white girl 'Becky with the good hair' from her hit song *Sorry* (Knowles, Gordon and Rhoden, 2016). Stephanie Patrick muses that, as a white Beyoncé fan, she found *Sorry* to be particularly evocative, in part because it allowed her to 'peek behind the scenes' of the private lives of Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z, but also because it forced her to Google what the term 'Becky' was referring to (Patrick, 2018, p.12). I wonder if the 'White People Politics' scene in *OITNB* performs a similar function in that it is recognisable to Black audiences and provocative to white ones, and thus acts as a challenge to the white feminism of the third-wave? Moreover, the comment about having 'really quiet sex, every night at 9:00' (Kohen, 2013g), also fits within the previously discussed situating of heterosexuality as boring and unfulfilling. In this example, the target is not specifically named as heterosexuality, but it is implicit within the comment that it refers to the plain, 'vanilla' sex of a particular kind of person who is conjured; namely, the white, heterosexual.

Intertextuality and pop cultural references are utilised as in-jokes and designators by both of my shows, though not always in such meaningful ways as discussed above. Both of my shows include 'throw-away' lines such as Will's policing partner referring to him as 'Mulder' (Wachowski, Wachowski and Straczynski, 2015a), (a reference to FBI agent Fox Mulder in the 90's TV show *The X Files*) and the Huffington Post has even compiled a list of the literally *hundreds* of pop-culture references featured in *OITNB* (Jacobs, 2014). Whether these references serve as poignant cultural commentaries, or simply as fun in-jokes, they are important markers as to who the assumed audiences of my texts might be. This matters, because, as discussed in my methodology chapter, meaning is discursively produced. What these shows represent, what they tell us about the current social climate and what they might mean for the cultural politics of sex in the #MeToo moment, is fundamentally routed in the relationship between these shows, their producers and their audiences. When an extra on *OITNB* comments that the movie *Thelma and Louise* 'was also about a particularly feminist futility and the impossibility of justice for women within a patriarchal court system' (Kohen, 2018b), we are being given a clear message about who this show is for, and what it is trying to say.

Both of my shows make frequent references to the characters' obsessions with celebrity culture. From the inmates' palpable excitement about the incarceration at Litchfield of (fictitious) TV chef Judy King, to Flaca and Maritza's YouTube vlogging during the prison riots and Lito's poignant wrestling with his fears that his career as a telenovela actor will be ruined if his homosexuality becomes public, a picture is painted of a culture obsessed with celebrity and

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so the shows become a mirror for the fourth-wave, identity orientated audiences who are watching them.

9. Conclusions: What Next For #MeToo?

The central hypothesis of this thesis was drawn from an intuitive feeling that we were undergoing a profound period of change in terms of the cultural politics of sex. The rise of the #MeToo movement not only elevated narratives of consent and harassment in public discourse but represented a quickly evolving trend of mass, social media facilitated activism. This thesis has argued that the movement coincided with a shifting between the third and fourth-waves of feminist politics and the furtherment of near absolute technological integration into our lives, homes and bodies, to create a pivotal 'moment' in the cultural politics of sex which I have dubbed the #MeToo moment, and one which extends conceptually far beyond the parameters of its namesake movement.

In Chapter Two, I sought to offer a historical context for the #MeToo moment by conceptualising how similar forces had coalesced previously to create notable preceding moments during the Sex Wars and Raunch Culture. I explored in each how different political, cultural and technological factors had combined to create a distinctive politics of sex, which were significant because of their divergence from each other but still had elements, such as the dichotomy of pleasure and danger, which remained present throughout.

In Chapter Three, I furthered my critical contextual work by looking more closely at the strands present in the #MeToo moment I was envisaging. Starting by situating the #MeToo movement itself, I then extrapolated from this to explore fourth-wave feminism's key components transfeminism, intersectionality, choice and sex work to illustrate the kind of radical cultural-political environment under which the #MeToo operates, but also incorporates.

In Chapter Four, I set out the process and reasoning which I undertook to enable this thesis to move from political and cultural observations around sexual politics, to exploring cultural manifestations of them in practice. I explained that by probing the cultural output created under such conditions, I would hope to create a 'snapshot' of the #MeToo moment, which would enable deeper understanding still and shed light on the conditions which facilitated the imagining and telling of such radical sexual narratives and potentials.

Chapter Five continued the theme of fourth-wave feminism by examining how my texts not only exist within feminist logics but seek to centre and name their feminisms in ways which mark a significant departure to the post-feminist cultural outputs of Raunch Culture. In particular, I argued that *Orange Is the New Black's* bodily narratives create radical spaces of authenticity and sites for fourth-wave feminism to be presented. I also explored what I felt to be the show's greatest shortcoming in its relatively non-progressive handling of abortion. I felt

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that discussion of abortion on *OITNB* was particularly illuminating for my conceptualisation of the #MeToo moment because it seems so at odds with everything else that was going on, not just within *Orange* but within the broader sexual politics to which this thesis alludes.

In Chapter Six, I offered a contrast to the cultural depictions of feminism and femininity by exposing the renderings of masculinity and masculinised sex, on a sliding scale of toxicity from puerile to predatory. I sought to derive from these renderings what was being said about the cultural politics of sex and examine how the exposure of notable Hollywood harassers during #MeToo might have shaped and facilitated such renderings. I also gave comment that the theme of sexual 'danger' remained ever present, though under #MeToo, this danger clearly comes from masculinity, rather than from women objectifying or degrading themselves and others, as was alleged under the Sex Wars and Raunch Culture.

In Chapter Seven, I began to examine the opposing thematic force of 'pleasure' by exploring how my texts, and the #MeToo moment itself have utilised utopian frameworks to carve out potentialities for political identity and sexual pleasure. This chapter explores the hypothesised matriarchy of Lichfield Prison during the *OITNB* riots and the politically important identities of the women who inhabit it. I then explored how *Sense8* in particular adopts a queer, transfeminist aesthetic potential which I think is of great cultural significance.

Chapter eight builds further on this utopianism by exploring how the speculative world-building of *Sense8* creates the possibility of entirely new forms of intimacy and sensuality through its reimagining of sex, relationships and empathy including its adoption of a trans aesthetic as discussed in Chapter seven, which transcends labelling and posits new, euphoric potentialities for collectivism and connectivity.

I hope, over the course of this thesis, to have clearly demonstrated the validity and utility in conceptualising recent periods of sexual politics as 'moments' which mark out colliding social, cultural, political and technological factors. In conceptualising the three most recent moments as I see them, the Sex Wars, Raunch Culture and #MeToo, I hope to have shown that each represents a unique point of intersection which distinguishes it meaningfully from its predecessor and successor. My ambition was to explore the #MeToo moment in particular and to expose the factors present within it so as to ascertain what might be learned about the current cultural politics of sex. I explored the kinds of politics being centred and their ramifications for sexual politics and potential and have speculated on the possible opportunities that are being presented.

As I draw this thesis to an end, I think it is natural to have found myself musing on what might be next. For me, #MeToo does not mark a perfect moment in the cultural politics of sex but an important broadening of the possibilities for sex, intimacy and identity. The hope of creating

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ever queerer, more inclusive, more diverse spaces for exponential developments in pleasure, intimacy and connection.

I mentioned in my introduction that entering the final write up/ editing stage of this process under Covid-19 lockdown had presented its challenges, and I touched in the final chapter on how the enforced removal of platonic intimacies from my life has been harder than I could have imagined. However, I have also started to ponder on whether we might be undergoing the emergency of the next moment in the pattern I have identified. Health Departments have begun to issue advice about sex during lockdown (Wilson, 2020) which is franker and more progressive than what has been seen historically.

Netflix have reported a doubling in the expected increase of its subscribers during the pandemic period (Alexander, 2020; Di Mauro, 2020), and anecdotal evidence from conversations amongst friends, and my own time under lockdown, confirms that we are watching more internet-enabled television than ever. Moreover, film studios have reported increased revenues from being forced to bypass cinema releases (Sweney, 2020), which might point to a shift in the business models going forward. For some consumers, it has been a simple solution to boredom, whilst others have sought comfort in the familiarity of known characters on screen and in the feeling of presence that is given by hearing other voices in the house. Once more though it seems that this medium is finding new ways to transform our relationship with it and to increase its prominent role in our lives.

Corona-enforced transformation is underway elsewhere too. Though the technology has been present for some time, many of us have had to really learn how to hold meetings, teach, organise and socialise through entirely virtual modalities. Friends report the trials and tribulations of being physically separated from their partners and children, and attempting to compensate for such separations via Skype, Zoom or other video messengers. I myself have been holding weekly gaming socials with my friends, sharing laughs, drinks and tears via my laptop's built-in web cam. At first, such connections were strange and awkward, then novel, but are increasingly becoming routine and even mundane. Even as a seasoned techie, and someone who has spent nine years researching around the subject, I have been surprised by the new intimacies that we are discovering and the pathways that we are forging.

I also wonder about an emerging and transformative return to collective politics. In the UK, each week we have begun taking to our doorsteps to cheer and applaud NHS, care and other essential workers. We have been forced to re-evaluate our civic connections. Though Margaret Thatcher thought that there was 'no such thing as society' (Thatcher, 1987), Covid-19 thinks differently. We have come to realise the ways in which our lives are inextricably interconnected, and we are utterly dependent on one another for healthcare, education,

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sanitation and wellbeing. Though we have Brexited, we have been faced with an enemy that has no regard for national borders, class or race⁴⁶. Utopian and dystopian fiction has always had a tendency to draw attention to the contradictions in perceived social wisdoms and logics, and it feels as though something similar has been happening during this global pandemic. We have begun asking *why* key workers are earning so little, or *how* it is possible and legal for employers to not pay people when they're sick or self-isolating.

Feminist politics, too, have been returning their focus to old problems emerging in new ways. The enforced lockdown has tragically, but unpredictably, led to an increase in domestic violence, with Refuge reporting a 700% increase in calls to its service within one day (Townsend, 2020b), and hotel chains offering up empty rooms to house people fleeing from dangerous domestic situations (Townsend, 2020a). As the economy has tanked and millions of people have found themselves either out of work or with reduced hours, there has been a reported upsurge in people participating in online sex work (Dorn, 2020). This raises all the usual questions about the safety of people engaging in such work, as well as new ones about the role that sex-cam services are playing in tackling loneliness under lockdown.

It's far too soon to offer more in-depth analysis here or to ascertain just what the lasting effects of Corona will be, but I can certainly see another collision point forming. New forms of technified intimacy against a backdrop of changing political focus and feminist activism might not yet be enough for me to call a Corona 'moment', but I am certainly intrigued to see where, if anywhere, this will go.

As I conclude, I am drawn back to a quote from my earlier reading around *Sense8*, and have the tenacity of #MeToo and the optimism posited by my queertopias to wonder what if...

Rather than a world with 'no race ... no genders ... no age', the utopia of sensate connection seems to offer an alternative vision for globalisation, one in which the dehumanisation and exploitation by the rich world of the poor could be replaced by an empathetic diversity in which the full subjectivity of every person would incontrovertibly be recognised.

(Lothian, 2016, p.94)

⁴⁶ Although it must be acknowledged that figures are starting to emerge which show that BAME people are being disproportionately affected, not by the virus itself but by their increased likelihood of exposure to it because of their disadvantaged positions within the workforce.

Appendix

Textual Analysis Proforma Example

Show:	OITNB
Season:	5
Episode no:	7
Episode name:	Full Bush, Half Snickers
Air Date:	09/06/17
Watch Date:	25/11/18

Narrative/ Plot

What was the movie about? Was it believable? Interesting? Thought-provoking? How was the climax revealed? How did the setting affect the story?

- The prison riot is ongoing, the families are waiting outside
- Inside the prisoners are getting bored and there's no real food
- Suzanne is delusional – she thinks she is talking to her parents at visitation but there is no-one there
- Piper and Taystee decide to do a proper memorial for Poussey
- The guards are being held hostage and are turned into 'inmates' to help Suzanne- evocative of prison experiments as Cindy dehumanizes them (for comic effect)
- Red and Blanca lure Piscatella into the prison (after stealing humps' phone and cutting off his thumb to open it)
- Gloria gets word that her son is in hospital
- A fight breaks out when the coffee shop runs out of coffee..

Themes/ Tone

What was the central goal of the movie? Was it made to entertain, educate, or bring awareness to an issue? Was there any strong impression the movie made on you? Did any symbolism come into play?

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- Food
- During the riot, Taystee is eating candy, Tiffany is giving out 'yellow drink' and the inmate raid the staff fridge
- The Latinas and Skinheads bond over the awesome Latin coffee, a Skinhead suggests they think about broadening the menu. She reveals that she was a top barista before she got caught poisoning people of colour
- Bodies/Functions
 - There is a shot of some tampons being exchanged for candy
 - Suzanne gets upset saying 'I am having some of the bad feelings. Like when you're at the swim party and all the kids are playing Marco Polo, but you have the menstruation in your yellow bathing suit.'
 - Someone is offering to braid people's pubic hair 'Full bush for half a snickers'
 - Leanne proposes they use clams in the Poussey monument because they're kind of vaginal, Piper extrapolates that the clams could symbolise pleasure and Leanne agrees, they could represent orgasms
 - Part of what they want to memorialise Poussey's sexual fulfilment
 - Blanca's makeover (her eyebrows are plural)
 - Leanne urinates in the yellow drink and Tiffany kicks the bucket over
- Pop Culture
 - Taystee and Piper are doing an online which Harry Potter house type quiz
- Mental Illness
 - Suzanne's breakdown
 - Cindy: She full possessed
 - Abdulla 'This is mental illness, not possession.
 - Cindy: Man, she need Jesus or or Hashem. She needs somethin'.
 - Abdulla: What she needs is her old routine back.
 - Cindy...But if she start yelling "cunt," I'm callin' me a Catholic
 - The comedy and tragedy are bundled close
 - Suzanne doesn't like being called 'crazy'
 - Institutionalism
 - Suzanne cannot function without the prison routine
- Celebrity
 - Flaca and Maritza have a makeover chancel on YouTube

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- Also implicit assumption that their interests are shallow and so are they
- Feminism
 - Alex comments that Piper is perky, she says 'what's not to like, there are no guards, freedom from the male gaze' – again not just feminist, but assumption about the audience
 - The CO says 'it does feel oldy calm today, must be the heat' -Boo replies 'or the absence of the patriarchy' – OVERT
- Age/Wisdom
 - The golden girls talking about past political struggles and complaining about young people
- Role reversal
 - Inmates v Guards
 - Women objectifying men
 - Women running the world (of Litchfield)
 - Gender reversal – Boo, but also two of the COs is wearing moo-moos
- Grief – mourning Poussey

Cinematography- Shots, Colour, Lighting, Framing & Editing

Framing, Shots, How is space (physical/ emotional) divided?

- Pop culture references = realism, also an assumption about the audience, that they will get the joke

Language

Rhetoric, Hyperbole, Register, Metaphor, Topic, Passive/ active sentences- Comment – the thing being said *about* the topic, Vocabulary, Repetition, Ingroup designators – 'us' 'we', Possessive pro-nouns, Implication, Number games, Thematic lines, Jargon, Syntax

- Suzanne doesn't like being called 'crazy'
- Alex has told Linda to 'blend' for her own safety and says 'Fucking the prison's lead stud isn't what I meant.'
-

Sound/ Music

-

Characters/ Actors

- Cindy opts to wear one of the guard's uniforms to return 'normality' to Suzanne who is not coping well

Representation/ Politics/ Culture

How does this fiction speak to me? Who does it think I am? Race, gender, sexuality, age, disability, actors

- Janae: Now I want you to punch this face like it's the person you're most angry at.
- Soso: Okay, that is so reductionistic. I'm not, like, angry at one individual person.
- Janae: You gotta want to punch something.
- Soso: Yeah, but it's bigger than people. I want to punch the prison-industrial complex.
- Parody of Coffee Shop culture
 - Skinhead Helen is singing a cover of Greenday's *Time of your life* with the words changed 'I hope you've served your time for your life' on a akela, the gathered ground, click rather than applaud
 - Another skinhead gets up to say a poem
 - Full bush.
 - Half Snickers.
 - Revolting women.
 - My sisters.
 - Stand united.
 - Better guards.
 - Yummy snacks.
 - Nicer yard.
 - Maxi Pads.
 - Cleaner showers.
 - Voices screaming.
 - Fight the power!
 - Another inmate gets up and does impressions of other inmates
 - Parody of the kind of culture that the audience belong too?

Sexuality/Sex

- Affection
 - Piper goes to kiss Alex but stops, looking disgusted 'When was the last time you took a shower?' Being anti-establishment does not mean you have to be dirty.' Alex responds 'Activism really brings out your inner bitch.'
- Women talking about sex
 - Frieda: I've always been more of a girth gal, myself. Don't like them long jobbies that poke your cervix.
 - Gloria: Amen to that.
 - Anita: Ain't nothin' like a Fat Albert.
 - Yoga: Those fatties stretch you out. I like to stay tight.
 - Anita: Ain't yoga good for that?
 - Jones: No, but it does make the dirty wheelbarrow position a lot easier.
 - Freida How 'bout you, Norma? What's the dirtiest thing you've ever done?
 - Norma writes something down
 - Gloria: Damn! I didn't know you ladies got down like that.
 - Frieda: They didn't call it the sexual revolution for nothin'. Come on, squirt. What you got?
 - Gloria: There was this one guy I dated. He had a foot thing.
 - Freida: Like high heels and all of that?
 - Gloria: No. Foot jobs. Like hand jobs, but with your feet. Whoa.... Imagine picking up a hot dog - with your toes, and then massaging it with your arches. It gave me calves like a speed skater!
- Butch
 - Boo is wearing a suit and is woo-ing Linda Fergusson (from MCC) who has got caught in the Riot, the CO is coy
 - Boo haggles for a necklace one of the inmates has made to buy for Linda as if they are strolling along a sunny boulevard somewhere
 - Ramos is showing Boo and Linda around the outside camp, as if she is selling a married couple real estate 'As you can see, it's, like way less

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crowded out here than it is in the dorms. And also, we have a thriving artistic community, which I know is so important to you gays.'

- An in-joke about lesbian communities
- A parody of the butch/femme dynamic
- Boo is playing the gentleman, offering her arm
- 2 inmates try to rob Linda's necklace, threatening boo with a shank, she pulls out a large kitchen knife saying 'didn't anyone ever tell you, size matters!' – innuendo re penis sizes as they walk away she says 'Yeah and it's MR butch to you!'
- Sex with Linda
 - Linda laying on her back on a desk in noisy ecstasy Boo aggressively performing oral sex
 - Boo is fully clothed, is her sexuality only for laughs?
- Male sexuality
 - Luczcheck gets an erection when Cindy is in power, treating them as inmates
- Female sexuality
 - Red needs Blanca to distract the doctor, she says 'You're a woman now, use your sexuality' -referring to her makeover, and also pointing to sexuality as power/ manipulation
 - There is an older inmate in the sick pay who objectifies the doctor saying 'hands off, he's my Bollywood prince' – role reversals
 - Cindy objectifies a good looking topless guard, biting her lips at him, and watching him through the window in the guards room (where she is now) voyeurism
- Masculinity
 - Vinny runs away when Lorna tells him that the 'lasagne is in the oven'
- Alex and Piper
 - After Alex's makeover, they make out in the dark, silhouetted and sensual

Notes

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- Litchfield without guards is a feminist utopia, the racial groups are bonding, the Litchfield community library in honour of Poussey, take one, leave one, doesn't need regulating
 - Episode ends with a fight breaking out.

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