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Katy Mayfield April 12, 2022

“People Are All We’ve Got”: Negotiation of Postfeminism and Construction of Meaning in Post-Recession Women’s Indie Television

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Abstract

"People Are All We've Got": Negotiation of Postfeminism and Construction of Meaning in Post-Recession Women's Indie Television
By Katy Mayfield

Over the course of the 2010s a distinct character archetype came to predominate women's television comedy. This thesis argues this extended-adolescent figure, variously referred to as the "precarious girl," "can't-do girl," and "girl-loser," is characterized by her affective palette of "ugly feelings" and frequent failure, including failure to live up to the postfeminist careerist model the previous era of woman protagonists established, and morally inflected failure in her interpersonal relationships. I first name this character the "woman dirtbag" and establish her as an entangled result of and response to that postfeminist model, who embodied gendered neoliberal norms like consumerism, self-optimization, careerism, and adherence to "feeling rules." Next, I interpret the distinct affect of the woman dirtbag shows as indicative of her processing her constrained subjecthood in a post-Recession landscape where achievement of the postfeminist mode is materially impossible. Finally, I identify the interdependent ethos these shows put forth, which positions investment in interdependent interpersonal relationships as the new normative and moral center of millennials' lives.

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Introduction.

> *"What if it were the story of a woman who lost herself in her thirties, who was changed by a poisonous, powerful love affair, and who emerged, finally, surrounded by her friends? Who would Carrie be then? It's an interesting question, one that shouldn't erase the show's powerful legacy. We'll just have to wait for another show to answer it."*-Emily Nussbaum, "The Difficult Women of *Sex and the City*"

In 2013, New Yorker television critic Emily Nussbaum identified Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* as television's first female antihero. Nussbaum bemoaned the show's "failure of nerve" in its final turn, which served its unruly, convention-bucking protagonists traditional happily-ever-afters; proposals, children, moves to Brooklyn (a nauseatingly suburban enclave!). What would it look like, Nussbaum wondered, for *Sex and the City* to stay the course and make good on its endorsement of single women faltering and finding meaning in their friendships? (Nussbaum 2013) At HBO, writer-actress-auteur Lena Dunham was at work on the beginnings of an answer. In 2012, Dunham's *Girls* debuted, a portrayal of four similarly unruly women who further leaned into the "anti" in "antiheroine." As *Girls* purportedly signaled the decay of American women's honor and decency, two similarly complicated and semi-autobiographical women began to form, one on YouTube, in Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*; and one onstage, in Phoebe Waller Bridge's *Fleabag*. By the TV premiere of both works in 2016, a cohort had begun to take shape; *Girls* in 2012, *Broad City* in 2014, and *Insecure* and *Fleabag* in 2016. Women creators were all creating, writing, and starring in newly personal, realistic, and reflective shows about life-sized women disappointing themselves and others, and searching for meaning. In 2022, viewers can throw a stone at a streaming platform homepage and hit a show about a realistically flawed woman figuring it out. Two decades after the disappointing final whimper of *Sex and the City*, Nussbaum is getting her answer.

Television centering women building their lives reveals the values and expectations that women inherit from their culture and choose for themselves. After the liberal second wave of feminism prioritized workplace equality and women's independence, the pioneering leads of the following half-century of feminist and postfeminist television shows from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Murphy Brown* embodied a reigning aspirational model of womanhood—"you-go-girls," in Nussbaum's terminology—one in which women's personhood is achieved through work. The postfeminist golden era of romantic comedy films featured professional, effortlessly glamorous, and mostly-white women striving to complete their already-exceptional lives with romance (Schreiber 2015), ensemble situational comedies included chipper women near-ubiquitously finding career success when not navigating their on-again, off-again romantic relationships, and programming for children and adolescents produced by Disney and Nickelodeon gifted their sunny young woman protagonists with exceptional abilities, like stardom or magical powers.

The generation coming of age throughout these eras unsurprisingly boasts a larger share of working women and female breadwinners than any generation before it. The millennials—born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock 2019)—also statistically moved in together, married, and had children later (Bialik 2019). Middle-to-upper-class women increasingly defined themselves by their work, venerating the "girlboss." Then, in 2008, the economy crashed, the Great Recession began, and a generation better prepared, educated, and qualified to inherit the workforce and creative class was locked out of the fast track and saddled with student loans, slim job prospects, and the imminent possibility of becoming the first generation in recent history to be worse off than their parents.

Enter Hannah Horvath, who in *Girls'* 2012 pilot is financially cut off years after graduating from Oberlin College with dreams—but not exactly plans—of becoming "the voice

of my generation. Or at least, a voice of a generation." ("Pilot") Horvath was correctly derided as the archetypal faltering millennial; upper-middle-class upbringing, elite liberal arts education, aspirations of artistic, world-changing grandeur without the necessary pragmatism. Rounding out her profile are the much-handwrung-about extended adolescence championed by millennials, a product of both post-Recession inability to achieve economic stability and that cultural tendency towards later marriage and child-rearing; and a close early-adulthood kinship group of close friends. Unlike the strong, independent city women of second-wave and some postfeminist television, Horvath could not be confused with Nussbaum's "you-go-girl types. Which is to say, actual role models." (Nussbaum 2013) *Girls'* struggling, often selfish, often deluded, often lazy women drew sufficient critical ire that upon visiting the series after its conclusion in 2017, *New Yorker* critic Jia Tolentino expressed palpable surprise at its quality, titling her article "On Finally Watching 'Girls,' A Different and Better Show Than I'd Been Led to Imagine." (Tolentino 2017)

The cultural frustrations with the *Girls*' bad attitudes and worse actions are fascinating in hindsight, as they are precisely the characteristics which came to define a culturally and critically acclaimed cohort of shows that proliferated throughout the 2010s. Scholars have built a rich body of scholarship on this oeuvre, with each naming the central figure differently depending on the characteristic of hers they deem crucial. I'm interested in what I refer to as the "woman dirtbag" character, so named for her disappointing performance, bad affect, and antisocial or immoral behavior. Characteristic entries include *Broad City*, which premiered in 2014; *Chewing Gum* in 2015; *Fleabag, Insecure,* and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* in 2016; and *Awkwafina is Nora From Queens* and Hulu's television reboot of *High Fidelity* in 2020. Contextually, these shows are rooted in the early to mid 2010s, usually aired on streaming services, and are often created, written, and starred in by the same woman, lending an unusually personal bent and

characteristically intimate feeling to the works. Demographically, they are set vaguely in the present they aired in and follow middle to upper-middle class twenty-to-thirtysomething women in major cities. Stylistically, they tend toward realism, sometimes bordering on mumblecore; they're characterized as comedies but lack the laugh track, ensemble, or episodic structure of sit-coms. However, the themes of these shows and characteristics of their leading women are found in differently stylized shows, like *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*, a musical comedy; *Never Have I Ever*, a coming-of-age series; *The Good Place*, a cerebral concept sitcom; and *You're The Worst*, a full ensemble of male and female dirtbags; and there is a tremendous amount of bleed of these themes and characteristics throughout contemporary "indie television" in particular (Nussbaum 2014). Woman dirtbag themes derive from their protagonists unexpectedly struggling and creating meaning in their lives outside of the institutions of meaning late-20th-century neoliberalism establishes, namely, careerism and commodity fetishism. Primary foci are ambivalence, disappointment, or disillusionment with one's career; abjection resulting from the discomfort of the distance between expectation and reality; a stark deviation from the upbeat neoliberal affective palette in favor self-loathing and frustration; loss and the "weight of meaninglessness" (Kristeva 1982); and personal growth and actualization via prioritizing and tending to interpersonal relationships. The woman dirtbag's semi-autobiographical nature, close ties to her millennial woman creator, resemblance to millennials' lived experience, and proliferation in television make her a clear barometer of many millennial women's perspectives, values, and struggles.

It's elucidating, then, to examine the people, stories, and values unrepresented within the genre. For instance, the genre began infamously white and wealthy, with predecessor-matriarch Bradshaw and early dirtbag Horvath inhabiting a shockingly whitewashed New York City. While

the cohort following up Horvath increasingly came at faltering from the perspective of Black, Asian, and queer women (and in so doing, revealed differing and intersecting pressures and frustrations) a multitude of identities, among them trans women, disabled women, and Latina women, have yet to appear. The genre has yet to center nonbinary or gender nonconforming people, interrogating the criteria for womanhood but leaving the category of "woman" itself altogether unexamined. Most strikingly, the shows come largely from and center the disappointments of the creative class—middle-to-upper-class women. Might the genre be incompatible with stories about poor or working class women, for whom existentialism and faltering are unavailable or have distinctly dire and non-comedic repercussions, and whose stories may inspire anger and collective action rather than malaise and individual contemplation? In other respects, however, the woman dirtbag has become even more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stories of grief and loss are obviously topical, as is the individual psychic fallout of institutional failure, a divestment from work as life's meaning-maker, and a renewed appreciation for close interpersonal relationships.

In chapter one, I will identify the expectational worlds postfeminist television established for women viewers: what women could expect for their lives, and what their world expected of them. I will outline the ways postfeminist media put forth careerism and commodification as the pillars of identity and meaning in women's lives, using moments from *Sex and the City* as case studies. I will then chronicle millennials' upbringing and socialization within this media landscape, and the catastrophic results of the Great Recession on their finances, careers, and senses of self. In this chapter I will rely on theoretical examinations of postfeminism, *Sex and the City*, and then more historical and statistical sources, such as Pew Research Center reports on millennial characteristics, as well as journalism providing the millennial perspective.

In chapter two, I will explore the woman dirtbag's complicated entanglement with her postfeminist socialization and foremother figure. I will identify the ways her difference from the ideal postfeminist subject is explored in these shows, namely through the genre-defining affects of abjection, guilt, and grief (and its resultant meaninglessness). I will then use *Girls* and *Fleabag* as case studies of the genre's varied entanglement with postfeminist ideologies, in this case, the branding of the self. In this chapter I draw on a number of theoretical and critical texts, as well as the woman dirtbag shows themselves. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be limiting textual analysis of woman dirtbag shows to *Insecure*, *High Fidelity*, and *Fleabag*, which I believe are the clearest examples of the novel subgenre-defining elements I will identify in chapter three. I will also occasionally cite and explore *Girls*, but will point out how it differs from its successors.

Throughout this thesis I will also take advantage of an often-ignored source within academia: video essays. Despite the reliable reputation of print outlets like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, similarly structured analysis and commentary video essays on YouTube reach a far wider audience, with some uploads by film analysis channel The Take garnering 3.6 million views. Discourse around cultural works now largely happens on social media, by unprofessional commentators, and via formats like video. The accessibility of these formats also democratizes discourse, generating heretofore-ignored knowledge by allowing the conversation to start from, in the language of standpoint epistemology, marginalized lives.

In chapter three, I will contribute to the extant body of scholarship my observation that woman dirtbag narratives put forth the fostering of intimate interpersonal relationships as an alternative mode of meaning-making to postfeminist self-optimization. I will examine how postfeminist tenets and feelings rules isolate these characters, and how the characters must learn

vulnerability and acceptance—necessarily divesting from “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011)—to foster intimacy, banish loneliness, and lift the weight of meaninglessness from their shoulders.

To conclude, I will discuss the relevance of woman dirtbag shows during the COVID-19 pandemic, and point out where further study of this figure is needed.

Chapter One. *Postfeminism and Its Discontents*

A varied but coherent archetype dominated the half-century of television comedies starring women protagonists inaugurated by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1970. Variously referred to as "can-do girls" (McRobbie 2015) "careerist feminists" (Dow 1996) and "you-go-girl types" (Nussbaum 2013), televisual representations of women since the crest of second-wave feminism exhibited feminism via aspirationality; they were revolutionary in their depiction of women as competent, confident, and independent (Dow 1996, Nussbaum 2013). Crucially, the venue for cultivation and exhibition of these strengths was uniformly the workplace. Second wave liberal feminism's strategic and ideological focus on the public sphere and its issues of hiring discrimination and wage disparities ushered in an equation of feminist womanhood with certain types of laboring (Dow 1996). This equation manifested in television; Lauren Rabinovitz writes that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* established the "working-woman sitcom" (Dow 1996) as the "preferred fictional site for a 'feminist' subject position." (Rabinovitz 1989) Further, work came to represent not only a crucial part of a woman's identity, but a core pillar of meaning in her life: Bonnie J. Dow writes that *Mary Tyler Moore* "was the first to assert that work was not just a prelude to marriage or a substitute for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman." (Dow 1996)

Contrary to the charge that the female protagonists of the 90s signalled "the end of feminism," (TIME 1998), postfeminist protagonists like Ally McBeal and the women of *Sex and the City* and *Girlfriends* actually represented a great deal of continuity with the careerist feminists before them, in fact carrying and adorning, rather than extinguishing, the torch of work-based appealing womanhood. Emerging in the 80s and 90s from the decline and disavowal

of liberal feminism, the rise of neoliberalism, and the capitalist embrace of women as consumers, postfeminism is characterized by:

> "The emphasis upon individualism, choice and agency; the disappearance—or at least muting—of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence (Kelan, 2009); the 'deterritorialisation' of patriarchy and its 'reterritorialisation' (McRobbie, 2009) in women's bodies and the beauty industrial complex (Elias et al., 2017); the intensified surveillance of women (Winch, 2013); calls to work on, monitor and discipline the self (Oullette, 2016); and the central significance of a 'makeover paradigm' (Heller, 2007; Weber, 2009) that extends beyond the surface of the body to an incitement to 'makeover' one's interior life, developing a new, 'upgraded' postfeminist sensibility." (Gill, 2017)

Postfeminism pushes women to independently optimize themselves by upholding a specific model of successful womanhood and presenting the pursuit of it as empowering (Gill 2017). Crucially, core pillars of that successful womanhood are consumption, to construct and signal one's aesthetic and identity, and labor, as a venue in which to exhibit resilience, exceptionalism, and confidence. The psychic and affective dimensions of labor-and-consumption-based womanhood undergird and pervade postfeminist female-led television, which itself is a crucial medium for the establishment and communication of the postfeminist model of successful womanhood, and, as such, an immensely impactful socializing force for women living and growing up in the postfeminist age. Using the lens of postfeminist women's television as a socializing force, I argue this careerist and postfeminist "can-do" archetype not only provides a model for women to aspire to, but expectations of what their worlds can and will look like; the assertion that a woman has the ability to become the postfeminist model implies she will inhabit a world that will allow her to do so. Subsequently, I argue careerist and postfeminist women's television establishes a two-sided expectational model for successful, meaningful womanhood, with one side setting what women can expect their lives to look like, and the other communicating what that lifestyle expects of them.

The expectational world of women's work

The first side of this expectational coin is the construction of a world that women raised consuming feminist and postfeminist television can expect to inhabit. The postfeminist protagonist derives meaning and identity from maintaining her model lifestyle—consumption is a crucial part of her identity construction, and her career both facilitates her consumption and further comprises her identity, as it distinguishes her as an independent woman, wrapping career, consumption, and independence up as the cornerstones of a woman's identity. We see this in the season 6 *Sex and the City* episode "A Woman's Right to Shoes" when Carrie explicitly conflates her possession of expensive shoes with her independence. Carrie opens the episode by writing "the single New Yorker's weekend is all about buying." After a pair of her beloved luxury-brand Manolo Blahniks are lost at a friend's baby shower and the friend both refuses to compensate Carrie for the $500 pair and chastises her for spending money on something frivolous (rather than something more "real," like children), Carrie is outraged. She claims the friend "shoe-shamed" her, emphasizes "a woman's right to shoes," and bemoans the sad state of the day when people "stopped celebrating each other's life choices and started qualifying them." ("A Woman's Right to Shoes") As the video essayist Broey Deschanel points out, beneath Carrie's shallow indignation, the episode actually makes legitimate points about cultural condonation of women's spending on weddings and children, but condemnation of women spending on themselves, thus upholding a woman's domestic role as more important than her individual personhood. ("Sex and the City: Love at the End of History") However, regardless of whether they spend money on expensive wedding gifts or designer shoes, all of the women in question in this episode, and *Sex and the City* at large, have completely intertwined their independence, their identities, and even feminism itself with their spending power. Her possession of expensive but

fashionable items is one of Carrie's distinguishing characteristics; she demonstrates her personality, her stylistic acumen, and her prioritization of her own tastes over the male gaze by buying and wearing expensive high-fashion clothes. Her unwillingness to give up shoes in order to pay rent or debts following decades of frivolous spending demonstrate that for Carrie, and in universe of *SATC*, spending money is not a privilege, a responsibility, or a necessity; it is constitutive of identity. Viewers, then, understand that the mechanism by which they can express both their independence and their personalities is by curating their consumption. This investment of both individual identity and women's welfare at large in consumption is textbook postfeminism, and half of the axiom that the postfeminist order sees women as ideal neoliberal subjects.

The other crucial half of that equation are the careers postfeminist women must hold to finance their identity-essential frivolous lifestyles. To again use the example of *Sex and the City*, in the season four episode "Time and Punishment," the women are aghast when Charlotte announces her plan to leave her impressive gallery curator job to be a stay at home wife. To their credit, their surprise comes from their assertion that Charlotte "loves her job." Charlotte, however, detects judgmental subtext. She later calls Miranda, the most careerist of the women, and accuses her of "thinking I'm one of those women… One of those women we hate who just works until she gets married." ("Time and Punishment") In her insecurity, Charlotte rightly identifies that for these women, a career is not only for money or personal fulfillment, but is also a crucial identity marker denotative of independence. This observation is substantiated by the structure of the show itself, and the daily structure we glean of its' characters' lives. The *SATC* women all occupy extremely impressive positions; Carrie is a successful writer and published author, Charlotte is a gallery curator, Samantha runs her own public relations firm, and Miranda

is a partner at a competitive law firm. These impressive and creative jobs sufficiently communicate the women's competence, intelligence, and independence so that post-feminism viewers still respect them despite their intense hyperfocus on romantic and sexual relationships; that is, they as characters had to earn their independent, respectable womanhood via, frankly, astonishing levels of career success.

Yet, their lifestyles are utterly incompatible with their demanding careers. The women meet for long lunches on weekdays, go out to clubs into the early morning, and make frequent excursions to destinations like the Hamptons and Los Angeles. Only Miranda is sporadically depicted struggling with work-life balance, with her intense work schedule straining her relationship and parenting responsibilities until she negotiates a *55-hour* work week. The reality of high-powered careers like Miranda's and Samantha's, or precarious ones like Carrie's, is decades of centering work in one's life, toiling, struggling, networking, having the right connections, being in the right place at the right time, immense talent, a lack of crises, emergencies, or doubts, or an inhuman steely resilience through those challenges, all to get to their positions. Once there, as the few glimpses into Miranda's work life demonstrate, they still demand long hours, availability more often than not, and total commitment. These aspects of the working woman's life are significantly less sexy than the *SATC* women's workplace hookups and midday brunches, and are thus excluded. Yet, they crucially underpin the women's lifestyles, identities, and the premise of the show itself. The show makes the women's hard labor invisible, eclipsed by the commodified lifestyle it facilitates.

The class privilege, scarcity, competitiveness and raw luck of the types of careers the women have is equally unspoken, and pervasive throughout postfeminist media. The very foundation of the working woman show is work, but always a very specific and pleasantly

presented variety of work: namely, a career, often one in the creative sector, of the "dream job" variety. Mary Tyler Moore worked at a broadcast news station, Murphy Brown was a news anchor, Ally McBeal worked at a prestigious law firm, in *Girlfriends*, Joan is a lawyer, Maya becomes an author, Lynn is a documentarian and singer, and Toni is a real estate agent. No postfeminist protagonists are deriving their independence, meaning, and identity from their barista job, food-delivery gig, or low-level corporate accounting position. Rather, purpose and independence are reserved for women with extremely competitive jobs. Further, by virtue of their universality amongst woman TV protagonists, appear to be not a moonshot, but a given.

Returning to "Time and Punishment," Charlotte goes on to remind Miranda "the women's movement is supposed to be about choice," and screams at her "I choose my choice! I choose my choice!" Charlotte's outburst prompts laughs, but reveals a good deal about the expectational world of postfeminist careerism. First, Charlotte's frantic attempts to defend her choice, her desperate effort to take "a woman's right to choose" at face value, reveal the falsity of neoliberal rhetoric that positions choice as empowering. Charlotte's right to make a choice that will make her happy or fulfilled isn't self evident; the burden is on her to prove why this choice is the "correct" choice for the kind of woman she is and life she is to lead. Angela McRobbie wrote of the facade of choice in postfeminism, "Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of restraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who makes the right choices." (McRobbie, 2004) The second wave of feminism sought to give women the choice to compete educationally and professionally. However, the evident attachment of career to independent, and therefore respectable and contemporary, womanhood (aided by the attachment of identity to consumption) turns pursuit of a career from a choice to a directive. Career, in postfeminist media, is somewhat of a fetishized commodity. The processes of its creation are completely

obscured to the audience, leaving only the packaged, appealing commodity. We as viewers identify with the commodity not because we associate with or buy into the processes of its manufacture, but because of what it, as a commodity rather than a material or lived object, can signal about us. Charlotte is right; career, for the fictional women of *SATC*, is an identity-signaling commodity, just like Carrie's Manolos.

So postfeminist television tells women to want and expect flyaway career success as a normative pillar of a material life. Crucial to this schema is the economic circumstances it sprang from; the optimism that follows prosperity. Postfeminism came about with the advent of Reaganism and the Young Urban Professional, during a booming economy, and in a decades-long age in which each successive generation could expect with near certainty to make more than their parents. As Tasker and Negra put it, postfeminism's key tropes, like "the celebration of affluent femininities," "are enabled by the optimism and opportunity of prosperity (or the perception of it)." (Negra and Tasker, 2014)

The expectational world of women's affect

Working women characters' lives were mired in optimistic narratives about the economy and women's economic lives within it, but they also performed that optimism. The other side of postfeminist television's expectational coin continues second wave television's modeling of the ways women must feel and be within the luxurious, impressive, and prosperous world they purportedly inhabit. As Emily Nussbaum writes:

> "Before "Sex and the City," the vast majority of iconic "single girl" characters on television, from That Girl to Mary Tyler Moore and Molly Dodd, had been you-go-girl types—which is to say, actual role models. (Ally McBeal was a notable and problematic exception.) They were pioneers who offered many single women the representation they craved, and they were also, crucially, adorable to men: vulnerable and plucky and warm." (Nussbaum 2013)

Similarly, many scholars have pointed out the ways in which Mary Tyler Moore's pioneering was enabled by her delicate management of her own feelings, as well as her nurturing of her male coworkers' (Dow 1996); viewers accepted and admired her choices because she "was hardly strident" about them (Klein 2006). The significant body of work on *Mary Tyler Moore* comprehensively covers the ways in which working women characters must regulate themselves and their emotions to be palatable to men. In postfeminist television especially, however, women have bent their affects not only to individual men around them, but to the demands of neoliberal capitalism. Emotional regulation is central to women's experiences and identities in a postfeminist world which predicates their successful womanhood on careerism and self-branding—in which "the young woman is set out as the new, meritocratic figure of achievement" (Kanai 2019)--and predicates both on constant self-regulation (Kanai 2019, McRobbie 2004, Gill 2017). Arlie Hochschild coined the term "feeling rules" to describe these demands, which Akane Kanai writes "stipulate that one must have the right feelings for the right context, and if these feelings diverge from the appropriate ones, they must be worked on to make them 'fit.'" (Kanai 2019) Specifically, young women are "increasingly exhorted to be 'normal', carefree and confident…resilient…approachable and pleasing." (Kanai 2019) Gill notes "the pressure on female celebrities to perform a particular kind of upbeat and resilient selfhood—to be 'gleaming' and 'dazzling' no matter how they may actually feel." (Gill 2017) In short, postfeminist women—and woman characters—are asked to be *upbeat*; to project confidence, optimism, and contentment; and to suppress or conceal "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005) that may interfere with upbeat femininity, like insecurity, self-loathing, frustration, and despair.

These expectational worlds and dictates, and their influence as a socializing or even pedagogical force, are especially visible in media messaging towards young women in the early

21st century, a time in which "girl power" prevailed as an approach to girlhood (Dobson and Harris 2015). The expectation that women will be ideal neoliberal subjects is made nearly explicit in this realm, via media directed toward young women that centers girls' ability to do anything, and exclusively features and venerates extremely exceptional young women. These "intensified expectations of girls' and young women's capacity to thrive in neoliberal economies" (Kanai 2019) materialize in the overwhelming pervasiveness of the extremely academically successful young woman archetype, as in Rory Gilmore of *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), Hermione Granger of *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), Alex Dunphy of *Modern Family* (2009-2020), Gabriella Montez of *High School Musical* (2006-2008), and Chyna Parks of *A.N.T. Farm* (2011-2014). The latter two examples hail from the core of girl power media directed specifically toward young women: the Disney Channel. Disney girls often served as 2000s girls' first or primary representations in media, so it is meaningful that Disney girls are, across the board, utterly exceptional. Hannah Montana of *Hannah Montana* was a tween rockstar, Alex Russo of *Wizards of Waverly Place* was a talented wizard, Raven Baxter of *That's So Raven* was clairvoyant, and Gabriella and Chyna were tween prodigies. This focus on exceptionalism and the honing of one's special abilities establishes a postfeminist model of ideal girlhood founded on individual achievement, equating successful girlhood with extraordinary performance; even setting extraordinary performance as the foundation or prerequisite to girlhood, in a similar manner to the way postfeminist women's television establishes a high-level career as a prerequisite to postfeminist womanhood. As in women's postfeminist television, these narratives situate agency and progress in the individual, presenting individual success as girls' means of accessing and contribution to women's empowerment. (Dobson and Harris 2015) Further, much like postfeminist television's abstraction of a high-powered career from the work and struggle it

requires, girl power narratives present exceptional performance as desirable by depicting the pressures and strains of exceptionalism as easily manageable and not interferent with girls' "dazzling" femininity. (Gill 2017) In other words, girls are expected to manage not only adolescence, friendship troubles, and romantic trials, but also high-level performance, with the same upbeat resilience expected of postfeminist women. The constancy of dazzling femininity in these shows is bolstered by a distinct lack of "unfeminine emotions" like anger and selfishness (Blue 2017). The author Rachel Simmons has devoted multiple books and speaking tours to instructing parents how to deconstruct this "supergirl" pressure in their daughters. Simmons' observation that "we told girls they could do anything; they heard, 'do everything'" (Simmons 2018) finds support in a famous 2003 Duke University study which found that women students felt an overwhelming pressure to be "effortlessly perfect," balancing high academic achievement, social life, friendships, and beauty standards, all without letting on that they were struggling with any of it. (Rimer, 2003)

Recession and the weight of meaninglessness

A media landscape in which middle class women's "academic achievement is both normative and taken for granted" (Kanai 2019), a fulfilling and lucrative career is positioned as the working woman's purpose and birthright, and upward mobility is a norm cemented by decades of prosperity bred the most educated and optimistic generation in American history: millennials. Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials came of age during the postfeminist era and either formed or caught the tail end of the girl power era. (Beaton 2016) Encouraged by decades of assertions that a college education was the ticket to career stability, upward mobility, and happiness, 40% of millennials earned their Bachelor's degree or higher (compared to 30% of

Gen X, 25% of baby boomers, and 15% of the silent generation) (Bialik 2019). In particular, women carried such gains; millennial women are four times as likely as their silent generation predecessors to hold a Bachelor's degree (compared to men, who are twice as likely), and more millennial women than men have one (43% of women versus 36% of men). In order to do so, however, millennials famously took out historic student loans; twice as many millennials as Gen Xers taking out loans, with those loans being 50% greater than Gen X's at the same age. Consequently, millennials were optimistically heralded as "the smartest, savviest, most self-assured generation in, well, generations," (Thompson 2010). Then, "that unstoppable promise… hit an immovable job market." (Thompson, 2010) With the Great Recession in 2008, millennials' unemployment rate rose 8%, reaching a high of 19%. Timing exacerbated matters; the Recession came as many millennials were graduating from college, and ⅔ of those 2008 graduates had student loan debt, $23,000 on average. (Kurt, 2020) A tight job market, sweeping layoffs, and interest-gaining student loans that suddenly became nearly impossible to pay off set millennials back financially and professionally: they had to settle for worse jobs early in their careers, depressing their lifetime earnings potential and inhibiting their ability to save for traditional adult milestones like buying a house or even retiring (Van Dam 2020). As Millennial author Anne Helen Petersen illustrates, "we're trying to build a solid foundation on quicksand." (Illing 2020)

Suddenly, the creative, upwardly-mobile, fulfilling careers many millennials built their selves and lives around were yanked away, catalyzing a discernible psychic shift in the generation's outlook and affect. Eight years after the Recession, 70% of millennials reported they hadn't made as much progress in their career as they'd hoped. The cohort chafed against the "more circumscribed reality" they found themselves in compared to the one they expected

(Beaton 2016), fell into “the widest gap between expectations and reality that the professional world has ever seen” (Kellaway, 2016) and experienced “cognitive dissonance” and “expectational hangover” (Hassler 2014) when “low wages, little appreciation, and lots of effort (replaced their) visions of fun, world-changing work.” (Beaton 2016)

Further, not only were these institutions of meaning—construction of a dazzling self, possession of an impressive career—now unattainable, the post-Recession political climate popularized the understanding that they were a mirage to begin with. Movements like Occupy Wall Street, the ascendance of intersectionality in popular culture, and Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders’ Presidential runs contributed and spoke to the growing understanding that neoliberalism’s expectational worlds were impossible for most Americans all along. The dangling of those expectational worlds, as well as neoliberalism’s insistence that they can be anyone’s—if only they make the right choices and exercise enough control over the self—sought to hide the state’s responsibility for its’ citizens welfare. Namely, postfeminism’s fixation on self-regulation and self-improvement, as well as its gender-specific onus on individualism as a defining trait of an admirable contemporary woman, are revealed to be the “naked individualisation” (McRobbie 2015) and “mythologizing about individuals’ control over their circumstances” (Blue 2017) that “allowed for neoliberal policy to relieve the government and major corporations of responsibility to citizens through deregulation and cuts in public funding for social services, such as education and health care.” (Blue 2017)

Disappointment and precarity toppled millennials’ schemas of themselves, their society, and their future, exhibiting a distinctive shift in affect in the rubble. millennials lost not only the lives and selves they expected, but the very materials they believed would construct meaning in their lives. Middle-class millennial women’s lives had been oriented towards successful

personhood, and successful personhood toward careerism and consumption to create an ideal image of the self. Suddenly without an arena in which to prove their competent, careerist womanhood; without the funds to construct their identities via consumption; and unable to buy into the optimism that undergirds upbeat femininity; middle-class millennial women were left struggling to reconcile an optimistic, postfeminist socialization with their more constrained realities and selves.

Chapter Two. *Post-postfeminist Entanglements and Affects*

Millennials' material circumstances after the Recession made the achievement of the postfeminist ideal fiscally or psychologically impossible for the vast majority of women. Crucially, achievement of the postfeminist ideal was *always* unattainable for or intentionally excluded the vast majority of women, especially poor women, women of color, and disabled women. It was after the Recession, however, that neoliberalism clearly abandoned the creative class; the same middle-class, highly educated women whom it had previously groomed for career success and ideal neoliberal subjecthood; and the same women most likely to create television. In their upbringing this cohort of women was promised—partially by postfeminist media—a prosperous neoliberal dream, then quickly and harshly disabused of that dream by a brutally competitive economy, shrinking career opportunities, massive student loans, and the subsequent impossibility of so much as owning a house, much less constructing the self out of designer labels. These women brought this overwhelming sense of disappointment to the increasingly-gender-inclusive expanding television landscape of the early 2010s.

In post-Recession women's television, career takes a backseat, ambition is scarce or satirized, and glamor is nowhere to be found. Rob of *High Fidelity* and Fleabag from *Fleabag*

are ambivalent and semi-accidental small-business owners whose occupations serve primarily to pay the bills and occupy them during the day; *Gilmore Girls: a Year in the Life*'s Rory utterly flails in her attempts to become a journalist after graduating from Yale; *Broad City*'s Abbi and Ilana cycle through miserable temp and custodial gigs, and Ilana's "wizness: woman-owned business" is played for laughs, not admiration ("Bitcoin & the Missing Girl"). While none are explicitly Recession stories, it's impossible to miss the stark difference between the glitzy corner offices of the 'aughts and the empty shops or grody gym bathrooms of this wave of women's indie television.

Even more striking is the accompanying stylistic and affective shift, which takes a sharp turn from the dazzling, self-assured "top girl" (McRobbie 2009) femininity of careerist feminist media. Scholars universally note that women-centered comedy definitively shifted to take on a new and remarkably coherent style, affect, and ethos following the Recession (Dobson and Kanai 2018, Woods 2019, Ford 2019). Jessica Ford astutely groups *Girls, Broad City*, and *Insecure* with *Better Things* and *Transparent* under the umbrella of "women's indie television," citing these works' clear stylistic and substantive roots in women's indie cinema (Ford 2019). Rebecca Wanzo influentially termed *Girls* and *Insecure* "precarious-girl comedy," because of the way the economic precarity of post-Recession womanhood appears in those shows as humor surrounding abjection—the precariousness of boundary transgression (Wanzo 2016). In an observation contiguous with Wanzo's, Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma group *Girls*, *Fleabag,* and *Insecure* by their mobilization of "cringe" aesthetics to simultaneously communicate comedy and discomfort with gender expectations (Havas and Sulimma, 2018). Faye Woods succinctly identifies "the representations and comic discomforts displayed in a transatlantic strand of female-led comedies produced in the 2010s." (Woods 2019)

The foundational characteristics cohering this subgenre are: a middle-class city-dwelling woman protagonist, whose perspective the show and audience are intimately and tightly bound to; an avowedly realist—as diametrically opposed to aspirational—approach to contemporary womanhood, additionally communicated by an understated film style; an "affective divestment" in positivity and empowerment (Dobson and Kanai 2018) in favor of ugly feelings like frustration, anger, and apathy; an undercurrent of loss, often expressed through more tangible losses like grief or romantic break-ups; and the protagonist's lack of and subsequent search for meaning. In sum, the prototypical woman dirtbag show employs an understated style to follow a creative-class late-twenties woman as she messily stumbles through adulthood toward some form of stability, identity, and meaning. However, there is an enormous amount of bleed throughout television, with many shows that don't fully fit the description clearly exhibiting the spirit or ethos of the woman dirtbag. For instance, *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*, a musical comedy; *You're the Worst*, an ensemble comedy; and *Better Things*, whose time frame is motherhood rather than early adulthood, all grapple with the same core challenges of disillusionment, loss and reconstruction of meaning, and morality as and through connection with one's community. The pervasiveness of these themes throughout such disparate forms of television speaks to their overwhelming centrality to the post-Recessional millennial middle-class psyche.

Undergirding this archetype, genre, ethic, and affect is the woman dirtbag's foundational troubled attachment to postfeminism (Dobson and Kanai 2018). The contemporary woman dirtbag predominating television is animated by a visceral and anguished dis/entanglement with the aspirational postfeminist figure, transforming into whom was revealed to many millennials to be both materially impossible post-Recession. In this chapter, I will outline and explore the ways in which the woman dirtbag affectively experiences the tension between her postfeminist

expectations and her material reality, and negotiates her dis/entanglement with postfeminist values.

Abjection

Rebecca Wanzo influentially termed *Girls* and *Awkward Black Girl* "precarious-girl comedy" utilizing "abjection aesthetics." (Wanzo 2016) As Wanzo observed, both shows leverage abjection for humor—*Girls* leans heavily on "grossness" and body humor, and *Awkward Black Girl* (and *Insecure*) sees Issa experience her simultaneous awkwardness and Blackness as abject. Wanzo writes, "abjection is often a principal sign of these characters' precarity: they inhabit spaces where they often recoil from others and vice versa, and their constant association with that which is considered gross (like dirt, vomit, and feces) is habitually a sign of what emotional and economic insecurity has wrought." (Wanzo 2016) Wanzo focuses specifically on the characters' interpersonal abjection, the way their awkward or discomforting behavior repels others. I would like to expand, however, on her note that "these shows are also somewhat haunted by their televisual antecedents." (Wanzo 2016)

It seems these women experience a sort of split or double consciousness in which their physical forms (their bodies, their income, their possessions, their location) are firmly tied to the post-Recession world they inhabit, but their expectations (for their emotions, their behavior, their careers, their relationships, and their lifestyles) are still calibrated to high postfeminist standards. Subsequently, the women are caught somewhere between their socialization and their reality, in a liminal, border-transgressing space where they are unsure whether to accept and adjust to their new world or continue to expect and strive for a top-girl existence. Often, the shows see their protagonists switch between modes, extracting comedy from the juxtaposition of the two modes,

or the girlboss mode in the banal real world; in other words, from the abjection of inhabiting and transgressing the borderland between expectation and reality. In *Insecure*, for instance, Issa is unassuming at work and in some relationships, prone to deferring to others, tripping over her words, or putting her foot in her mouth. When she's alone with her bathroom mirror, however, Issa raps confidently, tries on bold makeup looks, and asserts herself in imagined retorts. She even identifies this transformation by naming "mirror self" in season 3. ("Fresh-Like") As Wanzo points out, for Issa this split consciousness is racialized—mirror Issa reflects the veneration of cool confidence from both the White postfeminist ideal and a cultural equation of Blackness with coolness. Scholars have similarly analyzed how Hannah's outsized confidence and sexuality in the workplace in *Girls* depicts this abject tension—Hannah was socialized to believe that girlboss-esque confidence and sex appeal were workplace decorum and the keys to success, but when she attempts to adopt this postfeminist mode at work, it's a clear, cringeworthy mismatch with her actual poor performance and fumbling sexuality. (Genz 2017)

Choice guilt

No wonder this fantasy so persistently sticks around despite disqualifying material circumstances—as Gill writes, neoliberalism

> "Call(s) on women to recognize that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalized sexism but by their own lack of confidence—a lack that is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces. The solution, thus, becomes to work on the self, rather than change the world." (Gill 2017)

Because their neoliberal, girl-power socialization has taught them that the sum total of their lives is fully within their control and therefore on their shoulders; that they can achieve quite literally anything if they make the right choices and optimize themselves, the dirtbags have

trouble shaking the fantasy because they've been socialized to believe that, despite everything, *they have the power to make it a reality*. The neoliberal insistence that one's life circumstances fall entirely and solely on them sadistically obstructs a psychologically healthy acceptance of the post-Recessional economic reality. Subsequently, her conceptualization of the parallel *Sex and the City* version of her life clearly hangs around the dirtbag's consciousness through unemployment, dingy apartments, dead-end relationships and long spells of unhappiness, because if she just tried a little harder, just made the right choices, just projected the right confidence at work, the dirtbag has been told, she could have that life.

While the distance between postfeminist expectations and these characters' insistently realistic selves and lives is often expressed through humor, they are clearly deeply psychically troubled by the postfeminist version of the world that still lives in their heads and pushes to be strived for. The woman dirtbag's dissatisfaction with herself and her life is what lends these shows their unique and defining affective palette of ugly feelings: guilt, shame, anger, despondence, even grief. In fact, in multiple shows, characters explicitly express anxiety, self-doubt, and guilt about not being "the kind of subject who can make the right choices." (McRobbie 2004) In a rare expression of vulnerability, when asked what she wants, *Fleabag*'s titular character cracks and confesses, her voice full of ache and emotion:

> "I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong." ("Episode 2.4")

Girls' usually-haughty Marnie says in a nearly identical admission, "I don't even know what I want. Sometimes I wish someone would tell me 'this is how you should spend your days, this is how the rest of your life should look.'" ("It's a Shame About Ray") Neoliberal messaging

that one's life and satisfaction is entirely dependent on their individual choices has clearly sunk in with these women, for whom the "freedom" of extended adolescence and infinite consumer options successfully brings guilt and shame that they have not made the "right" enough choices to create fulfilling meaning in their lives (McRobbie 2004). Fleabag's and Marnie's understanding this meaningless to be their fault for not making the right choices, rather than the intention of a neoliberal order which prioritizes individual consumption over community coherence, as well as the inevitable grief of human existence, conveys the sinister intentions, success, and psychic toll of neoliberal individual-fault messaging: even as the Recession revealed "the sheer unviability of naked individualisation as the resources of sociality (and welfare) are stripped away," the neoliberally socialized Millennial was "(left) to self-blame when success eludes him or her." This self-blame gives these shows their very strong current of shame, guilt, and self-loathing, a current which at once breaks the "feelings rules"' insistence on confidence but at the same time does little to explicitly implicate systemic contributors to this weight of meaninglessness.

Grief and the Weight of Meaninglessness

Another prominent strain in woman dirtbag shows and their characters' sense of meaninglessness is underrepresented in the literature: grief. Following cultural, financial, or personal upheaval, Most woman dirtbag characters are experiencing the loss of the life they had pictured for themselves, the person they thought they'd be, the career, home, family, or relationship they'd believed was theirs if they only made all the right choices. While disappointment and grief are certainly different experiences and affects, I would argue the interesting prevalence of *grief* in its most literal form—namely, loss of loved ones—in these

shows denotes grief as a shared or canonical Millennial affective experience. Subsequently, it can be illuminating to read woman dirtbag individual grief narratives as analogous to or in concert with post-postfeminist loss of meaning.

Fleabag sets personal grief alongside a broader ennui surrounding uncertainty about one's path. Fleabag finds herself languishing and lacking meaning in her life following the deaths of her mother and best friend. The persistent emptiness in Fleabag's life indicates that not only is she grieving the loved ones she lost, but the life with them, and the meaning they gave to that life, that she once expected. Fleabag's earlier quote about desiring someone to tell her what to wear, how to live and what to believe especially highlights her distress at the weight of her meaninglessness, and also, I'd argue, is a manifestation of her grief. Through flashbacks we've seen that her deceased best friend Boo was the leader in their friendship, telling Fleabag what to wear and proposing ideas for their co-owned café. After her death, then, Fleabag is left not knowing how to orient her life: she cannot dress to impress Boo, she cannot improve their café to make her happy, and she subsequently doesn't know to what ends she should do or decide anything. In this way, Fleabag's individual interpersonal grief is a microcosm of the collective grief of Millennials, who too believed satisfaction, pleasure, and purpose would come from presenting and behaving in line with the postfeminist ideal, but found that ideal to be financially impossible or ideologically flawed. I would argue part of Kristeva's weight of meaninglessness for these characters, and part of their ongoing attachment to postfeminism we'll discuss in the next section, is grieving that meaning and staring down a future with no clear purpose in sight.

Hulu's 2020 remake of *High Fidelity* further canonizes loss as a defining Millennial, and even Millennial woman, experience: the novel-turned-movie was revived with a gender-bent protagonist who obsesses over the loss of her ex-fiancé a year after their break-up. Her life seems

to have stopped, as she spends evenings listening to "I Can't Stand the Rain" and smoking alone in her apartment, and days at the record store she evidently fell into ownership of. The revival adds a number of 2020-ready modifications, such as diversifying the cast and musical selections and featuring multiple queer relationships, but also demands to be grouped with the woman dirtbag renaissance in television by virtue of its misanthropic, languishing, grieving female protagonist. Further, the remake converts the original movie into television, a medium more temporally conducive to sprawl, and subsequently the woman dirtbag's feeling of "stuckness"; and omits an original plotline about book/movie Rob's ex-girlfriend Laura's grief over the death of her father, instead sitting its musings on grief and meaninglessness in Rob herself, and her loss of her fiancé. A key distinction is that the original sees Rob return to Laura (*High Fidelity*), which he resolves to work on; the remake, however, beamingly endorses Rob's decision to leave her previous relationship behind to pursue something new and healthier, rather than chasing a past romantic fantasy. This switch serves primarily to highlight Rob's personal and moral growth, a move this paper will dive into in the next chapter, but it also encourages *acceptance* of the loss and *grieving* the relationship. Rob's choice to turn away from a past fantasy and accept her current reality, however less glossy and more challenging it may be, is almost saccharinely applauded by the show (which plays warm, optimistic music and throws golden light over Rob during a montage showing her self-actualization after she closes the door on the past fantasy) ("The Other Side of the Rock").

Negotiation of Postfeminism: a Case Study in Fleabag and Girls

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant identifies ongoing allegiance to and hope in systems that have failed us as "disappointment, but not disenchantment." (Berlant 2008) Despite clear

affective and ideological "ruptures" (Dobson and Kanai 2018) with postfeminism, the extent to which woman dirtbag shows remain wedded to it—disappointed, but not disenchanted—is oft-scrutinized in the abundant relevant scholarship (Genz 2017, Dobson and Kanai 2018). Complicating matters is the fact that different levels of analysis—ie, within the narrative versus examining a show's production—reflect different investments in postfeminism; even within one show, the individual characters themselves wrestle with their own attachments to postfeminism in varied ways; and the genre's self-reflexivity has generated what I interpret as some shows' criticism of other shows' postfeminist tendencies.

At the macro- or meta- level of analysis, by virtue of their distribution and semi-autobiographical nature, the shows are invested, in the literal financial sense and subsequently ideologically, in postfeminism, epitomized by their creators' subjectivity as inherent postfeminist success stories. The shows are almost universally created by, written by, and starring the same woman, and loosely resemble her life. Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer created and starred in *Broad City* as Abbi Abrams and Ilana Wexler, whom the two say are younger versions of themselves (Paumgarten 2014); Issa Rae created, wrote, and starred in *Insecure* as Issa Dee; and *Girls* creator, writer, and star Lena Dunham and her character Hannah Horvath share key characteristics (ie, attending Oberlin college and aspiring to write professionally). The genesis of *Broad City* and *Insecure* as webseries, a form popularized synchronously with the "vlog," is further evidence of the shows' investment in lived experience and realism. That is; the heroines' identities and experiences as college-educated New York-based twentysomethings struggling in their careers directly derive from and reflect those experiences of their creators.

Ironically, the shows reflect women struggling to find career success and meaning, but the shows' very creation and distribution embody career success and meaning *for those same women. Broad City* sees Abbi Abrams try and fail to cultivate a successful career as an artist, but the show *Broad City* gave the real-life Abbi Jacobson an immensely successful, unlikely, and lucrative artistic career. Similarly, Issa Dee struggles in her career, but Issa Rae's depiction of those struggles led to her recent career-defining $40-million production deal with HBO (cite… someone). Though the streaming revolution has made space for new and more equal-opportunity content pipelines from outside the insular Hollywood system, like picking up webseries (Acham 2013, Sobande 2019), this disruptive potential is mitigated by the fact that shows are still distributed by enormous corporations. This of course calls into question how much disenchantment with the economic order such corporations actually abide in their programming, but also how divested these shows can actually be from neoliberalism, as they are actively crafted by neoliberal success stories. How does the fact that the Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer writing *Broad City* have a TV deal and therefore have "made it," in the current system influence their characters' and show's attitude towards that system? The question of whether these creators can actually bite the hand that feeds them in their work merits extensive further study, though Stephanie Genz' exploration of the commodification of the failed neoliberal self in *Girls* is a very solid foundation.

Genz writes that neoliberalism's impetus on refashioning the self brings about "a transformation of subjectivity that folds neoliberalism into the subject itself." (Genz 2017) Despite the impossibility of the dream, within these shows the top girl aspirational figure sticks around. The dirtbags seem perpetually visited, occupied by the phantom of the ideal postfeminist model that Gill describes (Gill 2017), as if experiencing a double consciousness. The

postfeminist ideal's omnipresence, and the dirtbags' relationship with her, resembles the internalized voice of an older sister with whom they have a constant contentious relationship. Alternately, the dirtbags try to impress her (and fail), claim to condemn her (but imitate her all the while), vehemently rail against the unfair standards she's set, and, at their most self actualized, disregard her entirely in favor of constructing their own identity. Comparing *Girls* (2012) to series 2 of *Fleabag* (2019) is an illuminating case study in these shows' varied and changing entanglements with postfeminism; specifically, *Fleabag* rejects *Girls'* ideology of branding the self.

While *Girls* is this post-postfeminist genre's progenitor, scholars and commentators have comprehensively detailed the ways in which it is less a rebuttal or alternative vision to postfeminism so much as postfeminism that hasn't showered in a while. While the aimless, awkward women of *Girls* distance themselves from the prosperous top girl or the sexually adept modern woman who "has sex like a man" ("Sex and the City"), they continue to optimize themselves for approval and consumption—as failures rather than successes (Genz 2017). Protagonist Hannah Horvath infamously endeavors throughout the series to write an autobiographical book of essays and cement herself as "the voice of a generation. Or at least, *a* voice of *a* generation." ("Pilot") Hannah subjects herself to degrading sexual experiences, bungles career opportunities, and mars her relationships with friends and family, all in the name of prioritizing and creating entertaining content for this future, effectively hypothetical, memoir. As Genz writes, this is the very "project of the self" that is a primary mechanism by which postfeminism operates on and through individuals, which "encourages individuals to become the authors of their own life scripts and constantly work to update/upgrade the self." (Genz 2017) While Hannah presents herself as a bold, revolutionary affront to the commodifiably thin,

socially competent, sexually empowered top girl who invents herself in accordance with beauty ads and fashion magazines, she is similarly constructing herself—as an interesting failure—to be consumed, creating herself to be most appealing to the literary markets. Further, the "girls" obsess over and package themselves at the expense of their interpersonal relationships, specifically their friendships, perpetuating postfeminism's prioritization of the commodified self over interdependent relationships.

In contrast, the second series of *Fleabag* sees the titular dirtbag disavow, in the name of healing, her own series. The first series of *Fleabag* was animated by its frequent fourth-wall breaks from the snarky but charming Fleabag, who conspiratorially turned to the audience to laugh and commiserate about her awkward, isolated life. The breaks read as innocuous familiar form. At the end of series one, however, Fleabag, always suave, in control, and quick with an aside for us, starts to slip and her memories of her role in her best friend's death start to break through—into her consciousness, and to us. Fleabag panics. She is horrified her doting audience is seeing the truth and frantically whips around in search of escape, but finds herself staring right at us no matter where she turns. ("Episode 1.6") We realize the fourth-wall breaks are not a value-neutral component of the show's form, but a coping mechanism Fleabag created to suppress her grief and isolation. After the death of her mother and best friend, she is without companionship, and immensely guilty. So she imagines herself as not alone, but rather constantly confiding in us, her audience, whom she can imagine provide her all the companionship and validation she craves. As long as she performs her ironically detached jester role and doesn't think about—and therefore clue us into—her guilt and grief, she can rest easy knowing a version of herself is in control, not hurting, not marked by her bad actions, and loved. This scene revealed the pathological bent to the fourth wall breaks; the show's last scene disavowed them.

In the last episode of the series, Fleabag exhibits an extremely personally challenging amount of vulnerability in expressing her feelings for and desire to be with the Priest she's deeply befriended throughout the season. Notably, this Priest, in deeply getting to know and caring for Fleabag, is the only character to notice Fleabag's fourth-wall breaks (revealing them once again to be very diegetic); "where do you go?" he asks after she turns to us for an aside ("Episode 2.3"). She even says something aloud to him that she intended for us—the intimacy she feels with us is bleeding into the closeness she feels with him, but she struggles to be vulnerable with him and perform for us simultaneously. In the last scene of the show, the Priest chooses his faith over a romance with Fleabag. This is a very different, changed Fleabag from the one we met two series ago; she is now working through her grief in therapy, making an effort to cultivate a relationship with her sister, and letting herself be known in all her pain and flaw and immorality by the Priest. So now, she is unironically, genuinely devastated. Rather than turning to us to crack a joke and downplay her pain, she glances sadly at us. As she begins to walk away, the camera starts to follow her. She looks back at us, softly smiles, shakes her head, turns back around and walks away with her back to us. As she walks from the foreground into the background, she pauses and waves at us one more time, highlighting the fact that she is physically farther from the audience than she has been all series. She keeps walking. As the show cuts to the title card, the lyrics "I know I'm gonna be alright" play. ("Episode 2.6")

Fleabag's final message is startlingly self-reflexive; to heal, to be present and to connect with others, one must walk away from the audience in their mind they perform their optimal self for; must process their hard feelings rather than packaging and capitalizing off of them. It is therefore an insistently clear-eyed look at the "project of the self" postfeminism entrenched, an exposure of the pathological and self destructive ends of that approach to life, and a

condemnation of the postfeminist big sister inside one's head encouraging her to manage and make appetizing her hard feelings (Kanai 2019). In walking away from her audience, the validators of her optimzed self, Fleabag abandons the very notion of an optimal self and all the values that make her preferable to the real, hurting, flawed Fleabag.

In "Not Taking the Self Too Seriously," Akane Kanai analyzed the social media posts of young women and found an overwhelming and nearly exclusive use of humor to divulge failure to live up to neoliberal norms; ie, young women joking about their lack of work ethic, their difficulty in school, or their apathy about their careers. Kanai writes,

> "Humour provides the distance required to minimise the disappointment, resentment and disaffection articulated in posts, rendering them amenable to further circulation. Expressing these feelings of failure in a comical fashion preserves the status of these neoliberal life regulations as rules that ought to be observed, while attempting to demonstrate a pleasing commonality in the struggle to adhere to them." (Kanai 2019)

Hannah's making life choices dependent on, and Fleabag catering her innermost emotions to imagined consumers of, their selves is a lucid filmic expression of the consequences of socializing women to view their identities as commodities. Our closer inspection, however, revealed a distinction in each project's investment in postfeminist ideology: *Girls* extracts humor from the distance between Hannah and the top girl, reflecting her *disappointment* with her project of herself—after all, Hannah wants to craft and sell herself with the talent of that very top girl, but humorously lacks the drive or skill to do so. Fleabag, however, becomes *disenchanted* with the project of managing and packaging herself. By walking away from her audience, her market, entirely, she reveals the pathological nature of the implanted postfeminist gaze, and condemns it altogether.

In sum, these shows' affective palette of ugly feelings and anguished relationship with the postfeminist ideal speak to their creators' and characters' difficulty parting with that

postfeminist fantasy and accepting it as such. Scholars are similarly torn in determining whether these characters, in their groundbreaking bad affects, mark a rebuttal to the postfeminist mode of being, or merely a new flavor of that very mode. Further complicating this question is the looming moral impulse that hangs over these shows. In the next chapter, I will argue that these shows put forth interpersonal ethics and the maintenance of interdependent relationships as an alternate mode of meaning-making to self-optimization, which, as chapter two has shown, these characters have largely divested from.

Chapter Three. *Finding Meaning Beyond Perfection*

Since the postfeminist mode of being is untenable for the woman dirtbag, what is she to do with her life? How is she to be in the world? The loss or lack of cultural instructions leaves her aimless and listless at the outset of these shows. We meet the woman dirtbag during a time when the weight of meaninglessness feels heavy on her shoulders: in her long grief Fleabag has yet to seek out new joy, companionship, or fulfillment (and is thus filling the void with compulsive sex); Issa is bored and frustrated in her stalled career and relationship; Rob realizes she has effectively paused her life for over a year following the dissolution of her engagement. Following loss, and foregoing top girl achievement and optimization, these characters, reflecting their extended-adolescent creators, clearly struggle to orient their lives in any particular direction. Counter to the prevailing narrative about these shows and their "immobility as a mode of being," (Wanzo 2016) however, I have observed that they rarely take up their protagonists' stuckness in their narrative structure or ethos. In actuality, the heart of these shows is evolution: they witness the germination and fruition of the main character's desire to become *un*stuck—as Rae said of *Insecure*, "it's always been a show about growth. (Jung 2021) Examination of the

state these shows depict as and therefore consider to comprise meaningless stuckness, and characters' evolutions from that point, reveal this cohort's value structure, which often rebuts postfeminist teachings and tracks with Millennial cultural mores. Specifically, these shows narratively communicate meaninglessness by depicting a character's lack of or apathy towards their close interpersonal relationships, or, secondarily, their ineptitude in romance or at work. The shows' narrative arcs follow or resolve with characters' awareness of, appreciation for, and intent to tend to, their friendships and familial relationships. That is, this cohort of shows consistently puts forth the formation and maintenance of interdependent interpersonal relationships as an alternative mode of meaning-making to postfeminist self-optimization.

The Loneliness of Ideal and Failed Neoliberal Subjecthood

These shows do not indict neoliberalism nor postfeminism explicitly. Yet the remnants of an individualistic neoliberal socialization consistently isolate characters. Postfeminism's obsession with self-optimization and control by way of proper choice-making inherently puts relationships with others, whom one cannot control and optimize, out of the aspirational frame. The pursuits postfeminism exalts are intentionally individual: optimizing *oneself* by purchasing products, acquiring capital, and making oneself over (Gill 2017). Of course, the characteristics and ethos neoliberalism at large advocates for career success are not only asocial but intensely *anti*social: total confidence, however unfounded; ruthlessness; eagerness to exploit others for their labor or use to oneself; belief that oneself is better than and more deserving than others. And because of that "transformation of subjectivity that folds neoliberalism into the subject itself" (Genz 2017), neoliberal subjects are conditioned to completely integrate these C-Suite characteristics into their selfhood, to aspire to them as the superior way to be in the world. Girl

power ideology also folds them into gender—equating successful womanhood with career success, acquisition of power and capital, and invulnerability, as well as positioning those *as* feminism, thereby communicating to women the way they can express their feminism and self-regard is through domination.

Insecure identifies and rebuts this conditioning explicitly. In contrast to the professionally floundering Issa, Molly Carter is a textbook-successful top girl. She graduated from Stanford, is on the partner track at the multiple impressive law firms she works at over the series, and is intensely hardworking, self-assured, and self-disciplined. However, Molly's achievement of the postfeminist careerist ideal isolates her again and again, occasionally via the demands of her job, but much more often as a result of Molly's perfectionistic and individualistic top girl mindset. Molly deeply craves romantic connection, but pictures a perfect romance, and consequently rejects potential partners on trivial or bad-faith grounds; she frets constantly over what choices she "should" be making, and subsequently harshly judges and has little patience for her friends when they make suboptimal choices; and she impression-manages so comprehensively that she hides a deeply impactful but messy relationship and breakup from her therapist for months, even though its emotional effects thwart her attempts to form new relationships. Issa, the directionless extended adolescent to Molly's girlboss, repeatedly challenges these tendencies, pointing out the judgment and criticism in Molly's obsession with "should"s when it's leveled at her relationships with friends and partners. Issa explicitly names the loneliness in Molly's defensive stance and top-girl domination in season 3, episode 8, "Ghost-Like," after Molly goes behind an associate's back to take an opportunity at work.

> ISSA: Like, you keep assuming the worst in everybody, like homie from your job, for example. You just came for him out of nowhere-

MOLLY: Girl, it was not out of nowhere. I don't wanna be like every other woman in my office, stalled out at associate. So yeah, this is just how I have to be.

ISSA: What's your angle? You gonna be partner all alone with everybody hating you? ("Ghost Like")

Girls importantly adds that one need not be a *successful* neoliberal subject to suffer from its isolationism. As chapter two discussed, the Girls cultivate an image of failed neoliberal subjecthood, but "stubbornly adhere to a narcissistic and self-important individualism" (Genz 2017) in their self-promotion and disregard for others. The Girls' rocky, selfish friendships, culminating in the dissolution of the friend group in the finale, testify to the loneliness of remaining entangled—however fretfully—with self-obsessed individualist modes of being.

Dirtbaggery and its Discontents

Considering the individualism of neoliberal socialization, it's no wonder the hyperrealistic, semi-autobiographical woman dirtbag millennials struggle with being in relationship with the people around them. On a surface level a primary factor cohering the characters is their dirtbag persona, which derives first and foremost from their previously-discussed bad affect, but also from their morality-inflected bad behavior. Some are loudly misanthropic (Rob from *High Fidelity*, Fleabag from *Fleabag*) but all mess up in ways that hurt the people close to them and grant them questionable moral status; Fleabag, in her grief-spurred sex addiction, sleeps with her best friend Boo's boyfriend, leading to Boo's suicide; Rob cheats on her fiancé and doesn't tell him even as the ramifications of that act disintegrate their relationship, then allows her brother to end his best friendship with that fiancé for her honor; Issa cheats on her long-term boyfriend with an old friend, then ghosts and ignores that

friend; and both Rob and Issa are prone to paying attention to their friends—their closest, most intimate relationships—only insofar as the friendship serves them in their times of need.

Very similar behavior infamously earned Carrie Bradshaw the title "television's first female antiheroine" (Nussbaum, 2013). In contrast with the revered canonical antiheroes of television's recent "Golden Age," Bradshaw never founded a drug empire, raped and pillaged, or serially murdered—rather, her violence was emotional (i.e., judging Samantha's sexual behavior), her villainous qualities those which hurt the people she was supposed to nurture (i.e., cheating on Aidan). In other words, Carrie put herself before others, prioritized her wants and emotions over the feelings of the people who care about her, and neglected close relationships—crimes any nonfictional person would be hard pressed to move through life without committing. The livid cultural reaction to these crimes, gleeful acknowledgements that Carrie is not a good person, and conference of villain status upon a selfish but average woman highlighted the lingering cultural belief in women as the moral guardians of society. For that reason, the dirtbag's bad actions, and audiences' affection for her regardless, signal a representational step forward: in these works, a woman is allowed to fail and be loved regardless.

This representational progress, I would argue, applies as well to the woman dirtbag's open expression of ugly feelings, as well as her average life, career, and ability; and goes double for groups of women who continue to be represented only insofar as they are perfectly exceptional. Video essayist Tee Noir expresses the unfairness and stress of contingent representation in her video "Society vs. The 'Average' Looking Black Woman," in which she argues that despite the prevalence of Black women in the upper echelons of American culture (as musicians, actors, etc) that representation is nearly-exclusive to light-skinned Black women and Black women with eurocentric features, and that Black women seem to have to perform

hyperfemininity and constantly undergo labor-intensive beauty routines in order to be visible and praised. Noir points out that this representation of exclusively "exceptional" Black women is wholly unhelpful and even counterproductive for the majority, for whom it reestablishes unattainable standards of self-optimization to be seen and celebrated; on those grounds Tee highly praises *Insecure*, where "in Issa's world, Black women are beautiful in the ordinary, in the regular, plain as hell, and that's just that." ("Society vs. The 'Average' Looking Black Woman") I would argue the benefit Noir identifies in *Insecure*'s "in the ordinary" aesthetics applies inside as well as out, with the depiction and *acceptance* of average and flawed women—in their careers, in their love lives, in relationship—providing a necessary foil to the postfeminist gaze, which confers narrative visibility on the grounds of some exceptionalism, or a willingness to strive for it.

At the same time, woman dirtbag shows do not revel in or indulge their characters' hurtful tendencies; they do not ignore their impact, as in girlboss narratives, nor try to spin moral failings into branding successes, as in *Girls*. In their hyper-realistic depiction of flawed women they soberly present protagonists' flaws as such, and show the resultant personal fallout; namely, the loneliness discussed earlier this chapter. When Issa and Molly get into a major fight, Issa spends an entire listless episode wandering around Los Angeles alone, even unable to enjoy a major professional success ("Lowkey Done"). The episode itself is one of *Insecure*'s most downcast and quiet, akin to the multiple episodes of fallout from breakups and grief. *High Fidelity*'s Rob minimizes her friendships with her record store coworkers and frequently swats down their offers to hang out in lieu of ruminating about her past relationship and smoking alone in her apartment, until she is horrified by getting a glimpse into her future upon seeing a woman decades older doing the same thing ("Track 2"). Fleabag's loneliness is so foundational to her

story that it prompts the implicit-audience structure of her show: in Fleabag's grief, unwillingness to express the depth of that grief to anyone, and subsequent isolation, she must literally imagine friends to share life with.

Coming to Goodness

The woman dirtbags' narrative arcs see them seek to climb out of this loneliness, and in doing so rebut feelings rules and individualism. Whereas abundant scholarship has covered and analyzed the woman dirtbags' affect, precarity, abjection humor, and other topics beyond the scope of this thesis, i.e., sexuality and gender identity (Holzberg & Lehtonen 2020), I have found little academic discussion of their high premium on moral growth—specifically growth through and into secure interpersonal relationship with others. Every woman dirtbag show mentioned in this paper presents and features a character's personal moral growth (with morality referring to inherently social questions of how we treat and what we owe others). Sometimes the woman dirtbag's growth includes her investment and advancement in her career, as in *Broad City* and *Insecure*, a topic which merits *much* further study, particularly as it pertains to the strained entanglement with postfeminism discussed in Chapter Two; much more ubiquitously, however, it is her coming to invest in her connection with others; romantic partners, friends, and siblings alike.

Notably, in contrast to the postfeminist romance cycle, in the narratives in which a character climactically pursues or enters a romantic relationship, the show rarely presents achievement of that romantic relationship as its goal. Rather, the traits the character exhibits in pursuing the romantic relationship are the same ones simultaneously shown to improve her relationship with friends and siblings. Though romantic relationships are at the forefront of these

works, almost always, the relationship development serves to highlight the character's nascent ability to be vulnerable or put others before herself. The final scene of *High Fidelity* is a case study of both growth as plot and romantic development as growth.

High Fidelity's penultimate and final episodes see the exposure of curmudgeonly, navelgazing Rob's secret: that her ex-fiancé and apparent true love Mac did not heartlessly leave her as the audience has been implicitly led to believe, but rather, that the night she found an engagement ring in his drawer, she was startled by the commitment of marriage, fled their apartment, had a one-night-stand, told Mac immediately afterwards that she wanted to get married, then for months proceeded to close herself off to Mac out of guilt and anxiety; as she confesses, "I pushed him away, and pushed him away, and pushed him away, until he had no choice but to go away." ("Fun Rob") In the year following Mac's departure to London, Rob effectively pauses her life to self-isolate and ruminate. When Mac returns to town, she obsesses over him, his new fiancé, and his feelings toward Rob and the potential that he's still interested (going so far as to send him a playlist of her feelings for him and spending an intimate rooftop birthday dinner with him while his fiancé is out of town)—to the point that for weeks she evidently does not even hear her friends when they speak to her. Her best friend and coworker Simon is tenderly and very attentively attuned to Rob's feelings at all times, checking in with her consistently over the series and discerning her mood from the sweater she wears or the band she's listening to. Rob, however, literally tunes Simon out while he's discussing a problem in his new and very important relationship (seemingly non-diegetic music plays over Simon's dialogue until Simon notices Rob is checked out and expresses his hurt), and as we learn from Simon, has not been listening to their other best friend and coworker Cherise talk *at all*, as Simon says Cherise has been talking about her plans to learn bass and desire for a specific model *nonstop* for

weeks, which Rob has absolutely no recollection of. Rob has also used new partner Clyde as a tool in her dealings with Mac, or as a literal means to an end, as when she brusquely dumps him, then calls him up days later to ask to use his car.

In the show's first stretch of episodes, Rob appears to be a lovable misanthrope, hung up on past loves and prone to overthinking. Those developments in the show's second half, however, reveal the underlying selfishness and disregard for others underneath Rob's surface persona. She feels the weight of meaninglessness of her self-constructed loneliness in the penultimate episode, "Fun Rob," in which she finds herself unable to summon anyone to celebrate her 30th birthday with her, blows off Clyde, and calls Mac to let her into her locked apartment, who kisses her. This evening is Rob's come-to-Jesus nadir; she has blown all her friendships to continue to complicate her relationship with Mac.

The last episode sees Rob realize, seek to rectify, and climb out of this rock bottom. In a sun-dappled montage set to the upbeat "Can You Get to That," Rob apologizes to her brother for breaking up his friendship with Mac, rushes to the hospital to meet his newly-born daughter, is shown to have sold a treasured record to buy Cherise the guitar she's been saving up for, and shows up at Clyde's doorstep to apologize for her callous behavior and confess her genuine care for him, despite knowing he may—in fact, almost definitely will—rebuff her. The series ends with the formerly-noncommittal drifter Rob taking Clyde's guess that their relationship has a "nine percent" chance of working in stride, declaring "Nine percent… I'll take it." ("The Other Side of the Rock")

Though it was the last scene of the season—and the show, following its cancellation—Rob's relationship with Clyde in particular is not the show's priority. Rather, Rob's willingness to go after Clyde serves to signal her nascent willingness to be vulnerable, apologize,

commit, and make active choices; as well as her understanding that her close relationships require nurturing, attention, and sacrifice. It is notable that the development with Clyde occurs in sequence with Rob making amends and setting intentions to improve in her other close relationships: meaningfully apologizing to her brother before meeting her niece and realizing the beauty in committing to growing relationships and kinship groups like family; and selling a favorite collector's record to a shop patron she hates in order to support Cherise. Rob's investment in her kinship relationships is especially important as a bookend of the series; in the first episode, Rob says "if we found out the earth was gonna blow up tomorrow, the first people I would call are the obvious: my parents, Cam. Then I'd call Simon, Cherise I guess. And I would be calling all of them to apologize for the fact that I would be spending the next 23 hours with… Mac." ("Top Five") The contrast between this assertion—which, like Rob's ruminating and exclusive attention on Mac, appears at first glance to be harmlessly hopelessly romantic until it becomes clear Rob totally neglects her non-romantic relationships—and the final episode's clear intent to show Rob closely tending to her friend and sibling relationships implies that part of Rob's growth is her attentiveness to *all* the relationships in her life.

Unlearning Postfeminism

Notably, the forms of growth these protagonists exhibit are all the inverses of postfeminist teachings, namely the "feelings rules" which include premiums on confidence, resilience, and emotional independence; and the myth of total individual responsibility that undergirds self-optimization imperatives and choice anxiety. In contrast, these "dirtbags" exhibit personal growth and progress toward a more compassionate existence via sharing their vulnerability and seeking interdependent forgiveness rather than independent optimization.

The doctrine of feelings rules, self-optimization, and "girlbossery" all communicate to women that value and love are predicated on perfection. Both characters' and audiences' adoration for these deeply messy protagonists, then, begins to untangle those myths: "In centering 'imperfect' and 'vulnerable' women who are openly struggling with the commands of gendered neoliberalism that structure twenty-first century life, these representations push back--to an extent--against the postfeminist expectation for women to be resilient above all else." (Perkins & Schreiber 2019) Subsequently, the woman dirtbags have trouble showing vulnerability and expressing, rather than regulating, their hard feelings.

In *Insecure*, Molly believes she is worthy insofar as she is perfect. As her therapist points out, "I know as Black women it can feel like there's a lot of things stacked against us. We feel invisible at work, we feel the need to have the perfect relationship. It's a lot." ("Hella Questions") As discussed earlier in this chapter, this drive for perfection pushes Molly to perform the "right" version of herself to partners and potential partners, and to criticize them for not holding up their end of her bargain. As a prototypical top girl and as a Black woman of whom both unwavering strength and total perfection are asked, Molly feels she must remain strong and productive at work even in the wake of her mother's life-threatening stroke; as her mother lies comatose, Molly takes work calls while pacing hospital corridors, assures her colleague Taurean, a competitor of hers, that she'll finish a project on time, and even attends a work retreat. At that work retreat, she finally clues Taurean into what's going on ("Surviving, Okay?!"). His response—shock that Molly is working through such a trauma, kindness and compassion, and, later, wine and flowers to her house when she's having an emotionally rough night and postpones a date—shows Molly love in the face of, and in direct response to, vulnerability. It is this relationship, built from Molly's moment of deep vulnerability and need for

support that, after five seasons, allows Molly to feel comfortable to be herself and lean on her partner.

Fleabag, meanwhile, struggles with guilt and self-hatred; she believes she is too bad, deep down, to deserve love. Her understanding that her love is destructive to the people who love her, and that she does not deserve help and comfort, lead her to suppress her grief; her callous, self-protective shell then fends off intimacy from the people around her, despite their best efforts: the Priest at one point exclaims "I'm just trying to get to know you!" to which Fleabag immediately responds "Well, I don't want that!" ("Episode 2.4") To those around her and her imagined audience, Fleabag sidesteps intimacy by brushing past moments of pain—which might prompt empathy, compassion, or curiosity towards her—with humor. As late in the series as the last episode, Fleabag still ducks into the fourth wall to crack a joke and avoid her pain. In a rare moment of emotional openness, her father tells her "I think you know how to love better than any of us. That's why you find it all so painful." It's a beautiful sentiment, and likely the exact one that Fleabag, whose love has proven tragically destructive, needs to hear. Yet she slices through the moment with a look to camera, wrinkled nose, and "I don't find it painful." As always, she denies her pain—likely even to herself—and projects us the image of an unbothered woman. Her conclusive moment of growth comes at the end of this episode and the series, when, following the Priest's rejection and departure, she openly cries, feeling and even allowing us to see her pain. Opening up to the Priest, allowing herself to be seen and known, is causing her pain, but also gave her the intimate connection she's been so longing for, and creating a cold simulacrum of—the Priest's ability to see Fleabag's cuts to camera indicated that he was as close to and intimate with her as the audience she imagined; the closeness she had to fabricate finally, with her vulnerability, confession, and openness to intimacy, became real. By the season finale,

she seems to have learned that loving includes and requires feeling your pain, that intimacy requires vulnerability, that, as the Priest says, "love is awful," and can now leave behind the invulnerable false intimacy of her imagined audience in favor of truly feeling, and sharing with others, her pain ("Episode 2.6"). *Fleabag*'s message is summarized in-world by Claire, who tells her, "it's about opening yourself up to the people who want to love you." ("Episode 2.1")

The Interdependence of Forgiveness

Much of the scholarly conversation around these works praises their embrace of abjection (Wanzo 2016); their rebuttal to the hero's-journey or makeover-montage traditional narrative in the form of allowing a flawed character to remain flawed and move about the world messing up. One could argue, then, that these journey-to-goodness narratives disrupt or invalidate that embrace of abjection; or even that they are merely novel forms of self-optimization, ones based in morality rather than, for instance, physical beauty. This is especially true of a show like *Insecure*, which is fundamentally "a show about growth," and which sees its characters self-actualize into the happiest, most successful versions of themselves by the series' end. However, these shows actually seek a middle path between the *Girls* model of nihilistic unabashed languishing in flaw, asociality, and ugly feeling and perfectionist self-optimization. They seem to implicitly offer—and perhaps reflect creators' discovery of—modes of self-actualization without self-optimization.

Pushing away from the languishing end of the spectrum, they stress the need for balancing expression of ugly feelings with sociality, specifically the obligation of reciprocity. That is, the example of *Girls* demonstrates that languishing in unadulterated ugly feelings is less revolutionary than indulgent and isolating. In *Girls*, this embrace of the morally and emotionally

abject brings out interesting conflict and humor, but is not conducive to the construction of meaning that most subsequent woman dirtbags are searching for. We know this because they themselves learn it; Rob ruminates so intensely on her ugly feelings that she ignores Simon and Cherise, and is called out for it ("The Other Side of the Rock"), and Issa seeks out Molly's help handling her messy emotions, but doesn't consistently show up for Molly, contributing to the temporary dissolution of their friendship ("Lowkey Losin' It"). Both women learn that they must balance feeling and processing their feelings with helping their loved ones do the same.

Second, and more crucially, the woman dirtbags' form of growth fundamentally cannot happen without the help of others—because their self-actualization is predicated on forgiveness, it is necessarily interdependent. The women are specifically *interpersonally* flawed; they have done bad actions and hurt the people around them, and their growth is realizing the error in those bad actions, being forgiven, and doing better. The third step *cannot happen* without the second; the woman dirtbag cannot individually, through self-discipline, correct choices, or strength of will erase her past crimes or grant herself forgiveness. The top girl's guide flies out the window here. She cannot optimize—rather, she must be redeemed. The prominence of granted redemption in these stories is epitomized by *Fleabag*'s second series' focus on the Priest. She does Confessional, she tells him many of the thoughts she believes she morally "shouldn't" be having, she cries. In other words, she shares everything she believes makes her fundamentally bad and unworthy of love; his persevering love for her anyway is the message she needs that despite her mistakes and flaws she is worthy of forgiveness and intimacy. Only then can she walk away from her imagined audience, the artificial intimacy she created out of believing she couldn't or shouldn't have the real thing.

The woman dirtbag shows overwhelmingly present loss and a sense of meaninglessness, then the creation of meaning via committed work on relationships. Because career requires prosperity, optimization requires control, and achievement of the postfeminist ideal requires perfection, in a world of disappointment in which we don't have much control, as one character tells Fleabag, "people are all we've got." ("Episode 2.3")

Conclusion.

The woman dirtbag figure arose from one catastrophe of institutional failure, and is perhaps even more fitting for another. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the return of some Recession-era conditions, like mass unemployment, and introduced novel ones, namely isolation and the near-total breakdown of public life. The category of "essential worker" laid bare American culture's undervaluation of the often low-paid work that keeps society functioning, and the Great Resignation saw many professionals question their decades of centering work in their lives and quit creative-class or white collar careers in order to travel, rest, or spend more time with loved ones. Grief loomed over everyday life. Plans were canceled; weddings, graduations, job offers, and moves postponed; developmental stages skipped. The complete shutdown of public life and forced isolation of quarantine pushed people intensely close to their loved ones or tore them apart; in both cases laying bare the fact that when institutions—workplaces, the economy, public commercial life—inevitably collapse or don't serve us, "people are all we've got." ("Episode 2.3")

Yet narratives pushing individual optimization in the face of catastrophe cropped up once again. TikTok's "that girl," a social media paragon of self-discipline, she woke up at 5am each morning to the glow of her sponsored sunet lamp, performed elaborate skincare and diet rituals,

exercised religiously, worked long hours at her perfectly organized work-from-home setup, and made time for reading and yoga in the evenings, as well as documenting her action-packed day hour by hour on TikTok. The emergence of "that girl" proved scholars' assertion that neoliberalism's emphasis on individual agency and self optimization serves to fallaciously bestow control upon the individual in times of completely uncontrollable systemic chaos or breakdown. "That girl"'s compulsion to perfect herself during a pandemic demonstrated the lasting prevalence in contemporary culture of the postfeminist narratives this thesis has covered. The woman dirtbag speaks directly to this newly constrained but contentiously named reality, in which many markers of identity and meaning—perception in public, conspicuous consumption, travel, career, total resilience—fell out of reach. Loss pervaded, ugly feelings reigned, and loneliness settled in. The expectations we had for our world, and for the versions of ourselves moving through that world, hung around unmet for reasons outside of our control—yet the idea that we could wrestle back control if only we self-regulated enough continued to reach us through media representations, whether they be on HBO or TikTok.

At the same time, masses came together to improve public life via protests, COVID testing and vaccination centers, and food banks, highlighting the limits of the woman dirtbag figure. Her acceptance that many circumstances are out of her control rebuts the assertion that individual discipline can make up for systemic failure. However, both scholars and social media commentators alike have pointed out how the insistent acceptance and tight individual focus of the "Fleabag era," shorthand for a woman languishing in her flaw and nihilism, neglects the privilege and opportunity to improve that many of these women have, as well as their obligation to collective action to improve material and civic conditions for the women whose problems go far beyond the existential (@c.a.i.t.l.y.n).

On that note, significant further study is needed surrounding the woman dirtbag character to determine the extent to which her existence and characteristics are exclusive to her class bracket. Because of the inextricability of this figure from her creator, part of this study should include a comprehensive account of the boom of woman-led television in the past decade, to determine *which* women are given the microphone and how. Which shows aren't we seeing greenlit? Which ugly feelings continue to go unbroadcast? There is a conspicuous lack of class rage in indie television; does this speak to indie television's producers, viewers, studio censorship, or an incompatibility between topic and medium?

Further, I would love to see more literature on the ways postfeminism mutates and adapts to racialized norms. *Insecure*'s Molly is a great example of the intersection, overlap, or mutual exacerbation of pressures for Black excellence and postfeminist perfection. Meanwhile, Disney's diverse, colorblind cast of exceptional young girls provides role models but erases the multi-layered difficulty of girlhood while Black or Latina, expecting the same excellence from Black and brown girls as white ones, despite and without acknowledging the systemic pressures against them, and, in fact, how the system they seek to excel in is intentionally stacked against them.

A topic adjacent to this thesis that merits further analysis is the emergence of humanized morally flawed women characters during an age of heightened individual moral scrutiny, particularly on social media. The classification of failures in relationships as "toxic behavior," cottage industry of dubious self-help and relationship advice on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, and users' constant vulnerability to very public exposure for any misdeeds sets an unattainable standard for interpersonal behavior. Does the popularity of women who break all of these rules and are lovable anyway speak to an exhaustion with this hair-trigger self-monitoring? Does the

aforementioned culture of moral perfection apply a self-optimization and perfectionistic lens to interpersonal relationship?

Whether the woman dirtbag truly ruptures with neoliberal ideology, or merely finds new ways of coping within it, is certainly up for debate. However, the archetype and her proliferation throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s has undoubtedly made space for flaw, failure, and the full scale of emotions in televisual representations of women. Her averageness, unsavory emotionality, and journey to interdependency establishes a mode of being as a woman outside of perfection, and her living in the shadow of loss provides a map for meaning without control in a world whose fundamental chaos has been laid bare.

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