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# Feminism Without Feminists:
# Gender, Race and Popular Culture

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Linda Jin Kim
August 2010

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Toby Miller, Co-Chairperson
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The Dissertation of Linda Jin Kim is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Feminism Without Feminists:
Gender, Race and Popular Culture

by

Linda Jin Kim

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, August 2010
Dr. Toby Miller, Chairperson
Dr. Ellen Reese, Chairperson

This dissertation combines insights from feminist and critical race theory to understand the social significance of *Sex and the City (SATC)* and its popularity among U.S. fans. I argue that popular consumption of *SATC* helps to illuminate current discourses and controversies surrounding changing gender roles and feminism in contemporary society. It also explores how responses to the series and film are shaped by fans' gender, race, and sexual orientation. My research is based on 42 in-depth interviews with fans, Internet film reviews and discussions about the series, and participant observations of film screenings in the Los Angeles area and a *SATC* bus tour. The data reveals that Internet discourses were often gendered, and themes related to misogyny and homophobia were central to these public discourses. Men were often disgusted or felt threatened by the series' popularity. On the other hand, the largely female fan base delighted in the representations of female economic and sexual liberation, although they often did not identify as feminists. Based on my interviews with fans, significant racial differences in meaning productions emerged. White women were more likely to relate to all of the characters, but women of color often identified with the relatively sexually conservative characters

because their “values” were more consistent with their upbringing, especially among immigrants. Lastly, although several of my heterosexual viewers found the stereotypes of LGBT characters problematic, the queer fans I interviewed felt it was a fair representation of their community, and certainly more realistic than the way gays are typically portrayed in mainstream media.

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## Introduction

*Sex and the City (SATC)* evolved from modest roots as a small lifestyle column in the *New York Observer* chronicling the personal lives of freelance writer, Candace Bushnell, and her friends in Manhattan. A collection of Bushnell's newspaper columns was published into an anthology before making its appearance as the raw material in the first season of *SATC* on Home Box Office (HBO). The creator, Darren Star, envisioned a true adult comedy (with film-like features) where the sex would not be reduced to the innuendo-like adolescent sexuality epitomized in broadcast television, but without showing a lot of nudity. Sexual discourse, not intercourse, would characterize this show. Star remarked, "You can look at the Playboy Channel anytime and see all the sex you want" (Sohn 2004:36). Ninety-four episodes aired over a period of six years (June 6, 1998-February 22, 2004). The show averaged 6.1 million viewers, and attracted 10.6 million viewers for their series finale (*Broadcasting and Cable* 2004). *Time* named it one of the "100 Best TV Shows of All-TIME" (Poniewozik 2007). Perhaps, the ultimate stamp of approval was its three-year Golden Globe wins and an Emmy award for Best Comedy Series (2000-2002); it was the first time a cable series beat the broadcast networks in that category. The *New York Times* called the show "a sociological event" (Smith 2004). Since the series finale, the show has garnered further popularity in syndication, on stations such as TBS and WGN, as well as other local channels and internationally. The reported asking price for each episode was $3 million for broadcast and $750,000 for basic cable (Albiniak 2003; *Broadcasting & Cable* 2001). For TBS, the series has helped reduce the median age of their viewers. Each episode has averaged 1.7

million viewers, 1.2 million of them between the ages of 18-49 (Hibberd 2006). These versions, however, did not air in its original commercial-free form and have been edited for sexual content and language. In 2008, *SATC* became a blockbuster hit in theaters worldwide, and the film sequel came out in 2010. Bus tours in Manhattan have capitalized on the success of the series offering tours to over 40 locations visited by these fictional characters; these 3-1/2 hour tours are offered in English and in German. When I took the tour in 2009, I noticed most of the tourists were groups of women (mostly white), although a few men accompanied women on the tour. One young New Yorker informed me that she takes all her out-of-town female guests on this bus tour because they all seem to enjoy it. I spoke to one couple outside of Magnolia Bakery, one of the stops, in Sarah Jessica Parker's West Village neighborhood. This newlywed couple from Ireland was in New York City that week enjoying their honeymoon. Whether a person watches (or likes) the show or not, its socio-cultural impact is hard to deny. Star knew that the series became relevant when he overheard people discussing the "Rabbit" episode while walking his dog up Runyon Canyon in Los Angeles (Sohn 2004:36). Woven into American popular culture, as evidenced by its global ubiquity and widespread appeal, an intellectual examination of *SATC* is warranted to better understand its popularity and engagement with feminist ideology and practice.

### *Feminist Sitcoms*

*SATC* is not the first American sitcom to engage with feminist narratives. The 1970s served as a critical juncture in television history as a larger proportion of women joined the workforce (D'Acci 1994; Dow 1996; Rabinovitz 1999). The commercially-

conscious representation of the feminist-inspired woman, or the "new woman," in U.S. television occurred at the height of the feminist movement. Positive images of women as workers instead of housewives were more readily available in the media. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77) is often credited for being the first television program with a feminist subjectivity. The theme song, "You Can Make it After All," opened up this thirty-minute sitcom which featured Mary Richards as a never-married, childless career-minded woman in her 30s. Set at the workplace, her co-workers functioned as her "family" and she did not stress over having to balance the pressures of work and family. *Rhoda* (1974-78), a spin-off of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, highlighted Rhoda's boredom with being a housewife and provided feminist fodder for this sitcom. She divorces her husband, and consequently finds respite through her work. *One Day at a Time* (1975-84) was the first successful American sitcom to feature a divorced woman as the lead, "a move too controversial to be aired five years earlier" (Dow 1996:54). The series was based on one of the creator's own experiences as a single mother. However, by the 1980s, the presence of the women's movement had subsided, and sitcoms featuring career women muted their feminist implications. *Designing Women* (1986-93), a work-centered sitcom about four interior designers, engaged with feminist narratives only to be undermined by their "excess femininity." Nonetheless, Press (1991:47) identifies this show as post-feminist and post-family for glorifying female bonding and alternative family forms. Meanwhile, Rabinovitz (1999:148) argues that the show's feminist platform is further undercut with its racist and homophobic implications. *Murphy Brown* (1988-98) featured a masculinized female news anchor by the same name, only to be

contrasted with Corky, a hyperfeminine ex-beauty pageant queen hired for her looks. Murphy is strong, aggressive, and confident, all traits which granted her success in a patriarchal workplace. This sitcom gained notoriety for offending Vice President Dan Quayle. In 1992, Quayle spoke on the topic of "lawlessness" and "lifestyle choice" in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots:

> It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has *Murphy Brown*, a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child and calling it a 'just another lifestyle choice' (Yang and Devroy 1992).

Instead of examining how existing structural inequalities contributed to the riots, Quayle averted his attention to the contemporary representations of women in popular culture. In addition, his disappointment with female liberation is related to women's independence from men, not financially, but socially, in its "mockery," or disregard, of the role of fathers.

Of course, the representation of strong female characters is not limited to situation comedies. *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-88) was a popular prime-time drama about two female cops in New York City, one single and the other married. They share a solid friendship and are not pitted as competitors. *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-01) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-03) also featured female leads that challenge conventional gendered norms. In addition, day-time dramas (i.e. soap operas) have never had a shortage of multiple strong, independent women, providing viewers various female subjectivities to select.

***Overview***

In this dissertation, I analyze the feminist implications of *SATC* through the examination of the publically available discourses generated by *SATC,* as well as interviews with fans. In Chapter One, *"The Sociology of Sex and the City,*" I outline my theoretical underpinnings rooted in feminist and critical race theories to ground my sociological analysis of the series. I also describe the multi-method approach that informs my research. In Chapter Two, *"Gendered Discourse,"* I examine secondary data sources (e.g. film reviews and Internet bulletin boards) to reveal how the discourses were often gendered, and how themes related to misogyny and homophobia played into them. The next two chapters summarize the results from my in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and participant observations. In Chapter Three, "*Sex Appeal,*" I investigate what fans like most about the series and decipher whether they buy into the hegemonic narratives renounced by many scholars. In particular, I am interested in how fans produce their own meanings and explore the social aspects of viewer consumption of the series. In Chapter Four, "'*Seeing' Race*," I examine how fans perceive the portrayal of racial identities and relations in the series, and break down the ways in which a respondent's race influences how they '*see'* race in the series. In my conclusion, I summarize the key findings from this dissertation and suggest directions for future research.

# Chapter 1

## The Sociology of *Sex and the City*

*SATC* has been applauded for privileging female subjectivity, albeit mostly a heterosexual, middle-class white one (see Bignell 2004; Brasfield 2006; Gerhard 2005; Henry 2004). Moreover, the show has been often criticized for its emphasis on conspicuous consumption as the protagonists parade across town in their Manolo Blahnik stiletto heels (starting at $400), while frequenting all the Manhattan hot spots to shop, dine, and drink (see Arthurs 2004; Harzewski 2004; Konig 2004; Negra 2004; Zeiger 2004). To date, the majority of scholarship about the series has transpired within the humanities and cultural studies disciplines. As an audiovisual popular culture artifact, it makes sense that research on *SATC* has its origins there. Hence, most research about *SATC* has been limited to cultural critiques via rigorous textual analysis in order to carefully delineate the dominant themes in the text. Despite the multitudinous cultural critiques readily available about the series, there are few in-depth empirical studies that examine how fans across races engage with *SATC.* In order to fill this lacuna, I look to *SATC* as a polysemic text, in which viewers construct their own meanings instead of passively adopting the preferred, or dominant, themes embedded in the series. I also consider how one's race, gender, and sexual orientation often leads to divergent interpretations. Informed by feminist and critical race theories, I rely on the combination of secondary data analysis, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation in this case study of the socio-cultural significance of *SATC.* This stands in contrast to the proliferation of research in the fields of medicine, law, and psychology,

which often treat people as "cultural dopes." Practitioners in these fields often employ a unilateral analysis of the effects of mass media and popular culture on its viewers as a way to explain a range of social problems, such as drug use, pornography, and violence. These approaches have a tendency to treat individuals as either passive viewers that absorb media messages as if they were sponges, or reduce them to statistical figures.

This study is grounded in sociological thought, but is indeed an interdisciplinary endeavor, borrowing insights from the humanities and cultural studies disciplines. In this chapter, I review prior research on *SATC.* I begin with a review of the major critiques and contributions of existing research on *SATC*, then summarize key audience research that pays attention to gender and race, and conclude with a section on fan studies. These three substantive research areas inform my questions about what fans find appealing about the series and how their social identities influence their interpretations of the various discourses related to contemporary gender roles and feminism in the U.S.

### *Prior Research on SATC*

*SATC* profiles four single women (three in their mid-thirties and one in her forties) who gather weekly to discuss their private lives, often in public places such as restaurants and bars. Carrie is the fashionable sex columnist (and diagetic narrator) of the series and everyone's best friend; Samantha is the confident vixen who runs her own public relations company; Miranda is the rational, career-driven corporate attorney; and Charlotte is the optimistically romantic art gallery director (See Appendix A for a complete list of characters mentioned in this project). *SATC* has been praised for its feminist elements, such as showcasing female friendship, privileging female subjectivity,

challenging dominant narratives, and encouraging frank talk about female sexuality. On the other hand, it has been critiqued for its post-feminist messages and reproducing hegemonic narratives about race, class, and gender, while glamorizing conspicuous consumption. Speaking to the strong reactions generated by the series, an edited volume devoted to *SATC* was published "to locate new ways of speaking and thinking about a popular cultural text that continues to be a site of contestation" (Akass and McCabe 2004:7).

Kim (2001:32) asserts that *SATC* offers "complex, innovative, and destabilizing representations of women through the politics of sexuality and a framework of female friendship." The weekly gatherings of the four female protagonists set a stage for alternative discourses related to sex and gender that are largely absent in corporatized mainstream media. Moreover, Nelson (2004b) and Gerhard (2005) point to this framework of female friendship as one that challenges traditional family structures. Nelson (2004b:85) emphasizes that "the series makes a persuasive case for the single life, as well as the need to expand popular notions of the family in ways that accommodate recent changes in women's lives." Further, Gerhard articulates (2005:44):

> The friendship these four women share offer an alternative to the compromising world of boyfriends and potential husbands. This elective family structure is one that gay men and lesbians have relied on for generations- a self-selected family that willingly meets its members' needs.

In this way, female friendship is prioritized over romantic relationships with men, and in the case of this series, over the characters' own biological family members.

Female subjectivity is another fundamental attribute of the series because it privileges issues important to women. Henry (2004) and Nelson (2004) describe the

conversations among the four women as consciousness-raising sessions. Likewise, Bignell (2004:167) links the way in which female identity leads to a sense of community through the confessional discourse best exemplified by women's magazines and talk shows. Brunnemer (2003:14), however, argues that female subjectivity is undermined upon examining the show's shots, angles, and mise-en-scene, which privileges a masculine gaze. Yet, Greven (2004) considers the series genre-defying in its persistent stripping of male bodies.

Female subjectivity has granted the series space to challenge dominant discourses related to contemporary gender roles, including those related to pregnancy and motherhood. Akass (2004:3) considers *SATC* radical for including discussions about abortion, and illustrates how Miranda translates maternal instinct into social mores during this rant about her pregnancy:

> The fat ass, the farting, it's ridiculous! I am unf*ckable and I have never been so horny in my entire life. That's why you're supposed to be married when you're pregnant- so somebody is obligated to have sex with you. [1]

Likewise, Tropp (2006) elucidates Miranda's ambivalence about pregnancy by referring to the episode when she "fakes a sonogram." Miranda pretends to be excited about her sonogram report and impending motherhood in order to align herself with societal expectations of women. In fact, Miranda's first reaction to her accidental pregnancy was to get an abortion, in spite of Charlotte's pro-life position and recent miscarriage. Over the years, *SATC* has offered these kinds of alternative narratives of pregnancy and

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[1] In 'Ring a Ding Ding,' 4:64.

motherhood, including how it has impinged on Miranda's career, time with friends, her body, and her sex life.

Whereas Miranda's character reveals the paradoxes of pregnancy and motherhood, Charlotte and Samantha represent the dichotomized characters begging the question whether women can have both a successful family life and career. Charlotte idealizes being a wife and mother, and prioritizes it over a career. Her economically privileged position is often used to justify her quest for the perfectly pedigreed suitor who will offer unconditional emotional and financial support. In one episode, she accuses Miranda of judging her, frantically exclaiming, "You think I'm one of those women…One of those women we hate who just works until she gets married!"[2] Montemurro (2004:2) points out that Charlotte's decision to enter a life of domesticity is perceived negatively by her friends and thus her minority traditional feminine voice is rejected rather than rewarded. On the other hand, for Samantha, female liberation is only possible by completely renouncing motherhood and marriage. Akass (2004:1) asserts that what makes *SATC* radical is not whether these scenarios are reality or fantasy, but that it offers viewers "alternative representations of motherhood as a learned behavior rather than one that is instinctual to all women."

Candid and upfront talk about sexuality has also been identified as a prominent feature of the series. Turner (2004:8) conveys that feminist and queer audiences can take solace in *SATC*'s widening array of roles for women and the inclusion of gay men. Henry (2004) credits *SATC* for challenging narratives about conventional sexuality often limited

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[2] In 'Time and Punishment,' 4:55.

to vaginal-penile intercourse, and extending it to include queer sexual practices, including the use of sex toys and varied sex acts. Henry refutes scholars who have dismissed *SATC* as a show about four men in drag as another attempt to remove female sexual agency. Yet, Comella (2003) finds it disturbing that the notorious vibrator episode flirts with sexual empowerment only to conclude that masturbation is not real sex.[3]

Turning to the critiques of *SATC*, most feminist media scholars argue that today's portrayal of feminism on television is commodified as a lifestyle rather than political ideology, commonly referred to as post-feminism. Post-feminism assumes that women have been liberated and are free to choose from a myriad of possibilities these days. Unfortunately, this is contrary to the real-life experiences of most women. The term, *backlash,* is often used to characterize the regressive decade of the 1980s (Faludi 1991). The gains of the women's movement were being retracted as many people were led to believe that feminism was no longer necessary or desirable as a collective social goal or movement. Instead, women were encouraged to exercise their individual rights to a career and education, if they chose to do so.

Moreover, Douglas (1994) considers the irony of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s being the most explicitly anti-consumerist compared to other movements; today, female liberation is inextricably associated with narcissistic values. Linking the connection between the two, Dow (1996: 207) explains:

> Television entertainment has hedged its bets by representing feminism through the lives of white, middle-class, heterosexual women: the women who benefited most from the movement gains and who are in the best position to practice individualist feminism. This allows the medium to substitute lifestyle questions

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[3] In 'The Turtle and the Hare.' 1:9.

> for political ones…Yet to give television some credit, the lifestyle questions demonstrates progress in time due to television's thirst for the "new," shift in social attitudes, and changes in people's awareness of feminism.

Thus, progressive ideology had little to do with positive images of women on television. It is rather the media response to demographic changes, which recognized that independent career women would make better consumers than housewives. This change reflected an economic, not a moral, imperative to represent women on television in a better light.

Furthermore, *SATC* has been critiqued for reproducing hegemonic narratives often associated with liberal feminist politics. Brasfield (2006:132) writes:

> *SATC* is an excellent example of how hegemonic feminism looks, how it thinks, and what it does…It reflects almost exclusively the perspectives and values of white, middle-class heterosexual women who define themselves primarily as oppressed victims of patriarchy.

Henry (2004:70) argues that "the solipsism of the main characters- the hours spent examining their sex lives- is a privilege of their race and class position." Non-white characters are tokenized for stereotypical story line purposes, whether it is the loud Black woman, the hypersexual Black man, or the Mandarin baby waiting to be adopted by well-to-do Westerners. With respect to sex and gender, "biological women are higher in the hierarchy than transgendered women, and the *SATC* women are not attracted to men who have evolved into homosexuals, or do not possess wealth" (Brasfield 2006:135). In fact, "the only fiscally deficient recurring male character is emasculated by being assigned a single testicle" (Greven 2004). Bisexual, lesbian, and gay characters are all presented in ways that marginalize their existence and reify the dominance of heterosexuality (Brasfield 2006:135).

Finally, the series has been critiqued for its outrageous validation of conspicuous consumption. Scholars argue that truly revolutionary feminist discourse is limited for that reason (Arthurs 2004; Harzewski 2004; Negra 2004). Negra (2004:23) brings to attention the significance of *SATC*'s geography:

> The emphasis of locating the single girl experience so exclusively in affluent urban New York may run the risk of deflecting attention from the alienation and diminished citizenship of single women who exist in a variety of class categories and geographical locations and whose lives play out as significant remove from the luxury and consumerist pleasures so frequently highlighted by the series.

Arthurs (2004:90) argues that a consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought, but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated, while Konig (2004) identifies *SATC* as a lifestyle brand. Zeiger (2004) writes that shopping is the way in which women have been incorporated into the public sphere outside the home.

Despite the plethora of praise and critique that the series has generated, few scholars have investigated the ways in which audiences interpret the series. In order to contribute to the existing research on *SATC*, my dissertation attempts to examine whether fans buy into the hegemonic narratives about race, class, gender, and sexuality embedded in *SATC,* or whether they produce negotiated or oppositional readings. *If so, what do they look like? How do they feel about the representations of race, class, gender and sexuality on the series? How do their own identities and social locations influence these interpretations?* These questions are specifically addressed in Chapters Three and Four. However, before I turn to those questions, I turn to a summary of audience research in the context of the cultural studies framework.

### ***Audiences***

Audience studies are a rich site to capture the voice of historically marginalized groups. Female audiences and feminine genres (e.g. soap operas) have been a source of prolific activity for those studying the media and popular culture. Scholars have pointed to the soap opera as an important space that privileges female subjectivity, making it accessible for discourses about femininities to flourish (Ang 1985; Geraghty 1991; Hobson 1982; Press 1990; Seiter et al. 1989). Additionally, scholars have explored how women's social location, such as class, may lead to differential readings. In one study of college-educated women, working-class women were found to be more critical of soap operas, finding them less accessible because they could not relate to the issues in their daily lives, compared to middle-class women (Seiter et al. 1989). On the other hand, Press' (1990) findings from her ethnographic study of female *Dynasty* viewers generated the opposite results; her middle-class women were more critical than their working-class counterparts. These studies are a testament that women should not be viewed as a uniform audience, and that class certainly matters for how women view popular culture.

Mankekar's (1993) examination of Draupadi as the successfully produced icon of 'Indian womanhood' nationally constructed by the Doordarshan, the Indian state-broadcasting organization, is also noteworthy. Draupadi is the wife of the five Pandava brothers in the serialized epic, *Mahabharata* (1988-90), viewed by over 500 million Indian audiences. In Mankekar's study of Hindu women belonging to working-class and lower middle-class households living in a multi-ethnic neighborhood of New Delhi, women across all classes, generations, and communities intimately identified with

Draupadi's vulnerability, especially with respect to sexual vulnerability, being a woman in a male-dominated society. This sentiment resonated especially among single women.

The examination of television viewing practices, as well as other media texts, also illuminated the implications of gender as a structure of power, and how it is both enforced and challenged in the home (Ang 1995; Gray 1987, 1992; Modleski 1983; Morley 1986). Radway (1984) reveals that romance novels offer an escape, both mentally and physically, for the Midwestern women in her ethnographic study, the majority of them married with children. Reading Harlequin novels was a strategy in making their bodies physically unavailable to perform reproductive labor, such as caretaking and housework. It was a challenge, not an affirmation, of their all too often marginalized position as unpaid laborers in the family. Moreover, their favorite romantic heroes in the novels were men who were masculine, yet extremely caring. In *Family Television*, Morley (1986) discovers that wives were more likely to combine housework with viewing television, whereas husbands preferred watching in solitary without interruption. This speaks to the way in which the home is often a site of leisure for men, but not for women who are often assigned the lion's share of housework regardless of whether they engage in paid employment or not. Likewise, Gray's (1987) female respondents expressed guilt when they did have the luxury to view shows in solitary. Nonetheless, the practice of watching television freed women from doing housework, and many of them considered uninterrupted viewing a reward (Gray 1992). Moreover, viewing feminine genres enabled women to share their thoughts with each other about various programs, making it a social activity for them (Brown 1994; Geraghty 1991).

Scholars in this field have been slower to address questions of race and ethnicity compared to gender. Notwithstanding, important work has been produced in this area (Bobo 1995; Bobo and Seiter 1997; Gray 1995; Hunt 1997; Jhalley and Lewis 1992). Shively's (1992) research on Native Americans' and Anglos' admiration for American westerns illuminates how these two racial groups both wished more were produced, but liked westerns for different reasons. Native Americans believed westerns reflected their values of autonomy, land, and freedom, whereas Anglos linked it to their history. Even more fascinating, none of the Native American Indians identified with the Indians in the show and a higher percentage of them identified with John Wayne than Anglos did (60% v. 50%).

When considering race, the bulk of audience research performed in the U.S. has focused on the Black audience and their interpretations of mass media and popular culture. *The Cosby Show* (1984-92) is an exemplary case that highlights the way racism operates in the U.S.; this sitcom about an upper-middle-class Black family that has been incorporated into the American Dream was endeared by both Black and white audiences. However, the sitcom meant different things for the two groups. In *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, Jhally and Lewis (1992:50) report that white viewers saw a black *family,* whereas black viewers saw a *black* family. This suggests that whites are more likely to live in a color-blind world and no longer view racism as a societal problem. This perspective downplays structural and historical explanations for the persisting racial inequality and fosters a person-blame approach towards people of color for their own misfortunes. Likewise, in *Screening the*

*Riots*, Hunt (1997) finds that race served as the primary factor in which Blacks were more likely to interpret the L.A. "riots" as a form of protest compared to white and Latino respondents. In his subsequent book about the O.J. Simpson trial, Hunt (1999) uses the term "raced ways of seeing" to explain how Blacks perceived themselves as raced, whereas whites perceived themselves as neutral in a climate of color-blind racism.

In *Watching Race*, Gray (1995) traces the way in which Black audiences resist dominant narratives. For example, Gray notes that despite the racist and stereotypical representations of *Amos 'n' Andy,* many poor, working-class, and even middle-class blacks were able to read against the dominant discourse of whiteness and find humor in it (p. 75). In his ethnographic look of *A Different World,* Gray reveals how "blackness" was constructed by a predominantly Black production team in order to boost their initial low ratings. The show underwent a make-over in order to become more "black" by visiting black women's colleges (the show takes place at one) and making changes in plots and characters that are more likely to represent "blackness." The show soon transformed itself into a success.

Some audience reception studies have also taken into consideration the intersections of race and gender. Lee and Cho (1990) interviewed twelve college-educated, middle and upper-middle class Korean women in the U.S. who are Korean soap opera fans. For them, renting Korean soap operas and participating in video clubs enabled them to share the video rental fees and engage in an oral culture where they could freely talk to one another. It was a social activity for them. Topics of discussion ranged from offering advice about rental suggestions to how to handle their husbands. Moreover, these

women preferred Korean soap operas to American ones because they considered the scenarios more realistic and it gave them a sense of being home. Similarly, Gillespie's (1995) study of Punjabi youth growing up in a predominantly Christian part of London reveals that while their parents were concerned about maintaining their culture, youth were more open to change, many of them identifying as both "British" and "Asian." A surprising finding of Gillespie's study was that news programs were the most watched and discussed genre by this group, as it was perceived to be a rite of passage into adulthood. However, for Punjabi youth, they were also expected to have an interest in news from India and to discuss issues in Punjabi to successfully master adult status, despite many of them being illiterate. Bobo (1995) finds that Spielberg's film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple,* which has often been critiqued for being co-opted by an upper-middle class male was favorably received by the Black women she interviewed; however, Bobo warns against treating her responses to this film in a "one-size-fits-all" manner (p. 91).

Although a lot of progress has been made in the field of audience research, there is still more work that needs to be done. Studies on gender often privilege white, middle-class viewers, whereas U.S. studies on race and ethnicity have a tendency to dichotomize race using the black-white binary. Unfortunately, these biases further marginalize minority groups, although unintentionally. In a conscious effort to avoid essentializing the experiences of viewers, my research employs an intersectional approach, which considers people holistically as opposed to categorical variables to be added up. Instead of relying solely on gender as a frame of reference, I keep in mind how viewers' race or

sexual orientation may influence their perspective. I conclude this section with an offshoot of audience research, which focuses on the *passioned* viewer, or the fan. This is an integral component to examine the socio-cultural impact of the series. *SATC* could not be the popular culture phenomenon that it is without its fans.

### ***Fans***

Fan studies problematize the connection between popular culture, audience reception, and media consumption. Research in this field exposes how fans are not passive consumers of media, and are often active producers through the creation of their own original novels, songs, and websites. In this manner, Fiske (1989) distinguishes mass culture from popular culture, in that the latter reflects what viewers do with it. This might take the form of a *SATC* viewing party or an "experimental political remixing video" like the "Queer Carrie Project," in which a 23-year-old-woman tells her version of a queer fairy tale based on original video footage from actual episodes (Clark-Flory 2010). Moreover, although capitalism encourages individualism, television fans challenge this by creating communities with one another to meet and exchange ideas. I now turn to address fan studies, as well as the major critiques of them.

The term *fan,* short for fanatic, became popularized in the 19th century to describe baseball enthusiasts, and by the 20th century, was extended to describe movie and other media enthusiasts. Today, the term is used more rigorously, and scholars even warn against the elitist tendencies of academics to marginalize fans as pathological, infantile, or feminine (Jenkins 1992; Jensen 1992). Ferris' (2001) study of fan-celebrity encounters

reveals that most fans make observable efforts to demonstrate to others that they are not obsessed and dangerous stalkers. Jenkins (2006:41) defines a fan:

> As one that translates viewing a particular program into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption naturally sparks production.

Pioneered by John Fiske (1987, 1989), alongside Ien Ang (1985), fan literature ranges from fandom in general (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007; Jenkins 1992, 2006; Lewis 1992), science fiction (Bacon-Smith 1992, 2000; Penley 1991; Tulloch and Alvarado 1983; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), dramas (D'Acci 1994; McKinley 1997; Parks and Levine 2002), and soap operas (Ang 1985; Brunsdon 2000; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hobson 1982; Tulloch and Moran 1986).

Ang's (1985) seminal work on *Dallas* viewers is important for raising questions of pleasure, which she defines as an irrational, spontaneously-produced feeling. For Ang's mostly female adult viewers of this primetime soap opera, it was the melodrama (that is, a mixture of masochism and powerlessness) which contributed to audience pleasure. Ang was not surprised to discover that many women, including herself, liked Sue Ellen's character because she was a source of great pleasure, despite representing a character that is far from being a post-feminist heroine.

In *Textual Poachers* (1992), Jenkins posits the fan, as opposed to the audience, as a "rogue reader." He considers fans as poachers. They appropriate and rearticulate program materials through the active participation in fan writing, zines, newsletters, websites, and blogs, which serve as examples of audience resistance and production. "Slash" fiction, written primarily by heterosexual women, represents a form of poaching

in which relationships between two male protagonists in a popular text is rearticulated into a romantic coupling (e.g. Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* and Starsky and Hutch are two of the most famous pairs among slash fiction writers). Slash fiction appeared in the U.S. by 1976, and became popularized by 1991 producing juried awards, music videos, annual meetings, and built-in market research techniques (Penley 1991:137-140). Slash fiction has prompted debates among scholars. Bacon-Smith (1992:236-54) believes that since it is difficult to create a credible female character, women writers imagine relationships through two men as surrogates, and hence slash fiction represents a sexually exciting arena in which they are able to identify with the characters. On the other hand, Penley (1991:154-59) argues that since women are minorities in science fiction, female fans must make do with what they have. To her, slash fiction expresses women's desire to "retool" masculinity in the future in which men learn how to express their emotions.

Fan studies have also offered insights about community formations, whether it is physical meetings (from small-scale television viewing parties to large-scale *Star Trek* Conventions) or online communities enabling a global network of fans to exchange ideas with each other. Although fan groups existed before computers were readily available, the Internet has allowed fan communities to proliferate exponentially and beyond borders linking people across the globe. Moreover, Baym (2000) observes that some fans are able to create devotional websites for their favorite programs that are as impressive as those belonging to the major production studios.

Speaking to the popularity of the series, *Reading Sex and the City* (2004) devotes an entire chapter to fandom. Jermyn's (2004) focus group study of eleven British female

fans (mostly white and middle-class educated) agreed that female friendship and conversation is what made this show enjoyable to them. Meanwhile, other scholars inserted themselves into the world of Carrie and Co. by taking the *SATC* bus tour. Rahilly (2004:229) reports her somewhat discouraging experience:

> My view- still circumscribed by a frame, this time a window rather than a screen- remained largely contingent on the televised narrative: when the coach careened through the meatpacking district, I witnessed no trash-talking, transsexual hustlers, but took the tour guide's word for it that they come out late at night; they're there- just like on *SATC*.

Along the same lines, Nelson (2004:231) describes her disappointing experience on this "hot chick tour." Rejected and hurt, Nelson proclaims: "I was the real fan, after all not some cheap floozy." On the other hand, Akass and McCabe (2004:236) realize "the on-location tour enabled them to consume the fantasy as well as be consumed by it." Bundy (2004) also visits the many on-site locations filmed in the series by taking a shopping expedition in Manhattan. In his bland, baggy clothes, he observes that his "deliberate non-couture appearance was threatening, a challenge to many clerks, and an insult to the museum-like 'spaces' of certain shops" (p. 237).

A major critique of fan studies is that while fans may demonstrate individual or small-scale agency, it is limited since it does not address structural, material conditions. Ang (1995:140) warns that an active agent is not the same as being powerful and that the study of audiences cannot be done in an isolated fashion without considering the social and political structures and processes in which they are embedded. The role of scholars as fans has also been raised as a potential methodological problem. Scholars who have written about fans have done so varying in engagement with the subject to be analyzed.

For example, Bacon-Smith (1992) tends to be distanced, whereas Penley (1991) and Jenkins (1992, 1996) are both actively engaged. Unapologetic, Jenkins (2006:19) calls himself "promiscuous, a total media slut." Hence, the recognition of the scholar's position is something to be considered in the context of fan studies.

To date, there are no in-depth qualitative studies on *SATC,* which privilege the diverse voice of fans and examine the social significance of this popular series. Most research on *SATC* has been limited to textual analyses, personal reflections, and small sample sizes. While these studies have offered interesting insights, they offer little information about the ways in which fans of the series that are not affluent, white women engage with the series. This dissertation fills these gaps by including the voices of fans spanning various racial/ethnic minority groups, socioeconomic levels, and sexual orientations. My research is guided by the following questions: *What is the appeal of SATC? Do fans buy into the hegemonic discourse embedded in SATC? How do fans feel about representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality on SATC? How does their social identity inform their interpretations?* In order to address these questions, my research builds on the insights of feminist and critical race theories.

### ***Feminist and Critical Race Theories of Popular Culture***

*Introduction*

McRobbie (1994:73) embraces feminist engagement with popular culture in recognizing that "the strength of feminism lies in its ability to create discourse, to dispute, to negotiate the boundaries and barriers, and also to take issue with the various feminisms which have sprung into being." Similarly, Dow (1996) argues that television's

willingness to engage with feminist questions is significant. Dow finds that the young women she has come across are not rejecting ideals of feminism, but rather adjusting to it (p. 87). Sociologist Scott Coltrane (1998) weaves examples from popular culture when discussing concepts about gender and family.

*Feminist Theory*

Historically, multiracial feminists have been marginalized by both the women's movement and the civil rights movement in the U.S., which largely benefited white middle-class women, and Black men, respectively (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; Glenn 1985; hooks 1981, 2000; Hurtado 1989). The second wave feminism of the 1960s lacked the cohesion of its predecessor and feminists of color often formed their own organizations distinct from those of white feminists since the latter groups often neglected issues of race and class. Feminists of color helped to develop multiracial feminist theories and their insights influenced later writings by feminist scholars of color. Multiracial feminist theories challenged essentialist notions of sex and gender, and how they are connected to race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Consequently, they insisted on the utilization of intersectionality. "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Collins 2000:18). Baca Zinn and Dill (1996:321) define multiracial feminism as "an attempt to go beyond the mere recognition of diversity and difference among women to examine structures of domination, specifically the importance of race in understanding the social construction of gender," whereas Glenn (1985:88) suggests "a revision of Marxist-feminist theory to be more

inclusive of race-gender interaction." When doing so, Glenn (1985:105) reveals from her case studies of Black, Mexican American, and Chinese American women workers in the mid-19th century that:

> White men were the dominant exploiting group; however, it is equally important to emphasize the involvement of white women in the exploitation of racial ethnic people and the ways in which racial ethnic men have benefited from the even greater exploitation of racial ethnic women.

In a similar vein, Hurtado (1989:854) writes "whether women are subordinated by white men through seduction or rejection, the results are detrimental to women's humanity." Hence, this approach not merely examines the matrix of domination (Collins 2000) and intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991, 1997, 1998), but also gives voice to women who have largely been ignored in the past.

Multiracial feminist theorizing also enriches the sociology of gender in its questioning of knowledge production. Historically, in the absence of voices of women of color, white women have frequently spoken on behalf of them, sometimes even misinterpreting them (even if unintentionally). Today, with the standpoints of women of color, they are now reclaiming their voice and becoming active producers of knowledge (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991; Sandoval 1991; Shohat 1995). Nonetheless, post-colonial theorists such as Narayan (1997) and Mohanty (1991, 2006) fear that the most oppressed women remain marginalized by Western feminists. Mohanty (1991) cautions against the assumption of an "average third world woman" and the use of a binary which normalizes the Western woman as liberated and educated. If this were true, gender inequality would be absent in Western countries.

Multiracial feminist theory helps to further enrich studies of popular culture, which often overlook the ways that its production and consumption relate to multiple relations of domination and resistance, even as they acknowledge their relationship to political discourse. For example, McRobbie (1994) argues that it is increasingly in culture that politics is constructed as a discourse where the popular assent in a democratic society. Likewise, Press and Cole (1999) argue that television is an active participant in social conversations about political and cultural matters, influencing our ideas, opinions, and values. Hobson (1990) finds that women use television programs as a part of their general discourse. In this sense, the feminist motto of "the personal as political" lends itself well to the examination of popular culture as an arena in which people construct their own meanings and challenge the status quo. However, Murdock (1989:436) reminds us that the discursive process of the construction of meanings needs to be analyzed with reference to institutional, economic, and material settings. Although audience studies recognize agency among viewers, they mostly examine the voices of white, middle-class women. Drawing insights from multiracial feminist theory, my research investigates the voices and practices of racially and class diverse viewers of *SATC*, to counter this imbalance.

*Critical Race Theory (CRT)*

A key tenet of CRT is that racism is pervasive and normal, whereas traditional anti-discrimination law assumes racism is an individual and aberrant act (Haney-Lopez 2003; Taylor 1998; Valdes, Culp and Harris 2002). CRT insists upon race-consciousness in order to level the playing field. Valdes, Culp and Harris (2002:1) assert that neutrality

is an unattainable and harmful ideal that promotes white supremacy instead of eliminating racial inequality. Crenshaw (2002:26) eloquently states "the colorblind discourse is *the virtual lunch counter*, the rationalization for racial power in which few are served and many are denied." Meanwhile, Chang (1993) argues that colorblind racism has obscured Asian-American discrimination. In an effort to focus on outcomes, critical race theorists have shifted their attention from a civil "rights" discourse, which is almost always procedural (for example, to a fair process) to one that is substantive and focuses on structural conditions.

Studies on whiteness exposed a history built on racialized privilege (Haney-Lopez 1996; Harris 1997). In *White by Law*, Haney-Lopez (1996) posits that race is a social construction defined by the law at a historical moment in time, in which whites are accorded benefits and non-whites are disadvantaged due to their position in the social structure. Whiteness is relational and defined by who is non-white and then denigrating the latter group. Haney-Lopez points out that neither common knowledge nor science measured human variation. Both only reported social beliefs about races (p. 546).

Whiteness is both normative and a kind of property, in which other groups, such as Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americas, are described as nonwhite (Delgado and Stefancic 2001:76). Like traditional, mainstream sociological theories of race and class, CRT has been criticized for homogenizing people of color (Crenshaw 1991; Mirande 2000). Crenshaw (1991) argues identity politics has an essentializing tendency that often ignores intragroup differences. She encourages an intersectional approach, identifying three sub-categories: structural (location), political

(feminist and antiracist politics), and representational (cultural), pleading it provides a basis for reconceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color. An intersectional approach breaks the black-white paradigm of studying race by being more inclusive of other groups, such as Chicana/os, American Indians, and Asian Americans with attention to their social location across gender, class, and sexuality.

Existing studies on *SATC* also reflect the predominance of middle-class, white backgrounds of researchers along with the theoretical and methodological tools employed by them. Moreover, although audience studies favor the female viewer, with the exception of diasporic studies, relatively few researchers have examined racial/ethnic groups in the U.S., in particular women of color. Combining insights from multiracial feminist and critical race theories, my research incorporates intersectional perspectives and challenges essentialist notions of a monolithic woman, both theoretically and methodologically. Arguments about *SATC* being "too white" are commonplace, but few studies have seriously considered race as an organizing structure of inequality, or the perspectives of non-white viewers. In the case of existing *SATC* research, gender trumps race. Utilizing critical race theory enables this project to begin with the assumption that racism, like sexism, is a part of society's institutional fabric. This dissertation explores how diverse types of fans negotiate a world designed for men, and simultaneously designed for whites, and how this shapes their consumption of *SATC*.

### ***Research Design and Methods***

My research incorporates a variety of methods, including secondary data analysis, in-depth interviews, surveys, and participant observation. Each of these data collection

procedures possesses method-specific advantages. The triangulation of these methods helps ensure both depth and breadth of information and allows me to address different types of research questions.

Culling through various *SATC*-related print and Internet sources, including but not limited to newspapers, magazines, blogs, and social networking websites (e.g. facebook and myspace), I selected three specific sources to analyze: (1) a collection of various professional film reviews widely available on the Internet, (2) an article in *Newsweek,* titled "Sexism and the City," which incited debates among male and female members of an Internet forum about the *Sex and the City* film, and (3) *Craigslist*, a popular, anonymous online bulletin board, in which *ranters* and *ravers* unabashedly expressed their views about the series. The combination of these sources represented the backdrop of the "dominant" discourses surrounding the series, which would be used as a comparison to the discourses generated by fans of the series.

In addition, I conducted forty-two in-depth interviews with adult fans of the series across Southern California, mostly clustered in the larger Los Angeles metropolitan area in 2009 and 2010. Both convenience and snowball sampling were utilized in order to capture a diverse group of fans. A majority of the initial interviewees responded to a *Craigslist* advertisement that I posted in the Los Angeles area asking for volunteers who consider themselves fans of the series to participate in my research. Other fans were identified through recommendations of friends and interviewees. Interviews were often conducted in public places, such as coffee shops or diners, convenient to my participants.

My sample (ages 21-56) were predominantly female (86%), mostly heterosexual (79%), and spanned across the social class spectrum. Over half of my participants had college degrees and considered themselves to be politically left. Eight respondents considered themselves to be politically indifferent. My sample was racially diverse: 34% white, 20% Latino, 15% Asian, and 10% Black. In addition, 20% of my respondents reported a multiracial identity.

The semi-structured, open-ended interviews consisted of questions about the series, including their thoughts about the characters and the relationships they were involved in, what they liked about the series, and thoughts about how the series could be improved. Underlying these questions, I inserted issues related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, whenever relevant. All interviews were digitally-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for major themes. To ensure anonymity, all respondents have been assigned pseudonyms. No real names are used in this study.

A single-paged, double-sided, closed-ended questionnaire was administered prior to each interview. The 26-item questionnaire was designed to capture demographic information, questions about how they consumed *SATC*, and a five-point Likert scale to measure their attitudes about gender roles in contemporary society. On average, it took the average informant roughly 5-10 minutes to complete all the questions in this survey.

Finally, informal observations were conducted to observe fans of the series in more natural settings. As a participant observer, I attended multiple movie screenings in the Los Angeles area during the first week of the film release in May of 2008, and later attended a 3½ hour organized *SATC* bus tour in Manhattan, NY, offered by *Screen Tours*.

This company offers the opportunity for fans to “follow in the footsteps of Carrie and Co., as they conquer NYC!”

# Chapter 2

## Gendered Discourse

*Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008) was released in 3,285 theaters on May 30, 2008 across the United States and Canada. In a press release by Fandango, an Internet site for movie information and tickets, *SATC: The Movie* made its Top Ten list of all-time advance ticket sales (as of 11/20/08). Harry Medved of Fandango stated, "We haven't seen anything like this before—it's unusual for a female driven movie to inspire so much fan anticipation" (Silverstein 2008). At the time, *Twilight* (2008) and *Hannah Montana 3D* (2008) were the only other films in this Top Ten list that were geared towards a female audience. In both cases, these films were targeted to a much younger female audience, with MPAA ratings being PG-13 (Inappropriate for children under 13) and G (General Audience), respectively, compared to *SATC: The Movie*, with a R-rating (Children under 17 must be accompanied by adult). The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) provides movie ratings so that parents can make assessments whether material is suitable for children. The film was also released in Israel, but the use of the word "sex" was banned from advertisements (Sorcher 2008).

Despite the buzz about *SATC: The Movie,* it was largely dismissed as a "chick flick" with a narrow audience appeal (young women of 18-29 years of age) (Lee and Horn 2008). It was in direct competition with Steven Spielberg's blockbuster franchise, *Indiana Jones* (2008), in its second week at the box-office. Often compared to *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), which grossed $27.5 million in its opening weekend, *SATC: The Movie* was speculated to gross anywhere between $35-45 million (McClintock 2008).

However, this $65 million budget film earned roughly $57 million opening weekend as it topped the box office charts in North America. In its 16-week domestic run, the film grossed $152,647,258. *SATC: The Movie* is the top earning R-rated film of 2008 and broke all-time opening weekend records in the category of Rated-R Comedy, previously *American Pie 2*, and female as the lead character, previously *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Cieply and Carter 2008). It made the top five list as an adaptation of a television series for all-time total gross, sharing the spotlight with *The Fugitive* (1993) and *Mission Impossible I, II, III* (1996, 2000, 2006) and as a R-rated film in the opening weekend, in the company of *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *300* (2007), and *Hannibal* (2001).[4] What is interesting to note is that *SATC: The Movie* beat films in categories formerly occupied by films that would typically attract men (e.g. action and thrillers). “The women of *SATC* don’t fly or have awesome weapons or even drive very often- but they do save each other from bad guys” (Griffin 2008). It is my contention that the popularity of *SATC: The Movie* suggests a demand for films that cater to women’s experiences.

In this chapter, I argue that gender is an important organizing structure shaping people’s responses to the film, as well as their views on contemporary gender relations, privileging hegemonic masculinity. My data suggests that people’s intense reactions to *SATC* is less about the artistic expression of the series (e.g. critiques about the writing or filming), and more about the deeply rooted societal tensions with respect to shifting gender relations and roles (e.g. how people feel about the characters or the series in

[4] Boxofficemojo.com is a box-office Internet database, which compiles up-to-date totals. These records reflect totals as of the end of 2008, the year *SATC:The Movie* was released.

general). Much of the discourse revolves around gender roles, be it economic or sexual liberation, in juxtaposition to the "liberal" values advocated by the four protagonists of *SATC*. In order to explore the various public discourses generated by *SATC: The Movie,* I supplement the analysis of two specific public Internet boards with a thorough examination of online professional film reviews. According to Eliashberg and Shugan (1997), in their empirical study of 172 film reviews by 181 critics, film reviews by professional critics were correlated with cumulative box office receipts, but did not influence early box office figures. In another study utilizing a multiple regression model, the use of a major distributor, a Christmas release, and the critics' ratings were the most important predictors of cumulative box office receipts (Litman 1983). These studies suggest a correlation between critic reviews and a film's financial success.

### *Internet Research*

The Internet has quickly proliferated as a topic of inquiry and a subject for developing appropriate research methodologies among social scientists. Mitra and Watts (2002:488) theorize that the Internet is a discursive space where "traditionally marginalized groups, such as gays, ethnic minorities, and women can express themselves and engage in a dialog with the global audience of cyberspace." They equate the importance of the voicing process on the Internet for marginalized communities as a kind of collaborative activism without the constraints of real-life. The Internet opens up a space for counter-hegemonic discourse and opportunity for social change, in spite of the ongoing reproduction of gendered and raced power dynamics on there (Jones 1998a, 1998b; Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 1999; Nakamura 2002; Smith and Kollock 1999).

Scholars engaged in computer-mediated communication research (CMC) purport to explain how technology, online communication, and social interactions are linked (Cherny 1999; Rice 1987), while the sub-discipline of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) focuses on the transmitted messages produced by Internet users. In Sussman and Tyson's (2000) analysis of archived electronic discussions, they discover that men used more words and had a higher tendency to express opinions, whereas women commented more frequently, lending support to the idea that the Internet remains a male-dominated environment. Tynes, Reynolds and Greenfield's (2004) comparison of Internet discourse in teen chat rooms indicated that race was frequently mentioned, and racial and slurs were more common in unmonitored chat rooms compared to monitored ones. Burkhalter (1999) found that the signaling of one's race is largely optional on the Internet, unlike one's gender, which is often revealed by their usernames (e.g. hotstud or brainygirl) or easily discernable by the content of the message (see also Thomson and Murachver 2001). Kendall (2000) discovered that identities in one interactive text-based forum relied on expectations concerning masculinity and whiteness. Meanwhile, debates about whether the Internet represents *real* communities or not in light of the absence of face-to-face interaction ensue (Smith and Kollock 1999; Rheingold 1993). Wilson and Peterson (2002:456) suggest that this distinction is not useful, and instead promotes the "investigation of the continuum of communities, identities, and networks." This area is where researchers are able to reveal rich insights about the relationship between online interactions and offline power relations. This naturally raises methodological issues about the how to study the Internet and its *netizens* (i.e. Internet participants), in terms of how

to conduct interviews and collect data in online communities in an ethical fashion (Paccagnella 1997; Ruhleder 2000; Turkle 1999).

### ***Methods***

In order to get a feel for the tone set by professional film reviewers, I culled the Internet to locate a broad range of film reviews about *SATC: The Movie*. I amassed reviews from Internet film review sites, such as imdb.com, movietome.com, and rottentomatoes.com, and carefully identified reviewers by gender in order to determine whether it affected over all ratings for the film.

I then examined the discourses about the film in a popular online community bulletin board, *Craigslist*. I located 226 postings that were related to *SATC* between the period of April 30, 2008 to June 12, 2008. Most of the postings took place around the time the film was released, and the majority of them were under the section called "Rants and Raves," a discussion forum whereby 120 unique users across 24 states *ranted* (vehemently negative) and 22 users across 14 states *raved* (enthusiastically positive) about *SATC.* I incorporated the voices of both *ranters* (i.e. haters) and *ravers* (i.e. fans) as a way to expand the discourse to include popular responses from people who liked and hated *SATC.*

I conclude with a discussion of a *Newsweek* article, "Sexism and the City: What's up with this vicious bashing of the "*Sex and the City*" movie?" that I discovered while scouring the Internet for gendered discourse about *SATC*. Setoodeh's article appeared four days after the U.S. opening of the film and prompted divergent viewpoints about the social significance of the film. This article was met with 261 comments from 160 unique

users, over half of them male. I identified major themes present in this threaded discussion board, all of which addressed many of the issues of gender and feminism I wished to explore in my dissertation.

In order to accurately capture the emotionally-charged tone expressed by respondents in the two public Internet forums, I often use the words of the respondents verbatim. In order to protect their privacy, I removed their usernames. Although these comments will likely to be extremely offensive to some readers, it is a reflection of the sexist, racist, and homophobic ideas that are woven into the public discourse about gender in contemporary society---all key themes in this chapter.

### ***Film Reviews***

*SATC: The Movie* garnered unfavorable reviews by professional film critics. Movietome.com compiles reviews from leading prominent critics representing diverse media sources, such as *The New Yorker, Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, NPR, Salon,* and *The Christian Science Monitor.* Their compilation of 38 reviews yielded an average score of 53% (See Appendix B for complete list). Similarly, the collection of 39 top critic reviews on rottentomatoes.com yielded an average score of 55%, 20 gave *fresh* (i.e. positive) and 19 gave *rotten* (i.e. negative) reviews. Yahoo! Movies' compilation of 14 reviews by critics, 12 of which are included in the Movietome.com review, averaged a B- score.

On the other hand, the average of 64 users on movietome.com came out to 70%, 65% of users on rottentomatoes.com rated it "fresh," and the average of 21,168 users on Yahoo! Movies came out to a B+. Moreover, the average vote by 37,989 users on Internet

Movie Database (imdb.com) came out to 55%, 1190 users on boxofficemojo.com came out to a B-, and 151 users on tvguide.com came out to 80%, a good review. These figures suggest that users, who are more likely to consider themselves fans of the series, had more favorable opinions about the film compared to professional movie critics.

However, gendered differences existed in the assessment of the film. For example, of the 37 out of 38 reviewers from movietome.com where the reviewer's gender could be ascertained, 40% (15 out of 37) were female, most of whose names (or photos) appear to be Anglo. When factoring average scores by gender, women rated the film a 66% and men rated the film a 53%, a 13% difference. These percentages are more aligned with the higher ratings given by users. In addition, of the top 12 reviews, ranging from a score of 70-100, 75% (9 out of 12) were written by women. A perfect score of 100 was given by Mick LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* calling *SATC* "the best American movie about women so far this year, and probably the best that will be made this year." Assigning the next highest score of 89, Kimberley Jones of the *Austin Chronicle* wrote: "In its cinematic incarnation, *SATC* has lost none of its bawdiness yet gained a more profound sense of soberness."

An examination of the bottom 10 reviews, ranging from a score of 0 to 42, revealed that 70% (7 out of 10) were written by men. Assigning it a zero, Rick Groen of *The Globe and Mail* (in Toronto) described the film as "the dull scrape of a culture hitting rock bottom," while Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* described the film as "vulgar, shrill, and deeply shallow." Although there was a wide range of some praise and mostly criticism from film reviewers, one critique echoed the sentiments expressed by

many scholars. Dana Stevens of *Slate Magazine* pointed out that the "attempt to address the series' endemic whiteness by adding a subaltern black character---Jennifer Hudson as Carrie's designer-bag-toting Girl Friday-- is a major misfire that only underscores our heroine's oblivious entitlement."

These professional film reviews suggest a connection between gender and the outcome of film reviews. In general, men were more likely to give negative reviews compared to their female counterparts. In addition, professional reviewers were more likely to offer harsher critiques of the film compared to other users on Internet sites who watched the film or were fans of the series.

### ***Rants and Raves***

Despite the relatively dismal movie reviews, *SATC* fans eagerly awaited the arrival of the film to theatres. Although the series ended in 2004, rumors of the film percolated over the years. By the end of 2006, it was confirmed that the series would appear on the silver screen in May 2008. The impending film release created a notable buzz on *Craigslist.* However, not all communication was good-natured. In addition, there were five times as many *ranters* than *ravers*, who were not afraid to anonymously voice their hostility towards the *SATC* franchise, and its fans. Themes that resonated in this bulletin board reflected people's anxieties about gender as a structure of power. Many ranters unabashedly expressed misogynistic and homophobic viewpoints. On the other hand, ravers utilized the forum to praise the movie and seek activity partners with whom they could celebrate the series.

*"I'm not a homophobe, but…"*

Typical rants about *SATC* on *Craigslist* revolved around the bashing of the franchise (e.g. referring to it as "the real axis of evil" or "the eighth apocalypse"), the actors (e.g. Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and Cynthia Nixon), and its fans. The explicit use of profanity was common, especially when it came to describing women and gays. For example, one ranter in North Jersey, New Jersey exclaimed, "F*ck *Sex and the City* and the assholes that go see it! I hope the movie is a flop! Sarah Jessica Parker, go eat some hay you horse face slut!!!" This posting captures several of the sentiments embodied in this section, including the denigration of *SATC* and women. The aggressive tone in this forum was palpable, and spoke volumes about the role of gender and sexuality as a signification of power.

Sexist and misogynistic statements were commonplace in this forum. Women were often referred to as "skanks," "cunts," "whores," "sluts," and "bitches." A typical posting read, "American women are lazy, no good, gold-digging whores who expect the world to kiss their ass because they have a vagina and watch *Oprah* or *Tyra* or *Dr. Phil* or *SATC*" (San Antonio, Texas). Other ranters were more elaborate in their misogynistic descriptions of women. For example, a man in Boston complained:

> We received another helping of *Sex and the City*. The evil cabal of menstruating masses greedily demanded a wide screen orgy to follow-up however many seasons chronicling the lecherous, lascivious, ladies of Gotham…Not since the earliest brown shirted putsches of fascist Germany has a population fallen under such evil societal destroying spells. Seig Vagina! Seig Vagina!

Not only did he select condescending language to characterize women, he also evoked parallels to fascist Germany in order to highlight the extent to which he considers the evil

impact of *SATC*. For example, “Sieg Heil” refers to “Victory Hail,” a common call used at political rallies during the Nazi era. Meanwhile, a man in Denver suggested aggressive action on his part by announcing: “This weekend I am gonna drive by a movie theater and spray all these whores waiting for *SATC* with a fire extinguisher…I hope all of the whores are wearing Prada shoes and Louis Vuitton handbags. F*cking sluts.”

Several of the sexist and misogynistic rants mirrored antagonistic societal views about women and aging. A man in Fredericksburg, Virginia, conveyed, “F*ck *Sex and the City* for glamorizing all this cougar bullshit. Yes, Eva Longoria and Teri Hatcher, TV tells us you are hot…old lady in Frednecksburg, you are not.”[5] Although the series has been applauded by fans in its showcasing of successful, middle-aged women, some ranters preferred not to see these types of portrayals of women in the media, referring to them as cougars, often a pejorative slang to describe an older woman on the prowl for younger men. A man in Las Vegas expressed, “if these women were even a day older they’d have to change the title to *Sex and the Cat Ladies*,” while a New Yorker suggested “they should change the title to Golden Girls.” It is worth mentioning that *Golden Girls* (1985-92) was a popular sitcom about four women in their retirement age that share a house in Miami. On the other hand, the women in *SATC* were mostly in their 40s at the time of the film. These kinds of statements reflect one of the many societal double standards of gender. Even today, women’s aging is often perceived as a detriment in a society that equates youth with beauty, especially for women. Although there has been an

[5] Longoria and Hatcher are actors in *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present), a popular prime-time soap opera about four housewives living in an American suburb.

increasing pressure for men to maintain their youth, men's aging is still more generally accepted and positively portrayed in the media.

Some men publicly aired their discontent about women's attitudes and treatment of men in modern society. A New Yorker shared this poignant example:

> They all want the men here in *real life* to resemble the character "Big" in that show. Tall, white, successful and good-looking. Funny thing is the actor that plays "Big" is and has been currently dating a *Black* woman…That alone should show you how bad white women here in NYC are. So materialistic and high and mighty that someone who could date a beautiful white woman chose to date an attractive black one. But that show is another reason why so many white men (myself included) are dating Asian women in NYC and all over the country for that matter.

Whereas the majority of rants had a tendency to essentialize women, this rant had the potential to critically problematize issues of gender, race, and class. In his example, white women have been uniformly characterized as materialistic, a negative quality. Meanwhile, women of color are considered more desirable dating partners because they are less likely to be materialistic, or 'high and mighty.' This writer offered his own observations about gender, race, and materialism to explain why some white men might prefer to date women of color. However, he falls short of linking race and class to explain uneven structural opportunities that negatively affect people of color, especially women.

Homophobic comments, often directed towards gay men, were also widespread. Many ranters insisted that a true heterosexual man cannot enjoy this "chick flick on steroids," leaving only gay men or questionable straight men to watch this film. Speaking to this, a fellow in Orange County, California articulated, "f*cking faggots make excuses about watching *Sex and the City*," while a ranter in Austin joked, "sounds like a great butt party for loser men who like *Sex and the City*. Are you receiv…I mean hosting." These

sorts of statements reveal a deep disregard for men who watched the film, dismissing them as gay and submissive. Addressing these statements, one user challenged the notion that only gay men could enjoy the movie: "You don't have the balls to spew that shit 'cept here on *Craigslist* cuz you're a homo…yeah I'm right and you know it cocksucker." Far from being a champion of gay rights, this user brought to attention how the anonymity of posting on *Craigslist* made it easy for some people to make offensive comments, but then in turn, attacked his questionable sexuality.

Generally speaking, the assertion of hegemonic masculinity appeared to be an overarching theme tying together the sexist and homophobic views expressed in this forum. A New Yorker hypothesized that "identifying with a source of entertainment consisting of middle-aged, skanky, cunty sexpots discuss[ing] shoes and blowjobs over wine is another indication over the pussification of society." The appearance of sexist and homophobic comments together such as this one in a single rant was common. In many ways, the degradation of women and gays often bolstered the position of heterosexual men. In a few examples such as the following, the construction of hegemonic masculinity directly rested upon the essentialization of both gender and sexuality. A case in point, a New Yorker professed:

> I have tons of fag friends! Don't get me wrong, I personally think it's the most perverted thing in the world for a man to suck another man's penis, but they were just born that way, it's not a choice. What *is* a choice is a male watching sex/city and then defending it in a public forum. Unless you're a homo, then just come out instead of talking about a girlfriend and her friends dragging you into the theater. Gay men have nothing to prove, they're *ok* by me. Most of them unless they're a pain in the ass queen. Like this guy that enjoyed this piece of shit film with its cunt themes.

This ranter found it acceptable for gay men to watch the film because they are not considered *real* men and cannot choose their sexual orientation. Hence, his comment suggests that biology is destiny, that one's genes determine whether it is acceptable for a person to watch a certain type of film. This user leaves no room for the possibility of heterosexual men to enjoy this "piece of shit film with its cunt themes."

As such, ranters often poked fun at men who watched the film with their female significant others by relegating their sexuality. One ranter in Austin asked, "How many of you pussy-whipped faggots out there are going to take your wife, G-friend, date or significant whatever to the *Sex and the City* movie?" Likewise, a ranter in Kansas City, Missouri, questioned, "what real man will go see a movie that is truly a chick flick. My wife knows better [than] to ask me to even think about going. She's going with some girlfriends." Along with questioning men's sexuality for watching the film, the film is immediately devalued for being a "chick flick" with "cunt themes." Although the majority of sexist and homophobic statements were made by men, one woman in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, also contributed to this direction of discourse by asserting: "If any man brings his woman to this movie, he is either pussy-whipped or a closet gay." This example elucidates gender and sexuality as structures of power that place hegemonic masculinity at the forefront. Again, it reinforces the idea that a "real" man would have no interest in the film. Being "pussy-whipped," or controlled by a woman is as much an affront to a straight man's masculinity as is being a gay man.

Whereas most of the postings on *Craigslist* were brief and appear to have been written without much forethought, as suggested by the many typos and grammatical

errors, a few were several paragraphs in length and carefully crafted. One Las Vegas ranter constructed what he referred to as "a national IQ test" measured by whether a person liked the film. In his words:

> A national IQ test for women takes place starting tonight. It's called "Sex and the City," the movie. If you like this TV-show-turned-feature-length-film and you're female, you failed. If you like it, and you're a guy, you threw away your man card long ago. You're not a failure. Just gay (like the people who created the show)…not to mention, completely bereft of testosterone.

In this relatively well thought-out posting, the user postulates that intelligence could be measured by a person's dislike for the film, for men and women alike. According to his "test," no intelligent person could like *SATC.* Moreover, for a man to enjoy it, he must be gay and lack testosterone.

*"Puts the 'F' in Fabulous!"*

In contrast to the hostile tone of ranters in this forum, ravers on *Craigslist* exuded a celebratory feel in their postings. The first rave was posted on May 1, 2008. A fan in New Orleans bursted, "The girls are on *Oprah* and talking about the new movie that opens May 30$^{th}$. There is a god! God I miss NYC! I need a cosmo." Five other ranters expressed their enthusiastic anticipation for the movie, including a 76-year-old woman in Philadelphia who was going into surgery to remove a cancerous growth whose dearest wish in life was to watch the film.

Meanwhile, thirteen of the postings raved about how "fabulous" the movie was. A fan in New Hampshire could not "think of a better way to spend two and a half hours," while an older woman in Rhode Island watched the movie alone and had plans to go watch it again the following week. She thought the movie was "just wonderful" and

urged, “you have to see it!” Although most people who raved about *SATC* appeared to be fans, three people were pleasantly surprised to enjoy the film. A mother in New York who thought the series was over-rated, accompanied her daughter, a big *SATC* fan, to watch the film. She described the movie as terrific, and defended a straight man’s prerogative to watch the film without being labeled ‘gay.’ The other two postings were by men who confessed to enjoying the movie. One man in Las Vegas watched the film with his girlfriend in an effort to make her happy, and then bragged about an unintended benefit: “She gave me one of the best blowjobs I’ve had in months on the car ride to a night of great sex in the city.” Likewise, a groom in Spokane, Washington, shared, “it was a very good movie and men would pick up some pointers from watching this one.” In both instances, men received benefits, be it the form of “great sex” from their partner or “pointers” about women and relationships.

It would be safe to assume that most of the raves were written by women. However, five of the postings were written by men (including the two aforementioned), and were distinctly written from a male perspective. Two of the four postings were by men who accompanied their female partners and surprisingly enjoyed the movie. A third posting by a man in Austin wrote:

> I was introduced to the series by a beyond beautiful redhead woman I was dating at the time that would not miss a show (I miss you babe). Believe it or not, *SATC* is a better movie than Indiana Jones. It is put together quite well. From a ‘social studies’ standpoint, the film is less ‘women empowerment’ than the tv show, which is good.

He provides context to establish his heterosexuality by referencing his “beyond beautiful” girlfriend and his patriarchal views (e.g. “The film is less women empowerment which is

good”). By doing so, he creates a safer environment to express his like for the film as a man. A fourth posting by a man in Jacksonville, Florida, declared that he has the “hots” for two of the *SATC* women: “Charlotte and her bangin’ ass, and Carrie with her sexy-assed walk.” A fifth, and final, posting from Philadelphia raved about his one-night stand:

> Omg! It was an awesome night to be a single 27-yr-old male. After the movie was over, Iron Hill was insane. It got better when the cougar club arrived and they were slamming their cosmos. Mellisa, I had an awesome night. Just sucks that you had to leave my apartment at 2am. I hope things with the hubby are ok…lol
> You rocked my world!

Whereas the first three postings were written by men who emphasized the role of making their female partners happy or being introduced to the show through them, the last two postings were written by men whose raves objectified women in one form or another. Nonetheless, when looking at the whole picture, raves were more likely to be written by women, and more tasteful compared to rants, where profanity and objectification were the norm, instead of the exception.

*SATC Fans: Commodity or Community?*

Ranters may have monopolized the rants and raves section, but *SATC* fans were more likely to make a presence in other forums on *Craigslist*. Forty-five (45) postings directed towards *SATC* fans could be categorized as: 1) advertisements for *SATC*-related events, 2) people seeking activity partners related to *SATC*, and 3) women seeking *SATC*-like friendships. A common thread represented in these postings was the *SATC* experience and the celebration of female-bonding.

Forty percent of the postings were for advertisements, including *SATC*-themed fundraisers,[6] ticket giveaways, and passion parties.[7] One licensed social worker in the Bay Area was charging $180 for a six-week conscious-raising circle that uses the film as a catalyst to explore relationships. In most cases, fans were being solicited to partake in the *SATC*-experience, which often included a combination of drinking, shopping, and being pampered (e.g. manicures and spa services). These kinds of advertisements suggest that female bonding was being commodified as an experience that could be purchased.

About one-third of the postings were by fans seeking each other out as potential activity partners, nearly all of whom were specifically looking for partners to watch the film in theaters. A posting by a female fan in Santa Barbara, California, captured the spirit of a characteristic posting: "Any females interested in getting together to see the new *Sex and the City* movie? It would be fun to go get a martini before or after the movie too." Other postings similarly suggested meeting up for cocktails before or after the movie. It appears to be a popular way for fans to get to know each other, while reminiscing about some of their favorite *SATC* moments together. This model of female bonding over cocktails was a commonplace scene throughout the series.

Although most of the posts seeking movie partners were written by women, 2 out of 13 of them were written by men. One man in Boston wrote:

> I'm a 25-year-old guy who wants to see the *Sex and the City* movie but for some reason I'd feel weird going alone. I'm straight and I wouldn't want my normal

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[6] Fundraisers included The Arthritis Foundation and Lisa's H.O.P.E. (acronym for Helping Others Progress Economically) Chest, a local non-profit organization in Austin, TX, providing gently used professional clothing for women and men in transitional stages of their lives.

[7] Passion parties are in-home presentations of sensual products and adult toys, often part of a bachelorette party and/or bridal shower.

> friends judging me for going. Anyone wanna go? I'll probably skip work to see it.

In this pithy post, this young male established his sexual orientation, something that is not mentioned in any of the posts drafted by women. His anxieties about his masculinity are evident as he expressed his fear of being judged by his friends for wanting to see the film. In fact, he would rather watch the movie with a stranger, than go alone or let his friends know that he watched it. Although it was not stated, it might be reasonable to assume that he was seeking a female date or companion by announcing that he is "straight."

Coincidentally, the second post written by a male also includes an affirmation of his sexual orientation. Casey in Sunnyvale, California asked:

> Want to see *Sex and the City* movie? I do, just not alone and you must be a woman. I am a 50 yo SWM. No strings attached. I'll cover the tickets and popcorn. OK, maybe the drinks also...I am avail Monday or Tuesday night. I'll send you my picture for yours…I am a professional working on my doctoral degree. How about you?

Highly reminiscent of a personal advertisement, Casey provides demographic information about himself, including his age, race, and gender, and alludes to swapping pictures before the date. He does not describe his physical features, but describes his work and educational background.

Whereas the two posts written by men sought out movie partners, one female in Huntington-Ashland, West Virginia, tried to free her boyfriend from having to accompany her. She stated, "I'm trying to spare my boyfriend and get a group of gals together to see the *Sex and the City* movie on Friday, May 30th. Wanna go? Cosmopolitans before or after….totally optional." This post reflects the view of *SATC* as a "chick-flick" that men could not enjoy. The film is, however, a celebratory occasion for

female fans to bond with one another. In fact, being a "*SATC*-fan" was the most-mentioned requirement for an activity partner in these 13 listings, and to a lesser degree, being female. Two listings stated an age preference. A female in Olathe, Kansas, was looking for *SATC* female fans in their early 40s, and a female in San Mateo, California, preferred a movie partner who was 40+. Some listings made it clear that they were not looking for "dates," perhaps an attempt to avoid uncomfortable advances by men.

The two fans that were not looking for movie partners were seeking unconventional activity partners. A female fan in Nashville, Tennessee, tried recruiting players to play the *SATC* board game at a local bookstore. She delighted in the opportunity to play the game with "a bunch of women" and even hoped this one-time activity might lead to new long-term friendships. However, of all the postings, one fan's desire to seek three female travel companions to accompany her to New York City best reflected the ways in which some fans were devoted to capturing the *SATC*-experience. Writing from Metairie, Louisiana, this fan described the trip she planned:

> If you're a fan of the gals from *Sex and the City*, I'm a female looking for 3 gals to accompany me. The trip is in August and we'd share expenses of $189 per day (about $50 each). This beautiful hotel is located in Times Square and features a kitchenette, so you wouldn't be eating out every day. Friendship only. Would like to meet prior to trip.

Although the contents of this last posting might seem outrageous to those who do not consider themselves fans, the crux of the message certainly does not stand alone. In fact, the theme of women in search of platonic female friendships was prevalent among ravers.

Speaking to this, about 1/4th of the posts were written by women specifically seeking *SATC*-like friendships. A woman new to Chicago utilized *Craigslist* as an avenue to make new friends with other 30-something women:

> Hi, I am a professional woman in her early 30s and I moved to Chicago for a job. I left behind a bunch of *Sex and the City* type female friends to hang out with and would love to meet new female friends for great conversation, dinner events, cocktails, festivals, movies, traveling and meeting Mr. Right! :)

For posts in which women sought *SATC*-like friendships, expressing preference for an age frame was typical. A 50-year-old woman in Reston, Virginia elaborated further requirements related to life stage and lifestyle:

> Looking for mid-life women who would enjoy committed friendship like in the movie, *Sex and the City*. Northern Virginia women who are straight, educated, now single, with no kids at home, who have a career and nice lifestyle. Women who have the freedom to give and receive time and friendship.

Meanwhile, a "girlfriend group" in Rochester, New York, opened themselves to any woman 21 and up, regardless of whether they were married, divorced, or single. The announcement read:

> Wouldn't it be fun to have a group of super-close girl friends like on the show "Sex and the City"? This is a group for fun women (age 21 & up) who are looking for more girl time in their life. Friends to eat out, hang out, & of course, shop with. :) We'll have fun, share ideas & make new friendships, so let your guard down and join!

In general, these types of posts targeted women stratified by age. For example, categories such as women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s were typically mentioned as prerequisites to be invited to partake in the various friendship formations.

Unlike the age requirement, race was rarely mentioned as a prerequisite, and only two posts made references to writers' own race. This may have been a function of the

assumption that posts were written by white women, who have the luxury to ignore the relevancy of their race as a central part of their identity or a major factor of their lived experiences. On the other hand, an Asian American female in Manhattan sought "*Sex and the City*" friends with like-minded interests:

> I am a single Asian American looking for female friends who have same interests and taste (love to dress up and have cocktails) so we can hang out and spend good time having martinis in roof top bars in Manhattan. Mid 30 to 40s is preferred.

In a similar fashion, a 22-year-old African American female in St. Louis, Missouri, was interested in forming a group of girlfriends like in *SATC*: "Hello, I am in college, have no children, and have a dog. I am looking to have friends who I can go out with and do things with." When comparing these two posts by women who identified their race, it is interesting to note that the Asian American female offered "dressing up" and "having cocktails," activities highlighted in *SATC*, as examples of shared interests worth mentioning. On the other hand, the African American female is simply looking for friends to hang out with without listing specific activities. Instead, she discloses basic information about herself, including the fact that she is in college and does not have children. This may reflect a conscious effort on her part to dispel stereotypes about Black women. For these women of color who disclosed their race, it might have been a way for them to seek companions of the same race by signaling their race, or perhaps a way to attract female companions of any race that would be comfortable with women of their particular race.

The discourse that transpired on *Craigslist* is a microcosm of the larger societal reactions to *SATC* and shifting gender relations and roles. The majority of the public is

likely to hold neutral or indifferent views, and may not even be familiar with the series, and thus do not engage in the discourse. However, for those engaged in it, the discourse reflects the dichotomized range of views of those who either "love" (ravers) or "hate" (ranters) *SATC* and the depictions of contemporary gender relations. In some ways, the franchise could be viewed as a Rorschach inkblot test. The image itself (i.e. *SATC*) is meaningless and arbitrary, but a person's interpretation is what becomes meaningful. When it comes to *SATC*, for all the fans who bask in the notion of female bonding and empowerment (real or fantasized), there is the ranter such as this one in Washington, DC, who believes "only dumb cunts would pay $10 to watch a movie about 4 old hag, used up sluts written by a bunch of fags."

### ***Sex(ism) and the City***

Setoodeh's article, "Sexism and the City: What's up with this vicious bashing of the *Sex and the City* movie," opened up dialogue about the fragmented opposition to the film by some individuals, especially men. He describes the original television series as a revolution for women and points out that women continue to face a glass ceiling in the film industry. The discussion boards in response to this article shows that his essay was met with both praise and insults and the discussion was emotionally charged. In one instance, a man accused a woman that "it must be that time of the month," which was then met with the response, "another caveman." Prompted by the question as to why men hated this movie (especially without having watched it), the discourse spiraled into polarized viewpoints about issues related to sexism and gender.

Instead of addressing Setoodeh's question of why men vehemently hate *SATC: The Movie*, the discourse was broadened by users who engaged in discussions about whether they liked the franchise or not (i.e. the products, such as the series and movie, associated with *SATC*). The most frequent response was users defending their position that disliking a film has no connection to sexism. However, evidence revealed in this chapter suggests otherwise. The discussions in this forum highlighted negative reactions to female empowerment through economic and/or sexual liberation and feminism. Moreover, the discussions included masculinity as a form of power, comparisons to racism, and women in politics.

Whether it was the dismissal of the film as a "chick flick" which denotes the privileging of women's voices and the connotation that "chick flicks" are frivolous and unimportant in the realm of Hollywood films, or why people loved and hated *SATC,* respondents in this forum expressed a broad range of views on its socio-cultural relevance. For example, one woman felt a discussion about *SATC* was more important than the presidential primaries as she addressed a user who brought up Obama's name: "Stop polluting areas where people are trying to have intellectual discussions." Another respondent encouraged someone to "write a dissertation about the spirit of *SATC* and its relation to Democrats losing the election." The film was in theaters around the time of the historic election where Hilary Clinton, a white woman, and Barack Obama, an African American male, were the frontrunners for the 2008 presidential bid. Meanwhile, one user

was surprised to find so many women reading *Newsweek.*[8] Another male who found the series to be degrading to women asked whether *SATC* will be a feminist landmark in 25 years? In this section, I explore the main themes that populated the discourse about *SATC*.

*Female Subjectivity*

Female subjectivity is the dominant theme resonating in the discourses generated by Setoodeh's article. Although not all female users in this forum were fans, a majority of them were. Fans and haters alike contributed to the dialogue about the ways in which this "chick flick" was threatening to many people, especially men. One female fan put it this way, "for men, it's like watching a foreign film without subtitles." In her analogy, men and women are assumed to speak different languages and possess different subjectivities that would explain men's lack of comprehension of *SATC: The Movie.* This confirmed several men's comments that the series was something to which they could not relate. Along the same lines, another woman wrote, "You either get it or you don't, women who don't like *SATC* are repressed, and women are self-sufficient these days because men want supermodels to soothe their egos." She extended the discourse by inferring that it is not only men who don't get it, but also "repressed women" who don't like the show. She went on to suggest that women *have* to be "self-sufficient" because men are only seeking partners who look like "supermodels" who will nurture their fragile egos. Some users expressed explicit disappointment in men's lack of introspection, while another pointed

[8] Fifty-five percent of their readers are men, 70% are college educated, 40% have graduate degrees, and the median household income is $75,263.

to the gendered double standard: “Men are uncomfortable with women speaking their minds and confidently embracing their sexuality.”

Many women in this forum relished the ways in which a female subjectivity highlighted their voices and experiences. These respondents felt that *SATC* was empowering, whether it was represented in the form of sexual or economic liberation. A typical response came from a woman who liked that the show portrays “women having both sex and brains, rather than waiting to be seduced by the big strong hero.” Likewise, another fan described the movie as one about “four close friends who were financially comfortable and love each other.” In fact, several posts alluded to the friendship among these four women as the *real* storyline. Echoing these sentiments, one woman expressed, “friendship, not fashion, is the focus of the film.”

On the other hand, some users (mostly men) insisted *SATC* was degrading to women and taught them to be promiscuous. One man described *SATC* as “porn for conservative women,” while another man who characterized the *SATC* women as “independent skanks” admitted that “Men don’t like watching women sleeping around.” In both instances, men expressed discomfort with women as sexual agents. Yet, for another man, he took it a step further stating, “men are bashing the movie because they don’t want to see 45-year-old women having sex when they can watch young women on the internet for free.” In these instances, men overlook the reasons women enjoy *SATC*. In some cases, not only do they deny this female subjectivity, but they are quick to objectify women and revert to sexist thinking. Although some men took a moral stance

about the sanctity of women's sexuality, at least one man only cared about "watching young women on the internet for free."

However, women were not complacent and often responded to men's sexist comments. One frequent contributor in this forum replied to a post by a *SATC* hater: "There are few guys worth marrying…and women prefer to buy shoes over settling down with men like you." She indirectly addresses one of the main critiques of the series, which is the promotion of consumerist values, and puts it in the context of choice and resistance. In this case, shoe shopping is a much better alternative to settling down, or getting married, to a man with sexist ideas. Another woman defended a women's right to both "shoes" and "sex."

Relating to the criticism that the series runs like a fashion advertisement, one man argued that "*SATC* is about women wallowing in vapid materialism…while most men are trying to make ends meet." In this case, he overlooks the fact that most women are also trying to make ends meet, and that few fans actually point to the consumerist message of the show as an appeal of *SATC*. One woman chimed into this discussion adding her own observation from the show, "I have never seen the women ask for men to buy them things." She admitted she has only seen a few reruns and hated the series. Interestingly enough, this statement hints to another double standard when it comes to gender. That is, it is acceptable for men to make extravagant purchases (e.g. cars, watches, electronics, etc.), but when financially capable and responsible women make them, they are considered selfish and materialistic.

*Doing Gender*

The examples of gendered double standards that arose in this forum highlighted how gender is about power, not biology or genitalia. Several users alluded that *SATC* was a threat to a hegemonic masculinity, which rests on fearing and looking down upon women and gays. One woman pointed to a review from *National Public Radio (NPR)* and their implication that "only gay or emasculated men would watch the film." She added, "It's only a movie, not a test of your masculinity, guys." Nonetheless, these comments spoke volumes about the construction of masculinity in our culture and how it is maintained and resisted in mass media and popular culture, as well as society-at-large. One man rejected the notion of creating a society of "*straw men,"* while another man informed men that "male suck-up is pathetic and men should stop seeking approval from women." Yet another hater suggested that Setoodeh sympathized with *SATC* because he is a gay man. A straight male, and a fan of the series, shared how he was ridiculed by his colleagues at work when he told them he planned to watch the movie. These examples reflect the imagined construction of hegemonic masculinity which rests upon both homophobia and sexism. Any indication of weakness becomes an affront to masculinity.

Other posts spoke directly to the fragility of masculinity stemming from men's own insecurities. Men were characterized to be terrified by the women in *SATC*. One female who loved the movie thought that men who did not like the movie were afraid of the "opposite sex" and were probably "control freaks" and "mama's boys." One man who accused another male user of sounding like a rapist agreed that "men are threatened by independent women." Another man who thought the show was funny and well-written

wrote that any show embracing a women's perspective is a challenge to masculinity. In support, he offered the example that men's reactions to men dressing as women as one that also incites anger, despite women wearing men's clothing as normal. Likewise, one post linked men's feeling threatened by the show "as a reflection of their insecurity and low self-esteem." One man reported that he "has observed the weakness and cowardly behavior of men all his life, while another male observed cultural differences in masculinity: "American men are limited in that they view emotionality as a sign of weakness, whereas European men are more open." Along the same lines, another male who thought the movie was great commented that he loves sex and women, but it was because he was Italian (as opposed to American). One man who thought the movie was not a profound work of art but still entertaining broached the topic of men and their insecurities. He explained that "men's wounded egos from the harshness of the dating scene might make some men uncomfortable knowing that women joke about men so openly (as do the characters in *SATC*)." For him, "just contemplating it can be unpleasant."

*Whiteness*

The neglect of race and class relations is a major weakness in the way that gender often gets essentialized in popular culture, including *SATC.* Some posts point out that the characters were white and rich and thus, "the issues presented on the show are not universal to the lives of women." People felt that the series reflected "waspish femininity" and was limited to "white women's success and problems." For good reason, many users considered the "whiteness" of *SATC* as a serious flaw.

Although the whiteness of the characters was frequently pointed out, only two users referred to Jennifer Hudson's character, the only woman of color in a significant role. One fan of the movie, viewing the industry is certainly sexist, "would've preferred a cool black girlfriend, maybe recently divorced, to a sweet personal assistant." Meanwhile, another respondent was puzzled that the "young African American woman has a computer science degree and the only job she can get is a maid (oops, I mean personal assistant) to a white woman." These statements recognize the manner by which Jennifer Hudson's character added "color" to the film, but reinforced dominant stereotypes of black women in servile roles for white women.

Perhaps the strongest message about racism revealed in this discussion was its comparison to sexism. One man believed that no one would dare attack a Black film like *Medea's Family Reunion* (2006) in the same way that *SATC* has been attacked because "sexism is more prevalent and acceptable than racism today." He made a parallel to the Obama and Hillary primary: "Just look at the late night shows and count the number of negative jokes at the expense of McCain and Hillary and then compare them to the number of negative Obama jokes." In his eyes, political correctness is associated with policing racial jokes, but not sexist ones. Another respondent equated "the degree of sexism in this country matches the racism of a generation ago…not that there isn't racism today, but it isn't as blatant as it was a generation ago." Meanwhile, another person posed the question, "why can't I admire Obama without being a misogynist?" reflecting the ways in which people have difficulty thinking about racism and sexism beyond a competing issue or mutually exclusive concern.

*Feminist Backlash*

The discourse surrounding feminism was highly antagonistic. Only a few posts mentioned the benefits of the feminist movement. For example, one person attributed the better representations of women in the media to feminist protests. More commonly, respondents clung to stereotypes of feminists (e.g. members of the National Organization of Women) as "bitter women who complain for no reason." One woman thought the movie was mediocre and expressed "that women's delicate sensibilities is not the way to reach equality." In her mind, women should not take so seriously what people thought of the movie. Likewise, another user voiced that "women should not be so thin-skinned and emotional." Unsurprisingly, people's opinions reflect the narrow portrayal of feminism and feminists in a typically negative and menacing light in the media.

Yet others questioned the relevancy of contemporary feminism. One person stated that "third-wave feminism or post-feminism or whatever you want to call it just might not be the best thing for women after all…The claim of "sexism" will lose all force-to the detriment of women." One woman hated the series and thought the movie was sexist. For her, "a real girl power movie would show women working and having meaningful relationships with men. It was the opposite of feminism." Meanwhile, another woman adds that there are "real battles for feminism," such as unequal pay for women. She considered the feminist ideology of the show dubious when considering the movie is simply another replica of "traditional Hollywood romantic comedy schmaltz." Hence, although both posts look to work as an important arena for feminism, they diverge when it comes to what relationships should look like. The first embraces a heteronormative

stance wanting to see women in "meaningful relationships with men," while the second mocks the "traditional Hollywood romantic comedy schmaltz."

Another common criticism was the association between feminism and consumerism. One woman claimed "people only need a third of a brain to enjoy the movie" and offers a commonly echoed post-feminist sentiment about the series when she sarcastically stated, "the feminist message is to buy shoes and dresses made in the Third World!" Likewise, the franchise was considered "a mockery of female empowerment through fashion and cocktails." Another person thought the show trivialized "women in their incessant talking of fashion." Many others shared these types of sentiments and problematized the link between female empowerment and consumerism. On the other hand, one respondent reminded the users on the forum that *SATC* is fictional and meant to be an unrealistic movie, explaining that some "women find empowerment in romantic and consumerist fantasies because it is so far removed from their daily life experiences."

On another note, one female who hated the series commented that "being feminist and empowered shouldn't mean male bashing." Her statement is a reflection of the tensions prominent in second-wave feminist theorizing, which often privileged a dichotomous way of thinking about gender and feminism in our society (e.g. males v. females, dominant v. subordinate). Moreover, this brand of feminism often generalized women's experiences as universal, and therefore ignored and marginalized significant differences by women who were not white, middle-class or heterosexual. Moreover, the misconception of the feminist movement being "for women" and "against men" is

problematic and encourages people to become defensive and reactionary, instead of building bridges.

Establishing a tone for the rest of the comments, the first post was initiated within an hour of Setoodeh's article being published on the Internet: "Why are men bashing this movie? Duh! Maybe because men are weary and tired of women bashing anything *male*." Other users added that men were treated like "cardboard figures" and "pawns" representing uni-dimensional characters that are stupid and expendable, while it was "rubbish [thinking] about women as victims." In contrast to Setoodeh's article, which cited examples of sexism against women in Hollywood as the status quo, these users insisted that it is men, not women who are the victims of sexism in the media. One man expressed, "Men are tired of being bashed in the media. The self-esteem of women has been more than corrected." Sharing similar sentiments, another man believed that women are no longer objectified in the media because of the feminist protests, which would accompany that type of action. Hence, users were more likely to sympathize with men as victims of reverse sexism in the form of male-bashing, than to consider sexism as a legitimate struggle faced by women in contemporary times.

*Sex and Politics*

Setoodeh playfully compared Hillary Clinton to Carrie Bradshaw in the last sentence of his article. He quoted Clinton, "I'm not some little woman standing by my man, like Tammy Wynette," and added his own commentary that "She was more like Carrie: too big for that." However, many users on this forum refuted this dubious connection between the two women. Some felt that "Carrie and Hillary share nothing in

common” and “probably wouldn’t like each other, let alone share a meal.” Also frowning upon such a comparison, one woman insisted that the *SATC* characters “would have vehemently voted against the war in Iraq and stood up to the good ole boys.” Providing additional support to the previous statement, one woman proclaimed “she would vote for Samantha over Hillary any day.” Perhaps reflecting one of the many tensions of feminist ideology, one man asked “whether he is a misogynistic feminist since he likes *SATC*, but not Hillary.” Another person explained his dislike for Hillary was for political reasons, having nothing to do with her gender. He announced that he is ready for a female president. Likewise, another post described Hillary as “a devoted, old-style politician that has shown her darker side.”

On the other hand, one respondent considered it a grave disservice to compare the *SATC* heroines to Ms. Clinton, one of the most significant advocates of universal healthcare and combatants of poverty and injustice in the world. Similarly, another user sarcastically commented: “I’m sure the first woman to have a realistic shot at being the leader of the free world would identify well with a group of women who “empower” themselves through the latest trend in purses and sexual encounters.” He infers that a woman who has a viable chance of becoming the next American president could not possibly have anything in common with women who are financially and/or sexually liberated. However, he overlooks the fact that women who are more financially and sexually liberated, at least in ideology if not in practice, are probably more likely to have a chance to become President compared to the average woman.

For some, there were obvious connections between Carrie and Hillary. They were both "stars without men playing central roles in their lives." One woman was disturbed by the vitriol directed at Carrie and Hillary and called men "a strange breed for preferring tame and quiet women." Another woman found it disgusting that men are bashing the movie, and blamed men for a host of social problems, including rape, domestic violence, and the demise of Hillary Clinton's campaign: "You don't have to wonder why Hillary Clinton was not nominated although the better and more experienced candidate. This is a man's world and see what it got us into: bad economy, wars, death, racism, bad healthcare." Although we live in a country that boasts meritocracy and equality for all, it is still an undeniable fact that Anglo men hold a majority of the dominant positions in the U.S. As we learned from the 2008 Presidential election, sexism keeps the engine of politics running, whether it is reflected in a person's complaint of Hillary Clinton for "being one of the boys" when in reality she is a woman who has broken many glass ceilings, or people's disappointment that women were more "empowered" to show up at box offices to make *SATC* the most watched movie in its opening weekend than to the election boxes to elect Hillary Clinton.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Despite dismal ratings by professional film reviewers, *SATC* fans came out in record-breaking numbers to watch the film adaptation of their beloved series. For fans, the film release was a celebratory occasion to spend with friends, and to some extent, make new ones. This speaks to the centripetal nature of media viewing and how it brings people together (Carey 1969; McQuail 2000). *SATC* was a social event, as is often the

case of viewing feminine genres (Brown 1994; Geraghty 1991). It not only made a remarkable imprint on box office figures, but it made a heavy impression on public Internet sites, such as *Craigslist,* and mainstream news media sources, like *Newsweek*. In many instances, men were disgusted or threatened by the popularity of the *SATC* franchise, whereas female fans spoke of feeling empowered and liberated from the constraints of patriarchy, at least temporarily, as a result of watching the series, much like Radway's romance readers or Ang's *Dynasty* fans. Both Internet forums revealed the societal tensions of gender roles and relations in contemporary society. These included discussions about the social construction of masculinity, subjectivities (gender and race), feminism and politics, and consumerism. Moreover, despite some utopic claims of the Internet being a space where gender and race are less relevant, my findings suggest otherwise. West and Fenstermaker (1995:13) argue that "all social exchanges, regardless of the participants or the outcome, are simultaneously 'gendered,' 'raced,' or 'classed.'" The findings in this chapter, based on a review of professional and popular film reviews available on the Internet, reveal that gender affected people's propensity to enjoy the film (including professional film reviewers), as well as inform people's idea about what the gender order should look like in contemporary society. In the next chapter, I examine what my interviews with fans of the series reveal about the appeal of the series, and the meanings they produce.

# Chapter 3

## Sex Appeal

*Sex and the City (SATC)* has been heralded by scholars for showcasing female friendship and privileging female subjectivity, while receiving negative critiques for its post-feminist platform of equating female liberation with individualized consumerist values rather than broad-based political goals. Many professional film reviewers dismissed the series-turned-film altogether, believing that the middle-aged women who loved *SATC* were too narrow a demographic to show up at box offices in significant numbers (Lee and Horn 2008). Despite the popularity (and profitability) of the *SATC* franchise, there has been no in-depth research, to date, which explores the social significance of the series among fans. Although the series ended in 2004, the popularity of *SATC* has not waned. Syndication has created a new generation of fans. According to Nielson Media Research, *SATC* averaged about 1.7 million viewers per episode on TBS, 1.2 million in the 18-49 age demographic (Hibberd 2006). Fans, both old and new, made their appearance in record-breaking numbers at the box office worldwide for the first feature film in 2008. The success of the film fast-tracked negotiations for the film sequel, which was released Memorial Day weekend of 2010. In this chapter, I summarize how fans interpret *SATC* and what they find appealing about the series. In addition, I reveal the *social* aspects of its popularity. Underlying my research, I examine the fans' discourses related to contemporary gender roles and feminism in order to explore how they manage and interpret the post-feminist narratives expressed in *SATC.*

***Big Fans!***

The fans I interviewed, ranging from 21 to 56 years of age, enthusiastically followed the lives of the three thirty-something (Carrie Bradshaw, Charlotte York, and Miranda Hobbes) and one forty-something (Samantha Jones) protagonists of *SATC*. Several of them were teenagers when they began watching the series, while one fan watched some of the episodes with her 89-year-old grandmother, also an avid fan. They watched the film together in a theater when the first film was released. When I interviewed Alana, she was quick to share with me that she was involved in a relationship like that of Carrie and Big; she even showed me her cell phone which had a wallpaper of Carrie and Big. A handful of them responded to my *Craigslist* advertisement as, "BIG fan of *Sex and the City*." Big is the leading man in the series.

Many fans were introduced to the series by other fans. Some fans were lent or given DVDs from friends or family members as an extra incentive to start watching it. As fans *got hooked*, they eagerly rented DVDs or downloaded episodes from the Internet and watched entire seasons in a matter of days to feed their "addiction." They then began recommending the series and converting their friends into fans. "Word-of-mouth" served an important role in creating a strong fan base.

On the other end of the spectrum, some fans began watching *SATC* with ambivalence. This may have been due to a general disinterest on their own part or because it was frowned upon by people around them. William, a 32-year-old white male, admitted his initial reluctance to watch the series because of "a bit of machismo." However, he was easily coaxed by a woman he was dating at the time to watch an

episode with her. It did not take long before he considered himself a fan. Soon after, he looked forward to discussing the show with other fans.

Jane, a 47-year-old white female, was exposed to sermons at her church that demonized the series and rebuked the *SATC* women for "seeking sex all the time." She heard similar messages about the series on Christian radio stations. When she finally caught one of the episodes on the tube because "there was nothing else on," she unexpectedly enjoyed and related to the storyline. Jane's problem with the series was its explicit use of vulgar language and excessive use of "four-letter words," not the sexual discourse and content. In fact, she identified with Samantha's sexually adventurous persona.

Carine, a 23-year-old Armenian female, was living with her parents in Armenia when she first heard about the series over a decade ago. Her mother prohibited her from watching the series because of its "adult" content. Carine clearly remembered the dialogue with her mother and placed it into context for me:

> In Armenia, we *never* speak about sex. We don't *say* the word "sex." My mom was telling me, "You can't watch it because it's a show for adults," so I imagine this show is just only sex scenes or something, *you know*? Like I thought it was a porno. But at the same time, she's watching it.

She spoke to me at length about her confusion at the time. Although she was a young girl at the time, she found it contradictory that her mother seemed to enjoy the show, but forbade her from watching it. It was serendipitous that when she left home in Armenia to attend college in Ukraine, her two Chinese female roommates were avid fans of the series. She explained how there was little to do in Ukraine, especially during the heavy

rain seasons where they felt captive in their apartment. Their only respite was watching shows and movies that were downloaded on her roommate's laptop. In her words:

> They had a laptop with shows in Chinese, and only one in English with Chinese subtitles. It was *Sex and the City*! I watched two seasons in one week. Now I'm watching it every day. It's like a part of my life. In part, why I wanted to come to the U.S.!

She made it a point to tell me that *SATC* was the only American show that was downloaded on their laptop. At the time, she pondered moving to Brazil to further her education. She also loves to watch *telenovelas*. After watching the series, she changed her mind and was inspired to attend graduate school in the United States. I interviewed Carine in between her classes on the grassy lawn at a prestigious four-year private university in Los Angeles. She dreams about getting an internship at the U.N. and visiting New York City.

### *Girl-Bonding*

*SATC* was the basis for many "girl-bonding" activities. It was a social activity that brought people together, especially groups of women. Fans preferred viewing episodes in the company of others, rather than in isolation. If Monday nights were reserved for sports enthusiasts to huddle over the television set or to visit the local sports bar to watch football, Sunday nights were now being reserved for *SATC*. The series debuted Sunday evenings at 9:00pm on HBO. Fans set aside time to watch these thirty-minute episodes with roommates, sorority sisters, friends, and family members. Like other social activities, it was common for fans to gather over food and alcohol, while catching up with each other about their own personal lives, sometimes mirroring the lives of the *SATC* characters. Debriefing time, after each episode, was as integral a part of the experience as

watching the actual episode. Thus, a thirty-minute episode was easily transformed into an entire evening to be spent in the company of other fans. Maggie, a 28-year-old white female, originally from Wisconsin, informed me that she and her best friend still watch reruns together during her trips back to Wisconsin: "We usually spend a night in. We *always* watch *SATC.* It's just like *our*, you know, routine."

Although most fans reported watching episodes with their peers (including siblings), a handful watched it with older female family members whereby a noticeable generation gap existed (e.g. mother, aunt, or grandmother). In most instances, viewing patterns were gendered. Women were more likely to watch the show with other family members, whereas most of the men I interviewed watched it with their female friends or dating partner. Michelle, a 25-year-old white female, described how *SATC* became a mother-daughter bonding activity for them:

> [Referring to the series] My mom got me into it and I used to watch it with her on Sundays, so it was kind of always*, our thing*. [Referring to the movie] *Sometimes* it was kind of uncomfortable, but my mom has always been really honest with me about that kind of stuff. There were some things that were *really* embarrassing. But for the most part, we thought it was funny. We laughed together. And it was just good times. Just for the two of us to spend.

This example reflects a specific type of adult female interaction, whereby a mother and daughter are able to enjoy quality time together, in spite of the many uncomfortable sex scenes and topics. It points to a model in which female fans across generations are able to relate to each other as women, while fostering a more intimate relationship with one another to talk about "taboo" topics related to sex. Michelle looks forward to future "mother-daughter" bonding moments, including the release of the *SATC* film sequel in theaters. There is no one else she would rather watch it with than mom.

Several fans associated specific personal life transitions with their introduction to the series. These often included events, such as break-ups, going away to college, and geographical moves across state lines. Elle, a 27-year-old Black female, remembered her emotional state when she was first convinced to watch *SATC*:

> I was so emotional because I broke up with my boyfriend at the time, and I moved into this dorm with these girls that I didn't know at all. They were strangers, and, um, my one roommate, she watched *SATC.* I'd never watched it. She was like, "Watch this, you'll feel better." And um, so we would watch it and we bonded *like that.* We became *instant* friends. We would just watch *SATC* every day after our classes. We became like *best* friends.

For Elle, watching *SATC* was therapeutic. At the time, she found it empowering to watch a series about a group of independent women who did not feel the need to be attached to men. The episodes served as fodder for reprioritizing personal life goals, with a focus on her own education and career. A latent consequence of the series was the friendship forged with a complete stranger who would later become one of her best friends.

### ***The Reunion***

The first feature film, *Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008), was released four years after the series finale and fans were ecstatic about their reunion with the girls, literally and metaphorically. Anne, a 37-year-old white female, "was just *happy* they made a movie because she missed the show *so much*!" Several fans planned weeks and months in advance to watch the film during opening weekend. Some of them took a partial or complete day off from their paid work or childcare responsibilities to fully partake in the festivities. Many would return to the theater to watch it again with different groups of friends (e.g. family, co-workers, friends, significant others). *SATC*-night often included advance ticket sales, dinner reservations, and rounds of cosmopolitan martinis. Four-star

hotels, like the Ritz Carlton in Marina Del Rey, also chimed in to take advantage of women wanting to celebrate the spirit of *SATC* by offering a “Get Carried Away” package, priced at $3,200 for two nights in one of their executive suites, chauffeured transportation in a Mercedes to the Los Angeles premiere, VIP access to the official premiere after-party, and a $600 gift certificate for the Jimmy Choo boutique in Beverly Hills (McClure 2008). A *SATC* Hotspots movie package, which included a bus tour of Manhattan, tickets to the film, and an after-party sold out weeks in advance. Taking the time to watch episodes with friends was a social activity. Watching the movie was an event.

Fans reported that women were the visible majority at film screenings during opening weekend, consistent with my own observations. Gay men were mentioned as the second noticeable group, while *straight* men were perceived to be in the minority. When I attended the midnight screening of this film the day before opening night in an indoor Los Angeles mall, I knew I was in the right line. Many fans were “dressed to impress,” whether they were inspired by Carrie’s eccentric tutu look or a slinky black dress fitting for a night on the town. They often arrived in groups to watch the film. Fans commemorated the evening by taking photographs with their friends at the theater before the film began. According to Nina, a 46-year-old white female, the air was thick with excitement “as if it were an Oscar Party.” During the movie, fans gasped, laughed, and cried together.

Fans rarely used the term “chick flick” to characterize the film, but stressed that it was a film *about*, and *for* women. It was something women were supposed to experience

with their girlfriends. Vanesa, a 24-year-old Latina, watched it opening weekend with a group of twenty women who were "glammed up." Her evening began with dinner at a Mexican restaurant and she shared her following observation with me: "It's a *friendship* movie. You didn't see *one* individual person. They were all in groups of women having a good time and just enjoying life and spending time with their friends." Kelley, a 33-year-old Black female, along with a fellow co-worker, planned a *SATC*-themed party on opening night for twenty of their friends and acquaintances. They both loved the series and wanted to bask in the *SATC* celebration by throwing this party at a boutique hotel in Los Angeles. She described some of the careful attention to details and preparations to make this night memorable:

> The theme colors were *obviously* pink and black. Every girl got a gift bag with pink martini glasses, condoms, lube, and little candies. At the time there was also a perfume called *Sex and the City*. We also purchased little vials and put them in the bags with instructions on how to make cosmos. It was great!

For Kelley and her friends, the release of the film was a reason to celebrate an evening with friends. She rejoiced in planning this sex-positive *SATC*-themed party, with condoms and lube as party favors, months in advance and wanted to make the night extra special for all of her friends.

In general, my mostly female fans enjoyed the film because it offered them a reason to spend time with close female friends and be reunited with the cast of *SATC*. They did not care that the film received low ratings from professional film reviewers. Many of them were already looking forward to the release of the sequel and could not wait for another opportunity to celebrate the film with their loved ones.

### ***Men and the Movie***

Some of the fans I interviewed watched the film with a date, whether it was a recent beau or a long-term significant other. Eva, a 50-year-old Latina, confessed that she dragged her husband to the theater with her, but later got harassed by her co-workers for *making* him go with her. Although her husband was a good sport about it, her co-workers thought it was too much that she took her husband to watch a movie geared towards women. She did not feel too guilty though, since he ended up sneaking out of the theater to watch something else. Likewise, Gisele, a 30-year-old Latina, watched the film with three of her girlfriends and made the following remark: "There was, like, *one* guy that a girl had dragged. And I remember we were critical of her because we were thinking, like *God,* doesn't she have any *girlfriends*! He was *obviously* unhappy."

Nonetheless, the majority of fans I interviewed shared positive experiences watching the film with their dates. In most cases, their dates offered to watch the film with them. Some of these dates also enjoyed watching the series, although fell short of calling themselves fans. Elle watched the film with a new guy she was dating at the time. With her infectious laugh, she filled me in on her movie date as if it occured yesterday:

> He didn't want me to tell his friends that he went to go see it. He never watched the TV series, but he really enjoyed it. The crowd was mostly women, and I remember us exiting the theater. There was another couple, and the guy said to my boyfriend, "Oh, she made you come, too?" They were just laughing so hard.

In Elle's case, her boyfriend did not mind accompanying her to watch the film. He did not care what strangers thought about him, even though he was one of the few men in the theatre. He did, however, care what his friends might think and insisted that she not let them know. *SATC* would be their little secret.

Ethan, a 28-year-old white male, was delighted that the girl he was dating asked him to watch the film with her. He remembered the surprised expression on her face when he enthusiastically agreed to go, as well as comments he received from random women at the movie theater:

> She thought she would have to *drag* me. I *really* wanted to go but none of my friends wanted to see it. And I remember when we walked in, a lady commented, "How did you drag him into this?" And *I* answered, "you'd be surprised, but I actually dragged her into seeing it."

Ethan grew accustomed to people's reactions about him being a fan of the series, especially by other men who often teased or ridiculed him for it. It was not uncommon for his male friends to question his masculinity. They often commented "whether he was gay or something."

On the other hand, he felt that he "scored points with women" for admitting to be a fan of the series:

> Girls, I think, sometimes kind of like it. There's a guy, and he's attractive too. He's straight and I can watch *SATC* with him. It's like a guy having a girl that you can have sex with, and you watch *Sports Center* before you go to bed, you know? To me, that's kind of like music to my ears. A guy saying, hey let's watch *SATC*. That's kind of like music to her ears.

To this day, he remains a steadfast fan and continues to encourage his male friends to have an open mind and watch the series. His favorite character, and "idol," is Big.

### ***Friendship, Queering the Family***

The thematic emphasis on friendship topped the list of what fans liked most about *SATC*. The unbreakable bond shared by the protagonists was often equated with "sisterhood" and "family." They were there for each other through thick and thin, despite their differences in options and lifestyles. These women made time for each other and

loved each other unconditionally. They prioritized their friendship over relationships with men. In the series, there were very few references to the protagonists' biological family members. In times of despair and celebration, whether it was going through a divorce or bringing a baby into the world, the women of *SATC* were each other's "family of choice."

They could always count on each other even when they did not agree with each other, which was quite often. For Charlie, a 30-year-old Asian American female, the theme of friendship deeply resonated with her:

> I liked how they came together when one of them was in trouble no matter what it was. Whether it was Miranda struggling about whether to have an abortion, even though Charlotte didn't agree with it. Charlotte ultimately supported Miranda despite her personal beliefs, and that is what a real friend is.

Charlie, a pro-choice practicing Catholic, pointed out that real friends accept one another even when their belief systems are not aligned. In this example, abortion, a still heavily contested issue in contemporary American society, was used to illustrate that friends do not have to agree ideologically to show support for one another's decision.

Patty, a 40-year-old Asian American female, also appreciated the significance of friendship as a major theme in the series:

> There's obviously all the fun stuff, you know? The fashions, and all the wonderful places. But at the heart of it, I *really* liked the relationship of the four women. It's like when you have your girlfriends, you can get through a lot of things, you know? They were always there for each other, through the good times and the bad.

Again, girlfriends were perceived as permanent fixtures that will be there for each other no matter what. She and her husband share a lot of common interests, but she explained to me how conversations with him are qualitatively different from those she has with her

girlfriends. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, Patty was thankful for having a husband she could watch the movie with. He also enjoyed the film.

### ***Sex and Subjectivity***

Female subjectivity, or the "female point of view," was another aspect fans liked about the series. Fans were thrilled to follow a series that was *about* women and how they negotiate contemporary gender roles, when it came to relationships, sex, and work. In addition, the total acceptance and unconditional love that the protagonists shared with one another set a foundation conducive for opening up honest conversations about taboo topics, especially those related to challenging dominant narratives about marriage and female sexual agency. The series grappled with a diverse set of topics, including sexual practices, sexually transmitted diseases, infertility, and abortion. Since the protagonists represented varying female perspectives, which ranged from conservative to more progressive, the series covered a smorgasbord of discourses related to sexual discourse. For example, Charlotte often espoused more conservative ideas about the sanctity of sexual intercourse, while Samantha and Miranda held more pro-sex subjectivities. Carrie was considered "middle-of-the-road." Sara, having worked in the entertainment industry, stressed the significance of *SATC* starting off at a cable station, like HBO, instead of one of the broadcast networks:

> I like the fact that it [HBO] gave me characters that weren't censored by network television. Um, having it on cable gave them so much more freedom, and it wasn't even just the sex. It was the heartbreak. It opened up a lot of avenues for humor and serious discussion as well.

Fans shared some of their favorite comedic moments from *SATC*, including episodes with Samantha's crazy sexual antics to more specific dialogues about "funky spunk" (i.e. foul-

tasting sperm), the work involved to give a good "blow job," and "Mr. Pussy," a character known for his cunnilingus skills. More often, fans talked about how the series dealt tactfully with more serious topics, like breast cancer, infertility, and abortion, in a lighthearted fashion.

Abortion was a topic that fans brought up in several interviews. They expressed mixed responses, from one end to the other. Jane was relieved that Miranda ultimately chose not to get an abortion, opting to raise a child on her own even though she was not in a committed relationship at the time. Although Jane did not agree with her church's position that female sexuality should be repressed, she stood firm with her church's stance on abortion. Sara felt otherwise. She did not see what the big deal was about abortion:

> When Miranda found out she was pregnant, along with 90% of everyone, I am just like, *big deal,* get an abortion. Even given her *so-called* medical history and the idea that she might not have been able to have a child, that wouldn't have deterred me one bit. But then, kind of going through that pregnancy with her and the horrifying aspects of pregnancy and having to pee every five minutes, it sort of brought it home in a way that no other character in television had before.

Sara found the abortion debate tedious, and felt that most women would agree with her. For her, the discourses about pregnancy were more groundbreaking in their honest depictions of how women really experience pregnancy. Meanwhile, Dawn, a 32-year-old Black female, would have liked the series to grapple more with the topic of abortion. She felt that the series could have delved deeper by addressing how the protagonists dealt with their own past experiences with abortion. In her words, "they never put it out there that the girls had abortions, and never wrapped it up."

For some fans, the open conversations about sex were a major attraction to the series. Many female fans talked about never having had a talk about the "birds and the bees" with their parents, and that sex is still a taboo topic at home for many of them. Dawn shared with me:

> It was the way they [the protagonists] could talk to each other. I mean, like, I was in college when the show premiered. I am a late bloomer so I was really just getting into sex myself and I couldn't talk to my mom. There were four different opinions you could relate to, and here they are just bouncing around ideas.

A few fans talked about how their mothers openly discouraged them from watching the show. Some mothers criticized the protagonists for being "sluts" and "whores." For these fans, comments like those served as cues that their mothers were not open to engaging in open discussions about their own sexual curiosities and experiences. Baylor, a 23-year-old white female, discussed how her mother's disapproval for the series put a strain in her ability to have an honest dialogue about sex with her mother:

> When I started having my own sexual experiences and I wanted to talk to somebody about it, I knew my mom wouldn't really approve. And then I started talking about it to girlfriends, and I realized, this really *should* be the norm. You *should* be able to talk about it cause when it's such a taboo subject, it's just too restrictive. I feel especially as a young girl, you're so conflicted morally and trying to find out what's right. I feel like you really need to be able to talk to somebody about it. Hopefully you'll be able to talk to your friends.

Luckily, most of my female fans with disapproving mothers found solace in watching the series and being able to discuss their sex lives with their friends. Many of them, however, reported that they wish they could have more open conversations about sex with their mothers, too.

In general, fans appreciated that the series was written to a wide variety of audiences and that it was easy to identify with the characters or the situations they faced.

They characterized the series as realistic, even if certain circumstances were exaggerated at times for entertainment value. In addition, because multiple perspectives were presented, fans were exposed to alternative viewpoints that they may not originally have considered. This was especially true for the younger viewers that I interviewed who were newer to the dating scene and tended to be less sexually experienced.

Fans also used the word *empowering* to describe how they felt about the series, especially with regards to gender and sexual agency. Some fans expressed their frustrations with the double standards that still exist in society despite living in a more egalitarian time period. Michelle specifically addressed these points:

> I think it [*SATC*] opened up my mind a little bit. I don't think I'd ever do some of the stuff that they did, but I can at least respect people that do decide to make those choices. Boys call girls sluts that decide to have one night stands, and I don't think that's right. I think it kind of leveled the playing field a little bit. I think as far as sexuality, I think that it empowers women not to feel bad. If it makes you happy and you want to do it, then I don't see a problem with it.

For many of the fans I interviewed, female subjectivity and sexual agency were linked to a sense of empowerment. This is a reminder that gender serves as a structure of power, and the important role of individual agency in dismantling it.

Several fans commented that they wished more men would watch the series so they could understand how women feel about sex and relationships. Maggie adamantly believed "it would be beneficial for most guys to see the show. They have scenarios that my friends have all been through. This is what it's like when girls are actually honest about it." She went on to say that she hoped more men would not "make an assumption that women are all alike." Eva hoped that men could learn that "women can take care of themselves. And with the *right* person, you rely on each other. You can need them, too,

but you can also take care of yourself." In her twenties, Eva quickly learned to take care of herself, as well as her recently widowed mother who was a stay-at-home mom and could not fend for herself. Eva is currently married to a man "she loves to death," but does not think it is necessary for women to get married these days.

Some fans actively encouraged the men in their lives to watch the series. Jane purchased a DVD of the movie to send to her ex-boyfriend. She planned to include notes on the film where she wanted him to pay special attention. In particular, she wanted him to see how trust and compromise were important factors in a healthy relationship. On the other hand, Erica, a 25-year-old Latina, was unsuccessful in her attempt to convince her boyfriend to watch an episode with her. He dismissed the show, claiming "it's just for broads." He further challenged her by saying "you are going to base your life on these old women that never got married?" Erica spoke to me about her constant need to defend the show to him. She believed "if guys watched it, they would get women more. Like they should, but they probably won't." Based on my interview with her, it seemed highly unlikely that her boyfriend would sit down to watch an episode with her, although it would make her very happy.

However, Ethan articulated that it was merely a matter of time before more men would watch the show:

> Guys my age, now that I associate with, are a little bit more secure and less homophobic, you know? More open, especially my friends. I mean, a lot of guys still wouldn't watch the show even not being insecure, homophobic, just because it's not an interest to them.

In his opinion, it was men's insecurity about themselves that prevented them from having an open mind to watch the series. Ethan was not shy to reiterate how much he loved

watching *SATC*. He found the series intriguing because it was "the first time there has ever been a series that shows *women* talking about sex, and not men." He told me how it helped him see how "girls" think.

### ***Feminist Archetypes***

*SATC* featured an ensemble cast of four female best friends with professional jobs that afford them a lifestyle beyond the reach of most Americans, regardless of gender. These women are in their 30s and 40s, and represent the beneficiaries of the second-wave feminist movement, which opened up opportunities for women to pursue higher education and careers that were not readily accessible for the previous generation of women. For many working-class women and women of color, questions of access remain to be resolved. The narrator of the series, Carrie Bradshaw, is the fashionably eccentric sex columnist with a fetish for shoes. Charlotte York is the art gallery manager, better known for her optimistic search for Prince Charming. Samantha Jones is the self-employed publicist with an insatiable appetite for sex. Miranda Hobbes is the career-driven attorney with a no-frills attitude towards life. By the end of the series, these lines get blurred, and all four women end up in stable relationships despite their initial propensity or aversion to being in one. Two of them, Miranda and Charlotte, have children with their committed partners, albeit in unconventional ways. Miranda accidentally "gets knocked up" despite having a lazy ovary and having "pity sex" with her ex-boyfriend with "one ball." For Charlotte, she waits to have sex with her first husband until the eve of her wedding when she learns he has problems "getting it up." She later learns that she is also reproductively challenged and their picture perfect

marriage ends in divorce. Charlotte eventually remarries. She and her second husband adopt a newborn girl from China.

In order to assess what fans thought about contemporary gender roles and feminism, I asked them to tell me about their favorite characters. This was not an easy question for many fans. About half the fans liked the characters more or less equally and could not imagine having to choose one. Zoey, a 36-year-old Latina, loved them all because "I think every women can identify with each one. I see myself in every single one of them. There is a little bit of the characters in each of us." Similarly, Jenn, a 38-year-old white female sees all four characters as "representing a complete woman." In general, fans *related* to most of the characters to varying degrees, but Carrie and Samantha were by the far the fans' *favorite* characters. Charlotte was a distant third. Miranda was least mentioned as their favorite character. I explore more fully their reactions to each of the main characters below.

*Carrie: The Post-feminist Mess*

Carrie Bradshaw is the central character in the series. Fans described her as "creative," "neurotic," and "real." Since female friendship and subjectivity were what fans found most appealing about the series, it is not surprising that Carrie, the diagetic narrator and the glue that kept the women together, was identified as one of the most popular characters. Sasha, a 27-year-old multiracial female, loved that "she's honest, and she's *flawed.* She's not perfect, and she's not afraid to admit that." Many fans found her imperfections to be an endearing, rather than an unattractive quality about her. Additionally, fans forgave Carrie for her excessive shopping habits, which did not bode

well for her since she seemed to have more money problems than the other women. In this sense, women seemed to relate to Carrie's intermittent financial vulnerability and how it conflicts with her love for fashion and obsession for shopping. Other fans liked that she was not conventionally attractive, especially in contrast to her nemesis, Natasha, the 5'11" classic beauty that Big marries to Carrie's dismay. Speaking to this, Selena, a 25-year-old Latina, commented: "She's not like the most beautiful girl in Hollywood. There is something unique about her. Like a lot of people don't think she is pretty, and I find her so pretty just because she's so different from other people." For fans of Carrie, it was the flaws and imperfections that made her an interestingly complex character. Compared to the other women, she was financially insecure, made poor dating choices, and was not stunningly gorgeous. In a time when women are said to "have it all" in terms of equality and opportunity, Carrie made a lot of bad choices and was a post-feminist mess. She was far from perfect, but ironically, that is what made her character easy to identify with and a favorite among fans of the series.

*Samantha: The New Feminist*

Unlike Carrie's character, fans loved Samantha, despite being unable to identify with her. The words most often used to describe her included "confident," "open," and "sexually free." Grace, a 29-year-old Asian American, looked to her as "a *new* sort of feminist who knows what she wants and she goes after it without apologies, without fear, without doubt. She seems so strong." Samantha's traits were identified as those embodied by a feminist, but not in the stereotypical way in which the mass media often constructs feminists to be sexually frigid or lesbian. Samantha was considered a "new" type of

feminist, one that puts sex out there. Her confidence stemmed from owning (and flaunting) her sexuality rather than having it controlled by the men in her life, a direct challenge to the gendered, heteronormative norms that structure sexuality in our society. For these reasons, Charlie loved Samantha for challenging the status quo. She talked to me about attending Catholic school her entire life and growing up in a very conservative environment that emphasized abstinence:

> I was told you can't have sex until you're married. I don't *disagree* with it, but I *appreciated* Samantha the most because she did things with no regard of what people thought of her, and she would just tell them to f*ck off if they didn't like it. I admired that because most women wouldn't. Most women would conform to what society thinks is normal or correct.

Samantha was a refreshing character, and fans looked forward to watching her confront societal norms and pressures, especially the sexual double standard. However, because Samantha was larger than life, certain fans considered her to be an unrealistic character. Kelley articulated that "a lot of girls want to vicariously live through her. I think a lot of women, they play like they are her, but I don't think a lot of them are as open as she is. So she kind of, like, represents a type of fantasy." Looking at it from this perspective, Samantha represents a potential model for which women could learn to embrace sexuality in their own lives, or at least imagine it.

Related to this, other fans revealed the voyeuristic pleasure they received from watching Samantha in her vividly animated sex scenes. Lexie, a 31-year-old white female, was one of them:

> I think voyeuristic is the right word. But it's like I am watching something I would never do, but I would love to do. So I really like her because she was just so sexually open, and that was really cool. Samantha is who I would want to be, but I am not.

A few fans even mentioned how their male partners loved Samantha's character and enjoyed watching her outrageous sex scenes. Anne's husband was one of them.

*Charlotte: The Anti-Feminist*

Charlotte was a distant third in terms of being identified as a favorite character in the series. Her fans described her as "prissy," "romantic," and "naïve." Fans loved her optimistic outlook on life and commitment to getting married and having children. Kate, a 31-year-old white female liked that "she always seemed so surprised by life. She doesn't seem the type to be disappointed or easily let down." Along the same vein, Erica spoke to me at length about how she identified with the romantic side in Charlotte. Her friends sometimes accuse her of being too naïve, but she does not mind being labeled a "hopeless romantic."

On the other hand, Ethan liked Charlotte better than the three other protagonists for different reasons. He does not consider himself a naïve romantic, but does find those features to be a desirable quality in a woman. He liked her the best because she is the kind of girl he finds physically attractive and easy to control in a relationship. Ethan goes on to say his ideal woman is like Charlotte, "Someone who is dependent. Kind of goofy. *Very* pretty. Classy. And kind of naïve." Although Ethan expressed he is not in a rush to get married, if he did, it would be with someone like Charlotte, someone who would prioritize a family over career. His perfect woman would look forward to being a nurturing stay-at-home mom. Of the four characters, fans had the most varied responses about her Charlotte, ranging from being a "sweetheart" to an "anti-feminist."

*Miranda: The Feminist*

Miranda was the least popular character of the four women. The adjectives "independent," "strong," and "hard-working" were commonly used to describe her. Compared to the other protagonists, she spent more time at work or talking to her friends about it. Sometimes it was about her frustrations being taken seriously in a male-dominated industry or creatively figuring out ways to juggle being a single mom and an overworked partner-track attorney. Other times, she dealt with how her work impinged on her dating and sex life. Maggie defended Miranda for her many virtues: "Miranda is not a popular one, but I *really* like Miranda. She's a *really* good friend. Um, she's a *very* strong woman, and she is *totally* okay being by herself." Other fans admired her for taking the responsibility to be a single mom.

Feminism mainly came up in my conversations with fans about Miranda. Gisele, a 30-year-old Latina, commented, "I like Miranda the best because she doesn't give a shit. She's a total feminist." Although a few fans pointed to the link between the sexual revolution and the feminist movement as a positive change for women, not all fans associated feminism as a positive thing. Fans often linked feminism with women taking on masculine roles, such as a commitment to a career or possessing a rational personality, while abandoning roles perceived as feminine, such as wanting to get married and raise children. My discussions with fans revealed the ambivalences and confusion most fans felt about feminism in contemporary society. For the most part, fans thought feminism was a desirable goal, as long as it was not "over the top." Paul, a 40-year-old male, shared his thoughts about Miranda's feminist implications:

> I didn't like her character at times. She was *too* hard. She was, I think, I wanna say feminist? But I know that's not right. But let's just say for the sake of conversation, feminism to the extreme. To *some* extreme. Or, the independent woman, cause it's not feminism? Independent woman to the extreme. Once in a while, you have to show some vulnerability. She did not want to show that vulnerability. Every once in a while she did, and that's when you liked her.

Several fans were turned off by her "independent," "dominant," and "tough" persona, characteristics they attributed her feminist proclivities. Although she had her share of fans, many fans were turned off by these characteristics in a woman. Ethan flat out stated, "she's the type of girl I kind of despise. And that's a double standard. More of like that masculine, career-driven, smart, but dominant female." If Miranda were born a man in our society, these would be considered desirable qualities. However, being a born a woman, these qualities made her a "bitch" in the eyes of some fans.

As such, Miranda was the character that fans liked least. These fans articulated that she was "too strong," "too independent," and "bitchy." Rachel, a 35-year-old Asian American, described her in the following manner: "She's just a bitch, but I think she means well. She's just super harsh. I really don't blame Steve for cheating on her." Fans also talked about her lackluster appearance, whether it was critiquing her "butch" hairstyle or fashion choices, especially in the earlier seasons. Fans liked her in the later seasons when she grew out her hair and dressed more feminine.

### ***Masculinities***

The majority of fans, including men, thought depictions of men were varied enough to be "fair," "realistic," and "accurate." Most fans recognized that men were secondary characters that "just kind of float in and out." Some fans used terms, such as "eye candy," "window dressing," and "accessories," to describe the men in the series.

Other fans made it a point to distinguish that a series about independent women did not automatically mean it was a show about bashing men. Kira, a 28-year-old single female, reflected:

> There was such a wide range from the nice guys to the bad boys to the mommy issues. There was always a man that had an issue that was talked about. It wasn't a show about bashing men. It was about women, and so it's like we as women make mistakes, too.

Kira mentions the wide diversity of men portrayed in the series. Although men were often the object of critique by the women in the series, the flaws and imperfections of women were also central to the storylines. For her, the series was less about individual character flaws, and more about making relationships work. Likewise, Carine does not believe in the idea of a perfect person: "Charlotte is looking for the ideal man, and every time she found someone, it turns out there is something wrong with him. Maybe the idea is not to look for them. They don't exist in reality. And there's no ideal woman."

Although most fans would agree that an ideal man (or woman) do not exist, the faces of fans lit up when they were asked to speak about their favorite male characters. Four men were consistently mentioned: Aidan, Big, Steve, and Stanford. To be fair, these characters had better developed storylines and more airtime than most of the other male characters. The first three men were involved in long-term relationships with two of the protagonists, and Stanford was Carrie's reliable gay best friend.

*Aidan: The Perfect Boyfriend*

Aidan Shaw was the rugged, yet sensitive, furniture designer that Carrie dated soon after her flame, Big, ended up marrying a woman he had met during a business trip in Paris. Words like "hardworking," "sensitive," and "easy-going" permeated my

discussions about Aidan. Several fans referred to him as the “perfect” boyfriend, a word that was not used to describe the other characters, male or female. A few fans qualified that statement by saying that although he was the better boyfriend, Carrie and Big belonged together. Unlike Big, Aidan was committed to the idea of spending the rest of his life with Carrie.

Fans honed in on his nuanced combination of masculine and feminine traits that made him a desirable partner. He embraced his feminine side, often being the more nurturing partner in the relationship. He was physically and emotionally affectionate, was seen preparing meals in the kitchen for her, and was a good listener. On the other hand, he enjoyed camping, playing with his dog, and performing manual labor. Numerous fans were impressed with his ability to “fix” and “make” things, whether it was remodeling Carrie’s apartment, or crafting custom piece furniture, which is how he earned a living. These fans wished men were more like Aidan, someone who does “manly” things, but is emotionally available and not afraid to be in a committed relationship.

*Carrie’s “Big” Love*

Big was the evasive real estate tycoon best known for toying with Carrie’s heart with his commitment phobic behaviors. Words like “handsome,” “charismatic,” and “smooth” dominated my discussions about him. Big and Carrie shared an undeniable chemistry. Many fans cheered on the sidelines waiting for him to finally commit to her. Unlike Aidan, he did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and there was a lot of mystery to his character. Sara speaks about this mystery, “He was *definitely* the sexiest, and there was the whole mysterious aspect about *who* he was. What is his *real* name, what does he

do, *how* rich he is?" Viewers of the show did not learn his actual name, John James Preston, until the final minutes of the series finale when his name unexpectedly appears as an incoming call on Carrie's cell phone.

Big's wealth afforded him an extravagant lifestyle and participation in elite social circles. He did not suffer a shortage of attractive socialites to date and was often seen being driven around town in a black tinted town car with his own personal driver. He was emotionally unavailable, and when it came to Carrie, he often acted selfishly. His needs always came before hers. Although Big possessed a lot of undesirable qualities, fans forgave him when he finally committed to Carrie in the series finale when he tells her she is "the one" on a bridge in Paris. Although both Carrie and Big were perceived as imperfect people, fans felt they were the perfect couple.

*Steve: The "Real" Guy*

Steve was the slightly immature, kind-hearted bartender that fell in love with Miranda. Adjectives like "honest," "sweet," and "real" were used to characterize him. Miranda met Steve at the bar where he worked. What was supposed to be a one-night stand ended up being a long-term relationship through Steve's persistence. In this relationship, Miranda was the breadwinner, which caused unexpected problems for them. Making matters worse, she had an unplanned pregnancy while they were broken up. They eventually got back together and married in a "no-frills" wedding ceremony in a community garden walking distance from their apartment. Malia, a 23-year-old multiracial female, described him this way: "He just has a good personality. He tries hard

to keep everything mellow. He did what he had to do, instead of bailing out on her when she was pregnant. He stuck around. He always puts in the extra effort."

Steve was one of the few characters that did not have a lot of disposable income. He dressed modestly and lived in an apartment that Miranda found disturbingly inadequate. Although he lacked the financial stability (or excess) and prestige shared by many of the other male characters on the series, fans did not care. In fact, fans liked that he was paired with Miranda because she was *too* driven. Kate explained: "I *love* Steve. You know, cause he was a 'real' guy, and I like that he brought Miranda down." Instead of blaming Steve for having limited financial resources, fans were more likely to chastise Miranda for being unfair to him, working too much, and making an issue out of money.

*Masculinities Gone Wrong*

Jack Berger and Trey McDougall were the fan's least favorite male characters in the series. They began as promising characters, or "good catches." However, their downfall was the way in which their insecurities seeped into their relationships with Carrie and Charlotte, respectively. Berger was a Pulitzer Award-winning novelist best known for breaking up with Carrie on a "post-it" note. Fans were annoyed that Berger was threatened by Carrie's success when she received her first book deal. Instead of sharing in her sense of accomplishment, he became petty and acted increasingly insecure. Sandra called him out for being a "wuss with his whole, like, I can't be with you 'cause you're too successful. I'd be like, bring home the bacon, mama!" Fans found it upsetting that despite having a lot in common with Carrie, Berger could not handle being in a relationship with a woman writer who was more successful than he was.

Unlike Berger, Trey was the established breadwinner in his relationship with Charlotte. He was a respected doctor with family pedigree, and Charlotte decided to quit her job at the gallery to become a full-time housewife. Charlotte considered him to be her Prince Charming, until the eve of their wedding day when she has sex with him for the first time. She discovers he has problems "getting it up," which would later cause problems in their marriage. Although some fans could forgive him for not being sexually potent, most could not accept that he was a "momma's boy." This term was most often used to describe him in a pejorative fashion. Patty expressed to me, "He represented everything I can't stand in a guy. Like the 'momma's boy' thing. On the exterior, he seemed so perfect, when in fact, he was just a mess in all aspects of his life." In general, fans found his unusually close and subservient relationship with his mother troublesome. Moreover, they thought a real man should be able to stand up to his mother.

### *Queer Representations*

Stanford, and to a lesser degree Anthony, also topped the list of favorite male characters. They were considered "funny" and "loyal." Fans loved that they were good friends to the protagonists, and for the most part, considered them as positive representations of the gay community. Thad, a 37-year-old multiracial male, was a big fan of Stanford:

> I really liked Stanford. Being gay I could relate to his struggles of trying to find, you know, a boyfriend, and dating in the city. Granted he is in New York City and I'm in LA. It's really hard to meet quality people. You know, people who are not shallow and superficial.

According to Thad, Stanford was a likeable and realistic character.

Nina, a 47-year-old white female, talked to me about the scene when Anthony helps Charlotte find a wedding dress: "It's like, who *wouldn't* want some *badass* Italian Jewish mother taking care of you?" It was clear that many fans loved that Stanford and Anthony had developed personalities and close relationships with the protagonists. Although their characters were in supporting roles, they were not marginalized as they often are on other shows.

Regardless of their sexual orientation, most of the fans I interviewed acknowledged that although gays were stereotyped on *SATC,* the portrayals were honest and positive. No one felt offended by the way gays were represented, although some heterosexual viewers were more critical of their portrayal. Thad commented how it was groundbreaking to incorporate gay characters in a straight series:

> The show started before *Queer as Folk* and definitely before *The L Word*. Um, those shows are primarily, solely, fixated on gay characters. *SATC* was, I think, pretty groundbreaking too. They had storylines, and um, not as prevalent, but you know Stanford was a pretty featured supporting character and Samantha had her lesbian relationship in the fourth season.[9]

From Paul's perspective, a 40-year-old Latino, Stanford and Anthony were very realistic characters, too:

> Stanford, you know, we have those characters. *Those* are us, *that's* us. You know, and we have, the loud one, the Italian guy. We have him. We come in all colors. I can't complain. It was handled the way it should be handled, whereas a show like *Will and Grace* made it all about that.[10]

[9] *Queer as Folk* (2000-05) and *The L Word (*2004-09) followed the lives of a group of LGBT characters on Showtime.

[10] *Will and Grace* (1998-06) features a gay man that lives with his best friend, a Jewish woman.

Some fans not only applauded the inclusion of Stanford and Anthony as positive recurring gay characters, but believed *SATC* helps to encourage gay tolerance in society. William spoke to me about his own perspective of these characters:

> It portrays them as human with emotions and feelings just like everyone else. I think that's good for people to see because I think it helps with my own perception of gay men. Maybe growing up, I was a little less tolerant than I am now, but now I don't care about sexual orientation. And I've been hit on by guys, and I think it's kind of flattering.

William felt that he benefitted from watching well-developed gay characters on television as it challenged him to think beyond the stereotypes of gays produced in mainstream media.

Ironically, it was fans that identified as heterosexual who were more critical about the stereotypical representations of gay men because of their limited range of images. For example, Baylor did not particularly like the way that gay people were stereotyped as flamboyant: "I've had a lot of gay friends, and sometimes there's flamboyant ones, but a lot of the time, they're really not and you wouldn't even know that they're gay." Over all, gay fans were more accepting of the portrayal of gays compared to heterosexual fans. This may be due in part to the "gay sensibilities" of the *SATC* producer, Michael Patrick King, and the fact that gays are still often misrepresented, or underrepresented in television.

### ***Consumerist Fantasies***

The fashion displayed by the characters was a seductive draw to the series for many fans. Patricia Fields became a household name as the costume designer and stylist for the series. The way she dressed the protagonists in a blend of vintage pieces with

contemporary haute couture reflected the distinct personalities of each character. Fans especially enjoyed watching Carrie parade around town in her quirky outfits. For Olivia, a 56-year-old woman, *SATC* was pure fantasy and she enjoyed watching Sarah Jessica Parker in her visually stunning outfits. As a lesbian, Olivia shared with me that she could not relate to any of the characters, but she indeed had a long-time crush on Sarah Jessica Parker. Although a few other fans thought the series was unrealistic, most fans thought the series was very realistic and relatable. Nearly all the fans I interviewed were able to relate to at least one of the characters. In a few instances, fans even identified with characters across gender, but more typically they identified with those of the same gender.

Most fans enjoyed watching what the women wore as much as they appreciated the clever and witty storylines. However, they found the extravagant lifestyle to be the most unrealistic aspect about *SATC*. Some fans even stated that the excessive consumption and materialism is what they liked least about the series. They realized it was for entertainment value, but rarely related to the lavish lifestyles. Speaking to this, Anne tells me:

> The one problem I've always had with the show is that the four women live in New York, where they have, it seems like, unlimited- I mean, Carrie had some problems with cash, I remember, but they all just seemed to have this money, and you know, they lead these lifestyles and sport these clothes and stuff, sometimes I couldn't relate to that.

Fans talked about how their financial situations were markedly different than those exhibited by the *SATC* characters. Several of them remarked that only the "upper-class" was shown, while working and middle-class folks were largely invisible. Steve Brady

was the only exception. Sandra brought up that, “You didn’t really see any poverty. You didn’t see people struggling to pay bills, or put food on the table. You saw Big, the really well to do. That’s not necessarily realistic.”

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The emphasis on female friendship and subjectivity were the cornerstones of the appeal of *SATC*. Although some watched *SATC* on dates, most fans preferred watching the episodes on television or the film collectively, especially with other female friends. Like other examples of feminine genre, *SATC* invited a participatory connection with other people (Allen 1992, Flitterman-Lewis 1983). *SATC* was a bona fide girl-bonding activity, whether it was with members of a sorority house or fellow co-workers. Most fans related to at least one if not all of the protagonists to some degree, especially with their experiences related to dating, sex, and married life. Moreover, they found the narratives highly accessible because of its female subjectivity, a finding consistent with other scholars who have examined feminine texts (Ang 1985; Brunsdon 1995; Geraghty 1991; Modleski 1984). In addition, the television programs often became a part of their general discourse outside the home (Hobson 1990). They did not, however, buy into the consumerist mentality. Fans considered the fashion and shopping as fantasy and entertainment. Many fans understood that the series was not a commentary about social class. As unattainable as the *SATC* lifestyle is for most people, fans would not have the series any other way.

Some informants felt that *SATC* could be used as an educational resource. Fans mentioned that men could learn more about how women think if they were to watch the

series. Fans defended the show from being called a "male-bashing" series and viewed the wide diversity of masculinities presented as honest and fair. Most fans appreciated masculinities which embraced feminine energies, such as those espoused by characters like Steve and Aidan. This is in tune with how Radway's romance readers associated heroes as men who were sensitive and emotionally available, in contrast to their husbands who were too rigid. On the other hand, Berger was considered an unappealing partner because he could not handle Carrie being a more successful writer than himself (even if only for the time being). Fans also did not care that Trey was a successful, attractive doctor. His masculinity was questioned because of his unusually close relationship with his mother. My informants judged male characters in the series for their personality, not their financial success.  Likewise, Miranda was looked down upon for her overemphasis on her career. Others felt that the series promoted tolerance of gays in our society because of the positive portrayals of gays, especially Stanford and Anthony. Surprisingly, gay fans were more accepting of queer representations, compared to scholars like Brasfield (2006) who argue that *SATC* reinforces heteronormativity.

Although much of the academic discourse about the series points to questions of its post-feminist qualities, my data suggest that the public discourse generated by fans reveals that most women (and some men) have not abandoned feminist principles, in spite of not identifying as a feminist. In contemporary times, women experience a post-feminist paradox that requires the difficult negotiation of being female, feminist, and feminine (see Mosely and Read 2002). What is sure is that my fans were well-aware of the persistence of gender inequality. For example, Carine spoke about the gendered

double standard commonplace in Armenia where she grew up and did not think she would identify with the four female American protagonists in the series because they were “liberated.” After watching a few episodes, she realized that she shared similar experiences to American women. They were not as free as she thought. In order to better understand how one’s race affects the way fans interpret the series, the next chapter is devoted to questions of whiteness, racial representations, and how fans “see” race.

## Chapter 4

## "Seeing" Race

The four privileged protagonists of *SATC* lived, worked, and played in New York City, one of the world's most racially and ethnically diverse cities. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau Report, 44.7% of New York City residents were white, 26.6% Black, 9.8% Asian, and 27% Latino. Moreover, 35% were foreign-born.[11] Even though racial minorities are the numerical majority in NYC, they were virtually absent in the series. The women of *SATC* spent a lot of time socializing outside their homes, but rarely mingled with or dated people of color. Despite this academic scrutiny of the series' whiteness, fans of all races loved the series. However, it would be remiss to overlook the significance of race in popular culture merely because fans across races enjoyed the series.

To put things into perspective, *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), another popular "white" sitcom that takes place in Manhattan, was met with negative attention while in syndication, for the racist tirade given by one of their actors, Michael Richards, during a stand-up comedy performance at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles on November 17, 2006. Better known as Kramer, Richards was condemned by the California and Hollywood chapter of the NAACP.[12] Ten days later, he offered an apology via satellite on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. As of August 16, 2010, over 792,570 viewers have watched the video of this performance posted on youtube.com three years ago, and

[11] Latinos may be of any race and are also included in the other racial categories, which is why the total comes to over 100%. Retrieved on July 7, 2010 (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3651000.html).

[12] For more details, the Press Release, dated November 21, 2006, is available on the NAACP website.

generated 7,691 posts (as recent as August 15, 2010). While some users attempted to explain Richards' insensitivity towards Blacks, others called him a hero, and much of the discourse pointed to claims of reverse racism against whites.

In this chapter, I reveal how race as a social location (e.g. white, Latino, Asian, or Black) affects how female fans "*see*" race, and influences their viewpoints about the portrayal of racial minorities in *SATC.* In particular, I want to see how they related to the various white protagonists, and evaluate whether race had a bearing on it. I am also interested in finding out which characters they considered to be "raced," and their thoughts about racial diversity. Moreover, I examine how fans interpreted the few available representations of race and/or race relations, in spite of the overall improved depictions of Blacks in the media since the period of the Civil Rights movement (Grossberg et al. 2006).

### ***Sample***

In order to capture the voice of female fans of *SATC*, I analyzed transcripts from a subset of my total sample. This subset included those that have identified themselves as white, Black, Latina, or Asian women. In doing so, I excluded six interviews with men since there were too few of them in my sample to draw any patterns with respect to race. In addition, I excluded five interviews with women that racially identified as "other" or "multiracial" because they were either racially ambiguous or more likely to pass as white based on their physical appearances. Upon filtering, I identified and selected thirty-one female informants: eleven were white, eight were Asian/Pacific Islander, seven were Latina, and five were Black. The vast majority self-identified as heterosexual, unmarried,

and without children under the age of eighteen living with them.[13] Fans ranged between the ages of 21 to 56, with 32 as the average, or mean. When I asked them about their feminist identification, 55% considered themselves feminists some or most of the time ("part-time" feminists), 26% rarely or never considered themselves feminists ("fem-nots"), and 16% always identified as "feminists." Almost half of the respondents considered themselves politically left, 23% considered themselves centrist, 19% were either unsure or indifferent, and 15% considered themselves politically right. Roughly three-fourths of my respondents earned a minimum of a college degree. On average, the feminists in my sample were more likely to be politically left and/or indifferent, and have completed higher degrees of education compared to "part-time feminists" and "fem-nots."

When considering race, my white respondents averaged 36 years of age, while my non-white respondents averaged 30 years of age. In terms of feminist identification, whites were equally distributed along the spectrum. On the other hand, 65% of non-whites identified as "part-time" feminists, 20% identified as "fem-nots," and 10% identified as feminists. When asked about political orientation, 55% of whites versus 45% of non-whites considered themselves to be "left of center." Non-whites were more likely to consider themselves to be politically indifferent or unsure compared to their white counterparts (25% versus 9%). They were also less likely to be "right of center" (5% v. 15%). With respect to educational attainment, all of my white respondents possessed

[13] Unmarried includes people who are separated, divorced, never-married, and/or single.

either two or four-year college degrees, while my non-white fans varied across the spectrum of educational attainment.

### *Racial Identification and Feminist Archetypes*

Irrespective of racial background, the four protagonists of *SATC* were perceived as realistic characters by most fans. Despite all the protagonists being white, many fans personally identified with the characters or knew of people who were like them, such as their best friend or a sister. Most fans lightheartedly shared stories with me about their own dating and relationship encounters and challenges. Some of those experiences even mirrored the situations faced by the characters, or could have been easily written into the series.

Female fans delighted in the complexity of the characters, while simultaneously acknowledging that each character represented a rigid archetype of womanhood. For that reason, they often identified with a combination of more than one character. Sometimes, they even identified with characters that they did not like as much, or were seemingly opposite characters. For example, Grace (29-year-old Asian) reluctantly admitted to identifying with Carrie, although she disliked many aspects of her personality, including her neurotic narcissism. On the other hand, Baylor (23-year-old white) felt she possessed the confidence of Samantha, while holding on to traditional ideals about the sanctity of marriage like Charlotte. Samantha and Charlotte are arguably the most opposite characters in the series. Eva (50-year-old Latina) linked characters with various life stages. She considers herself more like a Charlotte in terms of how she was raised to have family values, but hopes to become more open-minded and adventurous like Carrie in her

near future. Jenn (38-year-old, white) insisted that women had a little bit of each character in them, to varying degrees. In her case, she identified mostly with Carrie's creativity and Samantha's sexual boldness, but also related to aspects of Miranda and Charlotte.

None of the women of color I interviewed found the "whiteness" of the characters to be problematic. Gisele (30-year-old Latina) articulated, "I never really saw myself out of that. They never really were *just white* women. These four white women were friends and had all these different experiences." Kelley (33 year-old Black) echoed a similar sentiment, "Even though these were all Caucasian women, things that they went through transcended race and culture so that was the thing I loved about the show." For women of color, the complexity of the characters navigating a male-dominated world produced protagonists with whom they could identify because of shared experiences as women, in general.

In terms of character relatability, racial differences among fans emerged. White women identified with three of the four protagonists across the board in relatively equal numbers. The character they least identified with was Charlotte because she was too "prissy" and "conservative." Sara (52-year-old white) was bored with the triteness of Charlotte's domestication and obsession with motherhood, but found "the most fascinating part of her character to be her prudishness, and yet willingness to jump in and be more sexually adventurous like the other women." Nina (47-year-old white) flat out stated that she didn't have "a hidden desire to be taken care of." She could not imagine

that any women could feel that way. For Sara and Nina, Charlotte was far from being representative of a modern woman.

On the contrary, Latina women were overwhelmingly more likely to identify with Charlotte. Erica (25-year-old Latina) was able to relate to all the women, but felt especially in tune with Charlotte's character. She talked about her excitement to finally see depictions of "real" women on television, even though they were all white. She asserted:

> I guarantee you will identify with one of the characters no matter what race you are. I personally have never really identified with a character on TV like I do with them. I'm kinda like a mixture of each girl, but I would say I identify more with Charlotte. Charlotte is all about love and how love will conquer all. I really am like that.

Erica, a high school graduate, mentioned how proud her parents were of her because she has waited to get married and to have children, unlike the other young women around her. Like Charlotte, she fantasizes about her dream wedding, but wants to do things the right way and marry for love. Erica literally wears her heart on her sleeve. When I met her for our interview, the first thing I noticed was the tattoo of a heart etched in her arm.

Among my Asian and Black female respondents, they identified most with Carrie, and to a lesser degree, Charlotte. Fans identified with Carrie for a variety of reasons, ranging from her fashion aesthetic, sense of curiosity, eccentricity, or being "middle of the road." Some of them also related to the relationships she was involved in, whether it was dealing with their own roller coaster relationship with lots of ups and downs like that with "Big" or someone reliable and down-to-earth like "Aidan." Sandra (32-year-old Asian) explained that she is often inspired by Carrie's fashion sensibilities, and considers

herself the "connector" bridging her friends together. She ended up marrying her "Big" and remarked that her girlfriends would "kick his a** if he ever hurt her."

In general, women of color identified the least with Samantha. Many of them could not relate to her "blatant" sexuality. Eva referred to her as a "male female" --- like a man, Samantha had sex without getting emotions involved. Many of my female respondents expressed being open-minded to the idea of women engaging in casual sex without strings attached, but it would not be a personal choice of theirs. Over all, my non-white respondents espoused more conservative ideas about sex and relationships compared to whites, whether it was because of their religious values or family upbringing, especially for more recent racial immigrants. Kayla (30-year-old Asian) summed it up this way:

> I come from like a traditional household and they're like a little bit *hush hush* about sexuality and stuff. A little bit more old-fashioned and it seems Charlotte is kind of like that. I don't identify with Samantha at all. I am old-fashioned.

As much as these fans could not identify with Samantha, they often made it a point to tell me how much they enjoyed her character. Dawn (32-year-old Black) is in awe of her exclaiming, "Samantha is a superhero. She is out of this world!"

### ***Recalling Race***

Talking about race was tricky. Many of my fans pondered for several seconds before formulating a response about how they felt about the portrayal of race and/or race relations in *SATC.* Considering how quickly fans answered most of the other questions posed to them, this question appeared to be more challenging for them. Fans took this question very seriously, taking additional time to reflect and gather the appropriate words

to articulate their thoughts about the treatment of race in the series. Their responses differed across race, and certain themes emerged.

"Whiteness" as a way in which the dominant race is often left unexamined came to the forefront. Before sitting down to speak to me during the interview, many white fans never had reason to reflect about the "whiteness" of the series. They were less likely to have realized that all the protagonists were white, and what this meant, considering these women lived in New York City. For the most part, the lack of racial diversity in *SATC* was a novel and thought-provoking realization raised directly by the question posed to them. I personally witnessed the self-realization as the tone used by people changed. Jenn (38-year-old white) reflected, "Well now that I think about it, most of the people were white. Miranda *was* with the gorgeous hottie. He really cared for her. But her heart was with Steve." Upon reflection, many of my white fans were appalled by the lack of diversity and felt there was no excuse for it, especially in contemporary times. Some insisted that more people of color should be incorporated in order to "add spice" or offer a different perspective.

When whites were able to recall the presence of racial minorities in the series, they were more likely to enumerate "white ethnics," such as Harry (Charlotte's Jewish husband) and Anthony (Charlotte's Italian gay best friend) compared to people of color (e.g. Latino, Blacks, and Asians) as examples of racial minorities. Kate (31-year-old white) was stumped while she was thinking out loud, "Isn't the Jewish guy the only one that was a racial minority on the show? Or *who* is the flaming gay? He's Italian, and

that's not even a racial minority." Generally speaking, very few whites were able to recall the presence of any Asian or Latino characters.

On the other hand, Latina and Asian women expressed more ambivalence about the whiteness of the series compared to all the racial groups, including whites. As racial minorities, these women were not surprised by the lack of racial diversity in the series. Patty (40-year-old Asian) shared her thoughts about being a racial minority and dealing with the whiteness of characters in the mass media:

> It was all mainly about white folks, right? I mean, that's all I saw. And you know, as a minority, you're kind of used to that. Yeah, it wasn't very diverse, that's for sure. And I guess that's why they threw in Jennifer Hudson, but that was not enough.

For Patty, the lack of diversity did not diminish her enjoyment of the series. She was accustomed to watching white-dominated characters in the media. In the above statement, Patty suggested that the addition of one racial minority is "not enough" to create true diversity.

Other Asian and Latina female fans conveyed that the addition of racial minority characters might be disruptive, instead of being useful. Vanesa (34-year-old Latina) was adamant that the series was left perfect "as-is" without additional characters to make it more racially diverse:

> Why am I going to bring in another race or something? It's gonna clash. Just keep it consistent. It is what it is. Anglos, okay. Cool. I mean a Latina or another Black person is gonna keep it off a little. And then Carrie is going to change. A little ethnic here and there. It's not about that.

Vanesa did not see the benefits of making the series more racially diverse. In fact, she was bothered by the way Carrie acted differently, "a little ethnic here and there," in the

presence of Louise, played by African American Jennifer Hudson, in the *SATC* film. For her, *SATC* is about female subjectivity, not racial contrast.

On the other hand, Gisele was quick to express her anger about the lack of diversity in the series as she masterfully recounted all the racial minorities she could come up with:

> I don't think we could walk anywhere in New York and not see a woman of color, but *somehow* they have managed to do that! And the ones I can think of are the angry Black woman, Carrie's assistant in the movie, and Margaret Cho. Oh, and I was like, *of course* there would be these black men dressed up as women giving Samantha attitude.[14]

Gisele was critical about the lack of diversity, and extended her critique to include the marginalization of racial minorities on *SATC.*

Some fans problematized the link between race, gender, and sexuality in the series. Grace was frustrated with the way in which American media continues to sexually objectify Asian women, while racially defining them as passive and subservient.[15] Likewise, Gisele was upset that the only recurring Latina character, Maria Diega Reas, had to be a fiery lesbian that gets romantically involved with Samantha.[16] Speaking to this, Gisele brought up some interesting insights:

> It was interesting that Samantha was gay for a minute with a Latina woman. Why did you have to make her gay? Like, why couldn't she just be successful? Why does she have to be triple times oppressed? She's a woman of color. She's a lesbian. Oh, let's just put everything all in one. And I guess the relationship went

[14] The black men dressed as women was a reference to the transvestites outside of Samantha's apartment in 'Cock A Doodle Do,' 3:48.

[15] In 'The Caste System.' 2:22, Samantha dated a real estate tycoon with an Asian servant, Sum. Jina Oh played her character.

[16] She appears in three episodes, beginning with 'Defining Moments,' 4:51.

> ok until she was breaking the plates. Here is why people see Latina women as passionate and fiery and lesbian. I have an issue with that. Why can't we find a straight woman that can be of color?

Both Grace and Gisele bring to attention that women of color are not only marginalized as racial minorities, but as sexual "others" or objects. This form of "othering" is especially highlighted in contrast to the sexually agentic white protagonists.

Of all the racial groups I interviewed, Latina women were the most cognizant in terms of recollecting the various representations of race, including white ethnics, Latinas, Asians, and Blacks. Latinas were the only racial group to identify Miranda's housekeeper/mother figure, Magda, as a "non-white character," although they did not necessarily remember that she was supposed to be Ukrainian. People identified her as either ambiguously white or Middle Eastern. Magda was played by a Jewish-American actor, Lynn Cohen.

Asian women were also more likely to recall portrayals of raced characters compared to whites, although to a lesser degree than Latinas. Asians were more likely to recollect Asian characters than any other racial groups. Some examples ranged from Charlotte's adopted Asian baby, the most commonly cited example, to Asian-American entertainers making brief cameos in episodes, such as actor, Lucy Liu, and comedian, Margaret Cho. Grace cited the faceless Vietnamese pedicurists and the Asian servant as examples of how Asians are given marginalized roles in the media. Asian fans recalled white ethnic characters as frequently as did whites, but did not recall any Latin@ characters.

Black women were most likely to challenge the whiteness of the series by expressing the importance of the continued attempts at diversity. Dawn remarked, "Throw in some beautiful Asian. Throw in some beautiful chocolate. It doesn't matter. Have some with an accent. I mean this is America. We are all here. A little more diversity." A little later in the interview, she added, "I am not talking Italian or Swedish, but definitely physically different from the girls. Any nationality. It's not important. Black, Asian. Latina. Somebody who is successful like they are. They're equal." Like white fans, Black women wanted to see more people of color in the series. However, Black women explicitly vocalized how diversity could be done without being subject to marginalization. They were adamant that racial minorities should be portrayed in equivalent status as their white counterparts. Speaking to this, Kelley (33-year-old Black) could imagine the *SATC* women having a friend like Jennifer Hudson, but "she would not be the assistant. She would have to be in their friend range, or be well-off." Elle (27-year-old Black) mentioned that her Black friends who do not watch the series would be more likely to watch if "there [was] a recurring role with an African-American character. But it has to be a certain kind of person." Again, Black women liked the idea of adding diversity, but were not satisfied with the mere insertion of a person of color in a tokenized fashion. In general, Black fans primarily remembered seeing Black and white characters, although the notion of increasing diversity was extended to include all people of color, including Asians and Latin@s.

### ***Dreamgirls to Girl Friday***

Michael Patrick King, the producer of the series, purposefully created an African-American character in the anticipated feature film in response to the question posed by Black fans, "Where are the sisters?" Jennifer Hudson, an Academy Award recipient for her supporting role in the film adaptation of a musical Broadway, *Dreamgirls* (2006), and Grammy recipient in 2008 for her self-named album, was selected to play Louise, Carrie Bradshaw's energetic and loyal assistant (i.e. Girl Friday).

White fans often used words like "cute" and "youthful" to describe Louise. Ann (37-year-old white) remarked: "Oh! I liked her. I thought she was cute. And it seems like they maybe put her in there because the women are older, and they wanted someone young and kind of uplifting." Baylor (23-year-old white), a recent college graduate, identified with Louise: "I thought she was really cute. She's sort of like me. Just sort of starting out life, and there were those bags I'd really love to buy, but can't afford. She carried on with that hopeful message because she wanted to find love." Most white women described her to be a likable character and a positive addition to the film, although none expressed wishing to see her in the film sequel.

Latina fans were less satisfied with the addition of Jennifer Hudson in her supporting role as Louise. In Erica's assessment of her role:

> I felt like she was just too *street*. Like, you know what I mean? But, she was *sweet* at the same time. I guess it was kind of cool that she was so *different* than them. She was like them because she was looking for love, just a different situation, different upbringing.

Erica used descriptive phrases like being "too street" to refer to Louise's "working-class" identity, which was a direct contrast from the affluence of *SATC*'s main female

characters. Gisele also mindfully expounded her thoughts about Louise as one of the few racial minorities in the film:

> I saw it as entertainment, so I didn't really critique her. I knew it was important for her character that she was Black. I like that she was smart and grounded. I thought it was interesting that she couldn't afford the bags and had to rent them out. In many ways, that's kind of ghetto. And the fact that Carrie didn't know about it reinforces that it was ghetto.

Like Erica, Gisele employs the vernacular in talking about class difference. She felt it was "ghetto" that Louise had to rent her Louis Vuitton handbag from a website because she could not afford to purchase one.[17] This was in contrast to the protagonists who switched their handbags as often as they did their designer outfits. Many fans made it a point to mention that they were critiquing the marginal role given to Louise's character, and not Jennifer Hudson, the talented musician. Over all, Latina women felt Louise was marginalized because of her differential class standing. Louise's racial difference as a Black woman among a predominantly white cast was rarely mentioned.

Asian informants, like Latinas, also described Louise's character as marginal. They considered her character to be insignificant, and a failed attempt at racial diversity. Rachel expressed her thoughts about Louise:

> She was okay, but it could've been played by anyone else and it would've been fine, too. They finally got some diversity because everyone was white. It's about time they got someone in there with color. I don't know. It didn't really help much though.

Asian women were more likely to discuss and critique Louise's character in terms of racial difference, as opposed to class difference compared to Latinas.

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[17] Bagborroworsteal.com offers designer handbags for rent.

Black women also felt that Louise was a marginal role, but appreciated the attempt at diversity. Dawn articulated that she was a fair addition, but that anyone could have played that role:

> The truth? Don't get it twisted because I am Black. You know, I am glad that there was a diverse person. I just wished they could have become more like friends, but that would have changed the movie. I think they [referring to producers] have always been very good with integrating people and can always do better.

Elle also spoke to the issue of the politics of representation by sharing the discourse about race amongst her Black friends:

> My friends who are African American felt like they [producers] didn't give her character a lot of justice. They felt like, why aren't there any Black characters in *SATC*? I mean, I just take it as more of a global view, like we're all women and that you can't just say because this character was Black, they should have included her more in the story.

Elle spoke to me about how she was able to look beyond her race and enjoy the characters, although she understood why the majority of her Black friends were not satisfied with the lack of diversity and the marginalized roles assigned to Blacks.

### ***"The Hot Black Boyfriend"***

Actor Blair Underwood was cast as Dr. Robert Leeds (referred to as "Robert") in one of the few recurring roles for a person of color in the series.[18] Appearing in five episodes, Robert was introduced in the final season of the series while being interviewed by resident members of Miranda's co-op. Robert's race is immediately implicated in this "white space," an observation which became pronounced only because of his presence as a black man in the building. As the board scrutinizes his application, Miranda "cries

[18] He is introduced in 'A Woman's Right to Shoes,' 6:83.

racism" on his behalf to convince members that there is no need to question his character suggesting it is racist on their part to do so. Miranda does this not because she is an advocate for anti-racism or social justice, but because of her undeniable attraction to him. Robert and Miranda soon become romantically involved. Socioeconomically, they are perfectly matched. They are both successful professionals in their respective fields, medicine and law. This is in contrast to her on-and-off again bartender boyfriend, Steve, whom she shares joint custody for their young child. In her relationship with Steve, she was the breadwinner and negotiating money and power within this gendered dynamics was an underlying problem.

Female fans of all races liked Robert's character. Unlike Steve, he was considered a catch. He was charming, attractive, and a successful doctor. Vanesa remarked that he had "swagger." Adding icing to the cake, he was perceived to be a good boyfriend to Miranda. Maggie (28-year-old white) summed up the sentiments of most other fans,

> I liked that he was very professional. He really seemed to treat her well, too. You know, like giving her *great* tickets to a basketball game to, like, making her meals, and just helping her out. He was just very sweet and polite.

Women liked that Robert took care of Miranda. Like Aidan's character, he had a feminine side. Although he had a professional job, he was comfortable in the kitchen and emotionally available.

Although Robert was well-liked, fans communicated ambivalence when it came to his relationship with Miranda. On one hand, they were pleased to finally see an example of an interracial relationship in the series. Although the protagonists had busy dating lives, they rarely dated, or had sex with men of color. This lack of apparent

diversity was considered to be unrealistic by fans. Several fans were not convinced that they made a good couple, citing that the chemistry was "off." Some fans mentioned that their racial difference was a distraction because of the contrast in their skin color. Sandra (32-year-old Asian) felt they were oddly paired because "she's like, *stark* white and he's like, stark *not white*. You could tell it wasn't her comfort zone. I think she was more exploring. I saw that it wasn't going to last from the beginning." Baylor (23-year-old) felt "it was kind of like a joke how Miranda was watching the show on TV that had an interracial couple." Around the time that Miranda met Robert, Miranda began watching a fictional show on BBC, *Jules and Mimi*, about an inter-racial couple living in London. Jules, an attractive Black man, and Mimi, his white landlady, develop a relationship because they live in the same building. Miranda is addicted to the show and eagerly awaits the episode in which they finally have sex. Many fans, like Baylor, felt that Miranda's obsession with the show made a mockery of her actual relationship with Robert.

On the other hand, many fans wished Robert had a more developed character instead of being fetishized as the "hot black boyfriend." Some women of color mentioned that even with his high socioeconomic status, his character was still reduced to one of a sex object. In Grace's words (29-year-old Asian), "They could probably hold a conversation, but you didn't really see a lot of that. Mostly I remember it was purely sexual and instant gratification. Likewise, Kate (31-year-old white) recalled the nature of Miranda and Robert's relationship, "Now that I think about it, there was a *big* focus on sex, and how *supposedly* they are better. It was a little slanted." For Vanesa (34-year-old

Latina), Robert's blackness had everything to do with his sexuality: "This guy has it going on. He gave it color. Very charismatic. A Latino wouldn't be as intense as a black actor. The whole, masculine body. You know, black men do have nice big body parts." Zoey (36-year-old Latina) felt otherwise, defending his "larger than life" character had nothing to do with being Black:

> Their relationship was just so brief. He didn't really have a lot of lines. The camera is just there to watch him because he is so beautiful and everyone is watching him. You don't really care what he's saying. Maybe if he wasn't so gorgeous. Maybe if he was just more a normal person and actually have a story line. But race was never an issue. I mean he could be green. It doesn't matter, he's just so gorgeous.

Zoey felt Robert was an attractive man, and regardless of his race, he would still be considered gorgeous. Several fans did not like the way Robert was portrayed in his exit episode after Miranda broke up with him to get back together with Steve, the father of her child. Speaking to this, Nina (47-year-old white) articulated:

> I liked him. I mean I didn't like what they did at the end when he was having a three-way with the two girls to show he was over her. It shows a really sleazy side of him. I think his character has more class than that.

For Nina, Robert's last scene was inconsistent with his "classy" and professional persona.

Black women were most pleased with the portrayal of Robert's character. None of them felt he was unfairly reduced to a sex object, nor did they complain that he played a marginal role. Instead, they were delighted to see a physically attractive, successful Black man. Dawn (32-year-old Black) loved that:

> He was such a professional man, and he came to her with open arms, ready to embrace her child. I absolutely loved it, and then, them being interracial just made it better, but I still knew they were doomed to fail. Steve was meant for Miranda.

Betty (29-year-old Black) was also a big fan of his character and thought it was a shame he did not stay on the series longer:

> I don't understand why it ended. I mean I know it ended because she wanted to get back together with Steve, but I'm like, he is so much *hotter* than Steve. I understand being in love, but Blair Underwood was just so hot. He's a good-looking person. A doctor for the Knicks. *Ownage.* He was just a beautiful person.

Of all the men on the series, Robert was consistently described as the most beautiful, attractive, and gorgeous by female fans of all races.

### *"The Obnoxious Black Woman"*

In Season Three, viewers were presented with two African-American characters in one self-contained episode. The protagonists were dining at Fusion, a trendy, high-scale eclectic restaurant. Carrie's friend, Adele Williams, is the celebrity chef of the restaurant. Adele introduces the women to her successful brother, Chivon, a decorated music executive.[19] Samantha and Chivon begin dating, much to Adele's disapproval because Samantha is white. By the end of the episode, Samantha decides to walk away from this relationship. This was one of the few episodes that attempted to deal with race relations as a contemporary issue.

White and Black women were more likely to label Adele's actions as racist. For these women, racism was wrong, regardless of the race of the perpetrator. Dawn applauded the way Samantha handled the situation with his sister. She recalled, "She was like, it has *nothing* to do with race. I love how she flipped it. What's wrong is wrong. It was genius." White and Black fans viewed interracial dating as a sign and measure of

[19] In 'No ifs, Ands, or Buts,' 3:35.

improved race relations, and felt this episode was an unfortunate throwback to the more overtly racist days of the past. Baylor was also bothered by the backwardness of it:

> That just made me angry because there's so many other things in like that we have to deal with. It was just like really? You're really going to be just straight up racist? I feel like we moved beyond that so much in our culture today that it just seemed absurd.

For Sara, this particular episode hit home for her because she once dated a Black man, and his family and friends disapproved of her, too. She says, "Samantha really called it out in public and it was quite real to me. Well, maybe not the extent they got into. An all out catfight." So for Sara, she also faced the obstacles of interracial dating, minus the "catfight."

Asian and Latina women were more likely to offer mixed responses about Samantha's interracial relationship with Chivon. Some fans felt that Adele was certainly racist, but other fans were quick to defend her actions. Stella (22-year-old Asian) empathized with the sister to some degree. She understood the hardships and difficulties of being a racial minority. For her, marrying within one's race is a type of survival technique, which makes it easier to talk about and deal with race and culture in a white dominated society. Similarly, Grace (29-year-old Asian) challenged the idea that race did not matter. She defended Adele by saying, "It was just out of concern for her brother, in addition to her reservations as a black woman. She would experience a lot of different dynamics with white people [than Samantha]." Hence, Stella and Grace offer perspectives to illustrate how race shapes relations that people have with one another. Race does matter in a society where racial parity does not exist.

Gisele extended the discussion of race relations as one limited mostly to interpersonal relationships to include larger structural issues. For her, the real issue at hand is not the individual decision to date someone because of their race, but rather how uneven racial hierarchies are:

> There's not enough educated African American men, and here is this white girl [Samantha] that's trying to take him away from another Black woman. We avoid the question as to why she [Adele] is angry in the first place. It's because the majority of Black men are not graduating, and not going to college, and being incarcerated.

Gisele emphasized that structural factors shaped the reason why Adele did not approve of her brother dating Samantha. It was not about Adele's racist attitudes and actions towards whites, but rather a statement about structural social inequality.

In general, Asian and Latina women were also more likely to consider the representations of Adele and Chivon as racial stereotypes. Selena (25-year-old Latina) thought that particular episode played off heavily on stereotypes about Blacks. She appreciated seeing a woman of color characterized as a successful chef in a high-class restaurant, but did not like what they did with her character. She was bothered by a scene that took place at a hip-hop night club:

> They went to this night club and it was ghetto people. I didn't like that. It could have been in a different better light because she has a career and he's in the music industry. They have money, but it seems like the sister was loud and obnoxious. Even when they have money, you still end up going back to those stereotypes.

Women of color also commented that Chivon's character was sexually fetishized, much in the same manner as Robert's character. They were both viewed as physically attractive, and sexually potent Black men.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

In this chapter, I explored how female fans, white and non-white, felt about the "whiteness" of the series, a major critique by scholars. Keeping in mind the polysemic nature of texts, I was interested in how the social location of fans affected their interpretation of race and race relations in *SATC.* My data suggest that fans belonging to racial minority groups suspended notions of race and identified with at least one of the main characters in the series, even though they were all white. This is similar to the way in which none of Shively's (1992) Native American informants identified with the "Indians" in the show, and a higher percentage of them identified with John Wayne than their white counterparts. For example, Latina women identified most with Charlotte, arguably the WASPyist of them all, and Asian and Black women identified mostly with the central character and narrator, Carrie. White women identified with most of the women across the board. On the other hand, white fans related least to Charlotte, and non-whites least identified with Samantha. This may partially be explained by the more conservative upbringings experienced by women of color.

This chapter also revealed the ways in which informants had a tendency to selectively "see" race. A person's racial background highly influenced what they saw. In general, people were more likely to notice characters of their own race. By this I mean, whites saw other whites, while racial minority groups were better able at recalling characters of their own race (i.e. Latinas recalled other Latinas and Asians recalled other Asians). More broadly speaking, women of color recalled a larger range of racial characters, outside their own group. In addition, whites were more accepting of the

images of non-white characters and felt their characters helped bring diversity to the series, while women of color to varying degrees were more critical of the marginal roles assigned to non-white characters. For example, white informants were more likely to believe that Robert was a positive effort to create diversity in the series, but Asian and Latina fans felt that his Black race was a distraction. Black female fans found it refreshing to see a successful and attractive Black man on television.

As scholars have pointed out, black masculinity is often constructed in contrast to white masculinity, with differential socioeconomic positions. Kimmel (1997:6) asserts that men of color have been "set up as everything that 'straight white men' were not." Brooks (2009) argues that being a black basketball player is associated with black masculinity. Consistent with this argument, the black male character, Robert, was a sports medicine doctor for a real-life basketball team, the Knicks. This gave his character a constructed sense of authenticity as a Black man. Collins (2006:155) upholds that "Black men who earn large salaries but who are deferential and appear to uphold American values are acceptable," but are quick to be held in contempt when operating outside, or challenging those confines. Majors and Billson (1992) describe the "cool pose" as a mechanism for black men to bolster their masculinity to counter the legacy of racism in contemporary society. In Robert's case, he put on a "cool pose," characterized as emotionless, stoic, and unflinching in his last appearance in the series to demonstrate that he was not heartbroken after Miranda breaks up with him.

Collins (2006:151) warns of media's tendency to use "controlling images" of Black masculinity and femininity because "some of these representations of Blackness

become commonsense 'truths.'" She identifies representations of middle-class modern mammies (loyal servants) and educated black bitches (loud and aggressive) as rearticulations of controlling images of black women. In the case of *SATC,* the characters of Jennifer Hudson and Adele Williams characters, respectively, map neatly onto this representation, and more than a handful of women of color were quick to point out the problems with the persisting racial stereotypes of black women in the series and mass media more generally.

## Conclusion

On August 28, 2000, the protagonists of *SATC* graced the cover of *Time* magazine with the heading, "Who Needs a Husband?" The subtext read, "More Women are saying no to marriage and embracing the single life. Are they happy?" I remember this year clearly. I was in a committed relationship with a fiscally conservative, but socially liberal Republican. That was the same year of the Gore/Bush presidential election debacle. Bottom line, he was red. I was blue. Needless to say, we fought a lot. However, he knew me well enough to know that I would enjoy *SATC*, despite my obstinate determination to hate it at first sight. I reluctantly watched an episode with him at his beachside condo. He had cable. I didn't. I wish I could boast it had everything to do with my open mind. Instead, I wanted to confirm my preconceived thoughts about the show. The feminist in me would not allow myself to embrace a show that would mock what I knew about feminism. To my surprise, the show was smart, funny, and engaging. I liked the light-hearted way in which each episode dealt with women's issues. I secretly started looking forward to catching episodes at his place. Three years later, in 2003, he and I went our separate ways. Meanwhile, I was watching the last season of *SATC.* He and I have lost touch since then, but my relationship with the series evolved from one of deep skepticism to being the subject of this dissertation.

*SATC* became an accessible medium to discuss feminist ideas outside the classroom with friends and acquaintances not familiar with or versed in feminism. In the classroom, *SATC* was a pedagogical device to propel discussions about contemporary gender roles and feminism. Based on informal observations and discussions with people

about the series, I found that they believed in the principles of gender equality (i.e. feminism), but often rejected the feminist label. On the other hand, feminist scholars were quick to point out the series as a post-feminist text that reproduced hegemonic narratives and privileged heteronormative whiteness. Meanwhile, Sarah Jessica Parker expresses her thoughts about the feminist implications of the series:

> These characters, and the actresses playing them, reap enormous benefits from the women's movement. The characters have sexual opportunity, freedom, opportunity, and the ability to be successful…But I don't think of it as a feminist show, because true feminists may take issue with certain things about the women and would want things to be different from them. Cleverly or not, we have steered clear of labeling ourselves, but that's also reflective of who are as women (Sohn 2004:24).

Like Parker, Kristen Davis speaks about how the woman's movement afforded her more choices as a woman compared to her mother who was married with children by the age of twenty-one. Davis recalls growing up with *Ms. Magazine* on the coffee table and realized that *SATC* is really a cultural movement. Speaking to how they made it on the cover of *Time* magazine, she realized that women all over the country are trying to make sense of what do with all these choices (Sohn 2004:44). The title of my dissertation, *Feminism without Feminists*, is a reflection of this quagmire.

As both a feminist scholar and fan of the series, I inhabited a unique position to examine the social significance of *SATC.* The scholar in me is fully in accordance with the critical perspectives espoused by academics, pointing to the show as one that equates female empowerment with individual choice instead of political power. Montemurro (2004) illustrates how Charlotte's use of the women's movement as support for her decision [to abandon her career to become a housewife] co-opted feminist ideas, and how

liberal feminism unfortunately lends itself well to such appropriation. Nonetheless, she considers *SATC* more feminist than not because the other characters were more decidedly feminist when it came to making decisions about juggling work and family (e.g. Miranda) and going against the grain with respect to the gendered double standards of sexuality (e.g. Samantha). On the other hand, Levy (2006:173) highlights the political apathy and lack of civic-mindedness epitomized in the series:

> Carrie didn't vote. In one episode Samantha told another character, "I don't believe in the Republican party or the Democratic party…I just believe in parties…*SATC*'s idea of giving back was more in line with the Bush Administration's prescription to the nation after 9/11: The best thing you can do for your fellow man and your country is to shop till you drop.

Montemurro and Levy offer convincing evidence to demonstrate the undermining of feminist and political underpinnings in the series, although it is arguably laden with them.

Moreover, I agree with other critics that the series is too "heteronormative," "bourgeois," and "white," especially since it is filmed in a global city, New York City. However, much of the critique about the show has been limited to a textual analysis of *SATC*, which often privileges dominant narratives and interpretations. This is in juxtaposition to what a truly feminist, although imaginary, text might look like in the eyes of a feminist scholar. In doing so, an elite group of academics end up speaking amongst themselves about the cooptation of feminism from a political ideology to the individualistic and consumerist expression of equality (i.e. purchasing power). Meanwhile, many people are left out of this critical discussion of the role and significance of feminism in contemporary society. It is no wonder that most people yearn

for the end of gender inequality, yet do not personally identify as a feminist. In this sense, feminism is alive.

On the flip side, like many fans, I have watched every episode of the entire series multiple times, hosted my share of *SATC* nights, and even dined and shopped at some of the locations where the show was filmed. Whether one is a fan or not, *SATC* has become a part of our social fabric. From billboards, to advertisement, and even *SATC*-themed bus tours in Manhattan, the franchise has become a global phenomenon. Popular culture as a site of resistance where life is often more democratic than one's lived experience can feel refreshingly liberating. Carine's testimony as a recent immigrant to the U.S. speaks to this. She first encountered *SATC* when she was a pre-teen girl in Armenia. She innocently "caught" her mother watching an episode, only to be told she was not allowed to watch it because it was for adults only. When Carine moved to the Ukraine to pursue her undergraduate studies, she learned her two female roommates from China were huge fans of the series. They had English versions with Chinese subtitles of multiple seasons downloaded on to their laptops. For Carine, she instantly fell in love with the show. Her decision to continue her education in the U.S. was in large part due to the show. By watching it, her original skepticism of American women subsided as she related to their dilemmas of being an independent woman and wrestling with societal expectations of women.

As a scholar-fan, I was interested in reconciling the textual interpretations provided by academics with the various discourses produced by fans. By privileging the voice of fans, I wanted to find out what they liked most about the series, as well as

examining how they felt about the representations of race in the series. Throughout this dissertation, I have illustrated that *SATC* was more than just a textual object for fans. It was a social event, a way for fans to connect with other people, whether it was through the exchange of ideas or by carving out time to share a physical space among other fans and loved ones. In this final chapter, I highlight key themes from my empirical chapters and conclude with ideas for future research directions.

In Chapter Two, "*Gendered Discourse,*" I exposed how gender shaped the nature of the discourse surrounding *SATC* in secondary sources, like *Craigslist*, *Newsweek*, and Internet film reviews. For example, professional film reviews were skewed by the sex of the reviewer. In general, female reviewers were more likely to assign higher ratings than male reviewers. When examining *Craigslist* and *Newsweek*, it was telling to find that men felt the need to express their thoughts about a show they did not seem to know much about. Many men "ranted" and expressed explicitly misogynistic and homophobic viewpoints on both Internet forums. Not only did they bash the series, but also the fans that enjoyed it. On the other hand, the majority of women "raved," gushing about how much they loved the series. An unexpected finding was how women utilized *Craigslist* to seek platonic friendships with other female fans of the series. This is in stark contrast to the prevalence of personal ads in the classified sections to find romantic and sexual partners, often heterosexual in nature. This is another example of how *SATC* has bridged groups of people in search of friendships in place of relationships.

In Chapter Three, *"Sex Appeal,"* I found that most fans did not identify as feminists, but did consider themselves as politically left-of-center. Although they rejected

the “feminist” label, they did not abandon feminist ideals such as gender equality. Many of them associated leftist politics with more “female-friendly” and “LGBT-friendly” policies. In fact, many of them shared grating stories about existing double standards related to gender and sexuality. This contradicts post-feminist notions that feminism is an undesirable or unnecessary ideology. Viewers also revealed their understandings of feminism by how and why they identified certain characters and not others as “feminist.” The Miranda and Samantha characters were more likely to be identified as feminist, but in different ways. They were both described as possessing masculine qualities. However, Miranda was often chastised for prioritizing her career over a relationship, while Samantha was admired for challenging gendered sexual norms, which often limited female sexuality or reduced them to sex objects. This reveals how feminism was identified with women adopting traditionally masculine qualities rather than with the celebration of traditionally feminine qualities or with men becoming more feminine. These findings also speak to the schism among feminist scholars with respect to developing a useful theory that integrates sexuality and gender. In this sense, queer scholars have paved more significant paths in problematizing gender essentialism and the gender binary.

In Chapter Four, *“‘Seeing’ Race,”* I discovered that race did not affect the enjoyment of the material, but did affect the interpretation of events and characters. For example, white women were more likely to identify with most of the protagonists across the board. Charlotte was the character with whom they least identified. For some of them, it was during the course of the interview that they first realized and questioned the

“whiteness” of the series. Many of them were appalled by their revelation. In fact, when asked to identify racial characters, they were more likely to identify Jewish, Italian, and other white ethnic groups. They had difficulty recalling non-white characters.

On the other hand, women of color viewed the series with an awareness of the show’s whiteness. Since racial minorities are still underrepresented in mainstream media, this was nothing new to them. However, unlike the white women I interviewed, certain characters were more accessible to women of color, in particular Charlotte and Carrie. They are arguably the least feminist characters in the series. Charlotte had a leaning towards the domestic life and Carrie was addicted to shopping, although she mixed this up with her own active career as a writer. For women of color, they identified with their relative sexual conservatism and family values compared to the other characters. Instead of seeing economically privileged white women, they saw values that were more consistent with their upbringing than those represented by Miranda and Samantha. Moreover, most women of color (with the exception of my Black respondents) did not care to see the inclusion of more non-white characters in the series. This may be because of the way that non-white characters are often marginalized when they are given roles. Coltrane and Messineo (2000) speak to the way in which media does not allow women of color to be equals or to have similar emotional experiences and aspirations, which leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes about race and gender that are as consequential as more overt forms of racism. In addition, women of color were more likely to remember a broader range of racial characters. This was especially true for my Asian and Latina fans.

More specifically, fans were more likely to remember characters reflecting their own racial background.

Based on my interviews, it was clear that fans did not blindly follow the series accepting the hegemonic narratives embedded in *SATC*. Many of them were in tune with the criticisms of the series expressed by scholars, such as the whiteness of the series and the overemphasis on middle and upper-class consumerism. However, this did not negate the enjoyment they received from the series in terms of sharing it with their friends, and producing their own meanings, many of which were shaded by their racial identities.

Likewise, sexual orientation also influenced perceptions of characters. Although several of my heterosexual viewers found the stereotypes of LGBT characters problematic, the queer fans I interviewed felt it was a fair representation of their community, and certainly more realistic than the way gays are typically portrayed in mainstream media.

In addition, although we can trace the economically independent single woman in American sitcoms, *SATC* was the first to highlight female sexual agency to audiences globally. It was revolutionary in the sense that it ventured into a place where no show went before. Women were sex subjects, not sex objects. Although Kammeyer (2008:12) argues that we live in "a hypersexual society in which sexual discourse, erotica, and pornography are persistently present in almost all aspects of the society," few are female-friendly and/or accessible. He describes *SATC* as a sitcom that offers more sexual discourse than action. Likewise, Plummer (2003) points to the proliferation of sexual discourse, or what he defines as "intimate citizenship," public discourse on the personal

life, to be facilitated by shows like *SATC.* Plummer contends that this juxtaposition of citizenship (i.e. a public matter) and the intimate (i.e. a private matter) blurs the line between these traditionally dichotomized spheres (p. 68). The characters of *SATC,* to varying degrees, embraced their sexuality as an important part of their identity and provided a framework for viewers to openly talk about aspects of their personal lives. Several fans expressed how refreshing it was to see and hear honest conversations about sex. The episodes served as consciousness-raising sessions, exploring questions about pleasure, as well as the dark side of sex, such as getting sexually transmitted diseases. My interviews revealed the link between a feeling of female sexual empowerment and liberation. However, Levy points out the contradiction in which we might "live in a candy land of sex, meanwhile getting abstinence-only sex education in the schools, coupled with higher teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S. compared to other industrial nations." As such, a further look into how people comprehend the role of sex in their lives would complement the scholarship on contemporary sexual discourse.

My study of *SATC* and its fans and critics from an intersectional perspective helps to fill a gap in studies of the show and popular culture more generally. More empirical research on television programs from an intersectional feminist and political economic perspective is especially needed. Television continues to be an important socializing agent but not given as much serious attention compared to other forms of media, despite being the most accessible medium. As early as 1960, seven out of eight homes had a television set, and approximately 70% of homes now have access to cable and satellite (Grossberg et al., 2006:13 and 2006:117). The average person in the U.S. (and U.K)

spends more time in front of the television than those in other countries, about 28 hours (Nationmaster). In *Television Studies* (2002:x), Miller writes in his preface the need for a critical television studies asserting:

> [I]f there are to be more Tiananmens and fewer 11 Septembers, the viewers of today and tomorrow must have a wide range of pleasurable, smart, progressive TV programmes to look at, learn from, and influence. To make that happen, audiences need to understand the institutional, textual and political aspects of television.

Like Miller, I see television as an important arena for research (see also Miller 1993 and Miller 2007). Studying television provides important insights about the link between our neoliberal state and the mediated images projected onto our television screens. The deregulation of the media during the Reagan administration has led to the ever-increasing concentration of media in the hands of a few conglomerates instead of fulfilling the promise of more choices for the public. Moreover, television programs are a reflection of tenuous mainstream values in a society and the potential for social change. Living in the aftermath of the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement and the women's movement were influential in promoting more positive images of women and people of color in the media. However, we cannot overlook the way in which people of color are still underrepresented or marginalized in the media. Nonetheless, the women of color I interviewed were far from being passive viewers and often criticized dominant images of race. They were more likely to recall non-white characters in the series compared to their white counterparts, but none of them identified with them. Ironically, Latina and Asian women were more likely to identify with Charlotte, arguably the most WASPy protagonist in the series. Transcending race, they interpreted her character as one with

family values and sexual conservatism. This is in contrast to the way that Latina and Asian women are often constructed by corporate media as "exotic" and "sexually desirable."

Although my research focused primarily on issues of gender and race, the interviews with fans opened up dialogues about the role of sexuality in their own personal lives. I learned that many of my fans felt they received inadequate information about sex growing up and learned different perspectives about sex from watching the show. Many of my fans, who are now adults in their 20s and 30s, noted that sex was still a taboo topic in their family. In some ways, the show made it more acceptable to talk about sex with their peers. That is, although we live in a hypersexual society where sex is everywhere and something to be consumed (e.g. pornography, sex toys, strip shows, etc.), substantive discussions about it are still missing in many women's lives. Sex is for consumption, not comprehension. More research should be undertaken about the ways in which women of color wrestle with their sexuality in a world that is quick to commodify them as "sex objects."

More research is also needed on cross-national differences in television consumption, including consumption of *SATC*. My research has helped to shed light on American views of the show, but the *SATC* series is now broadcasted worldwide with various censorship ratings. Viewers in Australia are exposed to uncut versions during primetime hours, unlike viewers in the U.S. who watch late-night edited versions unless they have access to HBO. Illegal bootleg DVDs are ubiquitously found in some urban areas of Asian countries, such as China and Thailand, and more easily on the web.

Anyone with Internet access is able to download episodes onto their computer. In South Korea, fans watch episodes on their cell phones, a technology that is readily available (Frater 2007). Shanghai launched their version of *SATC*, called "Hot Ladies" which features the lives of four twenty-something friends navigating love and marriage in the city (*BBC* 2003). International syndication has made it possible for audiences in countries, such as Argentina and Poland, to view the series. In 2008, *SATC* hit the big screen and topped the weekend box office charts in nine overseas markets. One fan from Japan, Shulin Sun, placed a winning bid on ebay in the amount of $52,100 (proceeds going to Oxfam) to attend the red-carpet film premiere in New York City with Kristen Davis (Mander 2008). In 2010, the sequel was released.

Despite the global popularity of the series, scholars have not yet examined its global imprint. The series has inspired trends in certain Asian metropolitan cities. For example, in Seoul, "brunch" places serving *french toast* have become trendy spots for single women to hang out with their family and friends (Lee 2007). For a selective group of mostly white-collared, professional class women in East Asia, they too watch *SATC* religiously like their Western counterparts. Clones of *SATC*-type shows have mushroomed not only in the U.S. (e.g. *Lipstick Jungle* and *Cashmere Mafia*), but in China, Japan, and South Korea, using the same formula of the single, independent, and/or sexually adventurous woman. In these American versions that were short-lived, an Asian American woman was among the leading cast. A cross-national study of *SATC* consumption by viewers in these Asian countries would provide additional insights, which would problematize gender, race and nationality. For example, which characters

do they identify with and why? How do they feel about the representations of race and sexuality on the series? These questions would be a significant contribution to the existing literature in challenging media's persistent use of "controlling images" to portray Asian women in highly stereotypical ways, whether it is the servile Lotus Blossom, the castrating Dragon Lady, or the Model Minority (Cho 2003; Espiritu 2008). Such stereotypes often mask the real lived experiences of Asian women globally. Understanding how Asian women themselves actually interpret and consume globally exported media images of women in *SATC* and other television shows, and Asian audiences compare to American audiences, could help to further problematize the kinds of images produced and illuminate their wider effects.

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## Appendix A

## Characters

| *Actor* | *Character* |
| --- | --- |
| Sarah Jessica Parker | Carrie |
| Kristen Davis | Charlotte |
| Kim Cattrall | Samantha |
| Cynthia Nixon | Miranda |
| Jennifer Hudson | Louise |
| Willie Garson | Stanford |
| Mario Cantone | Anthony |
| Chris Noth | Big |
| John Corbett | Aidan |
| David Eigenberg | Steve |
| Kyle MacLachlan | Trey |
| Ron Livingston | Berger |
| Blair Underwood | Robert |
| Lynn Cohen | Magda |
| Sundra Oakley | Adeena |
| Asio Highsmith | Chivon |
| Sonia Braga | Maria |

***This is a partial list of key actors that are mentioned in this dissertation.**

## Appendix B

### Film Reviews

| ***Score*** | ***Publication*** | ***Reviewer*** |
|---|---|---|
| 100 | *San Francisco Chronicle* | Mick LaSalle |
| 89 | *Austin Chronicle* | Kimberley Jones |
| 88 | *Chicago Tribune* | Jessica Reaves |
| 83 | *Entertainment Weekly* | Owen Gleiberman |
| 80 | *Los Angeles Times* | Carina Chocano |
| 80 | *New York Daily News* | Elizabeth Weitzman |
| 75 | *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* | Athima Chansanchai |
| 75 | *USA Today* | Claudia Puig |
| 75 | *Premiere* | Emily Rems |
| 75 | *Philadelphia Inquirer* | Carrie Rickey |
| 70 | *Washington Post* | Ann Hornaday |
| 70 | *New York Magazine* | David Edelstein |
| 67 | *The Onion (A.V. Club)* | Genevieve Koski |
| 67 | *Christian Science Monitor* | Peter Rainer |
| 63 | *Rolling Stone* | Peter Travers |
| 63 | *Boston Globe* | Wesley Morris |
| 60 | *The Hollywood Reporter* | Michael Rechtshaffen |
| 60 | *Empire* | William Thomas |
| 58 | *Portland Oregonian* | Shawn Levy |

| ***Score*** | ***Publication*** | ***Reviewer*** |
|---|---|---|
| 55 | *NPR* | Bob Mondello |
| 50 | *Miami Herald* | Connie Ogle |
| 50 | *TV Guide* | Ken Fox |
| 50 | *Time* | Richard Corliss |
| 50 | *Chicago Reader* | J.R. Jones |
| 50 | *ReelViews* | James Berardinelli |
| 50 | *Variety* | Brian Lowry |
| 50 | *Village Voice* | Ella Taylor |
| 50 | *Chicago Sun-Times* | Roger Ebert |
| 42 | *Baltimore Sun* | Michael Sragow |
| 40 | *Film Threat* | Pete Vonder Haar |
| 40 | *Salon.com* | Stephanie Zacharek |
| 40 | *Wall Street Journal* | Joe Morgenstern |
| 40 | *Slate* | Dana Stevens |
| 38 | *New York Post* | Lou Lumenick |
| 38 | *Charlotte Observer* | Lawrence Toppman |
| 30 | *The New York Times* | Manohla Dargis |
| 30 | *The New Yorker* | Anthony Lane |
| 0 | *The Globe and Mail (Toronto)* | Rick Groen |