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## **Future and present imaginaries: The politics of the ageing female body in Lena Dunham's *Girls* (HB0, 2012 – present)**

### **Introduction**

Lena Dunham's *Girls* (HB0, 2012 – present) is a deliberately provocative television text. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Talley suggest its impact renders it amongst the 'elite' of the 2000s (2014, p.1). It has been simultaneously lauded as "a bold defence and a searing critique of the so-called Millennial Generation by a person still in her twenties," (Nussbaum, 2012) and decried as an "uninspiring experience to hold up as an example to young women," (Persky, 2013). The following analysis explores this tension in relation to the ways that the ageing female body is imagined within the series and within conflicting discourses of empowerment and decline that are prevalent in dominant western cultural understandings of age and within contemporary feminist approaches to ageing.

As a 'coming-of-age' comedy drama which focuses on the (mis)adventures of four twenty-something year old women in New York and centres around the experiences of protagonist Hannah Horvath (Dunham), *Girls* acts as a powerful social and cultural commentary on the imaginings of female ageing: igniting debates about feminism, gender, privilege, race and sexuality (Daalmans, 2013; Nygaard, 2013; Hamilton, 2014; Saisi, 2014; Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2014; Nash & Grant, 2015; Woods, 2015) and, in so doing, has deepened debates about the 'body politic' (Ford, 2016).

Media attention has focussed on the body of *Girls* creator, writer and actress Lena Dunham, which although young does not correspond to the size and type of idealised heterosexual femininity. In its centrality to the drama, her body has been subject to both celebration and shame. Inextricably linked to Dunham's own avowed feminist credentials, *Girls* performs a "female sexual subjecthood [that] is emotionally intimate, reflexive, and ironic," (Ford, 2016, p.2). We argue that this subjecthood, famously configured around the realistic and digitally unaltered youthful body, is also constructed against the imaginary of an older, and to Dunham, fear-provoking female form.

Given that *Girls* contemplates the experiences of growing older, both emotionally and physiologically, it is curious that previous academic and popular discussion of age in the text centres solely on the representation of the millennial generation. This chapter examines the ways that *Girls* represents the older female body and envisages its ageing. The following analysis takes the concept that ‘we are aged by culture’ (Gullette, 2004) as a way to explore the intergenerational imaginings and representations of becoming/being an older woman that are manifest in *Girls*. Using the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in connection to a television series that displays what has been recognised as Dunham’s awkward auteurship (Nelson, 2014), is particularly apposite as Gullette’s age critical perspective emphasises the power of autobiography and storytelling to unravel how dominant cultural narratives shape our understanding of ageing. This connection is also underpinned by the ways that ageing and millennial experiences are played out in contemporary America. *Girls*’ articulation of generational identities against contemporary economics and attitudes is intertwined with the American dream’s cultural narrative of ageing. The American Dream, according to Gullette, is a basic progress narrative; “an example of a life-course story told by ordinary people, over time, about work and its consequences: first to themselves prospectively, then in medias res, and finally, retrospectively,” (2003, p.103).

When television is conceptualised as a form of heritage (Garde-Hansen & Grist, 2015), it offers an important legacy as a resource for present and future identity formation. As a television text, *Girls* forensically explores identities, unpicking their complexities and contradictions. As Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Anita Wohlman (2015) explain, television texts constructed in serial form are able, over time, to develop strategies of identity and characterisation in enviable depth compared to other media forms. During 5 seasons the complex portrayals of identities and generations in *Girls* work also to serialise age. Dunham’s serialisation of identities and ageing is a highly personal project and one in which the understanding and representation of the female body is central. More especially, in *Girls*, Dunham visually foregrounds her own body as a feminist challenge to the limited range of possibilities that are acceptable as heterosexual femininity in Western society. *Girls*, however, fails to conceptualise the holistic experience of ageing as a woman. Instead, ageing is configured, as we will demonstrate, around millennial

generational fear of growing older. We also argue that this is neither surprising nor something that the series, or indeed Dunham should be blamed for. The limited and derivative textual and paratextual constructions of ageing and older women in *Girls* are the upshot of dominant and limiting understandings of female older age and the failure of various waves of feminisms to politically imagine a powerful older age for women. Where *Girls* does address the experience of ageing and later life, it rehearses culturally engrained tropes about older women in western societies. Ultimately, for a text that sets itself up to be simultaneously open to contradictions and to be contradictory, this weakens its impact. When read alongside Dunham's (2015) assertion that "There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman," (p.xx), the series unfortunately, for the most part, struggles to imagine female ageing beyond rigid generational and culturally ageist constructions.

### **Ageing and Feminism**

In 1978 Susan Sontag wrote "Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men," (p.285). This social pathology is one that endures to this day. Older women are held up to a double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1978) in the workplace, in social and cultural life and this is mirrored in their representation on screen. Unfortunately, second wave feminism did not engage with ageing and old age as an intersection of importance. Although there is now a current upsurge in feminist approaches to ageing, this work must now contend with what Hannah Hammad (2015) refers to as 'toxic intergenerationality' (p.170), where the life-views and cultural politics of second wave feminism and millennial post feminism are in conflict with each other. With regard to ageing and feminism, there is a residual vacuum that results from the failure of second wave feminist politics to offer a legacy that permitted the second wave feminists themselves, or women and girls younger than them, to age powerfully and to challenge the manifold ways they are aged by patriarchal culture.

In line with a growing ageing population in western societies, there has been a proliferation of images of older women on television in recent years. As Sherry Wilson

(2014) indicates, however, “rather than presenting us with new ways of thinking about age and ageing, representations cohere to a series of somewhat retrogressive images,” (p.189). Accompanying these images has been a surge of critical academic attention to these representations from scholars based within ageing studies, cultural gerontology and feminist media studies. With a few notable exceptions (see Krainitzki 2014, Jennings & Oró-Piqueras (2015), and Jennings & Krainitzki (2016), what is in evidence is the “persistent tendency of postfeminist culture to pit women against each other, especially across generational lines” (Hammad, p.170). We argue that an important aspect that plays out in the serial narrative of *Girls* is the juxtaposition of millennial post feminism with the inheritances of second wave feminists, as women associated with second wave feminism themselves contemplate their own transitions into older age.

In terms of representation across the media from television and film to news media, older postmenopausal women can generally be grouped as either in decline or successfully ageing (Dolan & Tincknell, 2012). Positioned as polar extremes on the spectrum of women’s possible ageing experiences both offer problematic constructions and imaginings of older female identities. On the one hand, older women are negatively portrayed as in decline and consequently as demented, vulnerable, asexual, dependent on others; grouped, as Kim Sawchuk and Barbara Crow (2012) have observed, within the ‘grey zone’ where no differentiation is made between 60 and 90 year olds. On the other hand, women are considered to have aged successfully if their body shows limited signs of age: no decrepitude or disease, minimal wrinkling, sagging or greying and a dedication to an ‘active’ lifestyle to stave off the signs of physiological old age (Twigg, 2004; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Katz & Marshall, 2008). In this context they are positioned as exceptions, as individuals who continue to do the upkeep work required by neoliberal understandings of femininity and invest time and material resources to deflect the physical signs of ageing by conforming to the glamorous celebrity standard of attractive and youthful femininity (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014, p.39).

Media representations, as Ulla Krieberegg and Roberta Maierhofer (2014) contend, “determine how we understand age and aging and influence the way we perceive others and define ourselves over the life course,” (p.2.). *Girls* is widely understood both in the

media and in academia as “a generational document,” (Woods, 2015, p.38) that explores the lives, experiences, and dreams of young women. This document evidences that for the millennial female protagonists and Hannah in particular, older women’s bodies provoke fear of growing up and growing older. As the next section will explore, one of the limitations of conceptualising age and ageing in relation to distinct and compartmentalised notions of generation is that it reinforces mutually ageist divisions between young and old and exacerbates the traumatic (Kaplan, 2005) and socially pathological imaginings of the female body in older age.

### **Intergenerational and Paratextual Ageism**

The concept of generation is problematic. Grouped by chronological parameters and linked to certain attitudes and characteristics, generations function to naturalise the master narratives of cultural ageing. They are, at one and the same, as slippery and imprecise as they are individually meaningful and meaningless. Despite this, they contribute to the “pretheorized, prehistoricized formulas that get automatically stocked in our mental rolodex through having been aged in our particular culture” (Gullette, 2003, p.107) and thus provide the core device for discussing identities and ageing in the series.

Distinctions and divergences between generations are central to the narrative of *Girls’* as well as to its paratextual commentary. As Erika M. Nelson (2014) explains, the digital interface between Dunham and her anonymous fans perform a kind of “hyperculturality” (p.93) that channels a collective cultural understanding of generational identities and experiences textually in the series and paratextually in the context of its influence and reception. Threaded through these generational explorations are explicit and implicit investigations of ageing. The terrain of this investigation plays out via an oppositional binary between what is commonly configured as the millennial generation and the baby boomer generation. The relationship between Hannah and her parents is a key vehicle for this examination and is conducted via a knowing postmodern lens which juxtaposes millennial entitlement and boomer mid-life crises.

The term ‘millennial’ refers to a generation born between 1984 and 1992, a generation marked by their exposure to technology, their flexibility to globalised neo-liberal

economies and by their skills in constructing their presence in the world online and digitally (Colloseus, 2015). Crucially for the exploration here, they are understood as inhabiting a liminal time/space between childhood and adulthood; experiencing their lifecourses (Katz, 2005) in a less linear way than previous generations of baby boomers (boomers), generation Ys or Xers (Colloseus, 2015). Cecilia Colloseus maintains that “We live in the anticipation of the story we will tell later” (2015, p.140) and, for Dunham’s loosely autobiographically charged *Girls*, this suggests that what is being rehearsed in the present and the past is an anticipatory future. For millennials, their ‘kidult’ status preserves a psychological separation between them and those who represent grown up values and identities. In *Girls*, parents and grandparents occupy these roles and span the pre-baby boomer generation (born before 1946) and boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) (Weiss, 2003).

The term boomer reflects a post-World War II surge (boom) in birth rates in the Western world and, as this cohort of people have moved or are moving into old age, the sheer size as an ageing demographic has branded them as a potential economic threat to neoliberal western economies.

In terms of thinking about ageing, particularly from feminist perspectives, the maintenance of generational conflict reinforces a disempowering ageist divide, when what is required, and what we argue here, is an empathetic intergenerational solution<sup>1</sup>. Providing powerful visions and narratives for women will assist women to prepare each other for, and to imagine, being old women rather than live in fear and denial of what, if we are lucky enough to live that long, we must all face.

In the context of writing this article, the process has been one of intergenerational feminist exchange and reflection as the authors (one fitting millennial chronology and the other boomer) have worked together to read *Girls* in its paratextual context. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which female bodies (both young and old) are constructed and represented in *Girls* and a critical discussion of the implications of

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<sup>1</sup> The WAM Manifesto presents one way in which scholars working in an interdisciplinary and intergenerational manner are proposing an empathetic intergenerational alternative to the maintenance of generational conflict. Available at <http://wamuog.co.uk/the-wam-manifesto> [accessed 24 October 2016].

these representations given the feminist credentials of the writer and the age-based premise of the series.

### **The Female Grotesque: Dunham's Body and Parallels in Ageist Discourse**

As Jessica Ford (2016) suggests, it is the “tension between the simultaneous celebration and critique of Hannah's body [that] is the driving force behind the series' body politics,” (p.9). Dunham's mode of display of her own naked body on *Girls* continues a tradition of feminist body performance art started in the mid-1960s and 1970s. In her autobiography, Dunham recounts seeing the nude photographs her mother took of her own body during this period – “the eye is drawn to her nakedness. Legs spread defiantly [...] [There is an] appealing seriousness to her fascination with herself,” (2015, p.100). An auteur renowned for writing what she knows, Dunham's self-revelation representationally emphasises the series' paratextual feminist, and more specifically second-wave feminist, roots.

Dunham's display of her body (and her body itself) transgresses normative images of western heterosexual femininity: whilst young, Dunham is short, tattooed and larger than heteronormative hegemonic media ideals. The way in which *Girls* uses Dunham's body (clothed and unclothed) therefore unsettles and challenges common televisual representations of the female form and of women's sexuality.

Dunham's body has been held up as a celebratory alternative image of Western femininity which, in its unruliness, is unsettling (Russo, 1995). Similar in some ways to the counter-hegemonic unruliness offered by Roseanne Barr in her 1990s television sitcom series *Roseanne* (Paramount, 1988-1997), Dunham's Hannah has generated “a powerful means of self-definition and a weapon for feminist appropriation” (Rowe, 1995, p.3). Like Barr, Dunham uses her own body in comedic and parodic ways to unsettle dominant discourses about the ideal female form and cultural norms. That is not to say that Dunham positions her body in *Girls* as a prop to be laughed at, rather the contrary. Dunham's body is used in the series as one imbued with verisimilitude – she is naked in the bath, getting dressed and she is naked (or nearly naked) having sex. The fact that Dunham's nudity continues to form a central theme in critical attention is significant in terms of the limited acceptable representational possibilities open to all women. For



instance, radio personality and *American Idol* judge Howard Stern publically shamed Dunham as “that little fat chick” who hogs the camera, and likened her nude scenes to rape (Hayner, 2013).

In western culture bodies which challenge the masculine gaze and heteronormative representations of idealised femininity are often signified by codes of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque grotesque: the Medusa, the Crone, the Bearded Woman, the Fat Lady and the Tattooed Woman (Russo, 1995 p.14). These invocations of the grotesque are regularly mapped against Dunham’s body as “Fat,” “Tattooed” and “Unruly” in acts of body-shaming that form part of the paratextual discourses that surrounds *Girls*. As Mary Russo (1995) suggests the “grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change,” (pp.62-63). Mapped on to these configurations, Dunham’s body is rendered grotesque and in the coming of age story narrative of *Girls*, there is a focus on the processes of becoming and change, where the body is integral (whilst not the sole focus of this process of transformation) to the transition from girlhood into ‘kidulthood’.

In her seminal study, Russo notes that grotesque female bodies are “the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body,” (p.55). Adult women’s bodies are thus produced as abject and older women’s bodies, when constructed through lenses of prevalent cultural ageism, are considered particularly grotesque. The limited and derivative representations of older bodies on screen inform audiences, as Sally Chivers (2003) suggests “of what each individual’s body could become. [...] Viewers accordingly come literally face to face with their preconceived notions of the grotesque aesthetic of age,” (p.xxvi).

In *Girls* Hannah is troubled by her physiological body – not so much its non-conformist shape or size, as Hannah states in an early episode “I decided I would have some other concerns for my life”; or even how that body might *look* as it ages - but by the human body’s propensity to breakdown and ail. Physical decline as a common trope about older age is taken for granted and rehearsed in *Girls*. In season two in particular, in the midst of an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) breakdown Hannah Googles “At what age does your body start melting down?”

The episodes that focus on Hannah's struggle with OCD (see Lehman, 2012) and this Google search are influenced by real life narratives of ageing as decline and the body as a metaphor for decay and leakiness (Shildrick, 1997). Hannah's struggle is also informed by Dunham's own history of OCD and by personal fears about her own body. A self-identified 'germophobe' Dunham wrote that she wished she "could be one of those young people who seems totally unaware of the fact that her gleaming nubile body is, in fact, fallible," (2014, online). Growing up in the late 1980s and 1990s, Dunham's childhood and adolescence was also marked with a hyperawareness of AIDS and a fear of HIV that is mirrored by her character Hannah in *Girls*. Dunham wrote:

Is what's manifesting as a fear [of illness, disease and death] actually some instinct to resist being young? Youth, with its accompanying risks, humiliations and uncertainties, the pressure to do it all before it's too late. Is the sense of imminent death bound up in the desire to leave some kind of a legacy? (2014, online).

Thus Hannah's relationship with her body, and her own youth, is complexly informed by Dunham's own fear of illness and disease and by popular cultural representations of older life as degeneration and decay (Dolan & Tincknell, 2012; Katz, 1996). It appears that neither Hannah nor Dunham have the tools to imagine a life without illness and decline in older age. The following section explores the most acute manifestation of this imagining of older age in *Girls* through the representation of Hannah's Grandma Flo and the older disabled artist Beadie.

### **The Ageing Body and Narratives of Decline: 'Grandma Flo' and the Artist 'Beadie'**

As discussed above, in their representation in film and on television, older women are found grouped as either in decline or as successfully ageing. Whether frail or robust both cultural constructions of older age rely on the body. Bodies thus work representationally to signify individuals' ageing process and it is in the representation of its oldest characters that *Girls* continues this tradition by mapping the ageing experience along the continuum of physiological success or decline. Building on Dunham's penchant for narratives that focus on the medical, the roles and representations of

Grandma Flo and Beadie in *Girls* offer the image of frail, ailing and disabled elders: old age as a metaphor for decline.

In season three, Hannah is drawn away from her vibrant youthful life in Brooklyn into the suburbs to visit her Grandmother 'Flo' in the hospital. Flo (June Squibb) who is in her mid to late seventies has been hospitalised with a broken femur. This choice of physical injury to incapacitate Flo is one that is most commonly experienced by older people, due to the lessening of bone density as we age (Novak, 2015, p.40). Whilst in hospital, Flo contracts pneumonia (another illness most common in people over the age of 65) and passes away from a heart attack. Whilst Flo's pathology is undoubtedly (and unfortunately) representative of the experience of many adults in their late seventies, in the construction of this character *Girls* misses an opportunity to move away from well-rehearsed tropes about old age as decline on television.

The mother of a boomer, Flo does not quite fit the recognised chronology of oldest-old or a 'Fourth Ager' (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010) yet she is represented as sick, frail and close to death. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2010) posit "that the fourth age functions as a social imaginary because it represents a collectively imagined terminal destination in life – a location stripped of the social and cultural capital of later life which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure," (p.14). Thus through Flo *Girls* constructs a terminal imaginary for its oldest character, one which rehearses old tropes and in its narrative limits the possibilities of later life for its audience.

Moreover, *Girls'* problematic conflation of third and fourth ages through its focus on the ailing aged body furthers the cultural representation of old people as a homogenous mass, existing within 'grey zone' (Sawchuck & Crow, 2012).

Margrit Shildrick (1997) holds that the body is "curiously absent to us during health, and it is only in sickness that it makes itself fully felt, and then as that which unsettles the sense of self," (p.10). In *Girls*, Flo is absent to us during her health, and it is only when she begins to succumb to the ailments of old age that she is revealed in the series. Though it is Flo who is dying, and because the audience accepts her prognosis as a fact of her age, a sense of 'unsettling of the self' is experienced through Hannah, her mother and aunts. Hannah's mother and aunts spend much of the episode dividing up

Flo's estate: her large reserve of prescription tranquilisers, sedatives and painkillers (medication itself a signifier of older age and evidence of cultural constructions of its association with pain and disease) and arguing over which of her belongings each will take when Flo dies. As such Flo herself does not feature in many scenes in the episode, but her belongings feature as a tangible legacy which must be argued over and divided. *Girls* therefore presents Flo as a character who Kathleen Woodward would describe as "invisible and without voice," (1999, p.xxvi).

The outro that covers the credits to the episode 'Flo' is 'Don't Let Us Get Sick' written by Warren Zevon and performed by Jill Sebule. With the first verse and the chorus sharing the lyrics: "Don't let us get sick/ Don't let us get old/ Don't let us get stupid, alright?" the audience is reminded once again that old age and sickness (and here with the invocation of the term 'stupid perhaps also dementia) go hand in hand. As Margaret Cruikshank (2009) reminds us, old age and its related cultural construction as decrepitude and decline means that elderliness is "disconnected from youth and midlife rather than seen as an outgrowth of them," (p.5). The soundtrack reinforces notions of old age as decline, and in Hannah's return to the city she is spatially disconnected from Flo, her ageing and her death, and through her youth she is also separated from the spectre of her own future.

Later in season three *Girls* offers an older female character with slightly more depth than Grandma Flo, though this is a narrative once again found attached to the metaphor of old age as decline. Jessa meets an artist named Beadie (Louise Lasser) in the gallery where Marnie works as an assistant, and later becomes her aide. Beadie is an older woman, whose chronological age might classify her as a 'Third Ager' (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010). Beadie is wheelchair bound, suffers from a nameless condition, and ultimately recruits Jessa to assist in her suicide. Beadie is first presented to the audience sitting in a wheelchair in the gallery, her face framed by white hair tied back into a ponytail and secured with a scrunchie. Beadie asks Marnie to wheel her closer to her photographs on the wall despite the fact that the wheelchair has hand rails for self-movement. From the first moment, then, Beadie is presented as dependent which does

little to augment the cultural construction of elders as reliant and incapacitated (Katz, 1996).

*Girls* conflates the experiences of third and fourth agers in constructing a terminal imaginary of later life in which dependency, decline and death drive the narrative. Ostensibly a similar narrative to that seen in *Flo*, the construction of Beadie furthers the sense that in the diegesis of *Girls* the multiplicity of experience of older life involve decline and decrepitude.

On the surface, as a successful artist with the associated socioeconomic and cultural capital, Beadie might be read as a character who embodies the third age disposition, as one who has the capacity to make decisions, to engage in social and cultural life with vigour. Beadie is given the agency to take control over her ailing body and its' transition into the fourth age in making a decision to end her own life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010). When Beadie is read by one 'thinking with age,' (Jennings & Gardner, 2012) however, it appears that the character is a flimsy (and somewhat clumsy) attempt to bring attention to hotly politicised topics such as older age and euthanasia. As Chivers (2003) notes "the silver tsunami discourse is tightly tied to the euthanasia debate," (p.75). Similarly, Beadie's dialogue is problematic as it suggests a surface-level engagement with political themes about the representation of older women on screen, yet the representation of this older character (who had the potential to be subversive) manages to perpetuate well-rehearsed tropes. Beadie states, for example:

Now I'm old, and no one looks at me anyway. [...] It is true. Getting old? It's the pits. Like, I hate watching television because all the old women are shells, and it... it just hurts to be a shell.

The research carried out by members of the *Centre for Women, Ageing and Media* (WAM) have found this sentiment echoed in the stories of many older women, and the lack of diversity in the representation of older women on screen indeed provided one of the main reasons for the formation of the Centre in the first place. But despite her lamentation, how far is Beadie's character 'just a shell'? Beadie's story is ostensibly one about care giving and euthanasia, a narrative intrinsically related to notions of ageing as

decline, and one which arguably perpetuates stereotypes of disabled elders reliant on (younger) others for help to end their lives.

In one episode Beadie tells Jessa, “Do you know that I wake up every day, disappointed that I didn’t die in the night?” and when Jessa still refuses to help her end her life, Beadie insists “Listen to me. I’m tired. My body is gone. I’m in so much pain, Jessa.” As an audience, we never learn the cause of Beadie’s pain although we are inclined to believe that she has a terminal illness. Appearing in only three episodes, without any real knowledge of Beadie’s history and without any real connection to her character, the audience is therefore likely to simply equate her pain and her failing health as a natural by-product of her age (as with Flo’s broken hip and pneumonia). Beadie’s unnamed condition continues the trend set up in *Grandma Flo* – both older characters and their stories are reduced to physiological symptoms and the care they receive from other characters, symptoms and actions which are decoded by audiences as signifiers of old age.

After much deliberation Jessa finally agrees to help Beadie end her life by giving her an overdose of painkillers. When Beadie decides in the final moment not to end her life, however, the action is not in fact a revival of agency rather it is a delay of dependency. At the beginning of season four, Beadie’s daughter who has learnt of the suicide attempt arrives in New York to collect her mother and bring her to live with her in Connecticut. When the responsibility for Beadie’s continuing care is transferred to her daughter, *Girls* perpetuates current media discourses that construct older age as dependency, the gendered nature of care work (Twigg, 2006), and old age as a net drain on resource. This is a continuation of what Gullette suggests is “the frightening side of the media’s relentless longevity discourses about the demographic catastrophe of ageing,” (2014, in Chivers 2003, p.75).

The inclusion of older characters in mainstream television series is, of course, to be encouraged but the depictions of *Grandma Flo* and *Bede* do little to challenge dominant narratives that represent ageing purely as decline. In the following section we explore the ways that *Girls* also works to stress the only current culturally acceptable vision of female ageing - ageing successfully.

### **Neoliberal post-feminism: Evie Michaels and ‘ageing successfully’**

Maricel Oro-Piqueras (2014) argues that media discourses about older women are “ungenerous by neither constructing nor spreading a positive image of the aging process in women” (p.20). This lack of generosity works to exclude more in-depth explorations of older characters’ experiences and fails to explore understandings of what might actually constitute a good old age for women and also for men. For instance, maintenance of good social relations and cognitive abilities, freedom from pain (though not necessarily disease) feature in the reflections of nonagenarians interviewed by Nosraty et al. (2015) in their ethnographic study, such understandings do not generally contribute to televisual representations of women in mainstream series. Such lived experiences contribute to our understandings of a worthwhile older age and a meaningful imaginary or counter narrative for ageing as decline (Nelson, 2001; Laceulle and Baars, 2014). If, as the above suggests, we are moulded by media and cultural pressure to fear old age, then the other side of this is that we are increasingly invited by neo-liberal modes of governance and the media to fight it.

What *Girls* does exceptionally well, especially within the narrative worlds of its millennial characters, is to offer in-depth explorations of the ‘post-traditional order’ of late modernity (Laceulle and Baars, 2014) and engage with the precarity of everyday existence within neo-liberal America. Older women characters in *Girls*, despite generally being more financially stable, are not immune to the pressures of late modernity (Laceulle and Baars, 2014) but for them, their precarity lies in the lack of meaningful explorations and representations of the older female body. Central to the project of neo-liberalism are discourses of individualism, individual choice and individual responsibility and this produces older women’s bodies as “consumer bodies, badly in need of special products, such as anti-ageing skincare or figure-correcting lingerie, which promise to halt the physical declining process,” (Swinnen, 2012, p.176). In *Girls*, Evie Michaels (Marnie’s mother), offers audiences neoliberal and postfeminist visions of older age informed by popular cultural narratives about ageing ‘successfully’ – Evie’s is evidence of the consumer body in action. As a self-fashioned cougar (Wohlman and Reichenpfader, 2016) she has attended to the self-policing of the body (including losing

weight) and searches out sexual adventure. Evie Michaels encapsulates the spirit of the boomer generation as an “aging youth culture” (Higgs & McGowan, 2013, p. 22) and while on the one hand she pursues the ideals of female sexual liberation espoused by second wave feminism, her representation is enmeshed in the commodified search for what Barbara Marshall calls ‘heterohappiness’. In a paper, currently in press, but first developed for the *Women, Ageing and Media International Summer School* in 2015, Marshall argues that the success of successful ageing is equated with acceptable performances of normative, gendered heterosexuality. As a result, women are now urged to maintain appropriate levels of heterosexual attractiveness throughout their lifecourse.

In contrast to the more fluid and detailed explorations of gay male sexuality at different stages of the lifecourse that are undertaken in relation to Hannah’s former boyfriend, Elijah, and also her father, Tad Horvath, any attempt to represent diverse non-heterosexual possibilities for women are low on the series horizon. Female queer potential in *Girls* is youthful and uninspiring. Apart from Adam’s coterie of twentysomething lesbian friends, a soft lesbian romp between Marnie and Jessa for the heterosexual gaze/pleasure of Jessa’s short-lived husband Thomas John, and a rather half-hearted and unsatisfactory encounter between Hannah and her yoga instructor at the female empowerment retreat in Season 5, older women are constrained within acceptable forms of female ageing; these are primarily constituted either as successful heterosexual agers or postmenopausal mothers and asexual.

The representations of ‘successfully aged’ older heterosexual women, such as Evie Michaels, within *Girls* contributes to the construction of the majority of other older women’s bodies as being aged unsuccessfully. The limited range of possibilities explored in *Girls*, of course, only reflects the limited repertoires currently disseminated in western culture and as such provides a restricted imaginary or narrative “content on which to model our own stories” (Laceulle and Baars, 2014,36) as older women. To Dunham’s credit, however, her immersion in feminist histories allows another possible narrative to emerge; a radical and controversial postmaternal identity. In the next section, we offer an analysis of the only recurring female character over the age of 50,



in *Girls*, Hannah's mother Loreen, Using ideas of postmaternity, we discuss the construction of a more 'everyday' alternative to successful ageing.

### **Ageing as Verisimilitude: Loreen Horvath and 'everyday ageing'**

When we first encounter Loreen Horvath in the first episode of *Girls*, she is introduced as an older woman who is both straight talking and strong-willed (certainly in comparison to her husband Tad). Her first intervention is to burst the bubble of her daughter's sense of entitlement, by insisting that she and Tad will no longer financially support her. She introduces both a reality check into Hannah's life, and a reality check to notions of ageing as decline and successful ageing represented in *Girls* by Grandma Flo, Beadie and Evie Michaels. Indeed, in the fifteen appearances she makes across the five series, Loreen represents ageing as verisimilitude, functioning as a generational counterpoint to Hannah's life journey through the intersections of postfeminism and late modernity. In so doing, she also produces a more ordinary or 'everyday' representation of female ageing. The deliberate manipulation of a generational (boomer/millennial) and feminist/postfeminist conflict running through *Girls*, initially at least, renders Tad as a more sympathetic and approachable character and positions Loreen in, what Gullette (1995) identifies as a troublesome and frightening cultural position for ageing women in patriarchal culture; the postmenopausal body.

As an 'everyday' challenge to the postmenopausal body's disempowering contemporary cultural script, Loreen makes a claim for postmaternity (Gullette, 2002). Postmaternity attempts a feminist intervention to negotiate some of the divisions that are constructed across generational lines. It aims to give worth to both the adult child and the postmaternal mother of the adult child through a transition in identity and status for both parties. Postmaternity is a largely unrecognised position because it threatens hegemonic notions of maternal roles and generations in western societies; particularly around cultural anxieties associated with disempowered female identities and the concept of the 'empty' nest, once adult children have established separate lives. In *Girls* this places millennial and boomer identities (Loreen turns 60 during season 5) in tension and constitutes one of the most significant explorations of the older female body and older female identity in the series. Indeed, much of the narrative is driven by the ways

that Hannah responds to Loreen's attempts to claim the status of postmaternity and push Hannah to become adult.

Although not completely successful in achieving postmaternity, her pursuit of it presages a distinctive space for the ageing woman in the televisual cultural imaginary. Evie Michaels, whose older female identity is still controlled by traditional expectations of heterosexual femininity is ultimately constructed as deviant rather than powerful because her postmenopausal sexual desires are judged in relation to notions of the maternal. She is presented as being unable to provide life wisdom for her adult daughter Marnie (cf. Gorton, 2016) and is branded a bad mother. Similarly, it is also in the context of the maternal that Grandma Flo and Beadie are rendered powerless. In Flo's case this is via the legacy suggested by the onscreen squabbling and negativity of her daughters; in Beadie's case it is by the implicated infantilisation of her by her daughter when she takes on her full-time care.

Loreen is a robust and forward thinking older woman, especially in the way she is prepared to be the unpopular parent. She has, of course, many material and educational advantages to draw on as a resource. In many ways she is the epitome of the white middle-class second wave feminist; a college professor who has achieved tenure; has aspirations to have time for her own interests and even a 'lake house' for her leisure time. This confidence comes from a set of material stabilities that are enviable to the millennial female protagonists in the series, but as the unravelling of her thirty-year marriage to Tad reveals, her life is still, in similar ways to her daughter Hannah's: "enmeshed by the contradictory demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation (Genz, 2010, p101).

Loreen's ageing is messy and not a linear progress narrative to either successful ageing or decline. Her ageing is in the everyday. As an older woman, of the feminist and *Cosmopolitan* reading generation, she has expectations of a sexually fulfilled life and her relationship with Tad is testament to sexual fluidity and negotiations of desire. She does not have to have a successfully aged body to enjoy sex; her mature body is on display with the same verisimilitude as her daughter Hannah's and it is one that desires

and is desired. She is ageing in the present and, as yet, not paralysed by fear of ageing in the future. As the car journey with Hannah to celebrate turning 60 in a 'queening ceremony' at a female empowerment retreat reveals, she wants to figure out who she can be as an older woman. As her subsequent actions in the series indicate, part of figuring this out is navigating a transition to postmodernity. The unspoken potential of this is to provide an empowered imaginary for later life for herself and also her age-fearing daughter.

## Conclusion

Kathleen Woodward (2006) suggests: "Aging—for ourselves individually and for all of us, no matter our age—is a feminist issue" (p.181) and this sentiment explicitly underpins Lena Dunham's *Girls* in complex ways. As a widely recognised millennial generational document, it reveals contemporary anxieties about ageing populations and older female identities and thus mostly rehearses well known tropes about older women: the dying Grandmother, the powerless disabled older woman, the successfully aged, but sexually deviant postmenopausal cougar. Amidst these anxieties, Dunham sneaks in, possibly unconsciously, an embryonic attempt to start to rethink the feminist politics of ageing for women which pivots around a changing understanding of ageing and motherhood. This is generated through the construction of Loreen Horvath's desire for postmaternity as a valid way for women to empower themselves and also provide cultural narratives of potential for their adult offspring. Her negotiation of the messy intersections of sexuality, motherhood and age through her desire for postmaternity thus provides an example of ageing which differs from dominant notions represented as either successful ageing or decline.

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