In February 2004, the final credits of HBO’s Sex and the City (SATC) rolled and a near-total media frenzy of goodbyes, tributes, commentary, and post mortems on the show ensued, testifying to the importance of the show to many viewers. Decidedly not innovative in its format, the show chronicled the life and loves of Carrie Bradshaw, a thirty-something single writer living in New York City. Where it was innovative, however, was its placement of Carrie in a tight-knit group of female friends with whom she could talk. In its combination of frank sex talk and best girlfriends, SATC became one of the most watched and discussed television series in recent memory.

The popularity of SATC, I believe, is due in part to its place at the juncture of two related trends in recent popular culture: postfeminism and queerness. The show is postfeminist . . . in the ways in which the women of SATC enjoy the fruits of women’s post 70s equality. In many ways obvious and subtle, the series explores the meaning of women’s sexual equality in the wake of the social and cultural achievements of second wave feminism. For postfeminists like Carrie and her friends, gender differences, such as wanting to look sexy and flirt are playful, stylistic, and unrelated to the operations of social power and authority. Women, if they so chose, can work, talk, and have sex “like men” while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman. At the same time and despite its insistent heterosexuality, SATC is a series that has taken advantage of the narrative possibilities afforded by queerness. By “queerness” I mean narratives, images, and plot structures that can be read as queer, whether or not the characters, actors or writers involved identified themselves as queer. As queer involves attempts to weaken the naturalized and normalizing binaries of sexuality (straight vs. gay) and of gender (masculine vs. feminine), it offers important insights into the show’s approach to the women’s desires. . . .

Carrie’s World of Love and Ritual

SATC is structured by two major and overlapping themes, both of which testify to the entanglement of postfeminism and queerness. The first, which is potentially the most disruptive to heterosexual allegiances, is that of the committed friendships between the women. The second is the bawdy talk the women engage in about their sexual partners. Explicit sex talk is the feature of the show most celebrated by critics, but also the feature of the series that does the most work towards expelling any potential for heterosexual instability. Together, both the female friendships and the frank sex talk demonstrate the incoherence that Janet Halley describes as a key feature of heterosexuality. In many ways, weekly episodes of SATC can be read as short lessons in the ways in which Carrie manages her incoherent identity not by “leaving” it and taking up a new one, like “becoming” bisexual or gay. Carrie finds satisfactions beyond those offered by men through her committed relationships with her girlfriends—Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha—without whom she would be adrift in a sea of orgasms, shoes, and inadequate boyfriends.

When one tunes into the show, one quickly gathers that these women’s girlfriends are the most valued people in their lives. And indeed, the show insists that these relationships are more lasting and trustworthy than those with men or potential husbands. The friends enjoy an intimacy that nostalgically returns female viewers to college dorms, boarding school, or sleep away camp. The friends have their own apartments, jobs and lives, yet thanks to modern communications are in constant contact with each other. If they are not talking on their cell phones with each other, they are walking the streets deep in conversation, or riding in cabs together. Their conversations are as intimate as the sex with men they enjoy. In many episodes, the heterosexual sex is akin to jogging or clubbing, but the talk is the true subject, the process by which the show’s narrative, its knowledge and its pleasures, are generated. The pleasures of talking are challenged by the competing ones of eating and stylish self-presentation. The episodes unfold around the friends’ shared breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and cocktails. At each gathering, the friends appear in different outfits and are ready to discuss the latest chapter in the chronicle of their sexual and romantic problems. Eating heartily, even if salad or saltwater taffy, literally and metaphorically stands in for other bodily pleasures, pleasures given to oneself yet amplified when done with others. Such eating moments literally structure the show far more than do the women’s sexual encounters. Shared meals, in conjunction with the never-ending conversations, function as the pauses where the women make sense of their lives, where they try to sort out what matters and what does not. They measure themselves against each other, listening in sympathy or outrage to how one of their friends might handle the same situation.

These conversations, on cell phones or face to face, become the bedrock of their collective life and of Carrie’s sex column. For not only does she get a regular supply of dating stories from her friends, Carrie also gets the discussion and debate about sex and its significance. Through these conversations, in fact, Carrie gets access to a more discursive and imaginary place where sexual pleasure is not confined only to the bodies of those involved, but to those who get to listen to the stories about pleasure. For example, in season four, when Carrie has a gigantic orgasm with a guy who has an Attention Deficit Disorder, part of the pleasure of that orgasm comes from talking about it to her friends. The friends’ collective marveling at a night of pleasure, at a forbidden practice, or at specific orgasms, secures the pleasure in time and place, makes it more real, and importantly makes it possible for the speaker (and
the audience) to savor it all the more. The connections that are not genital, but are pleasurable, that make sex more real than when one had it, complicate the series’ representation of heterosexuality. For what the friends come to want are not only the good nights of sex, but also the pleasures they get from sharing it, through conversation, with that someone special who cares.

Crucially, these friendships, with their problems and jealousies, offer the women an emotional alternative to the compromising world of boyfriends and potential husbands. The bonds that they forge, and upon which they rely, provide the women with the support that the endless stream of men cannot give them. The friends rely on each other to pay attention to their worries, to care about their latest $400 shoes, to be there when their mother dies, when a boyfriend dumps them, or when they dump a boyfriend. Ultimately, in function if not in name, they provide each other with an alternative family. 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.

The challenge the friendships pose to the women’s heterosexual identities is not that such friendships mark them as gay. Rather, the connections they have with each other create an alternative to their boyfriends, an alternative that, by its very existence, grants the women options different from those traditionally signified as “heterosexual” (where women satisfy their desires with one man, serially or monogamously). Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha have created a world within a world or, to borrow historian Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s term, a “female world of love and ritual” that supplements the heterosexual world of men in which they also live (Carroll Smith Rosenberg 1975). . . .

One of the projects of feminist historians in the late 1970s was to reclaim women’s friendships from the shadows of the nineteenth-century private sphere. For slave women, as documented by Deborah Gray White and Angela Davis, or for white middle-class women, as documented by Carroll Smith Rosenberg, the culture of separateness forged deep bonds with other women over birth, death, marriage, baptism, and care-taking.1 Women’s historians have argued that these private bonds were passionate, that they involved psychological and physical intimacy, and provided support and love that women living in racial/gender hierarchies could not get from men, who like women, lived largely in homosocial worlds. . . .

If Sex and the City’s raison d’être is the detailing of how hard it is to find a man worth committing to in modern Gotham, the show is nevertheless structured around the women’s non-heterosexual desires. Its clever innovation was to build the narrative around the very familiar and under-theorized alternative that women do have to men, to boyfriends and to the institutions of heterosexuality. The world of love and ritual that the four friends create for themselves allows the series’ exploration of female heterosexuality to go forward without marking the women as homosexuals.

Female friendship, then, is the first thematic of SATC. The second is female sexuality itself. Sexual explicitness occurs in two related arenas in the show: showing the women having sex with multiple partners over the course of the series, and the characters’ use of explicit language to describe to their friends the sex they have had with men. The sex talk, which makes up the bulk of the friends’ discussions, is one site of the series’ postfeminist sensibility. The tactic of show-and-tell around the women’s sex demonstrates that “heterosexual sex” refers to many things besides the missionary position or female sexual subservience. Many critics and viewers initially believed that the sex talk was the aspect of the show that was most innovative and had the most potential to disrupt confining gender constructions.
The women’s frank talk about the explicit sex achieves a number of important effects. First, the sex talk takes place in the context of the friends’ conversations, conversations that constitute what is knowable by the show. This knowledge works in the same way that consciousness-raising sessions did for second wave feminists. The women’s talk provides an account of the “dissonance” the characters experience between ideas about heterosexual romance and their experience of straight sex. The talk explains what’s not comfortable in sex, what they don’t like about what this or that lover does, what they would like more of in pleasures of heterosexual sex for women. These women are shown enjoying intercourse in an array of positions with numerous partners. The characters love penises and the men who bear them. They love feeling desirable. The pleasure they take in sex, which they narrate to each other in conversation, both binds them to each other and erotically to heterosexual pleasures. This must be seen as an important contribution the show makes—these women are the subjects of heterosexual sex, not its object.

That said, the series’ postfeminist sensibility undoes some of its potentially liberating aspects. At the same time the talk focuses on the pleasures of heterosexual sex, it also centers on their search for “the right man.” While the show celebrates the friends’ pleasurable sexual encounters, these moments of sex are narrated (on multiple levels of the show) in and through the quest for romantic love. The search for lasting romance reproduces the enduring message that woman’s ultimate personal and sexual liberation lies with men. While the show demonstrates that it is good to find a hard man, for Carrie and her friends, a good man remains so hard to find.

Paradoxically, the search for the right man, which up until the last season had inevitably failed, underscores the centrality of the women to each other. In episode forty, “All or Nothing,” Samantha gets sick and none of her lovers come to nurse her. In her hour of need, when all the desirability is gone, when there is no makeup, no lacy underwear, and no fancy cocktails, it is Carrie who comes to give her medicine and wipe her nose. Carrie reassures her lonely and despairing friend that they are not alone, that they have each other. A moment of postfeminist angst—being liberated is not all we were told it would be—is mitigated by the show’s queer perspective. Having each other becomes the way these women manage what is often represented as their lonely heterosexuality.

The show returns viewers back to this meta-narrative of queer families and even insists on ritualizing those self-chosen bonds. At the end of season four (episode sixty-four, “Ring a Ding Ding”) Carrie asks Charlotte for a loan with which to buy her literal home and to preserve her symbolic autonomy. At lunch with wine, a now separated Charlotte slides her engagement ring, encased in its original soft velvet box, the symbol of what straight women are said to desire, across the table to Carrie as a down payment for a new home. Carrie inhales sharply, looks up and searches Charlotte’s eyes for her meaning. “Will you take it?” Charlotte asks. Carrie takes Charlotte’s hand, and whispers, in a voice full of love, “Are you sure?” The penultimate scene that haunts Carrie and her friends’ inner closet of romantic love is enacted, but not with the “proper” person that straight women imagine themselves sitting across from. Instead of the boyfriend, it is the girlfriend. Not the lesbian girlfriend, but the straight girlfriend. And for this show, at least, and in this literary Gotham, this is indeed the “proper” person, the friend who will always be there.

Similarly, in the final season (episode eighty-eight, “The Ick Factor”), Carrie demands that her new boyfriend acknowledge the centrality of her relationship with Samantha. Samantha, recently diagnosed with breast cancer, is the character that is at once the most sexually adventurous and the most vulnerable to fears of growing old alone. During Miranda’s wedding, Carrie
and Samantha hold hands. Underscoring the family that already exists, the camera turns to Carrie and Samantha as we hear Miranda promise to her husband “to have and to hold, in sickness and health, as long as we both shall live.” Boys on the side, indeed. Call the boyfriend to dispose of rodents, and girlfriends to dispel fears of growing old alone. What made SATC different was that it regularly suggested that this family of four could be enough to make up a life, a life still worth living without the husband and baby, a life led outside the historic feminine and feminist script.

Yet throughout its tenure, the show walked the fine line between exploring the potential enough-ness of same sex families while never tipping the women into outright gayness. This unstable project—at once insisting on the women’s autonomy from men through their relationships with each other and their heterosexuality—reflects the convergence of postfeminism and queerness in the series as it struggled to conceptualize women’s freedom, sexually and psychologically. Rather than insisting that Carrie is not straight, we must note the multiple ways in which SATC demonstrates, inadvertently and episodically, that heterosexuals have desires that sometimes defy the simple equation between genital contact and sexuality, that sometimes disrupt the lines we draw between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and that sometimes crack the false divides between emotional and sexual pleasures. Gender similarity continues to provide the ground of psychological and emotional pleasures so rich as to be closeted. In its postfeminism, SATC’s solution to the historic problem of sexuality for women simultaneously reaches backward to nineteenth-century bonds of womanhood and forward to female independence based on those same bonds.

Note

1. Carroll Smith Rosenberg (1975), Deborah Gray White (1985), and Angela Davis (1989) are three of many examples.

References