"Hello Lover": Commodification, Intimacy, and Second-Wave Feminism on Sex in the City

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Few television series have captured the popular imagination like Sex and the City (hereafter SATC); if the creation and consumption of ancillary products and services inspired by a show are any indication of its success, then SATC is arguably the most successful non-children’s series of the last decade. Although the show’s finale aired three years ago, the buzz surrounding the SATC movie (currently in production), the increasing number of sightseers taking the SATC tour of New York City, and the best-selling catalog of SATC-derived self-help books illustrate the show’s enduring popularity. The syndication of the show (albeit a highly bowdlerized version) all but guarantees the continuation of the SATC phenomenon into the foreseeable future.

It is not surprising then, that cultural studies scholars, especially feminists, have been eagerly providing commentary about SATC, with interpretations ranging from formalist readings of setting and character, to examinations of SATC’s intertextuality, to extratextual analyses of issues such as audience reception. While this diverse spectrum of critical approaches reflects the complexity of SATC’s depictions of women’s lives, it also illustrates the marked split among scholars with regards to the show’s intervention into gender and sexual politics: some contend that the show ultimately confirms rather than contests heteronormative constructions of identity; others claim that the show subverts a patriarchal sexual economy through its celebratory depictions of single womanhood.

One of the criticisms leveled at SATC concerns the show’s silence about feminism, which renders it virtually invisible. The characters blithely reap the benefits of second-wave feminism without ever acknowledging its existence; indeed, the closest any of the characters comes to referencing feminism is Charlotte’s allusion to the “women’s movement” as a means of justifying her choice to quit her job and focus on having a baby. 1. The fact that Charlotte has such options to begin with is perhaps due more to her affluence than any conscientiously political assertion of feminist agency, or more precisely, her options underscore the show’s conflation of affluence with agency.

SATC’s implicit promotion of a late capitalist value system manifests itself in other ways as well; Stephanie Harzewski, author of the essay, “The Limits of Defamiliarization: Sex and the City as Late Heterosexuality,” claims that the show has
commodified sexuality to such an extent that it “is the stylishness of one’s execution of sexuality, not the sexuality one chooses, that matters,” thereby emptying its representations of sexuality of any political or ideological weight. Harzewski also notes that all four women characterize men “in terms of accessories and courtship in the idiom of business,” which problematically reinscribes the patriarchal and capitalist notion of the marriage marketplace, even if in this instance women are the ones who are “buying” rather than being “sold.” Similarly, the characters have integrated the language of relationships and romance into their consumer transactions: the title of this essay alludes to a scene from season 4’s “I Heart NY,” in which Carrie breathily greets a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes she sees in a store window with the phrase, “hello lover,” as she and Samantha gaze longingly and lustfully at them. For a number of scholars, then, although SATC is indisputably a woman-centered show, its elision of feminism and equation of women’s subjectivity with acquisition constitute an ideological view distinctly at odds with feminism.

While these critiques of SATC are certainly compelling, implicit in these interpretations is the notion that cultural representations of women should serve a corrective or “wish-fulfillment” function, dismantle dominant constructions of gender and class, and forward socially progressive and prescriptive messages. This is a critical stance common to cultural and feminist studies which, while based on a sincere and impassioned desire to effect social change, is nevertheless highly problematic. Too often, materialist feminist readings fail to acknowledge the political instability of consumer culture, instead relying on a leftist orthodoxy that sweepingly characterizes consumers as passive receptors and capitalism as a totalized entity. Such a premise masks the circulation of contradictory discourses and the potential for subversion that are constitutive of the culture itself. In addition, rather than dismissing SATC’s elision of feminism as a sign of its retrograde politics, it might be more productive to consider the show’s silence as a reflection of the ways in which feminism has perhaps failed to address the stereotypes about itself that circulate within dominant popular culture.

It is my contention that SATC’s engagement with the often contradictory nature of late capitalism is in fact one of the more realistic and subversive aspects of the show. Given the instability inherent in consumer culture, commodifications of various identity categories have the potential for both resistance and concession: I agree with Harzewski that representations of sexuality as objects of consumption reinscribe class differences, but the show’s “marketing” of politicized representations of intimacy and women’s friendships to its viewers challenges traditional views of sexuality and public discourse, making SATC one of the few homosocial alternatives to the tired marriage plot that permeates so much of women’s entertainment. Along less subversive but no less enlightening lines are the ways in which the characters’ consumerist behavior reveals the dialectical process through which heteronormative pop culture absorbs, appropriates, and repackages feminist discourse (including the representations of intimacy and friendships referenced above), thus reductively commodifying feminism into a facile justification for the choices the women make. Ultimately, SATC’s provocative depiction of the coexistence of subversion and concession inherent in commodity culture highlights feminism’s impact upon dominant sexual politics while nevertheless pointing to the work that feminist scholars still need to do. In the next section, I’ll explore in detail the show’s commodifications of intimacy and feminism, first briefly reviewing a well-known discussion about the politicization of intimacy and then linking it
Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s essay “Sex in Public” claims that conventional heteronormativity defines intimacy as strictly sexual in nature and relegates it to the private sphere. Berlant and Warner observe that as a defiant antidote, Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, f---buddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned…to use [these relationships] as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. (558)

While SATC’s women are undeniably heterosexual (with the possible exception of Samantha, who claims to be “trisexual” because she’ll try anything), the primacy of their friendship certainly falls outside the limited and limiting view of intimacy as an exchange between heterosexual couples. In fact, the show self-consciously works to redefine heteronormative tropes of intimacy, such as in the episode “Ring A Ding Ding” from season 4. Carrie, who has just been dumped by fiancé Aidan, lacks the money for a down payment on her apartment; unable to secure a loan from the bank, she faces the possibility of eviction. The newly divorced Charlotte offers Carrie her Tiffany wedding ring in the manner of a traditional marriage proposal as she asks, “Will you accept this ring?” and Carrie replies, “I will.” The scene revises a familiar heteronormative narrative and places it into a homosocial context, suggesting that men only fleetingly occupy the characters’ lives, while their friendship is the long-term relationship to which they are and should be most truly committed.

SATC also redefines intimacy through its resolute emphasis on sexual frankness and pleasure. The characters discuss a wide array of topics, including “golden showers,” “funky-tasting spunk,” and “depressed” vaginas; in addition, they exchange opinions and evaluations with one another to a much greater extent and in much more vivid detail than with their actual sex partners. In turn, the characters are frequently prompted by their friends’ opinions to experiment with behaviors and practices that they might not have otherwise. In the episode “Baby, Talk is Cheap,” Miranda’s initial aversion to the act Carrie calls “toukus lingus” metamorphoses into a decisive course of action after she hears the conservative Charlotte admit that she finds pleasure in this form of oral sex. Miranda reevaluates her point of view during the course of the conversation, declaring, “I’m definitely in the slow sexual group if even Charlotte is open to this….Is this my last shot, you think? Am I out of the ass loop forever?” Buoyed by Charlotte’s and Samantha’s endorsements, Miranda gives “toukus lingus” a chance and is pleasantly surprised with the results.

Scenarios such as this one sever dominant cultural connections between sex and intimacy. According to Berlant and Warner, heteronormative culture promotes the idea that “sex acts are supposed to be the most intimate communication of them all”; we see that SATC redefines “intimate communication” by making sex acts (especially non-reproductive ones) part of public discourse (555). Harzewski claims that by watching the show, “Viewers receive 30-minute education sessions in straight
diversity, wherein aspects of heterosexuality are revealed as constructed and frequently accompanied by their own set of perversities.” The series denaturalizes heterosexuality and deprivatizes intimacy by making sex a topic of discussion, analysis, and amusement, and substituting pleasure for procreation as the primary goal of sexual activity.

SATC thus offers us a variation on the transformative nature of what Berlant and Warner call the “sex public,” a discursive space “where sex appears...neither redemptive nor transgressive, moral nor immoral, hetero nor homo, nor sutured to any axis of social legitimation,” a space that is “public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (565, 562). Indeed, the characters’ conversations serve as an impunitive site of exchange for both these fictional women and the viewers themselves. This representation of friendship as a source of power also prompts audience members to engage in “public” and “collective activity” as they watch and discuss the show with each other, as illustrated by the phenomenon of SATC-viewing parties held in residences, restaurants, and bars.

Yet while the series offers viewers access to the “sex public,” even temporarily, it also undercuts Berlant and Warner’s suggestion that the “sex public” should work to transform the “possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (548). SATC ultimately reinstates heterosexual normativity through its depiction of pop cultural forms of “sex public” as transitory diversions, commodities with limited shelf lives. We see this most clearly in the series’ last season, when Miranda becomes a fan of a fictional British TV show, Jules and Mimi. The titular characters are a black man and a white woman, respectively, and the show traces the evolution of their romance. When discussing Miranda’s new addiction, Carrie notes that Miranda has traded “Steve-O for TiVo,” referencing the father of Miranda’s baby; Miranda loves Steve, but fearing rejection, she won’t pursue him. Jules and Mimi thus functions as a companion and an outlet through which Miranda can safely and vicariously indulge her romantic fantasies, a relationship perhaps not unlike that of SATC with many of its viewers.

Miranda’s passion for Jules and Mimi initially comments rather playfully on SATC and its audience, but as the season progresses, her life begins to resemble Mimi’s: she becomes intrigued by her new neighbor, Robert Leeds, a doctor for the New York Knicks (played by Blair Underwood). After Miranda and Robert begin dating, her one-time source of escapism becomes a burden: watching Jules and Mimi exchange “I love you’s” prompts a crisis during which she calls Carrie and repeatedly intones, “I am so f----- up,” and admits that although Robert is “perfect,” she still loves Steve. Carrie tells her to turn off her television and leave behind the fictional characters. While Miranda does eventually reunite with Steve, she never mends the rift with Jules and Mimi. The implication of this storyline is that we seek entertainment like SATC as a substitute or compensation or escape from our non-fictional lives, and despite any sense of fulfillment or comfort we might receive from our girlfriends, being in a heterosexual couple is nonetheless the ultimate goal.

This sometimes bewildering circulation of conflicting themes partially reflects SATC’s political reticence, but it also accurately illustrates the instability and incongruity of late capitalist subjectivity. Jane Arthurs argues that “postmodern consumer culture in itself produces contradictory juxtapositions that
undermine any secure position from which to interpret the world," including feminism, which has altered drastically from the collective and politically urgent movement of the 60s and 70s (88). In her book, Where the Girls Are, Susan Douglas pinpoints the 80s as the era in which tenets of feminism became commodified and consequently distorted:

Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires. Women's liberation became equated with women's ability to do whatever they wanted for themselves, whenever they wanted, no matter what the expense…. The ability to spend time and money on one's appearance was a sign of personal success and of breaking away from the old roles and rules that held women down in the past. (246)

Nowhere do we see this metamorphosis more clearly on SATC than in episode 83, entitled "A Woman's Right to Shoes." The episode's title alludes to the continuing struggle over abortion rights, though the substitution of "choose" with "shoes" signifies the shift to an explicitly consumerist mindset, in which one's individuality precludes collective identity as a source of political consciousness, and consumer ownership displaces questions of bodily ownership.

The central conflict of the episode is between Carrie and her friend, Kira (played by Tatum O'Neal), one in a long list of friends for whom Carrie has purchased engagement, wedding, and baby presents. Carrie and her closest male friend, Stanford, attend Kira's party commemorating the birth of her third child; upon their arrival, they reluctantly comply with her request that guests remove their shoes to avoid transmitting germs to the children. At the end of the evening, Carrie is horrified when her new Manolo Blahniks have disappeared. Kira offers to pay her for them, but when Carrie tells her they cost $485, she offers only $200, then dresses Carrie down for her "extravagant lifestyle" and dismissively says, "They're just shoes." A dejected and reflective Carrie then provides a voiceover narration that situates the conflict within a larger context of intolerance and oppression:

When we were young, Marlo Thomas sang to us about accepting each other and our differences. But then, we got older, and started singing a different tune. We stopped celebrating each other's life choices and started qualifying them. Is acceptance really such a childish concept, or did we have it right all along? When did we stop being free to be you and me?

Carrie's allusion to avowed feminist Marlo Thomas and her 1972 children's television special and album, Free to Be You and Me, directly invokes second-wave feminism even if she avoids using the actual "f-word." But her definition of independence as the freedom to make "life choices" that others should validate illustrates the facile misinterpretations of second-wave feminism that dominant culture promotes and sells, and recalls Douglas's characterization of 1980s feminism as "female narcissism unchained...collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires." Thomas's aphorism, "free to be you and me," evinces an inclusive vision unencumbered by oppressive traditional attitudes, but as Beth Montemurro contends, "This whole debate about choice [on SATC] must be placed in the context of oppression"; that is, Carrie's choice to have shoes instead of
children is actually "predicated upon other women’s lack of choices." Carrie has options available to her because of her affluence that many women (perhaps even Kira) do not ("Charlotte Chooses Her Choice"). It is also ironic that as Carrie campaigns for acceptance of others, she assumes Kira’s exclusionary attitude by describing her to Miranda as having had “two Caesarians and a lobotomy.”

In the end, not even a “ground-breaking” show like SATC can "escape the cultural trap of ambivalence toward women, their identities, and feminism," though this ambivalence accurately reflects the unintentional political disconnect of third-wave feminism (“Charlotte”). The temptation to summarily dismiss SATC as typical patriarchal pop cultural ephemera is powerful, but to do so requires a denial of how late capitalist culture has transformed feminism into a consumer-friendly source of enablement and a denial regarding our own participation in consumer culture. Fredric Jameson asserts that we cultural critics are “now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected...that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation...becomes unavailable” (85-6). Rather than relying on “old-fashioned ideological critique” then, perhaps we should conscientiously and consistently reevaluate our own assumptions and complicity with the very dominant culture we purport to subvert. Ultimately, in this postmodern, postfeminist, late capitalist society in which we are all implicated, maybe the most truly intimate and politically loaded relationship is between us and, to quote Homer Simpson, the “glowing warmth of [television’s] warming glow.”

Notes

1. Beth Montemurro’s essay “Charlotte Chooses Her Choice: Liberal Feminism on Sex and the City” (see Works Cited for complete bibliographical listing) provides an insightful and much more detailed reading of this scene and its political implications.

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Works Cited


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Sex toys History of sexuality Second-wave feminism Dildos Vibrators Dell Williams. This is a preview of subscription content, log in to check access. Cite article. How to cite? RIS Papers Reference Manager RefWorks Zotero. ENW EndNote. BIB BibTeX JabRef Mendeley. Bodies of knowledge: Sexual, reproduction, and women’s health in the second wave. University of Chicago Press. Google Scholar. Koedt, A. (1973). The Myth of the vaginal Orbasm. In A. Koedt, E. Levine, & A. Rapone (Eds.), Radical feminism (pp. 198–207). New York: Quadrangle Books. Google Scholar. Sending Sexy Texts Messages Is The Right Way In The Modern Era To Make Him Highly Aroused. So guys just grab your phone and keep your fingers ready to press the send button with some hot and spicy texts to speak your language of sex with your own sexting examples. Here Are My 56 Sexy Texts Message for Him. 1. Hey Honey! Actually I happened to read a magazine in which the author mentioned about some exciting sex positions. If you were free we could have tried tonight? 26. I don’t understand why it happens every time, but the moment you lick my nipples my legs get weak. What killed second-wave feminism was, in retrospect, not the conservative backlash of Reagan’s America so much as feminist infighting about sex and porn. Porn is never not a hot topic in our culture, but it was particularly controversial in the late 1970s; to some radicals, feminists like Gloria Steinem and Andrea Dworkin were starting to sound a little too much like the pro-family-values conservatives in their demands to ban material deemed pornographic, First Amendment be damned. The great cultural critic Ellen Willis, who in the heat of these debates coined the term pro-sex feminism, was a