

Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV

Bathrooms are a messy business. They are where we tend our animal bodies; they are where we enact a host of cultural beliefs. They offer privacy and structure sociality. We may stand, sit, or squat at their toilets, according to custom. Their bathing zone may be adjacent or not, designed to serve one or many. In a modern US context, they combine elimination with grooming, toilets with sinks and mirrors, conceptions of dirtiness with those of hygiene and beauty, dynamics of concealment with those of display. Such tensions are multiplied when it comes to public restrooms. Though addressing needs we all share, communal toilets have long served, ironically enough, to enforce a variety of social divisions (Barcan 2010). Notable among these today is the divide produced by compelling us to pee as either “ladies” or “gentlemen,” a bifurcation particularly dense with political meanings and effects.¹

The demand for designated women’s toilets originated in the late Victorian period as an equity issue. As urban sanitation improved, the building of public facilities for men prompted campaigns to provide like facilities for women. Advocates for “potty parity” argued that the lack of restrooms placed limits on women’s ability to move freely through city streets. Their call for lavatories was a call for inclusion in the public sphere (Gershenson and Penner 2009, 4–5). At the same time, as Terry S. Kogan (2010) explains, the assumption that women required special, segregated facilities drew on notions of properly modest and domestic femininity, reinforcing the ideology of separate spheres. More than a century later, gendered restrooms remain fraught for similar reasons. Feminists today continue to demand greater parity while also interrogating the role of separate bathrooms in reproducing gender norms.

Across dozens of educational and occupational sites, as women infiltrate previously all-male spaces, they are confronted by the absence of equal bathroom facilities. Women in the US Senate had no toilet of their own until 1992. Likewise in 2021, despite decades of legislation and updated building

¹ See Jacques Lacan’s ([1977] 2002, 143) oft-cited account of “urinary segregation” (and sexual difference generally) in obedience to the restroom signs “Ladies” and “Gentleman.” For feminist theorists, Lacan’s parable offers a particularly elegant illustration of binary gender as conferred rather than given.

codes, the inadequacy of public toilets for women is plain to see at any concert or sporting event. At the same time, as impatient women can attest, to break ranks and use the “wrong” room is a serious violation (Anthony and Dufresne 2009, 51–52). In recent years, the role of bathrooms in policing the boundary between “male” and “female” has been further highlighted by the movement for transgender rights. In 2014, transgender boy Gavin Grimm was denied use of the boys’ bathroom at his Virginia high school; Grimm would go on to file a successful case against the Gloucester County School Board. But the gender politics of bathrooms go beyond parity for women and recognition of trans identities. As Jack Halberstam (1998) observes, those entering the women’s room are judged not only on whether they are female-born but also on whether they are sufficiently, properly feminine. Masculine women may be harassed not because they’re mistaken for men but because they pose a challenge to the binary gender system (22–23, 27). As in the Victorian period, today’s segregated bathrooms serve at once to delimit women’s access to public spaces and to delimit what counts as normative womanhood.²

Addressing “the bathroom problem,” Halberstam notes the tendency in queer scholarship to “fix on the men’s room” (1998, 26).³ Building on Lee Edelman’s analysis of the men’s room as a space both inviting and prohibiting queer desire, Halberstam turns his attention to a different dynamic: “Whereas men’s rest rooms tend to operate as a highly charged sexual space in which sexual interactions are both encouraged and punished, women’s rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity” (24). In the discussion to come, I hope to further the project of directing our attention to the women’s room—in this case, with a look at toileting women as they appear on several female-authored cable shows. Shifting from men to women, from real bathrooms to realistically imagined ones, I will also be turning from contested public spaces to images of women in domestic settings.⁴

² Feminist responses tend to split accordingly: some battle inequity through “changes in cities, buildings, maintenance, staffing, and fixtures that adapt to women’s needs” (Greed 2010, 139); others would eliminate the division of restrooms by gender altogether (Case 2010).

³ For an influential example, see Edelman (1994). For an early (and controversial) sociological study of male cruising practices in the 1960s, see Humphreys (1970). On what the British call “cottaging,” see Houlbrook (2005).

⁴ For a foundational work addressing domestic spaces and television, see Spigel (2001) on suburbia as represented—and debated—in postwar popular culture. Lynn Spigel’s project, like my own, resonates with feminist efforts emergent in the 1980s to appreciate the creative as well as confining aspects of domestic life and of women’s culture generally. For a work turning from suburban to urban domesticity, see Wojcik (2010). Her analysis of the postwar “apartment plot” (in film and elsewhere) anticipates my comments on TV apartments as settings for intimacies beyond the heteronormative.

To do so is not to leave politics behind. Whereas Halberstam is surely right that actual ladies' rooms function conservatively, in the series I take up, female creators give us women in bathrooms who variously offend and upend conventional views of femininity. As we will see, their depictions also serve my purpose of putting pressure on the category of realism. My goal, in the end, is not simply to tout the work of female creators, much less to catalog instances of bathrooms on TV. My project, rather, is to pose the following politically charged question: Whose reality is privileged by a particular version of realism? Offering as case studies three women-centered series, I would begin to renegotiate the terms of realism along feminist lines.⁵

Bathroom rights as civil rights

Before pivoting to television, however, a bit more on the history of bathroom rights as civil rights. As David Serlin (2010) recounts, the achievement of public bathroom access for wheelchair users and other people with disabilities took decades of activism beginning in the late 1960s, with requirements for disabled stalls finally codified in 1980. Yet as Serlin observes, architectural measures geared to “independence” deny—and leave stigmatized—the reality of dependence on caregivers not only by the disabled but also by children and the elderly (which is to say, for some length of time, by all of us). And if public bathroom mores as well as architectural features strongly discourage reliance on others to pee, shit, and wash up, our stock of cultural representations generally do the same, reinforcing the assumption that privacy and physical independence in relation to toileting are necessarily both desirable and possible.

Demanding changes to bathrooms and other architectural features, disability rights activists drew on precedents set by the civil rights movement targeting racism effected by the built environment. Needless to say, the division of restrooms into “white” and “colored” under the regime of Jim Crow was an especially vile and explicit example of bathrooms deployed as a technology of social control.⁶ We might assume that such bifurcation by race was analogous

⁵ Thanks to Rebecca Lemon for helping me to crystallize the stakes of my project. I am equally indebted to the generosity and discernment of Steve Arata, Cory Fraiman-Lott, Sarah Hagelin, Gillian Silverman, and the two reviewers for *Signs*.

⁶ Less explicitly, bathrooms have also been (and continue to be) sites of class discipline and struggle: public toilets in airports are more pleasant and plentiful than those in bus stations (Anthony and Dufresne 2009, 50); people presenting as middle class have easier access to bathrooms in restaurants and hotels. On the dearth of public lavatories as a strategy aimed at the homeless population, see Davis (1992, 233–34). On the campaign for bathroom rights in the workplace, see Linder and Nygaard (1998).

to that by gender, both serving to codify and biologize hierarchical social relations. Indeed, Elizabeth Abel (1999, 438) notes that Jacques Lacan's famous discussion of the "laws of urinary segregation" explicates sexual difference using a term (*ségrégation*) whose racial connotations (in French as in English) would have been evident at the time. Analyzing photos of bathroom doors in the segregated South, Abel concludes, however, that the division of toilets into "white" or "colored" actually disrupted as well as mimicked the divide between "gentleman" and "ladies" (439). For African American women, there was scarcely a designated "ladies" room—which is to say, no stable place for them in the normative gender schema.

How does this bear on contemporary television? How does it bear, in particular, on three recent "dramadies": Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer's *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014–19), Issa Rae's *Insecure* (HBO, 2016–21), and Lena Dunham's *Girls* (HBO, 2012–17)? While there are certainly other shows with the occasional bathroom scene, these three are notable for their repeated use—we might almost say their signature use—of the bathroom as both setting and symbol in women's everyday lives.⁷ In an industry dominated by white men, they also stand out as vehicles for the perspectives of one Black woman (Rae) and three white women (Jacobson, Glazer, and Dunham). As I hope to show, their particular deployments of bathrooms intervene quite logically in the race-gender frameworks Abel documents: frameworks that remain in implicit but no less forceful effect today. Thus, Jacobson and Glazer's *Broad City*, along with Dunham's *Girls*, feature white women whose unruly bodies, sprawled on toilets and in tubs, are dedicated to desecrating the ideal of proper ladyness. Of course, for those excluded from rather than oppressed by this ideal, the project is rather different. Rae's *Insecure* is similarly punctuated by bathroom scenes, but in striking contrast to *Broad City* and *Girls*, it eschews toilets and tubs, grossness and fleshiness, in favor of Black female introspection. Countering the historical invisibility (or cartoonish hypervisibility) of Black womanhood, Issa's prop is a mirror—one reflecting not a static external appearance but a rich and dynamic interiority.

⁷ Unlike scholars, more than one journalist has noticed the salience of this motif. Megan Garber (2016) cites bathroom scenes in my three shows plus additional ones in *Atlanta*, *Fleabag*, *Divorce*, and *This Is Us*; on the importance of such scenes in *Girls*, see Budowski (2017); on the "potty humor" of *Broad City*, see Saraiya (2016) and Wolper (2019). Earlier shows with notable (though less defining) bathroom scenes include *Seinfeld*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; for another current show more nearly aligned with the feminist aesthetic of bathroom realism theorized here, see *Better Things* (2016–).

Realism as a feminist project

The historical and contemporary realpolitik of bathrooms as referenced above, primarily a politics of access, is clear enough. The politics of visibility—what’s at stake for me in exploring televisual images of bathrooms—requires further elaboration. As I’ve suggested, while the terms are different, I see my discussion of cable shows as nevertheless tied to the aforementioned struggles for greater inclusivity. If my goal is not to document televised bathrooms per se, neither is it simply to locate images of equal-access toileting. Rather, by shifting from actual public spaces to private ones in a realist mode, I wish to ask what kinds of people, locations, and stories serve as markers of the real; what kinds of shows are said to capture the grittiness of real life; what versions of realism are valued and for what reasons. Our feminist stake in challenging what counts as real is significant: to query and extend the bounds of realism is to show what has been hidden and claim what has been disavowed. By theorizing a televisual mode I call “bathroom realism,” I am out to affirm a set of reality effects centered on aspects of female experience more often obscured as either boring or disgusting.

In pursuing the uses of realism for this feminist project, I begin with concepts derived from the realist novel. I recruit these literary concepts—especially those dealing with realism’s subject matter—to identify a visual thematics recurrent across my three television series. To be sure, at the level of form, these texts differ not only from literary ones but also from each other and from notions of formal realism developed within television studies (Bennett et al. 1981, 285–352; Fiske 1987, 21–36). At the level of content, however, *Broad City*, *Insecure*, and *Girls* are more readily grouped together on the basis of shared concerns.⁸ Here, too, there are differences—yet each in its own way has something to offer to a theory of feminist realism and postnetwork television anchored by the trope of the bathroom.

The category of literary realism has been, since its origins in the nineteenth century, a slippery and frequently contested one, hosting various associations—now (negatively) with the feminine, now (positively) with the masculine. In

⁸ Jessica Ford (2019) makes a related case for linking these three series (along with *Transparent*, *One Mississippi*, *Better Things*, *Shrill*, and others) as evidence of an emergent “women’s indie television” inspired by *Girls* and borrowing from indie cinema (929). Her sense of the “unspectacular feminist sensibility” (929) uniting these shows—their aesthetic of smallness “in both scale of production and thematic content” (933), their feminism “rooted in the everyday and the mundane” (932)—rhymes with many of the observations I cluster under *realism*. My goal in focusing on the particular trope of the bathroom is to highlight a further common denominator: an investment in recognizing the conventionally ugly and hidden aspects of women’s daily lives.

1885, George Moore derided earlier modes of realism as prudish and effeminate while defending his own more candid version of realism for its virility.⁹ By the end of that century, however, the new realism was identified not with tough-minded masculinity but with the reprehensible feminist candor of Mona Caird and other New Women novelists (Arata 2007, 182). Depending on the wish to champion or revile, the gender spin given to novelistic realism has varied. That said, the set of characteristics seen as definitive has actually been relatively stable. Commenting primarily on nineteenth-century British, French, and Russian texts, literary critics then and now recur to many of the same elements as conducive to a sense of the real.

Drawing on the hints and formulations provided by scores of writers—from George Eliot to Peter Brooks—my own lengthy list of reality effects includes the following loosely overlapping themes and textual features: ordinary characters, everyday settings, familiar objects, common behaviors, quotidian concerns, daily routines, the average and middling, care for the local and small, specification of physical and other details, density and close observation of things, slow pacing and minute calibration of time, limited geographical range, smallish circles of people, the familial and relational, domestic interiors and practices, confined spaces, close proximity of bodies, two people at a time, intimate conversations, prosaic diction, psychic interiors, emotional honesty, moments of confession to oneself or someone else. Most important for our purposes here are several attributes added by late Victorians in pursuit of a “realer” realism: candor about bodies and sexuality, treatment of topics seen as possibly offensive, images of the unvarnished and even “ugly.”¹⁰

Realness, it seems, is conveyed by the stuff we bump up against on a daily basis, a class of things and behaviors that are readily recognizable but also, for that very reason, generally regarded—epistemologically and aesthetically—as belonging to a lower order. Masculinized, these features may be claimed as populist or admired as sternly empiricist. Feminized, they may be shunned as unseemly or, on the other hand, disparaged as banal. It is because, in today’s hierarchy of value, a realism of the ordinary is most likely to be coded and derided as “feminine” that I am moved to defend it from a feminist

⁹ Moore’s derision was aimed at Charles Edward Mudie, whose circulating library had refused to carry Moore’s naturalist novel; his diatribe calls Mudie “an old woman” whose taste caters to fussy female readers (1885, 16).

¹⁰ See Eliot ([1859] 1980) and Brooks (2005). See also, among many others, James ([1884] 1984), Auerbach (1953), Watt (1957), Lukács (1963), and Levine (1981). Historically, there has always been some crossover between literary and visual realisms. Arising alongside French realist painting and the development of photography, the nineteenth-century novel also drew heavily—especially for its everyday domestic subject matter—on seventeenth-century Dutch painting (Brooks 2005, 3, 16–17; Yeazell 2008).

perspective. Turning from the likes of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Gustave Flaubert, I look to Glazer, Jacobson, Rae, and Dunham because theirs, too, is a realism of the feminized ordinary.¹¹

The point is highlighted when we contrast their works with such higher-status, male-centered shows as *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. Both feature “ordinary” family men who are actually anything but ordinary and whose interest lies precisely in their radical inauthenticity. By contrast, the characters in my shows (like women generally) personify the dull domestic realism from which such antiheroic male characters deviate. Moreover, while Don and Walter are committed to hiding their real selves, Abbi, Ilana, Issa, and Hannah are committed to full exposure—whether physically or emotionally. Unlike those masculine sagas, the abiding concern of my shows is with the “little” and the “low”: ordinary people trying to keep it real, the routines and nonevents of daily life. Other aspects of their women-centered realism include a limited, fairly consistent cast of characters; a relatively circumscribed spatial and temporal range; domestic settings, props, and concerns; emphasis on the relational and familial; peak moments marked not by violence but by connection; a graphic but deidealized treatment of bodies, sexuality, and emotions—especially female ones.

Returning now to that most ignoble of domestic settings, I would argue that *Broad City*, *Insecure*, and *Girls* not only represent a realism of the everyday but, like the later Victorians, take this mode one step further—or lower—to what I am calling bathroom realism. Near the bedroom but surpassing it in connotations of fleshiness, fluidity, and vulnerability, the bathroom is claimed by all three of these shows as the realest of real spaces. What is more tied to the rhythms of daily life, to the ordinary and even abject, to a bottom line of authenticity, than the bathroom? An interior within an interior, it is usually windowless—a room at the core. Especially for Rae and Dunham, it also brings out what is innermost to a character, the messy accumulated matter of psyches as well as bodies. In comments on acting for television, Lucy Fife Donaldson

¹¹ While these and other nineteenth-century realist writers may be highly acclaimed, their preoccupation with domestic matters continues to be singled out for criticism. In a widely cited book, Nancy Armstrong (1987) ties the domestic purview of the early British novel to conservative class politics; Elaine Freedgood (2006), though usefully probing the backstories of domestic objects in Victorian novels, renders these props of daily life wholly coextensive with their dark labor histories. For my response to such views, see *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (Fraiman 2017), in which I defend appreciative accounts of domestic labor and concerns (especially in the context of queer and/or precarious housekeeping). That such descriptions are more often dismissed as inherently conventional reflects, at least in part, a bias against practices associated with women. Redeeming a feminized realism of the ordinary, this essay builds on my earlier efforts to counter this bias.

and James Walters (2018) identify “limited or enclosed spaces as sites for expressive interaction” (356). While they focus on scenes in cars, I think their linking of enclosure and expressivity applies equally well to bathrooms. There’s something about a small space, with room for only one or two, that encourages honest speech. Then again, bathroom honesty may mean no more (or less) than outing the facts of our shared animality.

My formulation of bathroom realism goes, in other words, beyond an investment in the mundane to reference late realism’s goal of portraying the raw and unbeautiful (Brooks 2005, 7–12). Treating such topics as poverty and prostitution, marital disaster and feminist protest, the late-century realists explored matters likely to offend or even disgust. All three of my shows may be seen as elaborating on their impulse to represent the conventionally ugly. In *Broad City*, this means tampons and excrement; in *Girls*, it means Hannah’s unabashed, pear-shaped nakedness. *Insecure* approaches ugliness somewhat differently, in keeping with the race-gender logic I have mentioned. Whereas *Broad City* revels in “ugly” bodily functions and *Girls* flaunts Hannah’s “ugly” body, *Insecure* avoids bodily functions and aestheticizes Issa’s body along with Black bodies generally. When it comes to emotion, however, the opposite is true. As her title indicates, Rae gives us a figure struggling with what Sianne Ngai (2005) would call “ugly feelings.”¹²

Before turning to individual readings of my shows, I want briefly to contrast their homely bathroom realism with the highly wrought, self-consciously symbolic use of bathrooms by three of our most iconic film directors.¹³ Think, for example, of the horrific shower murder in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. One minute a woman is soaping up; the next she lies dying as blood spirals down the drain. Think, too, of Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, in which Private “Gomer Pyle,” driven mad by the sadism of basic training, commits murder and suicide while seated on a toilet. And think, finally, of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, in which Vincent Vega, reading a book on the can, is assassinated with his own gun.

¹² On another show exploring the difficult affective terrain of female “depression and other forms of bad feeling” (tied, in this case, to the aging and bloated body of a white woman), see Brooks (2019) on HBO’s *Olive Kitteridge*.

¹³ In one of the very few scholarly pieces to treat on-screen bathrooms, Philip Kuberski (2004) analyzes what he identifies as a recurrent Kubrickian trope. Stanley Kubrick’s goal, he argues, is not “gratuitous ‘realism’” (143) but the exploration of such “intractable polarities of the human condition” as “freedom and necessity” (159). I find it telling that Kuberski dignifies Kubrick’s bathroom motif (and his own) in antirealist terms—elevating its significance to metaphysical levels.

What is it about cinematic showers and toilets that conjure violent death?¹⁴ All of these scenes invoke the simple acts of bathing or excreting in ways that point up our fragility and finitude as embodied creatures. As Hitchcock so graphically shows, conventional views of womanhood actually exaggerate this vulnerability. To judge from the movies, a woman need only take a shower to be naturally, by virtue of her silhouetted curves, susceptible to harm. As we know, the opposite is true of conventional manhood, which would posit an impervious self. For straight-identified men to be caught with their pants down—exposed in all their true leakiness and permeability—is thus to be both feminized and homosexualized. While Pyle is portrayed as insufficiently masculine from the outset, Vega’s mistake is to put down his gun and pick up a book. Both figures—seated like girls, with sphincters unclenched—raise the terrifying, humiliated specter of the unsexed man. Having brought us to this point, Kubrick and Tarantino waste no time in punishing the demystified male body with violent death. In all three of the above scenes, bathroom behaviors evoke feelings of vulnerability coded as feminine, which are then mastered for the sake of invincible manliness by an efficient stroke of narrative violence.¹⁵

For my women-centered cable shows, on the other hand, bathing and shitting are far less fraught and consequential. The vulnerability they entail is rarely cause for panic and never, for our female creators, an excuse for killing. The only blood is menstrual, the only corpses goldfish. While Tarantino has described his images of violence as true to life (“Violence is part of this world and I am drawn to the outrageousness of real-life violence” [in Fuller 1994, xiv]), his is a masculinist realism preferring the “outrageous” to the “ordinary,” the extreme to the middling, a man wielding a gun to a woman washing her face, the moment of dying (or defying death) to the many small gestures (and trips to the bathroom) it takes to get through a day.¹⁶ Dunham

¹⁴ Or, if not death, then danger and transgression of some kind. Bathrooms in movies are typically places to hide from killers, stash weapons, do drugs, or have hasty illicit sex. Alternatively, there are scenes played for scatological laughs. But whether suspenseful or comedic, almost all such sequences center on men, usually in a highly adrenalized (or possibly intoxicated) state—the exception being women under attack. Clearly few are simply realist in the low-key sense that interests me here.

¹⁵ Frances Pheasant-Kelly (2009) discusses *Full Metal Jacket*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Something about Mary* in similar terms. As she rightly elaborates, the fear of feminization prompted by men in bathrooms is also bound up with fear and desire around homosexuality. For her, violence (or humor in *Something*) serves to distract the audience from the homoerotic subtext.

¹⁶ For more on Tarantino’s equation of violence with “the real,” see my discussion of *Pulp Fiction* in *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (Fraiman 2003, 15–16).

talks back to this version of realism in a humorous exchange between aspiring writer Hannah and her friend Ray. Hannah has written a story about a guy she once liked who evidently had trouble with intimacy. Declaring intimacy “trivial,” Ray advises her to write about “real” things like abuse, acid rain, racial profiling, or death. “How ’bout death? How ’bout death?” he asks excitedly. “Death is the most fuckin’ real. You should write about death.”¹⁷ If Hannah seems to listen, Dunham clearly means to ironize this advice—not least by giving us, in *Girls*, a realism enmeshed with the many permutations of intimacy.

***Broad City*: So surreal, so real**

Season 3, episode 1, of *Broad City* includes a sequence that is literally about the lack of public toilets in New York City and the special hardship this poses for women. Lest we miss the point, when our full-bladdered duo finally spot a porta potty, it’s by a construction site marked “men working,” which Ilana instantly glosses as “another sign, literally, of women’s oppression.” As always with her outbursts of unsubtle political commentary, Ilana is right. My interest here, however, isn’t in literal signs of sexism or mimetic depictions of potty poverty but, as I have said, in the gendered attributes and uses of bathroom realism. I take my subtitle for this section from a subsequent scene, which occurs in an absurdly pretentious art gallery. One of the artists, who knew Abbi as an art major in college, condescends to praise her old friend’s landscapes as “so surreal but at the same time they were, they were, just so real.” My reading of *Broad City* appropriates these words as a reasonably good description of the show itself: a screwball pileup of implausible (and occasionally surreal) antics that is nonetheless, in its feminist materialism, just so real.

As illustration of *Broad City*’s repertoire of reality effects, consider the 100-second montage launching us into season 3. The fast-paced sequence is set entirely in the two women’s mirroring bathrooms—Abbi’s on the left, Ilana’s on the right—with the goal of catching us up on the yearlong interlude between seasons 2 and 3 (fig. 1). Both the diegetic spaces and the montage itself are jam-packed with a panoply of things, suggesting at once the paltry dimensions of New York City apartments and the creators’ scrupulous attention to detail.¹⁸ From the toothbrushes and tampons to the small cityscapes of bottles, all are humble objects serving to convey a dense and particularized material world.

¹⁷ Yael Levy (2015, 64) cites this exchange to make a similar point.

¹⁸ On the profusion of “extra jokes, callbacks, and hidden winks” in this carefully curated sequence, see Framke (2016).



Figure 1 Dumping fish/reading Clinton: *Broad City*, season 3, episode 1, “Two Chainz.” © 2016 by Comedy Central. A color version of this figure is available online.

Like the tampons, many of the quickly cited actions speak to mundane aspects of female embodiment that are, in fact, highly consequential: Abbi is on the floor with cramps; Ilana performs a breast exam; both women check the results of home pregnancy tests. Other shots casually re-vision masculinity: Ilana’s gay roommate Jaime shaves (not his face); Abbi’s straight roommate Bevers wriggles into one of her dresses. Sex acts include Ilana’s friend Lincoln going down on her; a bit later, the same in reverse; Ilana making out with a woman, both in Pride Parade getup. The latter three scenes naturally involve Ilana, whose bathroom features a large Q on the wall, along with a trinket warning “fart zone.” And yes, there are farts in the montage as well. In short, with its frank canvassing of gender, sexuality, and corporeality, willfully pushing the limits of what is acceptable, this opening takes the scandalizing concerns of nineteenth-century naturalism and updates them for the twenty-first century.

To be sure, *Broad City*’s madcap affect is nothing like the grim scientism of the earlier school. What it does share, however, is the petition for candor and inclusivity. With this short sequence set in narrow rooms, *Broad City* celebrates a realism that is broad in its purview—affirming while also extending the parameters of ordinariness. As another example, take its treatment of death. Instead of a climactic scene in which a man shoots or stabs someone, the montage makes four quick references to death, tucked in among dance moves and hits of weed. Three involve the goldfish Abbi glumly dumps at regular intervals. The fourth comes via a newspaper she’s reading, with the headline “Death and Hot Dogs: Upper Deck Collapses at Stadium.” As

we see, death in these instances is paired not with a psychopath but with the dailiness of pets and processed meats. Unmotivated and even (by the third fish) routine, death appears here less as a tear in the fabric of ordinary life than as one of its threads.

Devoted to the material, ordinary, sexual, candid, and intimate, *Broad City* insists on bodily functions usually regarded as shameful and gross. In art as in life, grossness is conventionally the prerogative of guys, whose belches, farts, and general slobbiness are the amusing signs of authentic masculinity. For women, by contrast, bodily emissions from sweat to shit are seen as uniformly disgusting (the one exception being tears). Given this double standard, *Broad City*'s most innovative move is to celebrate women in all of their naturalistic grossness (Saraiya 2016; Wolper 2019). Indeed, the show goes so far as to flip the norm completely by making female grossness cute and endearing, while male grossness—in the fleshy, appetitive character of Bevers—is portrayed as genuinely repellent. Significantly, however, if Jacobson and Glazer claim grossness for girls, they do so in a way that goes on to revise its significance. For while images of men toileting are often, as we've said, roiled by anxiety about gender and sexuality, here grossness shared between women is embraced as the truest sign of love. Nowhere is this more true than in episode 8 of the final season. Having puked, peed, and bled together for more than four seasons, our inseparable friends approach the series finale devastated by the prospect of Abbi's relocation. By way of putting a ring on it, Abbi finally grants Ilana's long-standing and dearest wish: FaceTiming her friend, she hovers the phone above the fetid contents of her toilet.

***Insecure*: Hey, mirror bitch**

As I've suggested, the language of realism in *Insecure* differs in significant ways from that of *Broad City*. While Rae gives us bathrooms aplenty, toilets are nowhere to be seen. There's even an improbable shot of best friend Molly calling Issa from the bathroom of her law office: the distraught lawyer slides down the wall and squats there, pulling at toilet paper to wipe her nose—yet the toilet itself remains out of the frame. Here and elsewhere, the downplaying of bodily functions makes for an effective rebuttal to an archive of images reducing African American women to their physical parts and uses.

As we know, in literary, cinematic, and popular depictions, Black female subjectivity has long been under erasure—replaced, with few exceptions, by a handful of stereotypes. Beretta Smith-Shomade (2002) describes Black sitcoms of the 1970s as tending to reprise the roles of the Mammy or Sapphire (15). Later shows typically cast African American women as wives or girlfriends in “vehicles created for Black male stars” (27). In Hollywood, too,

Black women finished out the century still likely to play servants in white narratives and bitch, hoe, or struggling single mother in the spate of Black gangster films following on *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood* (32, 21).

Early in the new millennium, Wanda Sykes's short-lived *Wanda at Large* would make her the first African American woman ever to create and star in her own show. More than a decade later, Issa Rae would be only the second to do so. While retaining some comic elements, *Insecure* eschews the overblown characters, family settings, problem-solving plots, and happy endings of the sitcoms discussed by Smith-Shomade. Nor does the show turn for reality effects to the racialized, male-centered tropes of urban poverty, violence, and criminality. Indeed, Rae makes a point of giving us a South Los Angeles stripped of the gang violence that has dominated both big and little screens. Her Inglewood and Leimert Park are ordinary neighborhoods of taco trucks, shopping malls, swimming pools, and middle school. Issa's worst police encounter is with an officious meter maid.

Instead of brutality in the street, Issa faces microaggressions in the workplace. At the white nonprofit "We Got Y'all," she is either ignored or treated as "the token with all the answers." Asked by her boss in the pilot episode, "What do *you* think we need to do to help these kids?" Issa can't help bursting out, "Stop treating them like they're all the same!" It's an imperative the show will proceed to take seriously. Rejecting the physical types of Black womanhood, Rae gives us a protagonist distinguished above all by the intricacy and mutability of her inner life.

Which brings us to the bathroom. As a trope for the privacy of Issa's mind, Rae turns to the most private room in the house. If *Broad City* stretches and feminizes realism via bathroom objects and bodies, *Insecure* evokes but dematerializes the bathroom, the better to map the shifting dimensions of Issa's psychic reality. Introduced to her yellow-tiled apartment bathroom just minutes into the pilot, we see none of the miscellaneous consumer goods that give heft to Abbi and Ilana's world (fig. 2). When one such item pops up later in season 1—the lotion pump of episodes 4 and 5—it does so divested of physical attributes and imbued with heavily symbolic ones. Its first appearance marks a promise of fidelity, while the second marks a breaking of that promise. In both cases, the bathroom accessory functions as a kind of wavering dream object, a screen for Issa's vacillating and conflicted feelings about herself and others.

The second mirror scene, coming at the midpoint of the pilot, is a vivid montage in which Issa tries on different shades of lipstick and rehearses exaggerated voices, each corresponding to a particular sexual persona—seductress, party girl, vamp. The last shot has Issa wiping off the lipstick, applying a natural lip balm, and smiling with satisfaction. The overall effect is clearly parodic. Woman as object of the male gaze—in particular, the hypersexualized



Figure 2 Issa in dialogue with her mirror self: *Insecure*, season 1, episode 1, “Insecure as Fuck.” © 2016 by HBO. A color version of this figure is available online.

Black woman—is exposed as the product of effort and artifice rather than nature. In its concern with appearance, however, this montage is atypical. From now on, when Issa addresses the bathroom mirror, it will be to wrestle with internal rather than external matters. I leave this scene with one more observation. The last lip-balm moment might seem to imply that Issa exits the bathroom having claimed her unadorned “true” self. In fact, the rest of this episode and, indeed, the series as a whole will insist on the elusiveness of a stable, consistent, “authentic” self. Rae turns to the bathroom, I would argue, for a realism that eschews not only objects and bodies in favor of the psyche but also any illusion that the psyche is a simple place.

Before elaborating on this point, I want to mention several techniques employed to emphasize the autonomy—the separate, compelling, nonphysical reality—of the bathroom as a space located in Issa’s imagination. While the first two mirror scenes are preceded by establishing shots of her apartment complex, the third one breaks with this pattern. It’s open-mic night at Maverick’s Flat, and Issa’s ex-boyfriend, music producer Daniel, is urging her to take the stage. The camera pushes in on her wide-eyed expression, as if to literally enter her head, and suddenly we are back home in the yellow bathroom, where Issa and her mirror self agree: “*You got this.*” As she blinks and reopens her eyes, bathroom lights become stage lights, and Issa is leaning into a mic. Such a quick, private visit to the mental space of the bathroom, followed by a return to the physical space she shares with other characters, will be used on subsequent occasions to contrast the angry words Issa voices to herself with the polite ones she speaks aloud.

The voices in Issa's head are given further substance and credibility by a mirror self who, in keeping with the autonomous space she occupies, proves to have an existence of her own. Unlike the several times that her boyfriend Lawrence peers into a mirror, all of Issa's mirror scenes involve the shot/reverse-shot convention used to represent two characters in conversation: half the shots show Issa from the mirror self's perspective. Late in the series, the realness of that self is made explicit by an upbeat rap set in the bathroom of Issa's new apartment: "Hey, mirror bitch, you lookin' real clean, you lookin' real bad, you lookin' like a queen." Interrupted by a knock on the door, Issa turns and walks away admonishing, "Don't you go nowhere, mirror bitch." The scene closes with a shot of mirror bitch laughing as she peers out after Issa's retreating figure: "Where I'mma go?"

So far I have stressed Rae's method of invoking the bathroom not to display Issa's body but to incarnate the workings of her psyche—a world apart. What remains is to stress the liveliness and fragmentation of this world. Issa's dialogue with "mirror bitch," herself a multiplying, shape-shifting entity, is complicated in almost every scene by additional voices, camera angles, and perspectives. In one case, Issa impersonates Lawrence; in another she flirts with Daniel. When Ty Dolla Sign enters the fantasy, we wonder if what Issa actually wants isn't to have Daniel but to be him, rubbing shoulders with celebrity musicians. Issa's problem, a deeply human one, is not knowing what she wants.

In the opening episode, Issa performs her infamous "Broken Pussy" rap, with apparent reference to poor romantically cursed Molly. By the end of the season, however, the brokenness turns out to describe not Molly's body but Issa's psyche. For while the pilot's crowd-pleasing rap seemed to promise a tale of "finding her voice," the actual trajectory is quite the opposite: a development stymied by troubles in love and friendship that are largely of Issa's own making. Rejecting physical stereotypes, *Insecure* is equally uninterested in any notion of African Americans as emotionally "cool." In Rae's hands, what's real is a world in which Black characters—women in particular—are permitted to struggle with conflicting desires; to feel awkward and insecure; to behave in ways that are self-defeating; to seek help from therapists; to achieve moments of self-recognition; in short, to have an inner life.

***Girls*: The most fuckin' real**

I turn now from Black female experience to a show whose narrow focus on white women has been justly criticized. But if *Girls* offers a curated version of New York City, Dunham's portrayal of the pudgy and self-involved Hannah Horvath stands out for its refusal to simplify or sanitize. This too has been

criticized, though with far less justice. While admired by many, the series has sparked a level of distaste on social media and in the popular press recalling the scandalized reception of such late nineteenth-century naturalist works as Émile Zola's *Nana* and Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus*. Like those earlier works, *Girls*' primary offense seems to lie in giving us a female protagonist distinguished by her frank sexuality and strong instincts for self-preservation. As attacks on Hannah's realistic nakedness and "unlikability" make clear, a character who so brazenly contradicts the white feminine ideal of skinny selflessness continues to rankle.¹⁹

As we have seen, *Broad City* and *Insecure* each deploy a distinctive bathroom trope that functions in a fairly consistent manner to portray either female embodiment or female introspection. By contrast, the many bathroom scenes in *Girls* (I count nine in the first season) are filmed in various ways and serve a range of purposes—while all asserting a specifically gendered version of the real. Several give us Hannah's partial, matter-of-fact, tattooed nakedness as she sits in the tub interacting with best friends Marnie and Jessa. At least one critic has complained that such nonsexual female nudity is "unmotivated" on account of its failure to arouse. But perhaps Dunham has another more realist motivation in mind: to observe that women's bodies have a life outside the male gaze and that women experience their own nakedness on a daily basis primarily in nonsexual contexts.²⁰

Other bathroom scenes do involve sexuality, but they pivot on the disclosure not of bodies but of information. Sitting on the toilet while arguing with Marnie, Jessa suddenly blurts out that she's pregnant; in an answering scene set in the bathroom of a bar, an elated Jessa discovers midhookup that she is bleeding—no need for an abortion after all. What I like best about the latter is the revisionary spin it puts on blood that might, conventionally, be cause for male disgust and female shame. Viewers, of course, understand Jessa's surprise and relief, while her partner doesn't have a clue. But he's beside the point; what's important, for Jessa and for the scene, is what bloodiness means for *her*.

¹⁹ For a feminist response to criticism of Hannah's physique, see Bailey (2015). For a refreshing take on her "unlikability," see Silverman and Hagelin (2018); celebrating Hannah (along with Abbi, Ilana, Issa, and others) as a female antihero, they claim her "failure" at courtship and career as a protest against normative female development. Both essays praise Dunham's depictions as "real."

²⁰ The journalist was Tim Molloy of *TheWrap.com* (cited by Bailey 2015, 27–28). Maria San Filippo (2015) agrees that, rather than objectifying women, Dunham's use of nudity is "naturalistic and subject-forming" (45). On Hannah's nudity as deeroticized and therefore "blank," see Ford (2013), who ties this view of the female body to Dunham's "low-key" aesthetic in the show as a whole (1037).

Even more than the mundane routines and revelatory moments of female embodiment, what counts as real in *Girls* centers on the trials, errors, and pleasures of intimacy between women.²¹ With few exceptions, bathroom scenes are talkative, communal affairs. Often they feature wide shots framing two figures, intercut with close-ups of faces in earnest conversation. The first such scene, five minutes into the pilot, shows Marnie, Hannah, and Hannah's cupcake sharing a tub. Differences between the two women are readily apparent. Marnie is perched at one end, wrapped in a towel, leading Hannah to complain, "I never see you naked, and you always see me naked." Marnie demurely shaves her legs while Hannah demolishes her cake. Despite these asymmetries, however, as Marnie confesses her antipathy for boyfriend Charlie, we are introduced to one of *Girls*' fundamental tenets: the emotional primacy of the best-friend bond. The intensity if not exclusivity of this bond is underlined when poor Charlie bursts in, expecting to find just his girlfriend. "It's never *just* your girlfriend in here," Hannah informs him, as he backs out apologetically.

Something similar might be said of the show as a whole: in contrast to *Insecure*, we rarely find just one woman in Dunham's bathroom. The proximity fostered by this contracted space doesn't, of course, always spell harmony. Toward the end of season 1, Marnie and Hannah have an explosive, insult-lobbing, toothbrush-flinging fight that moves in and out of the bathroom. At other times, however, the show turns to bathrooms as sites of connection. The most moving of these finds Hannah once again in the tub. Singing to herself and lost in her thoughts, she lets out a shriek when a tear-stained Jessa (her marriage in tatters) appears out of nowhere and proceeds to join her in the tub. As Jessa breaks down, Hannah reaches out to take her hand, and their interlocked fingers occupy the blurred foreground of the next few close-ups. The scene ends by pulling back to show the two of them, now splashing and laughing as they debate the "grossness" of Jessa's snot adrift in the water. In this lovely wide shot, the friends face each other across the tub connected by the horizontal line of its side as well as by outstretched arms—their clasped hands a knot in the middle of the frame (fig. 3).

The psychological as well as physical realism of this sequence is the effect of several elements: a woman in the tub without bubbles or pointed toe, mucous deposited into bathwater, a well-defended character opening up;

²¹ Elizabeth Alsop (2019) shares my interest in the spate of female ensembles featured on postnetwork television, in contrast to those starring a single male antihero. Her concern, however, is not with *Girls*-type intimate friendships but with the images of "ally-ship" (intersectional sisterhood with political overtones) that she finds in such shows as *Big Little Lies*, *GLOW*, and *Claws* (1037).



Figure 3 Hannah and Jessa meet in the middle: *Girls*, season 2, episode 4, “It’s a Shame about Ray.” © 2013 by HBO. A color version of this figure is available online.

a narcissistic one reaching out. The scene resonates with and rebukes an earlier one, in which Hannah’s love interest, Adam, accosts her in the vertical space of the shower. Here, too, she begins by shrieking in surprise, but this time what follows is more about violation than vulnerability and empathy. In a series of alternating close-ups, we see Hannah’s puzzled and then horrified reaction as Adam laughingly begins to pee on her. In this case, only one of them finds grossness funny, and the two never appear in the same frame. It’s true no one dies in this shower attack, but the reference to *Psycho* is unmistakable. Rewriting Hitchcock from a female perspective, Dunham suggests the more common and (usually) less lethal harms of bullying masculinity.

There’s one more scene from season 1 that I would offer as an antidote to the latter. During a visit to her parents’ suburban home, Hannah walks in on her panicked mother and naked father, who is lying exposed and concussed on the bathroom floor. As viewers have just seen, Tad has fallen in the course of unaesthetic but enthusiastic middle-aged shower sex. The scene is a triumph of realism in at least two ways. For one thing, the father’s flaccid horizontality serves to demystify notions of shower-proof virility. For another, Hannah’s shift on this occasion—from feeling entitled to lean financially on her parents to supporting her father’s weight as she helps him into bed—represents the complexity and elasticity of human character. It evinces our ability to respond, at times, against the grain of our usual tendencies and in excess of our usual limits. The sequence closes with a trademark instance of what I mean by bathroom realism: not death magnified by outrageous

violence but Tad's quietly murmured intimations of mortality: "Just realizing I'm growing older."

Life measured out in bathrooms

Let us conclude by briefly revisiting the two terms of my title. The realist project has proven to be a restive one, periodically driven to question its own limits, to dispute and renegotiate the scope of "the real." By stretching its parameters, innovative creators unsettle the epistemological as well as the aesthetic status quo. By elevating—as topics of interest, sources of knowledge, and measures of reality—previously unrepresented places and people, they may also pose a threat to the political status quo. Realist novels of the fin-de-siècle were lambasted accordingly—for endeavoring "to bring into prominent view what had always been considered beneath consideration" (Arata 2007, 181). What drew particular fire were efforts by New Women novelists to expose the unsettling reality of female desires and discontents. As worried critics like Arthur Waugh rightly recognized, expanding the field of literary representation went hand in hand with feminist demands to expand political representation (181–82). Tying my women-centered cable shows to the mode I call bathroom realism, I have wanted to place them in this tradition and value their contributions to a project with a notable feminist history.

As for bathrooms, I have invoked them here to mark a realism anchored, in particular, by the conventionally ugly and unseen aspects of women's daily lives: ignoble objects from tampons to toilets, shameful bodily functions, imperfect and vulnerable bodies, confused and embarrassing feelings. In addition to being "low," bathrooms are physically small; as we have seen, the result is a tendency toward compression, squeezing into visibility the secrets of bodies and psyches. Their cramped dimensions are also an invitation (not always accepted) to bridge the distance between bodies. Whereas real-world restrooms have served as technologies of separation, the bathrooms depicted by Jacobson, Glazer, Rae, and Dunham are technologies of intimacy—especially between women. Rewriting the ladies/gentleman divide, they prioritize women and multiply femininities. Contrasting, too, with restroom reforms bent solely on independence (recall Serlin), Dunham's show gives us people in tubs and on the floor needing and receiving help, emotionally as well as physically.²² That said, I see the politics of bathroom access and

²² For another recent example of this, breaking all the rules of men together in bathrooms, see the cold opening of season 1, episode 2 of *Ramy* (2019–). In this remarkably frank and touching scene, Ramy helps his wheelchair-using, wisecracking friend Stevie take a dump in the all-genders restroom of their workplace.

the politics of bathroom realism as working largely in sync, each in its own way pulling us toward greater inclusivity. How fitting, then, that Abbi's shower curtain features a map of the world. For as I hope I have shown, the narrowness of the bathroom is belied by its ability to sponsor a broader, franker, and more complicated portrayal of reality: girls who are gross, selfish, and insecure; dads who are fallen; talking mirrors, shared tubs, tainted bathwater.

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