

'It's not who I want to be!': Negotiating the 'illegible' single woman in US–UK popular culture

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Abstract

Drawing on analysis of media representations and interviews with 25 single women, this article argues that the single woman is abjectified in US–UK popular culture through processes of instability and incoherence, which construct her as a threat to heteronormative femininity and recentres the coupled norm. Yet there are moments of contestation within media portrayals, where her 'illegibility' allows for a troubling of the gender binary and opens up spaces for working with and against such oppressive structures. Drawing on Butler's heterosexual matrix, I show that singledom is produced here as a non-normative heterosexual practice, which radically destabilises femininity and heteronormativity. This article examines not only how single femininity is being culturally delegitimised, but also how single women in the United Kingdom experience such delegitimation. Through complex processes of what José Esteban Muñoz calls '(dis)identification', the women work with, alongside and against representations of normative coupled femininity. They also tactically work with portrayals of the single woman to self-reflexively construct alternative single feminine subjectivities. Yet more troublingly, even in moments of resistance, the single women make painful identifications with their abject positioning.

Keywords

Butler, discourse analysis, heteronormativity, popular culture, singledom, subjectivity

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the figure of the single woman has been reinvigorated and reconfigured within US–UK popular culture representations, often through postfeminist discourses of agency, freedom, self-surveillance and self-accountability (Busch, 2009; Negra, 2004; Taylor, 2012). Recent TV shows such as *And Just Like That*, *Girls*, *Broad City*, *Fleabag* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* see her continued centring within popular culture. But despite her greater visibility, and apparent ‘celebration’, the contemporary cultural moment still constructs the single woman in narrowly defined and ‘troublesome’ ways (Negra, 2009; Taylor, 2012: 58). This article builds on this premise to argue that while the single woman is more visible, she is being rendered ‘illegible’ through processes of instability and incoherence which abjectify her and sustain the heterosexual coupled norm. This article examines not only how single femininity is being culturally delegitimised, but also how single women in the United Kingdom experience such delegitimation. Multiple studies have looked at how women more generally construct their gendered subjectivity in relation to specific media texts or sites (Dobson, 2011, 2014, 2015; Press, 2011; Ringrose, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2013; Sanders, 2007). However here I analyse both media representations and interviews with single women to examine how women negotiate portrayals of single femininity – an area which has been neglected within much of the scholarship (Collins, 2013). Instead of taking an audience-based, reader-response or ethnographic approach which explores the reception of or ‘use’ of media, I examine how single women’s subjectivities are produced through and shaped by postfeminist cultural representations in more indirect and intangible ways (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Orgad, 2016).

My methodology allows closer attention to how intimate, personal lives are conditioned by, and may rework, cultural stories (Orgad, 2020b) and the complex ways representational patterns are configured on the ground, *beyond* the text (O’Neill, 2020). I argue that (1) single femininity is being abjectified through processes of illegibility and incoherence (2) contrary to more limited studies, which have largely either looked at representation or subjective experience; or over-emphasised either subjection or resistance, the women I spoke to simultaneously identify *and* disidentify with these discourses and at times reflexively enact alternative, more complex, single femininities.

My focus is on postfeminist popular cultural texts; however, the boundaries of postfeminist culture are complex and contested. Several scholars have argued that, since the early 2010s, rather than being ‘past’, feminism has now gained a hyper-visibility in popular culture discourse, acquiring a certain ‘cultural currency’ (Rottenberg, 2017: 331). Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017) argue that the present cultural moment is not postfeminist, as it does not ‘deny the need for feminism’, but is characterised by a popular feminism, which has the same *effects* as postfeminism of ‘shor[ing] up the ideological nexus [of] meritocratic neoliberal individualism, white supremacy’ (p. 886). Indeed, Catherine Rottenberg (2017) claims that, in a ‘return’ to a feminist moment, popular culture has become characterised by a feminist discourse which is neoliberal (pp. 330–331), with Elizabeth Prügl (2015) suggesting that feminism itself has become neoliberalised, as it has become popularised. However, I agree with Rosalind Gill’s (2016) argument that postfeminist logics still persist through this celebration of feminism. I employ Gill’s (2016, 2017) updated conceptualisation of postfeminism, which understands it,

rather than as obsolete, as having diffusely expanded to become a form of common sense; a discursive, affective and psychosocial 'sensibility'. This is relevant to my focus on how postfeminism circulates psychosocially across media texts and self-narratives of lived experience, at the cultural and the psychic level. This approach builds upon Negra (2009) and Taylor's (2012) observation that the single female subject is the 'ideal' postfeminist subject; who coexists alongside more ambivalent or abject representations, in complex, contradictory and contested ways.

Studies of the lived reality of singledom have identified themes that are parallel to and in tension with the literature on the single woman's cultural representation. This scholarship is largely conducted from a critical discursive psychology and social constructivist approach to understand how women experience and 'work up' their single subjectivities (Jacques and Radtke, 2012; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007). Much of this literature has been organised around considering whether singledom is stigmatised, as a 'deficit' identity, or whether such stigmatisation is 'resisted' (Addie and Brownlow, 2014; Byrne and Carr, 2005; Depaulo and Morris, 2005; Williams, 2014). Studies have also examined single femininity in relation to postfeminist themes of agency, choice, and independence, and how stigma intersects with (predominantly older) age (Budgeon, 2015; Hafford et al., 2016; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007; Sharp and Ganong, 2007). While much scholarship examines representation and lived experience of single femininity separately, few bridge these fields. Those that do, tend to focus on how single women negotiate what are seen as homogenously stigmatising mediated constructions of single femininity, or have conceptualised the subject as one who can act 'outside' of the cultural discourses within which she is located (Macvarish, 2006; Zajicek and Koski, 2003). Kristie Collins' Canadian study is one of the few to combine a textual analysis of US media texts with an analysis of single women's reception and use of such cultural representations. Similar to Jill Reynolds' discursive psychology understanding of single women as drawing upon 'discursive resources' in the cultural context to construct their identities, Collins understands singleness as a socially located discourse and as a set of personal narratives and subject positions (Collins, 2011; Reynolds, 2008) She explores how single women 'reject or identify' with discourses in specific media representations *and* the socio-cultural landscape more broadly (Collins, 2013: 37).

I build on Collins' (2013) claim that cultural and individual discourses of singledom are fundamentally interconnected in 'a discursive network' of singledom (p. 36). But rather than taking a discursive psychology and audience-based approach, by contrast, I use a psychosocial understanding of subjectivity as discursively constructed, where the subject is formed through and by the discursive *conjoining* of the cultural and the individual. I use Butler's (1997) argument that subjectivity is constructed through an 'interiorisation' of the regulatory force of social norms. While the subject is seen to 'capitulate' to the force of social categories, it is an agentic, desiring submission, which is constitutive by and of the social (Butler, 1997: 66). Such an approach highlights the agency in these women's accounts and regards feminine subjectivity formation as a process of both regulation *and* agentic negotiation. I therefore do not see the individual subject as drawing upon discourses 'out there' as resources which are either used or discarded, nor do I see cultural discourses as externally 'imposed on' or rejected by, but as fundamentally

constitutive of, the subject. I use this to identify where discursive patterns of single femininity between the cultural and the individual align, diverge or are reconfigured.

I argue that singledom is produced here as a non-normative heterosexual practice, which is fundamental in destabilising both femininity and heteronormativity. While I do not suggest the single woman is outside the boundaries of feminine subjectivity as a political subject, I do suggest she is abjectified in ways which put her feminine subjectivity into question. I build on Butler's (2011) claim that the heterosexual matrix is formed by constructing certain 'subjects' as outside the boundaries of subjectivity: 'This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects", but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. . . The production of the *unsymbolizable*, the *unspeakable*, the *illegible*, is also always a strategy of abjection' (Butler, 2011: 3; 142). I thus claim here that the 'viable' (heterosexually coupled) feminine subject is being sustained through an exclusionary abjectification of single femininity. The abjectification of the single woman operates through two mechanisms across the media texts and the interview data: instability and incoherence; both render her 'illegible' as a feminine subject, construct her as a threat to the heterosexual gender binary, and recentre the coupled feminine norm.

In the next section, I outline three popular cultural texts where the illegibility of the single woman was prominent: major Hollywood blockbuster *How To Be Single (HTBS)*, a special edition of US *Elle* magazine dedicated to single women and low-budget independent US film, *Frances Ha*. I argue in my analysis that she is presented as incoherent, unstable, and at continual risk of disappearing as a subject in ways that challenge normative femininity. I then show how the single women I spoke to experience such cultural delegitimation. In complex, tense negotiations, I argue that the women I interviewed both identify *and* disidentify with these cultural tropes of instability and incoherence to reflexively construct their single subject positions with and against the normative coupled feminine subject. But the women also tactically work with and against non-normative single identities – drawing on both normatively heterosexually coupled and queer sexuality – to self-reflexively construct alternative single subjectivities (Muñoz, 1999).

Methodology

Media texts

The media texts are selected from a larger study that examined eight US and UK popular culture representations in film, television, advertising and women's magazines. The category of 'single' is not static and is highly contested (Reynolds, 2008). However, for the purposes of selecting the media texts, I defined the single woman as not engaged in a long-term monogamous cohabiting relationship (Budgeon, 2008). My texts were chosen because they resonate with themes identified in a historical and contemporary review of representations of single femininity and demonstrated instances of 'illegibility'. Their selection allowed exploration of how these themes emerge across a diverse range of media sites, which underscores their significance and reach across genres. The selection follows Chouliaraki's (2006) 'merit of example', which suggests that the repetition of different

but interrelated regimes of representation across sites indicates significance.¹ While my focus is on women in the UK, the texts I analyse here are all US-based. This is because US and UK popular cultures feature a strong ‘discursive harmony’; US texts form a fundamental part of UK popular culture (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 13).² It should also be noted that all of the texts predominately feature a narrow form of young, white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity, which mutes more diverse depictions but is typical of postfeminist culture (Negra, 2009; Taylor, 2012).

‘The Single Lady Issue’ of women’s fashion magazine *Elle* US was published online in February 2016, to coincide with Valentine’s Day and was dedicated to single women. Women’s consumer magazines represent a powerful convergence of discourses of governmentality and postfeminist modes of regulation such as love your body/self discourses, particularly those that cultivate norms of embodiment and self-confidence (Favaro, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015). Therefore, the special edition is a paradigmatic example of how postfeminist discourses of single femininity are being reproduced. Although the text was produced in the United States, it has a global online reach. The tagline of the issue ‘Party of one, emphasis on party’ addresses the single woman as a singular subject, rather than collectively, and each article is branded with the image of a hand holding up an index finger. This emphasis on individualisation is consistent across the issue, with singledom constructed as a commoditised identity or style, emptied of political rhetoric that is highly postfeminist (Gill, 2016)

The romantic comedy, *HTBS*, stars major Hollywood actors Rebel Wilson, Dakota Johnson and Alison Brie. The main character Alice (played by Johnson) is a twentysomething, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman living in New York City who is learning how to negotiate the dating world having just left her boyfriend. It was released in February 2016 and is still available through paid-for streaming TV services Amazon Prime and Sky Movies. Produced by MGM and distributed by Warner Bros, the film grossed a box-office taking of \$46 million worldwide, enjoying significant commercial success (Box Office Mojo, 2016). All of the characters are in their twenties (except for one, Meg, who is in her thirties) white, upper- or middle-class, heterosexual, urban women, reinscribing the race, class and heterosexual privilege of postfeminist portrayals of single femininity (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Taylor, 2012).

The film *Frances Ha* is a critically acclaimed romantic comedy directed by Noah Baumbach, which was produced by independent US film company IFC, and was released in the UK in 2013. The main character, Frances Halliday, is played by Greta Gerwig who also co-wrote the film. Similarly to Alice in *HTBS*, Frances is a newly single twentysomething, white, slim, middle-class, heterosexual woman living in New York. Having just broken up with her boyfriend, the film shows her trying to make a living working precariously as an apprentice dancer, and to maintain her friendships. Yet, unlike Alice, the narrative is unusually centred around the ebbs and flows of her relationship with her best friend Sophie, rather than her dating life.

Interviews

As I am primarily interested in the relationship between popular cultural media texts and single women’s lived experience, I also draw upon single women’s self-narratives. From

June and December 2018 I conducted 25 semi-structured, 1-hour interviews with single women living in London. Interviews are a central methodology in the study of subjectivity, and the method contributes to the feminist tradition of investigating subjugated, situated knowledges grounded in women's everyday experience (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Budgeon, 2021). To define the contested category of 'single' and centre it on subjective identification, which is my focus, the women all self-defined as single and female.³ Divorcees, widows or single mothers were not included due to 'fundamental disparities' in lived experience between these categories of single women⁴ (Lahad, 2016; Taylor, 2012: 3). London as a location offers a range of class, race, sexuality and age groups from which to draw the sample and as a resident I was familiar with its demographics. The sample included diversity in age (from 21 to 66 years, with a mean age of 37 years), race (76% white, 24% Black, Asian or ethnic minority), class (84% middle class, 16% working class) and sexuality (72% straight, 18% lesbian, bi or queer). However, these experiences do not claim to be generalisable, as I am interested in the particular subjective meanings constructed by the interviewees. I also understand the narratives presented in the interviews as co-constituted between myself and the interviewee rather than 'a window into a life' (Reynolds, 2008: 78). My questions asked how women understood and experienced their single subjectivity, how they encountered and negotiated mediated representations of single femininity, and whether these understandings had changed over time. Questions also explored race, age, sexuality, class and embodiment. So as not to impose identity categories, these intersections were addressed indirectly. The women were not asked about the media texts directly, however, several texts arose spontaneously. As outlined above, this was due to my interest in focussing on how cultural discourses of singledom are reworked by the participants in more indirect ways, as part of a broader discursive network and to move beyond the text itself (O'Neill, 2020; Orgad, 2016).

The anonymised interview data were transcribed and coded, along with the media texts data, using NVivo software. I then conducted a thematic and a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis on both sets of data. I used Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to examine how discourses of singledom were embedded in social networks of power, and how they constrained and enabled, included or excluded, particular gendered subjectivities (Foucault, 1998; Hook, 2001). I analysed what was left unsaid or rendered unspeakable, which single subject positions were legitimised or not, and considered how this sustained or challenged gendered hierarchies, being attentive to moments of contestation. I drew the data-sets together using the conceptual lens of fantasy (Fuss, 1995), to ask how fantasies of single femininity are being constructed in representations, and how single women are discursively negotiating or resisting these fantasies. I also considered how gender was intersected with multiple categories of identity (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Crenshaw, 1989).

Media representations

The 'unstable' feminine subject

Within the media texts, the single woman is often rendered 'illegible' as a viable feminine subject during certain social encounters through processes of 'instability' (Butler,

2011). In one feature from *Elle* magazine, titled ‘10 Women on Being Relentlessly Single Shamed by Their Parents’, women recount how their single status is positioned by their families in highly stigmatising and exclusionary ways. One woman, Lexy, age 21, from Florida, tells of her experiences during her family’s Christmas ritual where they decorate a gingerbread house together:

My family had a gingerbread house decorating contest and my sibs had their significant others over . . . I didn’t have a boyfriend to invite over, so I opted to decorate mine alone. That’s when the snickering and comments began . . . followed by hysterical laughter.

The fact that she is not coupled means she feels shamed and unable to ‘legitimately’ take part in the task as a fully ‘viable’ and valid member of the family. She is defined in this instance only through what she is not, for example, in a normative intimate relationship or familial structure, leaving her with what she experiences as a partial, incomplete feminine subjecthood (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). She then tells of how her family’s hurtful comments about her status at Christmas Dinner forced her to withdraw from the gathering:

During Christmas vacation, the remarks [about my being single] started flying while at my parent’s house for dinner. The embarrassment of being examined so closely by all these people was too much for me to handle and I broke down in tears . . . It got so bad I had to go outside.

Her status not only causes her to remove herself from the event, it also troubles Lexy’s other familial subject positions of daughter and sister, locating her outside the nuclear family unit in multiple ways. She is reduced from the ‘usual’ family member who has a partner, and as a result is painfully and unwillingly compelled to leave these activities, which firmly recentre the coupled norm. Thus, the feminine subject is destabilised in her status as a ‘full’ family member – and psychically ‘breaks down’ – because she ‘lacks’ a partner.

Yet the instability of the single woman is sometimes addressed in more transformative ways to construct single subjectivity within and *against* the oppressive structures of normative coupled femininity. In the second text I analyse, *Frances Ha*, the main character is also defined by her deficit identity, due to her ‘lack’ of partner and child (Addie and Brownlow, 2014). However she uses her positioning outside the coupled feminine norm to challenge conventional femininity as coupled and as reproductive. In one key scene, Frances agentically draws on her status as uncoupled to work against the coupled, reproductive feminine norm. Currently between flat shares, she attends a dinner party with her friend, whose couch she is staying on. At the dinner table, a couple are showing everyone photos of their baby:

Woman: Oh, my God. He’s like the most beautiful creature . . .
 Frances: Oh. It’s so funny when people have kids, and they’re all . . . ‘I used to be so focused on me, and now I’m totally not’. It’s like, no. It’s still you. It’s half you. It’s a mini-you. I mean, you made it. [Chuckling].

Instead of admiring the images like the other guests, Frances dismisses the couple, and parenthood, rendering conventional family formations and motherhood

undesirable. Not only does she question something which is rarely challenged – why people want children – she denaturalises it as a desire innate to femininity and positions it as an active, even selfish choice (Burns, 2002). Her statement is met by awkward silence by everyone else. This ‘others’ Frances as an outsider among peers, as ‘out of place’ at the gathering. Following Sara Ahmed’s (2010) concept of the ‘unhappy queer’, Frances’ pessimism around the happiness of coupled parenthood creates an ‘alien affect’ at the party: ‘a queer politics which refuses to organize its hope for happiness around the figure of the child, or other tropes for reproductivity, is already alienated from the present’ (p. 162). Frances thus queers heteronormative intimate life through her liminal positioning outside of the coupled, reproductive norm. As with Lexy in *Elle* magazine, Frances is forced to promptly leave the party as a result of the discomfort her unstable subject positioning has created. When she tells her friend that she is going, her friend does not try to make her stay, even though they came together. Her presence is a threat not only to femininity but to the patriarchal, nuclear family unit. Yet, unlike the shame that Lexy feels in the *Elle* article, Frances herself simply chuckles. Her instability is transformatory in that it momentarily troubles the hegemonic heteronormative structures of intimate life; yet ultimately the coupled, familial norm persists.

The ‘incoherent’ single woman

The single woman is also constructed in the media texts as an ‘incoherent’ feminine figure (Butler, 2011). Once more, in *Frances Ha*, single femininity is produced as a highly contradictory form of subjectivity which challenges the gender binary. Despite physically conforming to the ideals of feminine beauty, being young, white, blond and slim, Frances is often masculinised in unattractive, more abjectifying ways. Her friend Benji tells her she has ‘a weird man walk’ and she frequently describes herself as being ‘too tall’ to marry – height being associated with masculinity. She also engages in risky highly masculinised and deviant behaviour, such as getting wildly drunk, shouting, swearing, urinating on subway tracks, engaging in physical play-fighting and having blazing, violent rows with her best friend Sophie. This renders her an incoherent feminine subject by linking her singledom to masculinity. Such a portrayal resecures coupledness to femininity and constructs singledom as a threat to the gender binary.

But Frances’ incoherence also blurs the gender binary in more radical ways. Throughout the film, her friend Benji repeatedly refers to her as ‘undateable’ in response to these masculine traits. Yet Frances uses this incoherence to question – if not transform – the boundaries of normative femininity. She agentially works *with* this abjectifying term, and uses it to define herself in positive ways. Rather than men not wanting her, as it might suggest, Frances describes herself as undateable because men ‘can’t handle her’. She positions her supposed lack in a humorous, positive way, caused by men’s inadequacy not hers, and produces herself as ‘too good’ for coupledness. For example, Frances calls herself undateable because she wants to educate herself by reading literature and learning a language before she travels to Paris:

Frances: ‘I have so much to do. I think I’ll probably read Proust. . . I should probably learn French first . . . and then read it in French. Undateable’.

In a later scene, Benji calls her undateable when she makes an obscure literary reference to Virginia Woolf. But such moments show her as possessing and cultivating knowledge and skills. Thus, Francis redeploys the blurring of her femininity, to reconstruct her positioning as an aspirational state which decentres and transcends the coupled norm. Rather than striving to be dateable, Frances disorients the regulatory structures of intimate life and this contradictory, incoherent identity positions her as desirable *because* of her supposed inability to couple.

By contrast to Frances, in *HTBS*, the ‘incoherence’ of the single female subject reinscribes gendered, heteronormative power structures and recentres the coupled norm. Throughout the film, we see the main character Alice, who is also white, middle class and heterosexual, continually struggling to establish and maintain a coherent sense of self after breaking up with her boyfriend Josh. In one of the climatic scenes of the film, we see her unexpectedly encountering Josh at a party. Alice, on the verge of tears, explains to him that she has not been able to stop thinking about him, and that because of this she is in danger of ‘losing’ herself:

I spent so much time wanting you back that when I thought that you wanted me back, it's like I lost my mind for a second . . . I completely lose myself . . . I forget what I want and I just disappear . . .

Taking up postfeminist themes of affective regulation, emotional disconnection and self-surveillance, Alice's failure to detach from Josh emotionally is not just shown as upsetting, but as threatening her entire feminine subjectivity (Gill, 2017; Negra, 2004). We see Alice fearing the complete breakdown of her single self simply because she has still been thinking about her ex-boyfriend. Thus, the single feminine subject is at risk of being lost as a legitimate subject when she does not continually self-monitor and self-regulate her psychic life, ‘remember’ who she is and what she ‘wants’. This produces her as a ‘non-subject’ who might disappear if she does not continually engage in active, intensive affective regulation. Her abject construction resecures the (coherent) normative feminine subject as always coupled.

These media representations demonstrate the typical ways in which single femininity is being culturally delegitimised through abjectifying processes of incoherence and instability which position the single woman as a threat to the feminine, heteronormative, coupled norm. Yet there are moments of contestation, where her illegibility allows for a troubling of the heteronormative gender binary and familial, reproductive norm. The liminal positioning of the single woman at the boundaries of normative femininity thus opens up spaces for working with and against such oppressive structures. I now turn to exploring how single women experienced such cultural fantasies of singledom.

Single women's narratives

In the following discussion, I show how the interviewees' accounts aligned with, reconfigured, and responded to the cultural delegitimation of single femininity in contradictory ways. Several tried to overcome or to avoid confronting the single woman's painful incoherence as a figure and instead consolidated their sense of self by evoking coupled

femininity. Alternatively they collapsed singledom into sexuality and engaged with representations through a more coherent (coupled) non-heterosexual identity. As found in the media representations, they evoked objectifying discourses of singledom as a deficit identity, associating single femininity with mental instability, masculinisation and deviancy. But they tactically used such destabilising discourses in conflicting, ambivalent ways to self-reflexively find a form of belonging within, alongside and against coupled femininity and to revalue or construct alternative understandings of single femininity.

The single woman: negotiating instability

Consistent with the media analysis, while many of the women I spoke to said they felt there was a shift towards *more* representations of single women, when I asked them to identify examples, either fictional or real, the majority could not think of any. I argue that it is because of her illegibility within cultural representations that the women struggled. Most of the women were surprised and disconcerted by this. For example, Jane, a 33-year-old, heterosexual, white woman who has been single for 6 years, gave a typical response. She punctuated her speech with brief, broken statements, as she struggled to think of anyone. This hesitation was replicated across several accounts:

- Jane: I think in the media, I don't think . . . I still can't think of anyone off-hand . . . Yeah. . . . [long pause]. No, nothing . . . Worrying!
- Caroline: I'm racking my brains is there a politician a female politician or something or a scientist? [long pause] No, not really.
- Maria: I just think, I can't come up with a good example. I could just invent one!
- Annette: Oh that's hard to think off the top of my head . . . Err . . . Erm, I'm try'na think.
- Eleanor: Erm I don't know if . . . Erm, I'll think . . . a really long time. No . . . not a lot comes to mind I find.

It was a point which was not long dwelt on by the women, which demonstrated their unwillingness or inability to address her illegibility and indicated their deep discomfort. As Collins (2013) argues 'when social representations do not exist, or only have a negative meaning, the presentation and construction of the self becomes more problematic' (p. 84). However Maria's suggestion of inventing an example showed a continued longing for representation – indeed Butler (1997) describes a fantasmatic desire for a coherent identification or 'stable' identity as foundational to the performative construction of gender (p. 136). Here, Maria demonstrates, as we saw with Alice in *HTBS*, fear of a complete loss of self.⁵ Several interviewees sought to reconcile such a desire for identification by citing examples of female representation more broadly. Many brought up coupled women who were aspirational to them. Annette is a white, 30-year-old, heterosexual woman who has been single for 1 year after the end of a 4-year relationship. Annette mentions the TV character Wynonna Earp as significant for her:

- 'There's like a whole fight scene in one of the episodes where it's like three women fighting . . . A lot of superhero women are . . . flat personalities whereas [the main character's] like a total

hot mess, she's got like massive trauma from her childhood . . . like an emotional rollercoaster and it's like "oh ok you're a real person", like, I can identify with that.'

Annette values the character, not for her coupling, but for her 'realistic' portrayal, which incorporates physical strength and mental vulnerability. In the absence of single women, this offers Annette an alternative, necessary form of belonging and affective recognition (Berlant, 2008: 7). Building on Muñoz (1999), who claims that new minority sexuality subject positions are formed through a 'disidentification' with dominant identity structures, rather than fully opposing them, individuals 'tactically work on, within and against dominant cultural forms such as normative sexual and gender roles' (p. 12). While Muñoz's work examines disidentification in the context of marginalised queers of colour, and Annette is white and heterosexual, she also seeks to transform the majority coupled culture by working from *within* – drawing on aspirational elements from coupled femininity for her own purposes. But such a disidentification not only reinscribes coupled femininity, as with *Frances Ha* it also partially sutures single femininity to more masculinising traits in both destabilising and liberatory ways.

Helen instead highlights a non-single celebrity who stands out to her: Beyoncé. Helen is a 41-year-old, white, heterosexual, middle-class woman who has spent most of her life single, but has had several relationships of around 2 years, with her last ending 2 years ago. She describes how Beyoncé for her embodies a 'single' identity, *despite* her married status, because of her autonomy and individualised construction as someone who can 'put herself first' In doing so she draws on a celebratory discursive repertoire of singleness as independence and freedom (Reynolds, 2008):

Helen: I keep thinking Beyoncé, Beyoncé, but you know she's married and, and, but she has that, you know her life comes first I guess he's, which is which is really . . . interesting to watch . . . and that's yeah intriguing to see that she's out there as a woman . . . she comes across like a single woman almost in that she's so I don't know know, of her own. She comes first.

Interviewer: She's not someone's other half?

Helen: She's 80% right?

Thus, Helen says she desires Beyoncé's freedom, independence and ability to be 'out there' yet *still* remain feminine. Helen describes Beyoncé as 80 percent, rather than *subsumed* by her identity as a wife or as someone's 'other half'. Yet she also constructs Beyoncé in a similar way to *Frances Ha's* central character as partially masculinised, in ways that blur the gender binary. Such a celebration, while highly postfeminist, marks Beyoncé out as transcending gendered and coupled norms. Yet Helen's identification is partial, as she later firmly adheres to coupled femininity (see 'The illegible single woman: (dis)identifications').

Perhaps because of the illegibility of single femininity in popular culture, several interviewees, when asked to give an example of a single woman, overcame this by collapsing singleness into sexuality. Anna is a 36-year-old, white, middle-class woman who identifies as queer. While she has primarily dated men, she has more recently dated

women. Anna told me that she believed popular cultural representations were more promising in terms of depicting more ‘diversity’ within intimate life. When asked to elaborate, instead of discussing more diverse representations of singledom, Anna⁶ mentions the US singer Janelle Monáe’s sexuality. In doing so, Anna constructs an identification through her own sexuality, rather than her singledom:⁷

Interviewer: Do you feel like you see your life reflected . . . ?

Anna: Erm . . . more so now, I think. And I think that’s maybe coincided with me erm . . . kind of being more explorative in relationships. Take Janelle Monáe for example, that’s a much more, she’s overtly, she’s bi, but she’s not labeling it as bi. Err . . . Yeah, I think there is always still a coupling of some sort.

Anna demonstrates an inability to negotiate the incoherence of the single woman in popular culture. She repeatedly says ‘erm’, pauses, then shifts the emphasis towards the representation of non-normative sexualities. Anna not only prioritises Monáe’s (bi)sexuality, but links her bisexuality to coupling when she says ‘there is always still a coupling of some sort’, thus doubly eclipsing both bi- and non-bi single femininities. Anna’s account suggests that a focus on sexuality further marginalises the single subject through another form of non-hetero coupledness. Another example of the centring of sexuality *over* singledom was given by Abby. Abby is a 30-year-old, bisexual, South East Asian woman who has been single for 4 months since ending a 10-year relationship. She relates to Oksana (Jodie Comer) from TV show *Killing Eve*,⁸ primarily because of her single status and her homosexuality:

Oksana . . . is a complete like [whistles] psycho . . . but I relate to her because, I think she is just a person who wants to find someone . . . but she’s also like . . . a ruthless lesbian . . . killer assassin . . . she’s very powerful . . . She goes against societal norms of what a woman is and should be . . . I can really relate to that.

Abby says she identifies with Oksana precisely because of what she contrasts as Oksana’s celebratory revaluing of deviance, lesbianism and mental instability, *alongside* what she calls her desire for the ‘normal’ pleasures of coupledness. Oksana’s lesbian positioning offers Abby a chance for recognition and belonging through her more radical non-conformation to heterosexuality, while still desiring – and valorising – coupledness (Berlant, 2008). Thus, in this complex passage, Abby works *against* heterosexuality, but also *with* normative coupled femininity.

The illegible single woman: (dis)identifications

Interviewees described how cultural representations often reduced single femininity to stigmatising tropes, highlighting the ‘incoherent’ or partial nature of representations of single-ness. They struggled with and sought to disidentify with what they saw as abjectified, and ‘incomplete’ media depictions. Katherine, a white, middle-class, 33-year-old, heterosexual woman who has been single for 10 years, was one of the few to think of an example:

Even . . . where there've been things like *Fleabag*⁹ where they're kind of like 'oh look this is a much more kind of realistic portrayal of you know a modern woman' it's still um it's not really positive, is it? Like the idea is that she's, oh you know she's a bit crazy isn't she? . . . it is also played for laughs.

But while Katherine credits *Fleabag*'s 'realism', she notes its engagement with historical tropes of insanity,¹⁰ and critiques such a construction, working to resist and distance herself from this negative portrayal. She highlights the limitations of reducing singledom to mental instability and perceives the comedic aspects of this as derogatory rather than, as Kathryn Rowe suggests, an opportunity for transgression of gendered stereotypes (Rowe, 1995). Katherine indicates the affective cost that is required when negotiating such abjectifying representations, even in moments of resistance.

This process of disidentification with the abject single worked in multiple, often more ambivalent ways, with women at times rejecting the coupled norm and revaluing singledom, and at times reinscribing the coupled norm. As Butler (2011) claims, abjection is intimately tied up with subconscious processes of identification *and* disavowal: 'abjection can only take place . . . through an identification with that abjection, an identification which must be disavowed' (p. 74). Such ambivalence is demonstrated well by Erin. Erin is a 47-year-old white, heterosexual woman who describes her relationship history as 'mixed', with no relationship longer than a year and no live-in partner. She mentions celebrity figure, Jennifer Aniston, who is often abjectly constructed through discourses of singledom:

I was reading [about] Jennifer Aniston . . . I think she is always painted as a slightly tragic figure and to my horror I find myself . . . thinking 'oh that's so sad' and then I think, 'that's me'! And I would be outraged if someone was describing me in the way that she's described . . . as lacking . . . having lost in some way.

In doing so, Erin engages a key repertoire identified by Reynolds and Wetherall (2003) of singledom as a pitiable, pathetic and problematic 'deficit' identity (p. 9). There are also parallels with Lexy from *Elle* magazine's abjectified positioning as 'lacking'. But here Erin performs an agentic process of both identification with and disavowal of this construction. Following Butler's (2011) understanding: 'certain identifications are made *in order* to . . . institute a *disidentification* with a position that seems too saturated with injury or aggression . . . occupiable only through imagining the loss of a viable identity altogether' (p. 64). To avoid the loss of herself as a viable (single) subject, Erin draws on this trope to reject an identification with the 'pitiable' 'lacking' single woman which Aniston represents, while *still* invoking it. Erin is ambivalently caught between pity and a horrifying realisation that she sees herself within this representation. It is thus an identification that she fears to make 'because she has already made it' (Butler, 2011: 112). She concludes by insisting that she would never allow herself to be seen in this way by others. But her deep discomfort at this thought, and strong desire to resist it, is underscored by her use of the word 'outraged'. In asserting her disidentification with Aniston, she reflexively constructs an alternative single subjectivity for her own purposes, one which is more positively valued and which is not characterised through loss.

While disidentification is often unknowable to the subject, operating subconsciously, it is sometimes externalised and made explicit by them. Another woman I spoke to, Helen, expressed a radical disavowal of single femininity, which suggests at some level that she identifies with it (Butler, 2011). When asked about examples of single women in the media that she could relate to, she got angry and told me that she actively refuses to identify with them:

I try to do the opposite. I try to model off happily married women who I would rather be. . . . I don't go around looking at single women going 'that's what I want to be' because it's not who I want to *be*! So I'm like 'ok that's nice, you go do your single thing', and actually 'what can I learn from these women who have what I feel like I want?'

Helen here tries to erase the single woman from her view, instead focussing on embracing 'more desirable' representations of married women. In doing so she firmly re-establishes the boundary of the viable feminine subject as one who is coupled. Yet her anger denotes the pain that such an unwanted identification produces within her. In an opposite move to Erin, she questions why one celebrity figure, Oprah, she admires is single.¹¹

I guess Oprah's single but she kind of disappoints me, makes me feel kind of sad, like why is this amazing woman single? Like, what the fuck is wrong with society? She's amazing, she's beautiful . . . why is she single?

Helen once more uses the repertoire of singledom as a 'deficit' identity – as a pitiable, unattractive personal attribute (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003: 9). Yet she 'objects to an injury done to another, to deflect attention from an injury done to oneself' (Butler, 2011: 64) as a way of displacing the hurt she herself feels. She is unable to reconcile what she constructs as the 'oppositional' characteristics of Oprah being a desirable, viable subject worthy of validation through marriage, but also being 'disappointingly' single. In both statements, Helen demonstrates her desire to maintain a close proximity to the conventional love plot which offers her the prospect of social belonging (Berlant, 2008), while she herself painfully falls outside the boundaries of what she constitutes a 'valid' subject.

The women were thus problematically caught between a fantasmatic desire for a legible, coherent single femininity and a desire to disidentify with an abjectified positioning. In the absence of legible representations of single femininity, they drew on representations of non-single women or sexuality in ways which, while working *against* heteronormativity, nevertheless still worked *with* the coupled norm. Where they did cite cultural representations of single femininity, they often attempted to resist these painful identifications. However, the encounters were also often ambivalent ones which at times revalued single femininity as desirable, while conversely tactically recentring coupled femininity to affirm their status as a 'viable' subject.

Conclusion

While the single woman is increasingly visible in the contemporary US–UK cultural realm, she is being produced through highly abjectifying processes of illegibility which

put her feminine subjectivity into question. The single woman is destabilised as a subject through her construction as lacking: defined through what she is not; produced as an unstable, incoherent non-subject at risk of disappearing. This resecures the (coherent) normative feminine subject as coupled. However it is this destabilisation of her subjecthood which is used to challenge both normative femininity and the familial norm. Frances in *Frances Ha* is positioned at the very boundaries of feminine subjectivity through abjectifying processes of masculinisation in ways that construct single femininity as a threat to the heterosexual matrix. Yet there are transformative moments which destabilise the gender binary in more radical ways. Frances agentically redeploys the label of 'undateable' to reconstruct single femininity as a desirable, aspirational state which *transcends* the coupled norm. Thus, singledom is produced as a non-normative heterosexual practice, which destabilises both femininity and heteronormativity.

The interviews profoundly highlight the consequences and dilemmas that the cultural delegitimisation of single femininity has for single women's everyday lives. In the absence of representations, the women must work more broadly *with* normative coupled femininity as a way of transforming the hegemonic (hetero - and homonormative) coupled culture from within – drawing on aspirational elements for their own purposes. The women also self-reflexively deploy cultural representations by rejecting abjectifying associations with mental instability and singledom as a 'deficit identity'. But they also use them in ways which sustain the coupled norm and offer them a chance to maintain proximity to the conventional love plot (Berlant, 2008). For example, the figure of Oksana in *Killing Eve* offers Abby recognition through her radical non-conformation to heterosexual femininity, while her account still desires – and valorises – a form of coupledness. Yet the women's accounts more troublingly demonstrated how even in moments of resistance or rejection, they endured difficult identifications with what is a culturally delegitimised figure. Indeed, Helen painfully falls outside the boundaries of what she herself constructs as a 'valid' feminine (coupled) subject.

As well as offering a resolution to significant anxieties surrounding single femininity, the cultural realm thus offers the women I spoke to a way of discharging the perceived 'threat' of feminine singledom to patriarchal structures (Radway, 1984). This study illuminates the need to investigate the significant psychic consequences of the representation of single femininity for women's lived experience. The findings contribute to an effort within cultural studies to demonstrate the importance of how the structural conditions lived experience, rather than considering these accounts as solely personal. I have demonstrated how cultural narratives fundamentally shape – and at times painfully regulate – intimate life and how these processes can occur alongside moments of resistance (Orgad, 2020a). Taking Taylor's (2012) analysis of the blogosphere as a starting point, more studies of alternative media texts – such as social media platforms – might show where women are resisting in the media sphere itself.

As the numbers of single women grow and their (troubled) representation becomes ever more visible, studies must urgently explore what it means to be a single woman within the contemporary context. Many scholars have discussed how UK society is increasingly characterised by widening social inequalities, predicated by the dismantling of the welfare state and foregrounding of policies centred on the nuclear family (McRobbie, 2020; Orgad and

De Benedictis, 2015). As Angela McRobbie (2020) has argued, the all-consuming work of building an individualised ‘resilience’ has become the substitute for welfare provision, and is a burden which falls predominantly on women. This has been only exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic and cost of living crisis. Therefore, single women face cultural delegitimisation within *multiple burdens* of increased economic insecurity, lack of economic support and disadvantages of occupying a single-person household. While the women I spoke to were predominantly white and middle class, further research is needed to explore how such pressures and psychic tensions are intensified through intersections with class, race and age.

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Notes

1. I scanned TV and film databases using the keywords and searched online and in the popular press to see which texts were achieving prominence. I selected texts where key themes of single femininity identified in a review of the literature – chastity/asexuality, deviancy, vulnerability/mental instability, hypersexualisation, professionalisation and self-surveillance – were systematically repeated.
2. Many of the media cited by the women I interviewed were US texts.
3. ‘Woman/women/female’ are understood here as socially constructed categories. I tried to recruit transgender women, however, none came forward.
4. Two interviewees had been married for visas. They were included as they did not consider themselves having been married in a normative sense which would accrue social capital, for example; they did not tell others or understand themselves as ‘married’.
5. This theme of a loss of self came up several times in Maria’s interview.
6. Eleanor, 37, also said she thought there was more diversity in terms of depictions of bisexuality and non-monogamous relationships.
7. Anna later mentions to me that she, similarly to Monae, does not like to ‘label’ her sexuality.
8. *Killing Eve* is a British-American spy thriller (2018–), written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Oksana (also known as Villanelle) is a queer assassin who has an obsessive romantic relationship with the main character, former M16 Agent, Eve.
9. *Fleabag* is a UK TV comedy show starring, written and produced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who plays a white, middle-class single woman in her early thirties. The show employs tropes of failure and female sexuality (Holzberg and Lehtonen, 2021).

10. The development of psychoanalysis and Freud's theories in the 1920s and 1930s was a major factor that led to single women historically being linked to mental instability or social dysfunction in the United States and United Kingdom (Israel, 2003).
11. By contrast, Oprah emerged as the 'ultimate' single female real-life role model according to Collins (2014) in her study of single Canadian women. Rather than being disappointed by her, the women valued her upwardly mobile 'rags to riches' American-dream style life trajectory.

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