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Introduction to MALS--Oversharing –Spring 2015

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Lena Dunham: Women's Bodies and Contested Space

For anyone in the least acquainted with national media, it may seem as if everywhere you go, there too is Lena Dunham. Her body of work includes the feature film *Tiny Furniture*, four seasons of the HBO series *Girls*, and a much reviewed and best selling memoir, *Not that Kind of Girl*, as well as guest appearances on popular programs, a New Yorker humor piece, and even a “Get Out the Vote” PSA. Her high media profile has prompted feminists, liberals, conservatives, general cultural critics and a exhausting number of Twitter users alike to scrutinize her every move- and endeavor to see whether she is contributing in a positive way to American society—or responsible for its demise. Despite all the debates in the media, very little scholarly research has been conducted on Dunham. The goal of this paper is to analyze commentary related to Dunham and to explore why the most virulent attacks and praise center around issues of the female body.

On *Girls*, Dunham plays the central character Hannah Horvath. Hannah is one of four girls, just out of college, all slightly adrift and looking for the next right move. As the writer, producer, and lead actress, Dunham presents everyday struggles and triumphs—hunting for jobs and creative

fulfillment, finding and being dumped by lovers, bonding and being disappointed by friends—and she narrates these experiences in ways that are wry, self-aware, and self-deprecating. “I’d felt duped by television,” Dunham herself stated, saying that little of what she saw was real. She wanted to portray women she hadn’t seen on television before—women like her.¹ *Girls*, as many media observers have noted, is one of the few women-centered comedy-dramas in which the characters are complicated and nuanced—generous, selfish, self-absorbed, confused, and discovering who they are and who they want to be. Hannah is an aspiring writer who announces to her parents early on that she will be “the voice of a generation,” and later modestly amends it to the “the voice of *a* generation.”² When she discovers how difficult it is to succeed as a writer, she procrastinates and covers by telling an ex-boyfriend she is in the “pre-writing stage.”³ Although Hannah is not an exact reflection of Dunham, Dunham has stated that Hannah and the other “Girls” are based on her life. The “girls” in the title are her friends from real life. And the scenarios she chooses are products of writers’ meetings of which she, along with co-show runner Jenni Konner, lead and draw from their own lives. In addition, Dunham often chooses to display her own near-naked body in situations such as having sex, or going to the bathroom, taking baths, or simply walking around. Even if one were to believe that the rest of *Girls* were entirely fictional, it would be hard to

fictionalize Dunham's in the flesh body. In this sense she has totally conflated fact with fiction. ⁴

On a weekly basis, viewers see Dunham's body: chubby, not the norm by Hollywood standards, and certainly not in compliance with the idealized female body projected at the public from other films or on television. Today, lead actresses are chiseled and refined to perfection, or else relegated to the roles and behaviors of "chubby" girls in TV shows and film. As feminist author Roxane Gay (*Bad Feminist*) stated in her article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Overweight actresses are routinely constrained to roles and plots that make their body the focal point, and more often than not, a source of ridicule or humiliation." ⁵ Melissa McCarthy played a masculine, unattractive and overly aggressive woman in *Bridesmaids*, a film considered groundbreaking; it was woman-centered and proved that women actors could be big box office. Currently, the all-women comedy *Pitch Perfect 2* is breaking box office records but Rebel Wilson's character is called "Fat Amy," and she is foremost defined by her body. ⁶ In the world of *Girls*, however, Hannah is not defined by her body. One is always aware of her mind at work, desperate for new experiences.

In one scene, Hannah is having sex with her (then) boyfriend, Adam, and he pokes her stomach, saying "your stomach is funny." "I don't want my stomach to be funny," she replies. She has so much to say during their lovemaking session, Adam suggests, "Let's play the quiet game." In another

later episode, Dunham plays nearly-naked table tennis and has casual daytime sex with a handsome neighbor (played by Patrick Wilson.)⁷

Although she won praise from some corners for displaying her “funny” body, she also sparked disbelief that she would be able to nab a man “superior” to her in appearance and have casual sex with him in broad daylight. The Kinsey Institute’s Bianca Jarvis praised Dunham for promoting body diversity and quoted XO Jane writer Emily McCombs as saying she had a body like Dunham’s and banged “super hot guys.”⁸ However, the comments that followed were most often attacks: “Dunham is just a fat and homely girl” and “I would compare her body to a large sack of flour . . . it's cruel for Lena Dunham to continue parading around in the altogether and not give me some naked Alison Williams.”¹⁰ Few men are subject to attacks like the ones aimed at Dunham.

These opinions, both positive and negative, show that like women before her, Dunham’s body is subject to different expectations, demands and cultural codes. These demands on women’s bodies have changed along with the shifting tides of culture.

There has long been squeamishness about women’s bodies, particularly in America. In the 19th century, artists—invariably male—who dared to paint the nude female figure were relegated to “medical” exhibitions, behind curtained spaces. Women life models often wore masks, so that they would remain anonymous to the sketchers. As society became more open,

artists began painting nudes, but again those artists were predominantly male, for art academies were predominantly male. ¹¹

Today, feminist art historians assert that aesthetics in art and culture have been dominated by male thought and production. ¹² In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger asserts that women's bodies have been depicted in a certain way, often in full frontal nudity, painted by men to please other men.¹³ In Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the author coined the term "male gaze" and applied it to film, noting that films are made primarily by male directors, and these male directors shoot from angles to reveal the woman's body that their perceived dominantly male audience wants. ¹⁴ Social construction theory centers on the transformation of physical bodies to fit cultural ideals of feminine beauty and masculine strength, and these norms change over time. ¹⁵ Additionally feminist scholars note the internalization of these "norms" by women.

"Modern society creates 'docile bodies,' bodies that meet social expectations without complaint or resistance," stated philosopher Michel Foucault. These bodies become docile "not through punishment but by teaching individuals to accept those expectations as their own and to live as they might be punished at any moment." Foucault based his studies on prisons, the template for many social institutions, including schools, offices and many department stores. In Foucault's view, prisoners never knew where the eye of the lone guard in the tower would land, so in effect they were under

surveillance at all times.¹⁶ Sandra Bartky extended Foucault's ideas to female bodies, citing the gaze, applying it to women and noting that these disciplinary practices keep women smaller, weaker and constantly struggling with shame when they cannot meet the standards.¹⁷ Moreover since these disciplines are seemingly accepted willingly—we are not marched off to Weight Watchers under penalty of death—they are even more insidious. Women strive to be “thin” and perfect, and if they are not often feel they have failed. If you are not fit, as has become a euphemism for body perfection, you are not fit to be seen.¹⁸

The consequences are what some might find catastrophic. Never before have we had bodies that are so artificially manipulated. The overwhelming number of sufferers of anorexia, and consumers of cosmetic surgery are women. In fairness, men are not immune to these demands for a perfect appearance. The target customer for cosmetic breast surgery reduction is a man.¹⁹

Certainly, Dunham is being punished by flaunting those social expectations; she is hardly alone in being subjected to body shaming on social media. But she is also considered heroic. The fact that Dunham's choice to show her body as it is, a bit lumpy, certainly natural, with no artificial augmentation, is considered heroic is certainly a strong commentary on culture. That her display of her naked body is met with revulsion and astonishment is a cruel commentary on American life. Yet, through

Dunham's continued choice to show her body, she alters visual culture; she presents a woman's body in a way male filmmakers have not. In portraying Hannah in this manner, Dunham, the auteur, not only takes over the process of filmmaking, she has begun to construct a new aesthetic. Through exposing us to her "unconventional" body repeatedly, she is normalizing that body. For Dunham and viewers alike, the display of her naked body is a feminist statement. She has taken the hegemonic standard and remodeled it, altering the male gaze.²⁰

Most likely, Dunham did not sell her show to Executive Producer Judd Apatow and to HBO by waving a feminist flag. However, even if that was not Dunham's purpose at the outset, the result is the same. At first Dunham's intent was not to seize the reins of television production for her feminist sisters. In an interview with Terry Gross of NPR, she tells of her stories coming from a more personal space: "It came from my experience," she says. "When you're the fat girl, you have to be more accommodating. You have to be willing. To be ready for adventure. That was the story I started to relate."⁹ But the responses to these depictions gave her renewed fervor. "Once I saw people's responses to these characters, and how angry it made them," she says. "I had to keep going," She has also realized that "For me, the personal became political."²¹

Dunham's exposure became all the more personal with *Not That Kind of Girl* (2014). Like the controversy which swirled around Dunham's

nakedness in *Girls*, the response to *Not That Kind of Girl* often centered around a young woman's body. Whether people had read the book or not, two passages became extremely problematic. In Dunham's account, one incident occurred when she was seven, and her sister Grace one. In the media, some responses termed it childhood exploration, and others sexual perversion. Dunham recounts:

"Do we all have uteruses?" I asked my mother when I was seven. "Yes," she told me. "We're born with them, and with all our eggs, but they start out very small. And they aren't ready to make babies until we're older." I look at my sister, now a slim, tough one-year-old, and at her tiny belly. I imagined her eggs inside her, like the sack of spider eggs in Charlotte's Web, and her uterus, the size of a thimble. "Does her vagina look like mine?"

"I guess so," my mother said. "Just smaller."

One day, as I sat in our driveway in Long Island playing with blocks and buckets, my curiosity got the best of me. Grace was sitting up, babbling and smiling, and I leaned down between her legs and carefully spread open her vagina. She didn't resist and when I saw what was inside I shrieked.

My mother came running. "Mama, Mama! Grace has something in there!"

My mother didn't bother asking why I had opened Grace's vagina. This was within the spectrum of things I did. She just got on her knees and looked for herself. It quickly became apparent that Grace had stuffed six or seven pebbles in there. My mother removed them patiently while Grace cackled, thrilled that her prank had been a success. ²²

Kevin Williamson was most vocal in his National Review piece, entitled "Pathetic Privilege," a reference to Dunham's upbringing. Williamson is best known for an earlier essay called "Laverne Cox is Not A Woman." (Cox is the transgender actor from the Netflix series about prison, "Orange is the New Black.") ²³ He chooses to recount Dunham's words, out of

context, in this way: “At one point, when her sister is a toddler, Lena Dunham *pries* open her vagina,” said Williamson altering Dunham’s quote.: ‘my curiosity just got the best of me,’ he restates her saying, then adds his own remark, “ as though that was an explanation.”

Williamson continues, calling the incident, “very disturbing behavior that would be considered child abuse in many jurisdictions,” the sort of thing which gets children taken away from “non-millionaire families.”²⁴ Dunham’s disclosure of her interest in her sister’s anatomy irked feminists as well. LaChrista Greco, founder of Guerilla Feminism wrote on that Facebook Account, “It’s not normal, It’s not okay.”²⁵ Hood Feminism writer Mikki Kendall asserted that “The gap between the attitudes that let R. Kelly prosper and the ones that excuse Lena Dunham are incredibly thin,.almost non-existent.”²⁶ In equating Dunham with Kelly, she equates this story of childhood exploration with that of an adult male’s charged with child pornography and having sex with underage girls.

These strong accusations require an investigation into what jurisdictions would call this child abuse, and if these charges would hold up in a court of law. “In the sexual abuse field, we generally do not consider children age 7 as sexual abusers,” David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, told *Salon* writer Tracy Clark Flory. Finkelhor, author of such titles as “Sexually Victimized Children,” “Childhood Victimization,” “Child Sexual Abuse” and “Nursery Crimes,” continued that

instead: “we are concerned about children that age who are ‘sexually reactive,’ meaning sexualized in a developmentally inappropriate way” or “being aggressive toward and exploitive of their siblings or peers.”²⁷

Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Sharon Lamb, also cited by Flory, says of Dunham, “First of all, it’s totally normal for kids to be curious about each other’s private parts and the fact that she checked out her sister’s vulva — not vagina, the vagina is inside,. this is really within the norms of childhood sexual behavior.”²⁸

Debby Herbenick, PhD, another Kinsey Institute writer and Associate Professor at Indiana University, spoke to Jia Tolentino of Jezebel. “Anyone who has worked in K or Pre K will tell you that you’re often having to remind little children not to touch their genitals and keep their hands to themselves; genital exploration is very common among young children....some small girls put things up their vaginas—toys, pebbles, Legos... vaginas are not considered sexual at this age.”²⁹

On Twitter, Dunham’s sister, Grace, offered her own opinion: “I’m committed to people narrating their own experiences, determining for themselves what has and has not been harmful.”³⁰ Grace Dunham is joined in her statement by a number of users of the Tumblr blog, *Those Kinds of Girls*, created in the wake of the controversy. The blog contains hundreds of first person accounts from girls around the country and around the world who as children, have explored, or been excited by those not–so-secret nether

regions. As the subhead *Those Kinds of Girls* states: “We did weird sexual shit when we were kids. We’re all those kinds of girls.” The weird kind of shit they’re talking about ranges from “playing horsey,” to jumping up and down showing off our vaginas in mirrors, ³² Far from a criminal activity, experts assert, this sort of sexual exploration is an average rite of passage. Like it or not, and some are sure to not like it, “Those Kinds of Girls” further normalizes a behavior which is considered natural by experts in the field of child development, provides a relatively safe place for women to share these stories and also encourages the free expression of women. “Those Kinds of Girls” would not exist without Dunham.

However, another incident related in the book –Dunham’s disclosure of a sexual violation which occurred in college—has continued to cause strong controversy. As Dunham recounted in her book, she had been at a party, drinking and taking Zanax and cocaine, and has sex with a man she names “Barry.” The encounter turns rough, she notices mid-coitus that he is not using a condom, in fact has thrown it off to land on a potted plant. The sex is so rough that she needs medical attention. She hears through friends that he reports that he “deep dicked” a girl, and that girl was her. Finally, when she tells a friend, her friend calls it “rape,” and Dunham realizes what has happened. ³³

“I spent so much time ashamed.” Dunham said, reflecting on her choice to disclose her rape within the memoir: “For me to have been at a

party drunk and looking for attention was such a shameful place for me... Still, I felt sharing that experience was important not only because I was seeing what other women go through and I thought about what it would give me spiritually”³⁴

Dunham was slow to talk about, not to mention publish, her account. But the publication was important. An approximate 60% of college sexual assaults go unreported according to the University of Michigan’s Sexual Assault and Awareness Prevention Center. ³⁵ Today, campus activists argue that for a woman who is intoxicated there is no such thing as consensual sex. Yet, immediately there was blowback to the story. A man named Barry, who went to school with Dunham at Oberlin, sued because he was wrongly named in the story. Dunham had made up a name for her abuser, but it turned out to be the name of a student who actually attended Oberlin at the time. Random House, who published the book, changed the name in subsequent printings. Dunham apologized, but that wasn’t the end of the controversy. In the minds and words of Dunham’s detractors, Dunham’s story was now wholly rejected. The misidentification of her accoster—Dunham’s attempt to provide anonymity—unleashed a torrent of defenses for all the “Barrys” of the world and for all men who’ve taken advantage of girls too drunk to say no. ³⁶

Camille Paglia observed that “The majority of campus incidents being carelessly described as sexual assault are not felonious rape but are oafish hookup melodramas.” ³⁷ Williamson sees Dunham’s story as a “gutless and

passive aggressive act.”³⁸ Months after publication, Dunham was linked with NYU student and victim of campus rape, and posters pasted near the Columbia campus called the two women, “Pretty Little Liars.”³⁹ But not all rushed to condemn. In speaking of black communities in general, Rochelle Robinson of “Black Girl Dangerous” cited their underreporting. “There remains an ethos oppressively ubiquitous and violent, that enables and normalizes rape, rape culture and sexual assault. Locked in place is the pathology of holding the victim liable for her own victimization, she brought it upon herself.”⁴⁰

Robinson’s voice is crucial to the conversation (although she made no reference to Dunham specifically). Dunham has been accused of existing in an all white world, in a privileged position which not all get to share. This accusation is used to make her voice invalid. “There is an undercurrent of rage that seems to have very little to do with the book,” said Roxane Gay. It involves its “disclosures, and everything to do with a privileged white girl succeeding. Yes it is “f*ckd up that we all don’t enjoy the same privilege that Lena Dunham has. But that conversation is not about Lena Dunham. It is a separate conversation.”⁴¹

This paper would be lacking if it did not include the impact of Dunham’s upbringing on her work. Her “privileged” circumstances may have uniquely prepared her for her role as “voice of a generation,” as she wryly, and perhaps presciently uttered in an early episode of *Girls*. Dunham’s

mother, the well-known artist Laurie Simmons, is a co-founder of Women's Action Coalition, a downtown New York women artists group of the nineties which aimed to reconstruct the "gaze," and put women at the artists' table.⁴² Lena Dunham went with her mother to Women's Action Coalition meetings in downtown New York, along with other daughters of WAC members.¹⁰ Today WAC has disbanded but its members fund raise for Planned Parenthood, as does Dunham.¹¹ Dunham's father is the well-known artist Carroll Dunham. His early work centered on male nudes, making them baboon-like creatures with indeterminate sexual organs.¹² Today, one has only to go to the Whitney in New York City to see a prominently displayed wall-sized work of Carroll Dunham's, a female nude frolicking in a cartoon-like garden.¹³ The female nude's body parts are as unconventional as his males'. Certainly Dunham's father has done his share to rework the male gaze. The family, as a whole, has progressive ideas about the body, too progressive for some.

That upbringing has been a point of contention for some parties. Williamson notes that she is the daughter of a successful artist. Dunham was able to go to the finest public schools, and that she is entitled. "Entitlement," he suggests, makes her revelations invalid, unreliable, and the case of a spoiled child being indulged to "overshare."⁴⁷ But the charge of oversharing, and of not having the right to speak, Dunham refutes:

"I think when men share their experiences, it's bravery and when women share their experiences, it's some sort of — people are

like, "TMI.," said Dunham to NPR's Gross. "Too much information has always been my least favorite phrase because what exactly constitutes too much information? It seems like it has a lot to do with who is giving you the information, and I feel as though there's some sense that society trivializes female experiences. And so when you share them, they aren't considered as vital as male experiences." 48

Indisputably, women do share more than men, states Pat Heim PhD and author of *In the Company of Women: Indirect Aggression among Women* (2003). "Men live in hierarchies," and women live in a flat culture where power is shared more equally, Heim told Monica Corcoran of Elle Magazine. "But women do have to be careful. Because this sharing makes you more vulnerable." 49 Despite this, and to the discomfort of some, Dunham appears comfortable sharing her intimacies with a number –estimated to be in the millions--of "those kinds of girls" found on social media, in front of their televisions, and as readers of pop culture biographies. 50 She may not speak for everyone. She may not be the "voice of a generation," but she is a voice. Her powerful presence in popular culture, in the consumer press, in the social media universe, and on cable television, makes her a strong voice that will echo into places in which it is perceived she does not reach. But her voice is a voice which will enable other voices to become louder.

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