

THE VOICE OF A GENERATION: AN EXPLORATION OF  
LENA DUNHAM'S MULTI-MODAL PERSONAE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Lena Dunham has been coined as *the voice* of the Millennial generation. Her multi-modal career, varying from her HBO sitcom *Girls*, best-selling memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*, to her online website/e-newsletter *Lenny*, has provided Dunham a platform to discuss her opinions on political, economic, and social issues, specifically pertaining to the feminist discourse. What becomes problematic in positioning a figure to represent an entire generation is it, consequently, silences and continues to marginalize the voices she is intended to represent. Particularly focusing on her memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*, and her website/e-newsletter *Lenny*, I view Dunham's personae as a microcosm for the larger issues I find in third-wave feminism and the Millennial generation.

## INTRODUCTION

For the last five years, Lena Dunham has been continuously referred to as *the voice* of the Millennial generation (*Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, *Harper's Bazaar*). Dunham's career currently spans across various modal platforms and allows her voice to be heard at high volume. In return, her successful multi-modal career has now created, what I refer to as, *The Lena Dunham Empire*, which rests upon an overarching platform of Western privilege. Moreover, Dunham's empire provides her the agency to voice her opinion on various social, political, and economical issues, particularly within the feminist discourse. Yet, her privileged voice, that is intended to represent an entire generation, consequently silences many of the narratives she has been positioned to represent. Her impact on the Millennial generation and the multi-faceted personae she represents, both professionally and personally, provide for a fruitful rhetorical exploration of both literary criticism and the historical positioning of the feminist movement in the twenty-first century.

Because viewers and critics have positioned Dunham to represent her generation entirely, I will be exploring Dunham's empire as a microcosm for the various critiques I have on the Millennial generation. Focusing on a profound figure, such as Dunham, provides an entrance into exploring my critiques of the Millennial's relation to the feminist movement in the twenty-first century. Yet, it is imperative to recognize that I approach Dunham from an unreliable

positioning. I am a member of the very generation she represents, and I too, come from a Western platform of privilege. As a Millennial, both my literary critiques and observations of the feminist movement are a product of my generation. I address this influence because my subjective positioning hinders my ability to view both Dunham and the Millennial generation through any alternative lens. My exploration of Dunham, and the work I create in this thesis, should be read with an eye toward relativity.

Dunham's successful career began on an already-privileged platform. Born May 13, 1986, Dunham was raised in an upper-class family in New York City with her parents, Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham, and her sister, Grace. After high school, Dunham continued as a student at Oberlin College in Ohio where she majored in Creative Writing. In November of 2010, Dunham released her independent film, *Tiny Furniture*, that quickly led her into a multi million-dollar relationship with HBO to produce, write, and star in the hit series, *Girls*. The success of her HBO series led to winning two Golden Globe Awards and eight nominations for Emmy Awards as a writer, director, actress, and producer ("The Argotist"). Dunham's series would unknowingly become the strongest platform that would sustain *The Lena Dunham Empire* that she is more prominently known for today.

In April of 2012, HBO launched Dunham's sitcom, *Girls*, that follows a group of twenty-somethings who are trying to make their way through New

York City. Starring as the main character, Hannah Horvath, Dunham encompasses a character that viewers and critics refer to as a slightly more neurotic alter-ego of Dunham's. Undeniably, Dunham and Horvath's experiences mirror one another; Dunham, too, grew up in New York City and has been observed, by her viewers, as correlating narrative plots to her personal life experiences. Dunham's position as being labeled *the voice* of the Millennial generation, without coincidence, derives from a statement from her character, Horvath, in the pilot episode of *Girls*. Dunham satirically mocks the "post-undergraduate writer" through Horvath's character, in stating, "I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least *a* voice. Of *a* generation" (*Girls* 1.1). Horvath's character has been labeled as a direct correlation to the "real" Dunham, and the statement from Horvath, in season one, has now been transcribed to represent both Dunham's identity and empire.

The success of her HBO show and Dunham's quick rise to celebrity stardom prompted *Random House Publishing* to grant Dunham a 3.5 million-dollar advancement for the text that became known as *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned."* Shortly after her 2014 publication, Dunham's book became a *New York Times'* best seller. Although originally published under non-fiction, Dunham's book became re-categorized by her readers as a memoir-*ish* due to its disguise as an "advice book...(as in how to navigate the perilous waters of girlhood) in the guise of a series of personal

essays" (*New York Times* n.p.). From this literary genre-shift came substantial reader-backlash surrounding issues of "truth-telling" within her narrative. In other words, because Dunham's text is read as a memoir-*ish*, readers enter the narrative with a set of expectations from the author. However, genre-expectations provide even more insight in to the preconceived expectations of gender. More specifically, for a female who has been positioned by her viewers as *the voice* of her generation, *Not That Kind of Girl* acts as a case study for providing a deeper understanding of what female writers can, and more importantly *cannot*, discuss in their narratives.

With the help of both her successful and ongoing HBO sitcom and book release, Dunham became a public figure for the Millennial generation. Taking advantage of her successful platform, Dunham began using social media sites, such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to cast her opinion on political, social, and economical issues. In return, Dunham became a strong voice for female reproductive rights and gender equality. She can be seen in commercials supporting President Barack Obama, aligning with his views on female reproductive rights, and as the 2016 presidential election kicks off, Dunham now stands with Hillary Clinton to further the feminists' rights dialogue within the political realm. Yet, Dunham's activism has shifted, and consequently limited, the feminist movement toward a singular narrative surrounding female reproductive rights and supporting corporations such as Planned Parenthood.

Although her activism positively places the feminist discourse at the forefront of Millennial minds, the sole focus on a single issue consequently marginalizes alternative feminist narratives. This singular focus derives from a mainstream representation of feminism that I view as the major shift in the movement in the twenty-first century. Feminists, like Dunham, are what I refer to as *fad feminists*, which I further discuss in the conclusion of my thesis.

Alongside her political activism, Dunham took to the internet to voice the third-wave, feminist discourse. In August of 2015, Dunham and co-creator, Jenni Konner, produced an online website/e-newsletter, *Lenny*, that attempts to create a space for a collective feminist dialogue to discuss, “feminism, style, health, politics, friendship and everything else” (*Lenny*). *Lenny* strives for a communal dialogue that brings “it all to your inbox and to highlight unique voices” of feminism/s in the twenty-first century (Quoted in “Makers”). The success of her website/e-newsletter placed Dunham on an even higher pedestal for being a strong symbol for the “modern feminist” (“In the Red” 19). Although Dunham pushes for a communal project for all feminists, subscribers and critics have positioned Dunham to be the voice for not only the Millennial generation, but more specifically, the “Millennial feminist.”

Dunham’s success across various modes (television, internet, book, etc.) allow her to carefully craft a personal narrative for her viewers, critics, subscribers, and readers. Within Dunham’s multi-modal personae, she self-

represents a persuasive indication of “authenticity” that alludes to a singular, tangible identity that viewers can grasp, only to turn around and contradict herself by displaying another “version” of Dunham. Where things get messy, for Dunham’s viewers and critics, is precisely within the contradictions Dunham creates.

Throughout my thesis, I will be exploring *The Lena Dunham Empire* and the multi-modal personae Dunham has created and sustained. Although my research may allude to a singular identity, it is vital to know that the search for a singular identity is unattainable. Therefore, when referring to Dunham, I will be consciously approaching her as a “text” to avoid falling into the misconception that Dunham is a singular identity that can be examined. Instead, Dunham, as text, enforces the notion that identity is a fluid and incomprehensible construct. While analyzing Dunham and her various personae, I will inevitably be constructing a representation of her, but it is imperative to recognize that it is a reading that will not produce a singular, tangible identity.

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As I analyze Dunham’s multi-modal career, specifically honing in on the controversies surrounding her best-selling memoir-*ish* and the viral success of her, and co-creator, Jenni Konner’s, feminist website/e-newsletter *Lenny*, I am viewing the platform that Dunham stands upon as a microcosm for the third-wave feminist platform of choice, or what derives from the concept that Aimee

Carrillo Rowe refers to as *power feminism* in her 2009 article, “Subject to Power – Feminism Without Victims.” Carrillo Rowe views the birth of power feminism as a way to:

couple the notion of “power” with that of “feminism.” ...Acclaimed feminists...have laid their claim to ‘power feminism’ as a rhetorical form that might help feminists overcome some of feminism’s fundamental weaknesses” (13).

Power feminism’s exigence seems to be seeking to “assuage the fears inspired by feminism’s threat to male authority, while renouncing the ‘victim’ status of women, a figure that 1970s feminism allegedly constructs as a fragile and passive (non)agent of male control” (13). In other words, we must distance ourselves, as feminists, from victimization and “redirect it toward the power of the word and of action to locate new forms of women’s empowerment – most particularly, one’s own individual power” (13). The emphasis on the individual feminist, and the choice to voice differing ideological interpretations of what it “means” to be a Millennial feminist is reiterated throughout Dunham’s multi-modal career and personal life, which are strongly apparent in both her memoir-*ish* and website/e-newsletter, *Lenny*.

Dunham has created an environment that thrives on the unapologetic, individual feminist who refuses to be placed in a box. Her memoir-*ish* is a strong case study for the apophatic approach to sharing her experiences of growing up as Millennial female in New York City. In other words, Dunham takes the approach of sharing her experiences without labeling them for her readers,

rather than providing her readers' and critics with an outright understanding of her experiences. She continues this same approach within her online feminist venture, *Lenny*, in order to expose as many contradictory narratives of what it "looks like" to be a feminist in the twenty-first century. However, as I explore both modes of Dunham's career, I am unsatisfied with the feminist approach Dunham lives by. Although Dunham successfully brings the feminist dialogue to the forefront of the Millennial discourse, she lacks the awareness of her responsibility and obligation to her feminist foresters and those who are currently being marginalized today. What my exploration exposes are the underlining issues I find to be existing within the third-wave feminist discourse.

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In Chapter One, "Truth-Telling" Within a *Memoir-ish*: A Look into Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned,"* Dunham's contradictions provide insight into newfound conversations surrounding genre studies and, more specifically, the ways in which readers, viewers, subscribers, and critics respond to Dunham's feminist empire. This chapter is split into two major sections: "Grace" and "Barry," where I explore, what I view as, the two most controversial moments of reader-backlash from her text.

In the section titled, "'Grace': Gendered Authorship and Narrative Geography," I focus on the controversy surrounding Dunham's retelling of a

sexual account with her younger sister, Grace. The rhetorical situation surrounding reader-response exposes fruitful information surrounding genre studies and reader-expectations, particularly honing in on how the author's gender plays a strong part in what a female author can and, more specifically, *cannot* discuss. Leaning on Anis S. Bawarshi's approach toward genres as being "rhetorical ecosystems" and Walter R. Fisher's concepts of *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity*, I discuss, what I refer to as *narrative geography* to better understand what we read for and where the narrative between reader and writer lives.

In the second section titled, "'Barry:' and The Co-Authoring of Narratives," I shift focus from genre studies toward an exploration of narrative agency. Both Dunham's "Grace" and "Barry" chapters revolve around Dunham's past sexual encounters. Her recollections in her chapter "Grace" have readers casting Dunham as a sexual predator, whereas her "Barry" chapter recalls an experience in college where Dunham alludes to being raped by a "mustachioed republican" named Barry (*Not That Kind of Girl* 51). Once readers dug into the "truth-telling" of this chapter, they came to the account that Dunham, was in fact, "lying" about her encounter with a man named Barry. Using Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "Autobiographical Pact," I argue that the pact not only refers to the truth-telling agreement between reader and writer, but more so

exposes conversations of narrative authority and narrative agency between the writer, reader, and subject being discussed.

This chapter concludes by zooming out on my analysis on both chapters from her text to see what the two sections expose about what we, as readers, read for. The controversy surrounding both chapters expose our predetermined and preconceived ways of reading due to genre-expectation, and what I would argue is more outright, gender-expectation. Dunham continuously tells her readers that she is an unreliable narrator throughout her text, yet readers refuse to listen. Because Dunham rejects to ever define what her text is doing she, consequently, becomes labeled by those who encounter her text.

In Chapter Two, "Toward a Safer and Homier Space: A Feminist Critique on Dunham's Website/E-Newsletter *Lenny*," I switch my focus toward another mode of Dunham's career, her creation of the feminist website/e-newsletter, *Lenny*. Dunham, once again, takes the apophatic approach and refuses to define what it means to be a Millennial feminist. Instead, she creates a platform for others to express their individual ideological interpretation of the movement. Her website has attempted to create a space for the various contradictory voices of the twenty-first century feminist.

Dunham and co-creator, Jenni Konner, describe the website as a space that becomes "... your over sharing Internet friend who will yell at you about your finances, help you choose a bathing suit, lamp, president...AND tell you

what to do if you need an abortion" ("Makers"). The exigence behind the feminist website/e-newsletter attempts to create a home-like space of inclusion for the varying narratives of the twenty-first century feminist.

In my exploration of Dunham's website, I discuss how the internet was initially intended to create a cyber-space of inclusion for all marginalized voices to be heard. Instead, the cyber-world has become a carbon copy of the patriarchal society it was initially trying to avoid. Because the internet reiterates the problematic issues for feminist voices to be heard, I view *Lenny* as an attempt to create a safer and homier space of inclusion that allows for varying feminists to voice their narratives.

Using Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's chapter in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, titled "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?", I dissect their two concepts of being "home" and "not at home" to ultimately break down the binary between the two in order to argue that Dunham's website provides the technological illusion of being simultaneously "home" and "not home." In other words, we are now able to expose the varying feminist narratives across the globes inside both the metaphoric and literal walls of our own homes. The online space connects various narratives of feminism, not with the exigence to provide a universal definition for the movement, but rather to create an outlet for feminists to be exposed to the various identities and interpretations of feminism/s.

I conclude this chapter by pointing out the gaps within my argument that ultimately, expose the overarching gaps within third-wave feminist movement. Specifically, I argue that although Dunham's attempt to create a space of inclusion, the very platform it stands on unavoidably excludes those that do not have the privilege or access to the very mode Dunham's online feminist discourse is displayed on.

In my thesis conclusion, "Privilege in Choice: A Critique on Dunham's Voice," I center my focus on readers' and critics' insistence to cast Dunham as *the voice* of the Millennial generation. Returning to main themes of both chapters one and two, I dissect the problematic nature for casting a single person as *the voice* for any generation. Looking at Dunham as a figure of privilege, I re-examine the issues surrounding the *power feminist*, aligning with Carrillo Rowe, to argue that the major problematic areas within third-wave feminism/s lie within the twenty-first century shift toward, what I refer to as, *fad feminism*. This term encompasses the Western, privileged, twenty-first century feminist that lacks the awareness for both the feminist predecessors and marginalized feminists that created the platform fad feminists stand upon. Although this may be the shift that the movement is taking in the twenty-first century, we mustn't forget those who came before us and those who are currently silenced. Our ability to voice our narratives in the twenty-first century is not solely a consequence of embracing individual power; but rather, it too derives from the sacrifices and struggles of

many feminists who paved the way toward the possibility of feminist agency of choice that so many feminists take advantage of today.

## CHAPTER ONE

“TRUTH-TELLING” WITHIN A MEMOIR-ISH: A LOOK INTO DUNHAM’S  
*NOT THAT KIND OF GIRL: A YOUNG WOMAN TELLS YOU*  
*WHAT SHE’S “LEARNED”*

*“One is fruitful only at the cost of being rich in contradictions.”  
-Friedrich Nietzsche*

I’M AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR. The thoughts, analyses, and words I write in this chapter are directly influenced by the historical and contextual situations I surround myself with/in. These historical and contextual situations create my ever-evolving subjectivity, making my thoughts, analyses, and words an unreliable source for a narrative that expresses any resemblance of an objective “truth.” Returning to Carrillo Rowe’s article, as a third-wave power feminist, I find comfort in my unreliability and seek narrative agency in my literary contradictions. I am unreliable, and so is Lena Dunham. In fact, the introductory statement regarding my unreliability directly derives from Dunham’s famous sentence in her non-fiction collection of personal essays, *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She’s “Learned.”* Although Dunham’s text self-categorizes as a series of non-fiction essays, readers and critics more so refer to her text as memoir-*ish* due to its disguise as an “advice book... (as in how to navigate the perilous waters of girlhood) in the guise of a

series of personal essays" (*New York Times* n.p.). Though I agree with *New York Times'* reasoning behind filing Dunham's text as such, the deeper understanding behind referring to Dunham's text as memoir-*ish* derives, for me, from a more fruitful standpoint; one which raises questions surrounding both genre and gender expectation, and authorial agency. Is the addition of *-ish* to the genre Dunham's text aligns with a subtle play on the text's refusal to fit the boundaries that literary genres enforce? Do we have a genre for Dunham's text? Is the additive *-ish* a temporary placeholder until Dunham's narrative paves the way to a new genre? Does the *-ish* expose conversations surrounding readers' resistance toward sexually "taboo" content written by a female author? Through her apophatic literary and narrative approach, Dunham's text does not provide the answers to these questions; instead, it more strongly represents what it is *not* doing rather than attempting to answer what it *is*.

When looking at case studies such as Dunham's text, we are partaking in a larger conversation of genre studies, particularly literary genres. As I address some of the questions Dunham's text exposes, specifically surrounding author function and reader response, I am approaching literary genres as the rhetorical ecosystems that Anis S. Bawarshi believes help us to create a framework for navigating different:

Forms of life [and] ways of being. [Genres] are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the

familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the *guideposts* we use to explore the unfamiliar. (italics added, Bazerman qtd in Bawarshi 25)

Viewing genres from this perspective also addresses the interconnectedness between various rhetorical ecosystems. In other words, genres as rhetorical ecosystems are continuously influencing and interacting with one another, but in order to analyze our communicative processes, we bracket “ways of being.” And as we are exposed to various rhetorical ecosystems, a major component of navigating various genres and our myriad reactions to texts is through the use of guideposts of familiarity. For example, Walter R. Fisher’s terms of *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity* provide us with language-focused terms to explore why we react the way that we do to various genres (“Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm” 383). Narrative probability refers to whether or not we view a narrative as producing a “coherent story,” and our search for narrative fidelity focuses on “whether the stories [we] experience ring true with the stories [we] know to be true in [our] lives” (383). Fisher’s two concepts, I posit, become what Bawarshi refers to as some of the “guideposts” that navigate us through unfamiliar rhetorical ecosystems.

From a literary standpoint, we use these same guideposts to navigate literary genres. And part of our understanding of literary genre-categorization derives from relating texts to genres we are already familiar with. As readers, we enter literary narratives with preconceived expectations that are signaled to us from the very genre they have been aligned with or confined to. In Jonathan

Culler's essay, "Toward a Theory of Non-Genre Literature," he states that as readers, we have "a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherences one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read" (*Theory of the Novel* 51). One factor that contributes to our preconceived expectations as readers is which genre the text is to be filed under. As readers, we not only navigate texts by the literary genre they are categorized under, but also apply the same "set of expectations" and "instructions" to the gender of the author writing the narrative. In other words, we have certain guidelines for what a female writer can, and more importantly, *cannot* discuss.

When I hear the name Louise Erdrich, for example, I know I will embark in an Erdrich text that aligns with the overarching genre of magical realism. I also expect Erdrich's narrative to be a non-linear representation of a particular Native American family, spanning over multiple generations. However, the genre expectation of her novels goes deeper than literary expectation and expands into the expectations, and limitations, of what Erdrich, as a female Native American author, can write about. When that expectation is not met, there is reader-resistance. This resistance can be seen, for example, in her 1996 satirical love story, *Tales of Burning Love*, that consequently led loyal followers of her writing to doubt Erdrich's narrative ability because both Erdrich and her writing became unfamiliar. Dunham is no exception to this reader-expectation. By being categorized as *the voice* of the Millennial generation, readers

approached Dunham's memoir-*ish* with a set of expectations for what/what not her narrative was allowed to discuss, especially when it pertains to sexual content. However, *Not That Kind of Girl* does not shy away from sharing graphic stories of sexual curiosities and encounters that do not align with the mainstream view of "normal" sexual experiences for an American female. Readers of her text quickly label her memoir-*ish* as a "taboo" narrative because their preconceived expectations for what Dunham *should* discuss are not met.

However, Dunham's text attempts to avoid any literary and gender categorization and we see this rebellion within the very titling of her text. Her apophatic title refuses to serve her readers with any sort of literary guidepost to lean on. Instead, she will only preface her readers by stating that she is *not that kind of girl*. In the attempt to avoid any sort of categorization, Dunham's text pushes for a narrative of unfamiliarity. However, for publication purposes, it was initially categorized under the genre of non-fiction. Yet, readers and critics did not find that particular categorization to be the most suitable for Dunham's text. Instead, readers re-labeled Dunham's text to be alternatively categorized as memoir-*ish* because the content of her text aligns with some of the guideposts we already associate with the memoir genre. Therefore, in order to be able to comprehend Dunham's text as "familiar," it had to be re-categorized under an alternative genre.

With the re-categorization of Dunham's text comes new readerly expectations designated to the particular genre of memoir. In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, they align with Culler and explain some of the preconceived expectations when writing and reading within the larger umbrella of life-writing. They argue:

We read differently and assess the narrative as making truth claims of a sort that are suspended in fictional forms such as the novel...Readers ascribe these memories and experiences to a flesh-and-blood person and assume that publication acts as an ethical guarantee by publishers and agents. (11,37)

What happens, then, is Dunham's text is now being read as a memoir. With the shift in genre-categorization comes new reader-expectation that calls for Dunham to provide true tellings of her past. For example, the additive excerpts from various communicative modes, whether that be old email correspondence or past AOL Instant Messenger conversations from ten years ago, initially read as rhetorical narrative moves that give an audience insight into Dunham's younger years, to now being read as actual, word for word, retellings of her encounters. Yet, her text never self-identified as memoir-*ish*, and it is this exact genre expectation that incited Dunham's text as controversial.

This dispute between writer and reader is apparent in backlash toward Dunham's chapters, "Grace" and "Barry" that provide insight in to genre expectations and narrative categorization. Within both chapters, Dunham shares past experiences that discuss sexually "taboo" stories. Where I see

predetermined categorization stemming from, in the case of Dunham's two chapters, is within readers' constant search for narrative fidelity. In other words, when we are faced with a narrative that pushes against our ways of knowing and comprehending (i.e. sexually "taboo" content written by a female), we often respond negatively or actively refuse to partake in that particular narrative. Although reading for narrative fidelity and probability are not the only guideposts used in exploring various genres, I will primarily be focusing on the specific outcomes deriving from this particular read.

These specific reactions, deriving from narrative fidelity, is in direct response to Bawarshi's concept surrounding issues of narrative unfamiliarity. Because Dunham's apophatic literary approach pushes for a narrative that cannot be categorized, our understanding of the additive *-ish* can be seen as twofold. In Dunham's defense, it instills the text's insistence for a narrative that cannot be categorized or bracketed; and for reader's navigational purposes, it provides a temporary placeholder, created by readers, for literary narratives that ring unfamiliar until the narrative can eventually evolve into a narrative of familiarity. Genre expectation and narrative-categorization is exemplified in *Not That Kind of Girl's* chapter's "Grace" and "Barry" not only through the narrative within her memoir-*ish*, but the rhetorical situation surrounding reader-response and backlash to her text.

“Grace,” Gendered Authorship, and Narrative Geography

Smith and Watson describe the memoir genre as “bracket[ing] one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span and offer[s] reflections on its significance for the writer’s previous status of self-understanding” (4). The “bracketing” that Smith and Watson refer to, alludes to a narrative that lacks the ability to revise according to contextual change. Therefore, in the case of Dunham’s text, the stories that she shares can and would only begin and end within the pages of her bound memoir. However, the *-ish* addition to her memoir challenges the narrative bracketing that the memoir genre enforces and pushes for a narrative that bleeds outside of her bound text. The *-ish* added to the memoir genre provides the freedom for the narrative to exist outside of the requirements and guidelines of texts that solely align with the specific memoir genre. Moreover, the additive *-ish* also exposes the collaborative and co-authoring of the unique narrative created by each reader’s own subjective exposure to Dunham’s text. This co-authorship between reader and writer, I argue, lives not within the bound text, but instead within readers’ collaborative understanding through their own subjectivities. We see the alternative narrative placement that pushes away from brackets within the rhetorical situation surrounding the text, particularly within Dunham’s chapter, “Grace.”

I have established how readers have an easier time pointing out narratives of the unfamiliar as inappropriate or unworthy of being read when the text is labeled or categorized, under specific genres. Yet, not only does the genre in which the sexually “taboo” content is categorized under affect reader-reaction, it simultaneously exposes issues of gender when it comes to authoring inappropriate content. In the case of her chapter on her sister, Grace, Dunham’s recollection of sexual curiosity was quickly categorized as being a truthful account of Dunham’s childhood. What seems to be the catalyst for reader backlash, in this case, is the sexually “taboo” content that many readers may not have expected from a female life-writer, especially one who has been labeled *the voice* for the Millennial generation. Because the content touches on socially unacceptable behavior of a female, readers have labeled Dunham as a sexual predator and, consequently, turned their backs on her as a “reliable” female author. Thus, a text written by a female sexual predator becomes an unrelatable narrative, or an example of Bawarshi’s concept of narrative fidelity for the mainstream reader.

Shortly after the publication of her memoir, a website called *Truth Revolt* published their disturbed reaction toward Dunham’s retelling of her childhood memory with her younger sister, Grace. *Truth Revolt* pulled an excerpt from Dunham’s memoir-ish where she recalls an incident of sexual curiosity with her one-year-old sister when Dunham was at the young age of seven:

“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 looked 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. (Quoted in *Truth Revolt* n.p.)

By honing in on Dunham’s recollection of sexual curiosity, *Truth Revolt* quickly labeled Dunham as behaving in a predator-like manner by “using her little sister at times essentially as a sexual outlet, bribing her to kiss her for prolonged periods and even masturbating while she is in the bed beside her” (n.p.).

Followers of Dunham quickly aligned with *Truth Revolt*’s interpretation of *Not That Kind of Girl*’s “Grace” chapter. This publication consequently led to a viral hashtag, #DropDunham, that protested both the purchasing and reading of her text. Readers that quickly aligned with *Truth Revolt*’s narrative provide insight in to the type of narrative fidelity readers are more likely to relate to. In other words, the search for whether or not Dunham’s experience with her sister is in fact true or false is irrelevant; but instead, a question of whether or not we view her narrative as “taboo” or not, as a female life-writer, becomes our primary

focus. If our subjective interpretation of Dunham's narrative pushes against our ways of knowing a "coherent story" for female authors, then it becomes easier to align with a narrative, such as *Truth Revolt's*, that exposes the unfamiliar as inappropriate and "taboo" sexual content.

With the publication of *Truth Revolt's* narrative, readers now have a place, or genre, for the unfamiliar narrative found in *Not That Kind of Girl*. By labeling her narrative as "taboo," *Truth Revolt* and followers of their article, remove the narrative from Dunham's text and place the unfamiliar narrative into a separate category. Therefore, the conversation and search for what to do with/where to place Dunham's controversial narrative has been "solved" for her resistant readers. Readers have now taken the memoir's unfamiliar narrative outside the pages of the bound text and continued the narrative within *Truth Revolt's* publication in order to make sense of its unfamiliarity.

Yet, Dunham's text attempts to be un-categorizable. Now that readers and critics have provided Dunham's narrative with the familiar title of "taboo" content, the narrative is no longer homeless and has now been categorized. As Dunham's readers have taken it upon themselves to create an alternative categorization that, consequently, did not sit well with the female author. So, Dunham quickly jumps in to stir up the dialogue surrounding her narrative. *Truth Revolt's* article and the creation of the viral hashtag seem to become the tipping point for Dunham to re-enter the conversation and re-establish a text that

refuses categorization. Her reaction to reader-responses provides more insight into our understanding of narrative fluidity outside of a bound text and the power feminists' unapologetic narrative approach.

Quickly after the publication of *Truth Revolt's* article, Dunham publically reacted in outrage. In the course of six minutes, Dunham responded to readers' allegations through a stream of published Twitter responses:

"The right wing news story that I molested my little sister isn't just LOL-it's really fucking upsetting and disgusting" (12:24 PM, 1 Nov. 2014).

"And by the way, if you were a little kid and never looked at another little kid's vagina, well, congrats to you" (12:24 PM, 1 Nov. 2014).

"Usually this is stuff I can ignore but don't demean sufferers, don't twist my words, back the fuck up bros" (12:25 PM, 1 Nov. 2014).

"I told a story about being a weird 7 year old. I bet you have some too, old men, that I'd rather not hear. And yes, this is a rage spiral" (12:28 PM, 1 Nov. 2014).

"Sometimes I get so mad I burn right up. Also I wish my sister wasn't laughing so hard" (12:30 PM, 1 Nov. 2014). (Twitter.com/@lenadunham)

In the case of both *Truth Revolt's* publication and Dunham's tweeted responses, we now see an alternative understanding of where a narrative exists; what I would refer to as *narrative-geography*. In other words, where the narrative lives or belongs is being challenged by *Not That Kind of Girls'* refusal to be bracketed. With the change in narrative modality, moving from her bound text to both *Truth Revolt's* publication and her Twitter responses, *Not That Kind of Girl* represents a narrative that is no longer bracketed, but can live outside the bindings of a

printed text, and challenges our understanding of both the composition and revision process of a narrative. Naturally, both composition and revision are understood as living solely in the discrete stages prior to publication, and the inevitable bracketing of a text. Instead, Dunham is exposing how her narrative does not solely exist in a bracketed text that can only live and die in a bound book; rather, the continuous revising, removing, re-writing, and new additions to the narrative, seen in the examples of *Truth Revolt* and Dunham's Twitter rant, continues outside of its textual bindings. Both *Truth Revolt* and Dunham's "tweeted" responses, thus, reiterate *Not That Kind of Girl's* refusal toward being bracketed and increase our understanding toward the additive *-ish* to Dunham's memoir.

What Dunham's narrative overflow exposes even more so is the prevalence in which the content of a narrative calls for further explanation past the initially published narrative. Dunham admits that while most readers' reactions can be overlooked – "Usually this is stuff I can ignore but don't demean sufferers, don't twist my words, back the fuck up bros" (12:25 PM, 1 Nov. 2014) – those regarding sexually "taboo" content told by female authors and those that challenge the moral distinctions of readers insist that the narrative must be re-categorized. Here, Dunham has produced a story that pushes the narrative-morale toward what appears to be a level of reader discomfort and unfamiliarity. However, like pushing the narrative boundaries by writing

outside of her bound text (a la *Truth Revolt* and Dunham's tweeted responses), Dunham's narrative, too, will not avoid stories that allude to sexually "taboo" content. That is to say, she is *not the kind of feminist* who avoids the retelling of sexual experiences. A narrator and/or text that refuses to label or categorize (once again, reiterated in the the very title of her text), risks the consequence of being labeled by readers and critics. However, while Dunham refuses to categorize herself, she inevitably opens the door for her followers to label her as they see fit. Consequently, the dichotomy of either "not the kind of girl to narratively avoid sexual experiences" or "Dunham as sexual predator" is created. What is threatened then, when a life narrator avoids proactively stating what they are, inevitably seems to take the risk of being labeled what they may not wish to be.

In the case of Dunham's sexual curiosity with her younger sister, Grace, the repercussions were minor. Dunham even states in her tweeted response that her sister reacted humorously to the molestation accusations; so, the uproar surrounding this chapter slowly faded out. What causes readers to forget (and possibly forgive) narrative content of unfamiliarity that threatens moral distinctions tends to be contingent upon the reaction from the subject being discussed. However, Grace's reaction is being channeled through the publication of Dunham's Twitter account. Yet, readers seem to trust Dunham's interpretation of Grace's reaction enough to forgive Dunham's sexually "taboo" narrative in

*Not That Kind of Girl*. Moreover, because Grace's narrative agency was not threatened, readers seemed to have the ability to de-label Dunham as a sexual predator and brush off their negative reaction to her chapter.

However, there are allegations of sexual "truth-telling" within Dunham's memoir-*ish* that led to more severe consequences for the female life-writer. Instead of being labeled a predator from the content of her "Grace" chapter, Dunham is now painted in the light as a sexual victim – temporarily. In her chapter titled, "Barry," Dunham claims to have been raped by a fellow college student during her time at Oberlin, and was quickly praised for her bravery in publically sharing her experience. However, readers and critics began to investigate the validity of her statement. The controversy surrounding Dunham's chapter, "Barry," exposes new insight on gender-expectations alongside conversations surrounding the issues of authorial and reader agency.

#### "Barry" and The Co-Authoring of Narratives

The *-ish* of Dunham's memoir not only represents the refusal of genre and narrative pigeonholing but also acts as a placeholder for a discussion of authorial agency; or rather, who is responsible for the authoring of Dunham's text? To begin, Smith and Watson would argue that rather than a text solely being authored by the writer, it is instead a collaboration of authorship through a "dialogical exchange between writer and reader/viewer" (16). They argue:

...The author of a life narrative is not an authority on it [autobiographical “truth”], for life-writing requires an audience to both confirm the writer’s existence in time and mark his or her lived specificity, distinctiveness, and location. Thus autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding...”. (*Reading Autobiography* 16)

Therefore, Dunham’s memoir-*ish* is being created within the exchange between Dunham’s written text and readers’ reaction to her text. We see this lean toward a collaborative narration within the narrative overflow including writer and reader-response in the case of her “Grace” chapter, and in subtle portions of Dunham’s narrative within her memoir. For example, Dunham acknowledges her subjectivity within her own writing when she explicitly admits to the multiple variations she can tell in one story. She states, “I’ve told the story to myself in different variations – there are a few versions of it rattling around in my memory” (*Not That Kind of Girl* 52). By explicitly stating both her subjectivity and relativity (depending on the context she is in while recollecting the memories), Dunham invites her readers to do the same. Like nodes on a map, the writer and readers’ subjectivities meet and create an understanding unique to every writer and reader-collaboration.

Nevertheless, what Smith and Watson’s statement does not fully address is how this position exposes issues of literary authority over the narrative expressed in life-writing. Because the narrative lives within the collaboration between writer and reader-reception, what is received, narratively, strongly depends on the readers’ response to the text. However, when a reader

approaches a text categorized under life-writing, they enter a contract of “truth-telling” – or what Philippe Lejeune refers to as “The Autobiographical Pact” – between reader and writer (quoted in Smith and Watson). This pact seems to become problematic when the understanding of what is “true” is held between the author of the text and each individual reader who encounters the text. We see instances where this pact is broken in the case of Dunham’s chapter regarding her sexual encounters with her sister.

However, I posit that Lejeune’s pact is not solely interested in “truthfulness” within the narrative but more so – and if not more importantly – emphasizes the authorial agency of the author, the reader encountering the text, and the subject being discussed within the narrative. In other words, the author of the text, those who are reading the text, and the subjects being discussed in the text, equally partake in the creation of the narrative. And I argue a text can only be read as “successful” when all parties involved feel satisfied with their positions within the narrative. In the case of “Barry,” the “Autobiographical Pact” was breached when the investigation of narrative accuracy was proven to be fictitious by her readers. Because Dunham broke Lejeune’s pact by “lying,” the agency of both the narrative’s subject (Barry), and the readers exposed to the lie (anyone who entered the autobiographical agreement) was threatened.

In her “Barry” chapter, Dunham recalls a “sexual encounter with a mustachioed campus Republican as the upsetting but educational choice of a girl

who was new to sex when, in fact, it didn't feel like a choice at all" (*Not That Kind of Girl* 51). As Dunham's memoir-ish gained more exposure, her "Barry" chapter became the dominant narrative of *Not That Kind of Girl*. In response to her chapter, Dunham was praised by her readers for being brave enough to share an experience of sexual assault and, consequently, was positioned as a strong female figure for other women who have been sexually abused. Yet, as the excerpt from her text shows, Dunham never explicitly states she was ever sexually assaulted. Reader-reception to Dunham's narrative, then, exposes how the production of a narrative is not solely created by the words in the chapter, but constructed during the transaction between author and each individual subjective reader. In the construction of "Barry," the overall interpretation of Dunham's narrative is a recollection of being raped. What Dunham's narrative alludes to in her "Barry" chapter seems to be as strong as – and arguably stronger than – what she actually says on the page.

When *Breitbart* website's staff writer, John Nolte, released an article challenging the rape allegations Dunham had made toward an Oberlin college student named Barry, the investigation pinpointed a man that fit Dunham's description of Barry. The man Nolte discovered, also named Barry, denies all rape allegations and argues he had never met Dunham. The "real" Barry's attorney, according to Nolte, has "requested that Dunham's publisher, *Random House*, alter the passage to indicate that the name is a pseudonym" because the

“real” Barry “was under fire by the media and living in constant fear of his name being forever smeared” (*Breitbart* n.p.). A new revised and edited version of *Not That Kind of Girl* has complied to said changes.

In the case of both chapters, “Grace” and “Barry,” a significant difference is prevalent – the narrative agency of the subjects being discussed within her text. As we saw from Dunham’s Twitter rant, Grace supposedly reacted in a humorous manner that alluded to no signs of stripped narrative agency. Her reaction shows readers that she is compliant with the narrative Dunham has provided and does not seem to be affected, at least negatively by it. Therefore, readers eventually followed suit. However, this reaction is not shared with the subject discussed in Dunham’s chapter, “Barry.” Therefore, readers seem to be less forgiving when Dunham has the platform to share her narrative when the “real” Barry is not provided the literary agency to do the same. Thus, the “Autobiographical Pact” was breached because readers’ ability to forgive does not apply when a text strips the subject of the text’s narrative agency.

However, the “Autobiographical Pact” seems to lean heavily on the consideration of both those being discussed and the readers that are exposed to the narrative, but what is stripped is the narrative agency of the life-writer. In other words, when the focus lies on both the reader and subject’s agency, the authorial agency of Dunham is negatively altered. The lawsuit against Dunham and *Random House Publishing* regarding a faux rape allegation has consequently

led readers and critics to label Dunham's "publication of the story a 'gutless and passive-aggressive act'" (Stampler, n.p.) and many now refer to Dunham as a "big fat liar" (Bajekal, n.p.). Similar to the response of her "Grace" chapter, Dunham is being negatively labeled by readers in the place where she refuses to self-label or self-identify. In no section of her chapter on Barry does Dunham self-identify as a sexualized victim. Instead, Dunham provides a narrative with no labeling and simply shares a recollection of an experience in college. In doing so, Dunham is consequently labeled a victim only to later be categorized as a literary "liar." Narrative agency, then, seems to lean heavily on reader's reception to sexual content and their interpretation of the agency of the subject being discussed, and little on the authorial agency of the writer; so much that Dunham is forced to revise her text. Therefore, the female author is being told what she is allowed and, more importantly, not allowed to discuss in her own memoir-*ish*, consequently stripping Dunham's agency over her own life narrative.

### Having it All-*ish*

We see in both cases of "Grace" and "Barry" that Dunham's memoir-*ish* has the apophatic approach to labeling and categorizing. This approach is explicitly apparent even before readers open her text. Before reading her memoir-*ish*, Dunham's title, more or less, reads as "I am not going to tell you what kind of girl I am, but I can at least tell you I am *Not That Kind of Girl*."

Dunham is not the first female pioneer to attempt this literary approach. Dunham references life writer, Helen Gurley Brown, and her 1982 canonical feminist memoir, *Having it All*. In Dunham's own words, Gurley Brown's memoir paved the way for many female life-writers to "share [their] assorted humiliations and occasional triumphs" by providing an "Idiot's Guide precision, how you too can be blessed with 'love, success, sex, money, even if you are starting with nothing'" (*Not That Kind of Girl* xiv). Dunham's memoir-ish resembles similarities to Gurley Brown's memoir, specifically with the major themes discussed in both texts. Dunham describes Gurley Brown's memoir as "divided into sections, each section a journey into some usually sacrosanct aspect of feminine life such as diet, sex, or the intricacies of marriage" (*Not That Kind of Girl* xv). Dunham, too, divides her stories into thematic sections: Love & Sex, Body, Friendship, Work, and Big Picture.

As they appear to fall under the same literary genre, with similar lines of form and feminist content, what separates Dunham from Gurley Brown is, in fact, her apophatic approach to reaching out to her Millennial readers. Instead of taking the approach of owning and self-identifying as a modern female – which we see in Dunham's interpretation of Gurley Brown's memoir – Dunham seems to take the opposite approach. Dunham's unapologetic narrative approach points solely toward what she cannot be labeled in order to avoid the categorization of being a feminist self-help writer. In her introduction, Dunham explicitly states:

No, I am not a sexpert, a psychologist, or a dietitian. I am not a mother of three or the owner of a successful hosiery franchise. But I am a girl with a keen interest in having it all, and what follows are hopeful dispatches from the frontlines of that struggle. (*Not That Kind of Girl* xvii).

Her memoir-*ish* sets her readers up by acknowledging the genre and narrative similarities to earlier female life-writers like Gurley Brown and, for a moment, readers may seek comfort in the ability to categorize Dunham's text as a "familiar" feminist text by finding themes of similar format and content-based narratives. However, Dunham quickly pulls the rug from underneath her readers and, like her statement above expresses, she cannot be categorized by any of those similarities. In this case, the *-ish* is represented as Dunham's stance against being categorized with other female life-writers that may appear to be similar — her memoir-*ish* is simply not that kind of feminist "how to" text.

Right when we, as readers, think we have finally pinpointed what Dunham is, she quickly contradicts herself and we are left with the inability to categorically place her once again. Yet, what is considerably overlooked in her memoir-*ish* is the one label Dunham's narrative seems to be comfortable claiming: that the stories she shares are, in fact, unreliable. I return to my introductory statement of this chapter declaring my unreliability by using the words from Dunham's text. Dunham provides her readers with a disclaimer within the very chapter that led to the lawsuit between the "real" Barry and Dunham. She states in all capital letters, "I'M AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR" (*Not That Kind of Girl* 51) and immediately continues by writing:

Because I add an invented detail to almost every story I tell about my mother. Because my sister claims every memory we “share” has been fabricated by me to impress a crowd. Because I get “sick” a lot. Because I use the same low “duhhh” voice for every guy I’ve ever known, except for the put-off adult voice I use to imitate my dad... The latest version [of my experience with Barry] is that I remember the parts I can remember. I wake up into it. I don’t remember it starting, and then we are all over the carpet, Barry and I, no clear geography to the act. (51-2)

I find it fascinating that the only label Dunham’s narrative feels comfortable self-identifying with is a term whose characteristics are built on fabrication, contradictions, exaggerations, and fictitious content.<sup>1</sup> In claiming such a faulty trait, the declaration of her unreliability places some of the agency back into the hands of the female author. Yet, by self-identifying as unreliable, the text does not, however, remove the reader and narrated subject’s agency. We see that in the consequences of her chapter on Barry that led to a lawsuit and forced revision of her text. Still, it does raise the question of what we, as readers, read for and what guides our reading the most? In the examples of both “Grace” and “Barry,” readers’ allegations of fabricated sexual storytelling, I argue, should hold little literary merit because the memoir-*ish* explicitly states her unreliability as a narrator. Yet, we would rather trust the categorization and preconceived expectations that come with specific literary genres and gender expectations to guide our interpretation of a text more so than the narrative being told. When

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<sup>1</sup> Although these characteristics are often associated with memoir authors, Dunham was not initially writing under the particular set of expectations that come along with life-writing.

we expand our understanding of genre to ways in which we, as readers, interpret what female life-writers are “allowed” to discuss, we see an even thicker layer of predetermined reader-interpretation of Dunham’s text.

Since we shift how we approach, read, and interpret texts depending on the genre and gender they are categorized under, the additive *-ish* to Dunham’s memoir, thus, evolves into its own literary genre that represents texts of narrative unreliability. Therefore, the *-ish* becomes a genre-placeholder that has created a space for the very thoughts, analyses, and words that unreliable narrators develop through their ever-evolving subjectivities. The unfamiliar narratives that readers resist live within the *-ish* of our storytelling. I’M AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR. Yet, it is my unreliability and contradictory statements that supply my narrative agency of choice as a female writer.

## CHAPTER TWO

TOWARD A SAFER AND HOMIER SPACE: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE ON  
DUNHAM'S WEBSITE/E-NEWSLETTER, *LENNY*

*"Agency...stems from the use of contradiction as a means of self-determination and identity, of transcendence of seemingly forced or dichotomous choices, and counter-imaginings of a better future." - Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards*

As I browse through Lena Dunham and co-creator, Jenni Konner's, online feminist website/e-newsletter, *Lenny*, I am bombarded with varying article submissions that do not seem to create a unified or seamless narrative. Some articles, for example, range from: "Burger, Bitches and Bullshit," where lead singer of the band, Best Coast, reflects on the disheartening comments she receives via online social networks; "There's No Such Thing as Voting with Your Vagina," an article that propounds to illuminate the sexist backlash among female Millennial voters of the 2016 presidential election; to "Body Glitter and Slap Bracelets: A Brief History of Claire's," that reminisces on the notorious store that became the mecca for many female Millennials' "firsts:" "Your first ear piercing, your first attempt at thievery, your first experience with self-expression, maybe even the first time you pulled bills out of your wallet and handed them to a cashier without the assistance of an adult" (Sherman n.p.). At first glance, the website seems unorganized and altogether lacking a central theme that ties the many narratives together. And, once again, I am faced with a text from Dunham

that I am unable to categorize into a particular genre. *Lenny*, like *Not That Kind of Girl*, does not provide its subscribers with a concrete definition for the contradictory narratives placed together.

However, Dunham does explicitly strive to provide an online platform for contradictory articles that will create a space for an overarching feminist dialogue of empowerment. Twice a week, *Lenny* sends a direct email to all subscribers with new articles that portray various feminist narratives. Shortly after email publication, *Lenny* submits the articles on to its website. The attempt to create an all-inclusive space for third-wave feminism/s is weaved into *Lenny's* exigence that self-identifies as being "... your over sharing Internet friend who will yell at you about your finances, help you choose a bathing suit, lamp, president...AND tell you what to do if you need an abortion" ("Makers"). The disclaimer stands, then, as an attempt to expose what third-wave feminism/s' primary platform is composed of—individual empowerment through internal contradictions. Still, I am approaching Dunham's website through the lens of Fisher's guideposts of narrative fidelity and probability, and cannot help but wonder how these differing themes provide a fluid narrative. And, how does this narrative help us to understand the direction that third-wave feminism/s is/are headed?

As a self-identifying Millennial feminist and creator of the online platform, Dunham does not provide a concrete definition for what a feminist *is*;

rather, she presents a broad and all-inclusive positioning by stating, “part of feminism is the freedom to let other women make choices you don’t necessarily understand” (“The Scene”). Although Dunham’s ideological understanding represents an inclusive and tolerant nature of feminism, viewers and critics of Dunham are not necessarily as forgiving towards Dunham’s behavior. Because Dunham self-creates various personae via multi-modal platforms (i.e. social media, actress, author, activist, etc.), she makes it necessary to view her as a complex and multi-faceted personae, rather than a singular identity. Moreover, many argue that Dunham’s multi-modal personae consequently represents a “fair-weather” and “flip-flopping” feminist, protesting for female reproductive rights one moment, and making seemingly patriarchal representations of a submissive female the next. One critic goes so far as referring to Dunham as “completely obsessed with, run by and dependent on men” (Wilhelm, “Real Clear Politics”); whereas another casts her as *the voice* of the Millennial feminist (Bazaar qtd. in Chicago Tribune). Regardless of which direction viewers lean toward the subject, Dunham is, once again, being categorized and labeled due to her contradictive behavior.

As my first chapter shows, Dunham being labeled as a contradictive liar is all too familiar, and it can be unsettling for followers to not have a strong understanding of Dunham’s character, especially when she is the symbol for an entire generation. Similar to the many accusations surrounding her memoir-*ish*,

Dunham's feminist-*ish* behavior has critics and viewers casting her identity as fictitious or a false representation of the "real" Dunham. However, the attempt to categorize Dunham's behavior as either "feminist" or "un-feminist" re-inscribes ways of exclusion that are found in identity making.<sup>2</sup> Yet, I posit that it is precisely Dunham's contradictory behavior, and many third-wave feminist/s' behavior, that nurtures the fundamental roots for providing agency; ultimately, it creates a stronger understanding of identity through diversity in order to sustain the third-wave feminist movement. Moreover, recognizing our own internal contradictions will, thus, contribute to our tolerance toward the varying representations of third-wave feminists to create a stronger and united front of difference to sustain the movement in the twenty-first century.

Where I see this attempt to embrace contradicting feminist ideologies is within Dunham's feminist website/e-newsletter, *Lenny*. The online space connects various narratives of feminism, not with the exigence to provide a universal definition for the movement, but rather create an outlet for feminists to be exposed to the various identities and interpretations of feminism/s. In doing so, Dunham's website/e-newsletter ultimately creates a safer space, or cyber-home for relationships of exposure, acceptance, and education for various third-wave feminists. And as I recognize the problematic connotations that are

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<sup>2</sup>. Thus, by stating what you "are" consequently excludes you from what you "are not." See Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's chapter, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?"

connected to viewing an online feminist space as both safe and a home, I view *Lenny* as an attempt to reach out to the largest feminist audience through the safest and homiest approach.

### Third-Wave as Contradictory

Contradictory behaviors, Foucault argues, “function to develop and elaborate ideas, reorganize discourses and ways of thinking, and to interrogate critically discursive formations” (Quoted in Renegar and Sowards 5). Foucault takes a positive stance by viewing our very contradictions as rich outlets toward newfound ways of knowing and being; however, this understanding seems to be halted when the conversation congregates around feminist behavior, and a hyper-examination is evermore apparent around famous feminist activists under constant watch by followers, such as Dunham. And in cases like Dunham’s, developmental progressions in her identity-making and feminist expression are stunted when various behavioral acts are pin-pointed and examined against one another.

As Dunham’s identity as a feminist is simultaneously challenged and praised—depending on what website you visit or article you read—I argue that Dunham’s contradictory behavior is the very substance that provides her with the agency of choice that progresses the third-wave movement. In both Claire Snyder-Hall’s article, “Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of ‘Choice’” and

Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards's article, "Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism," they argue that the freedom of "self-possession" and "self-determination" provide a person the agency to develop new ways of thinking and imagine new ways of social action. Instead of viewing contradictory behavior as unreliable, fictitious, and phony, our internal contradictions create substance for growth and new ways of knowing, characterized by inclusion and indefinability. This alternative approach thus becomes a key component in growing and sustaining our ways of knowing and understanding third-wave feminism/s.

When looking at Dunham's multi-modal personae, we see a Dunham that fits Western-society's structural mold of what a more common representation of feminism should "look like." For example, Dunham follows in the footsteps of her forefathers, and can be seen protesting female reproductive rights in various modes including anything from campaign commercials endorsing Pro-Choice President Barack Obama, to dressing up as a Planned Parenthood Abortion Doctor for Halloween (Hall, Newsbusters.org). These images of feminist behavior seem to be more acceptable to viewers because they align with the more traditional representations of what a feminist looks like – protesting for female reproductive rights. However, it is when Dunham exposes another, more unorthodox representation of feminist behavior, that some viewers and critics

jump to argue that her contradictory behavior indicates Dunham is no feminist at all. More specifically, in many scenes from her HBO show, *Girls*, Dunham is represented as submitting to her boyfriend's "freakish" sexual fantasies, and moments of her character having no sexual control when her boyfriend lies about wearing a protective contraceptive. As critics debate whether or not Dunham represents a feminist or not, Dunham responds to their labeling by stating, "I resent being forced in to a position of having to represent all of female sexuality" ("Makers"). The show's representation of what appears to be unwanted submissive sex through the persona of Hannah Horvath, although scripted by Dunham herself, is juxtaposed, again, by viewers against her activism outside of filming. The problematic nature of readers and critics comparing the two modes of expression and two separate personae – one being filmed and scripted, the other a personal exigence of Dunham's outside of filming – is an arbitrary debate to compare the two, but a debate created by viewers and critics nonetheless.

However, in this case I argue it is not the submissive representations of sex that oppresses Dunham; rather, it is the dichotomous argument between Dunham's viewers that label her "feminist" or "unfeminist" that removes her agency over "self-possession" and "self-determination" (259) that Snyder-Hall believes are some of the key components to the third-wave movement. In other words, what constitutes Dunham as a third-wave feminist is the control over the choices she makes, ultimately, empowering her with the right to consciously

express herself. Therefore, when viewers attack Dunham's behavior, they are stripping Dunham from her rights of choice-making because making her own decisions, even if they are viewed as disruptive, is part of the right she claims as a power/choice-feminist.

What Dunham's contradictory behavior represents, instead of un-feminist, is what Snyder-Hall refers to as "feminist consciousness," or "choice feminism,"<sup>3</sup> meaning not only "the capacity to make individual choices" but more so "the ability to determine your own life path" (256). This third-wave approach to feminism collapses any attempt toward universalizing the term. Instead, choice feminism provides a platform for individual difference and personal interpretation of what it "looks like" to be a feminist in the twenty-first century. Because third-wave feminism is "pluralistic and begins with the assumption that women do not share a common gender, identity or set of experiences and that they often interpret similar experiences differently," it therefore "seeks to avoid exclusions based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so forth" (Snyder-Hall 259). In Dunham's case, the "so forth" Snyder-Hall discusses would be the personal choice to represent herself as a feminist who advocates for female reproductive rights, who also partakes in submissive sexual

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<sup>3</sup> Snyder-Hall recognizes the problematic nature of the term "choice feminism" stating, "the term 'choice' trivializes what are often hard decisions," and that "by looking at the final choice that was made tells us nothing about how much a woman actually struggled to balance competing imperatives, such as gender equality and sexual pleasure" (255-6).

behavior without having to define her contradictory behavior as “feminist” or “unfeminist” acts. Instead, Renegar and Sowards might view Dunham’s contradictory behavior as:

not just a statement of opposition, but rather functions as a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency. Contradictions found in third wave feminism are often designed to challenge traditional notions of identity and to create ambiguities...and different ways of thinking.  
(6)

The embodied contradictions thus foster the choice-feminist’s actions by supporting one another during individual understanding of what they interpret as living as a third-wave feminist. In other words, our embodied contradictions act as a microcosm for the larger conversation of third-wave feminism/s.

Recognizing our own contradictions ultimately allows us to learn how to support other feminists’ interpretations of what it means to live as a feminist in the twenty-first century.

By accepting the vast behavioral traits within a person, Snyder-Hall’s definition of the choice feminist pushes against exclusivity, and moves toward a more inclusive feminist movement. We see Dunham defining this inclusive and tolerant approach, more or less, in her quote in the opening of my introduction, where she discusses the third-wave feminist’s non-judgmental mentality toward various representations of feminism/s unlike her own. Dunham continues her statement by providing an example of inclusive behavior stating, “You may not want to walk out with taped X’s on your nipples and booty shorts...that may be

the strong feminist choice for another woman...and part of your job, as a feminist, is to support her" ("The Scene").<sup>4</sup> Here, Dunham's response provides a strong example of understanding how our internal contradictions must be respected and supported. Renegar and Sowards view this inclusive approach as another key component to sustaining the feminist movement as a whole by positing, "complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole" (2). I see Renegar and Sowards' acknowledgement of internal contradictions as having a contributing factor to the awareness and acceptance of various definitions of feminisms from other third-wave perspectives.

However, what is unaddressed is the format in which this inclusive approach can be voiced, heard, and shared. And in the twenty-first century, the most efficient approach to including and reaching a large feminist population would be through the internet. Online spaces provide platforms that are able to reach voices that would otherwise be unreachable, and allows for various third-wave feminists to educate and be educated. However, the cyber-world is not normally a place feminist narratives thrive. Utopian spaces that appear to be all-inclusive must be approached with severe caution. As Liz Lane, and many

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<sup>4</sup> Dunham's statement on feminism is contradictory. She positions her beliefs about third-wave as an all-inclusive, tolerant discourse; yet, the latter end of the statement concludes with a demand toward feminists. In other words, you can make any choice as a feminist, but you do not have the choice to decline support to your fellow feminists.

feminist rhetoricians would argue, the internet can become a pool of patriarchal overriding that stunts the feminist voices.

### Digital Sphere as Safe-ish

In Liz Lane's article, "Feminist Rhetoric in the Digital Sphere: Digital Interventions & the Subversion of Gendered Scripts," she points out how the internet was initially conceived of as a space where all users – including feminists – could interact safely. She posits, "the initial promise of the internet peddled a forum in which one can interact freely, without worry of restrictions based on one's gender, class, race, or other identifiers" (n.p.). However, the online sphere has instead become a microcosm for the:

frameworks of our everyday cultural realms: instances of Twitter shaming and commenting sections on stories written by or about women are often the most flagrant, with back and forth accusations of "slut," "whore," and much worse. (Lane, n.p.)

If we recall the incident of Dunham's "tweeted" response to reader's interpretations of her "Grace" chapter, the narrative did not stop at Dunham's online reaction. Instead, Dunham received countless hateful comments back. This cyber-bullying "ended" in Dunham's decision to delete Twitter altogether.

The same account goes for her Instagram feed. Dunham uses this specific social media application as a way to publicize her feminist self-expression. In some cases, Dunham has deleted posts due to viewers' negative and irrelevant responses. For example, Dunham had posted a photo of her mid-section dressed

only in what appears to be men's underwear. When she deleted her post, she replaced it with a frustrated response, stating:

I just deleted a pic of me in my boyfriend's underwear. Just an FYI, I don't delete because I'm ashamed of my body; I delete because certain pics become hot beds for negativity. You think I want a teenager visiting my page and seeing a zillion comments about how fat I am? No, because that is hurtful to any person struggling, comparing, contrasting.<sup>5</sup> (Sutton, Racked.com)

However, while Dunham attempts to use the internet application as a place to continue the choice- feminist discourse of self presentation and self-determination, the overarching patriarchal rhetoric inevitably invades, and thus, creates an unsafe environment for Dunham to express herself freely. Both Dunham's Twitter and Instagram examples represent the infinite accounts of female body-shaming that occur within online spaces. Lane posits when a woman is publically speaking or writing about feminist issues, "it is the body that is harassed or attacked when women resist the cultural expectations of silent

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<sup>5</sup> In a conversation with Dr. Linda Karell, we discussed how Dunham's follow-up response is layered in the fruitful contradictions that exemplify the kind of contradictory behavior that pushes against hetero-normative ways of being. First, the rhetorical situation begins with Dunham positioning herself within the fantasy-image of women dressed in lingerie; yet, her photo simultaneously taps into a deeper fetish, for some, of women dressed in men's underwear. Yes, Dunham's image touches on society's taboo of cross-dressing, however Dunham is still able to be viewed in a hetero-normative light. Alongside dancing between society's norms of both hetero- and homo- representations, Dunham also exposes the juxtaposition between the prohibition against the photographing of overweight females that explicitly addresses – without being stated – society's norm of thin women only deserving to be captured and photographed. Through her defiant casualness, Dunham successfully contradicts the many norms Millennial females are commonly expected to represent.

or docile speakers” (n.p.). Where I see the issue for body-shaming thriving is within user’s ability to comment directly on/under a publication. Therefore, a single step toward sustaining a feminist discourse can be immediately capsized by the waves of thousands of negative comments attached. The overwhelming amount of negative feedback consequently moves the focus toward the comments that silence the initial post and ultimately creates an online ethos of feminist exclusion. For a space that was initially conceived for reducing the patriarchal silencing of marginalized voices, the online platform inevitably mirrors society’s hierarchical ranking of voices that “matter.” Thus, there seems to be no difference between the oppressed nature of female voices within the social and cyber-social milieu.

Because the initial use for the internet was to provide a space for all voices to be heard safely, Lane and many feminist rhetoricians, call for structures “to shape new spaces of interaction for feminist voices in a restrictive sphere” (n.p.). I posit that Dunham’s website, *Lenny*, is a step in the direction toward a cyber-home, for the third-wave feminist discourse to interact in a safer space. And as I recognized in an earlier section, the problematic nature behind referring to a space of feminist discourse through the lens of a homier place,<sup>6</sup> I view *Lenny* as

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<sup>6</sup> The Western, privileged understanding of the concept of *home* as a place of inclusion and acceptance avoids any alternative understanding of the term. Marginalized groups, whether queer, women of color, trans, may view *home* as the alternative – a place of exclusion and rejection.

providing a hybrid-home that brings the various representations of feminisms through an online home-base into the literal homes of third-wave feminists across the globe.

### Home and Not Home

Before beginning my discussion on Dunham's website, *Lenny*, as a representation of a safe feminist platform, or home for various feminists, I turn to Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's chapter in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, titled "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" to further address the negative connotations surrounding the term "home" within the feminist discourse. Martin and Talpade Mohanty argue that identity making and home, become a place of exclusion that "sustains its appearance of stability by defining itself in terms of what it is not."

To further explain, they state:

not black, not female, not Jewish, not Catholic, not poor, etc. The "self" ...is not an essence of truth concealed by patriarchal layers of deceit and lying in wait of discovery, revelation, or birth. It is the very conception of self that...likens to entrapment, constriction, a bounded fortress that must be transgressed, shattered, opened onto that world which has been made invisible and threatening by the security of home. (196-7)

Thus, it is within the realm of the spatial home, according to Martin and Talpade Mohanty, that shelters us from our exposure to the diverse surroundings that can only be seen outside of our home's walls. The home, literally and metaphorically, blocks our vision of the diverse political, social, and economical makeups that are

neighboring us, and leaves us solely within our own epistemological understanding of the world.

The home, in return, creates an exclusive environment for the third-wave feminist—blocking the very nature that I see as making the movement sustainable. However, Dunham’s website/e-newsletter redefines our understanding of home and creates the cyber-home of *Lenny* as a place for third-wave feminists to be exposed to the various ideological interpretations and representations of feminism. I do not, however, argue for a space that provides the illusion of an “all-encompassing home” (Martin and Talpade Mohanty 86), or a space of conflating feminist voices. Instead, I view Dunham’s *Lenny*, more or less, as having created a hybrid-home that breaks down the exclusivity by bringing the inclusive third-wave principles—through a digital mode—into the homes of feminists across the globe, providing a space for the infinite voices and representations of the choice feminists.

Martin and Talpade Mohanty’s chapter on “home” continues by explaining their interpretations of “being home” and “not being home,” and their push to enter a place of exposure to diversity. They write:

“Being home” refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (“What’s Home Got to Do with It?”, 196).

Martin and Talpade Mohanty challenge feminists to break out of the literal and metaphorical walls of our secure home in order to expose the neighboring narratives that have been silenced. Although I view their overarching exigence of exposure to diversity as an absolute necessity for pushing the feminist narrative forward, I am most interested in achieving this motive through spaces that search for non-dichotomous approaches. In other words, where I find Martin and Talpade Mohanty's position to be problematic is not within their call for feminists to "leave home," but more so within the binary options to either be at home or not.

Alternatively, I view the space that will sustain the feminist dialogue in the third-wave as a hybrid of the two: being simultaneously home and not home. Naturally, I acknowledge the contradictive nature of both being and not being at home; however, it is my very contradictive stance that washes away "artificial dichotomies...[and] challenges the either/or nature of forced choices and allows for complex combinations of options and new alternatives to emerge" for third-wave feminists (Renegar and Sowards 11). An online medium, like Dunham and co-creator, Jenni Konner's, *Lenny*, can support the idea of being two places at once by creating a technological illusion of being and not being at home. This hybrid-home is achieved through multiple layers of the website/e-newsletter.

*Lenny as Hybrid-Home*

In the Fall of 2015, Dunham and Konner launched the feminist website/e-newsletter that provided a space for a sustained discourse of choice-feminists – advocating for the very tolerance and inclusive discourse Renegar, Sowards, and Snyder-Hall promote. Within the homes of thousands of *Lenny* subscribers, feminists have direct access to the multiple narratives of oppressed histories that Martin and Talpade Mohanty argue are unattainable within the walls of our homes. Instead of viewing the home as creating walls between feminist narratives, *Lenny* provides cyber-windows that expose the differing ideologies of various feminists that one may never be exposed to in a lifetime. By providing a broad scope of various feminist narratives, *Lenny* ultimately creates a space of inclusion through exposure to different feminist ideologies.

However, this inclusive feminist approach is not only achievable through the technological mode it is being transported by, as we have seen reiterated within the very exigence behind *Lenny's* website/e-newsletter. Dunham and Konner describe their feminist website/e-newsletter as a sort of “self-help” for all issues that a feminist will encounter – however complex and contradictive that may be. It is through these varying discussions that Dunham and Konner call for conversations of paradoxical and conflicting messiness – that ultimately foster “a sense of agency...that enables [us] to understand [our] identities, diversity, and feminism on [our] own terms and to explore new possibilities and options for

everyday experiences and activism” (Renegar and Sowards 2). Thus, it is through a combination of our personal feminist lens and exposure to diverse, and even conflicting, feminist ideologies that we are able to sustain the feminist movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And in order to achieve an understanding of both our own identities and the differing identities surrounding us, we must interact in a space that allows us to simultaneously be home and not home.

This third-wave push for an inclusive discourse is reiterated in the format of Dunham and Konner’s website/e-newsletter. Broken down in to five tabs: Politics, Style, Life, and Work, and one being a link to buy *Lenny* products, the various articles are collaboratively authored by feminists across social, political, geographical, racial, and sexual-identification spectrums that discuss current issues, thoughts, and advice for subscribers. And although when we think of *Lenny*, we naturally turn to the faces of both Dunham and Konner, *Lenny* strongly resists the notion of an authoritative approach toward the authorship of the sustained feminist dialogue. Instead, Dunham and Konner provide a platform for the various interpretations of feminism. Some articles written by various feminists across the globe, for example, focus on: personal pressures of heritage from growing up as a half-Chinese woman; Chicana activists in Southern California; Interviews with female Congresswomen; a transgender’s experience of being marginalized in the modeling community; discussion against maternal guilt; exercises that work for all body types; and articles from male

feminist perspectives. The representations of different “faces” of feminism that collaboratively author the inclusive discourse is also reiterated in the various modes of personal expression and communication. The publications vary in mode, from poetry, short story, interviews, to even paintings. Another attempt toward a cyber-safe home can be seen in the removal of direct commenting.

As noted prior, the feminist narrative is easily silenced on online-platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, by the thousands of patriarchal comments that can be directly stamped to the initial publication. *Lenny’s* choice to remove the ability to comment directly on article submissions removes viewer’s ability to silence the choice-feminists’ voices with negative and irrelevant comments. Thus, *Lenny* welcomes all voices of feminism through various forms of expression, supporting a safer, more inclusive space.

### The Issues with *-ish*

Although Dunham and Konner’s website/e-newsletter has created a safe-*ish* and home-*ish* space for choice feminists to voice their narratives freely, the *-ish* unavoidably allows room for moments of exclusion. For example, the very platform it stands on can only be accessed by a percentage of feminist voices. Because access to a computer only provides voices to a select percentage, many narratives are continuously being silenced. Not only would a feminist need access to a computer, it would also require that the subscriber has the privilege of

time. The luxury of being able to voice our narratives through the act of writing calls for the freedom of time that not many acquire. Alongside the privilege of both computer access and the constraint of time, we, as Western readers and authors, forget about the freedom of speech we quite often take advantage of. Creating a space for dialogue surrounding socio-political issues may not be an option for many feminists around the world. As Western feminists, we tend to forget that the platform we stand on to voice our narratives comes at a cost for some twenty-first century feminists.

However, *Lenny* is a step in the right direction. A choice-feminist, like Dunham, has provided an outlet that welcomes the internal contradictions found within many third-wavers, to be externally voiced. In return, *Lenny* attempts to spread awareness of the various representations of feminism in the twenty-first century. This same proactive approach can, then, be reiterated by *Lenny* subscribers in their own way. The feminist viewers that have access to the online space can take the voiced feminist narratives published on *Lenny* and transcribe them outside both the online space and walls of their homes to proactively sustain the third-wave feminist/s' exigence for an inclusive movement of difference.

## CONCLUSION

## POWER FEMINISM AND THE PRIVILEGE OF CHOICE:

## A CRITIQUE ON DUNHAM'S VOICE

*"To stand in one's power, then, is to stand in the power that others have made possible: to hold oneself accountable to that power is to take responsibility for its most resourceful use." - Aimee Carrillo Rowe*

*"This bridge called my back, this bridge we call home, these terms of naming our vital role in connecting to one another becomes a metaphor for life that exists in relation. No linear path, this bridge; each generation is transformed by the other." -Carrillo Rowe*

As I read over my research on Lena Dunham, I find myself unsatisfied. Here we have a woman who has been continuously referred to as a dominant model for the Millennial generation. To be precise, viewers and critics have repeatedly praised Dunham's multi-modal career by stating: "Dunham may be the voice of a generation of women" (*Rolling Stone* qtd. in *Chicago Tribune*); "Lena Dunham has captured her generation's story" (*Vanity Fair* qtd. in *Chicago Tribune*); "Lena Dunham: A Generation's Gutsy, Ambitious Voice" (*Time* qtd. in *Chicago Tribune*); and the most outright of them all, "Dunham is *the voice* of a generation" (italics added, *Harper's Bazaar* qtd. in *Chicago Tribune*). Yet, they never fully answer how she has become the all-encompassing voice for the Millennial generation. What about Dunham's personae, exactly, has viewers casting her with such a long shadow?

Dunham's jump to stardom is undeniably impressive. In a matter of five years, she went from an anxiety-ridden, creative writing college student, to a multi-millionaire standing next to political figures such as Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton, while also becoming a strong feminist figure for Millennials to turn to for advice. Additionally, Dunham has been able to successfully cross over various platforms, spanning from screenwriter of her independent film *Tiny Furniture*; writer, director, and actress of her HBO hit show *Girls*; author of her *New York Times*' best-selling memoir-ish *Not That Kind of Girl*; and feminist activist, ranging from her *Lenny* website/e-newsletter to auctioning the sweater off her (literal) back that pictured a woven female reproductive system for four-thousand dollars during a Planned Parenthood auction (*Chicago Tribune*). Her voice is undeniably heard and cherished by millions, but what I find unsettling is when a particular person is cast as *the voice* for an entire generation of people; it rings a bit "cultish," personally.

As a member of the very generation Dunham represents, I feel utterly spoken for. And relatively, I am not that different from Dunham. Here I am, a white, middle-class female living in the United States. I have the power to voice my opinion within this thesis, regarding topics of literary and feminist theory through a mode that will eventually be bound, published, and read. And even more so, Dunham and I have the privilege of choice to contradict ourselves. While Dunham's career is built on her contradictive personae, the same goes for

my thesis. As I conclude my work, for example, I see areas where I contradict particular statements made from my previous chapters; yet, my writing will still be respectively heard. Surely I will not be given a 3.5-million-dollar advance or be read by thousands, but the underlining principle remains the same: both the power and privilege in our choice to be heard. So, if I am a female that relatively aligns with Dunham's lifestyle and *still* feels spoken for, imagine how the marginalized members of the Millennial generation must respond if/when they hear that Dunham has been cast as the voice of their own narratives.

That popular culture critics have cast Dunham as the voice of the Millennial generation began, for me, as a minute annoyance. However, it evolved into the very substance that irked me throughout my research, the problematic issue I have with Dunham that I couldn't quite put my finger on – until now. Yet, my issue with Dunham is not personal. Dunham's platform acts as a microcosm for the problematic issues I find that live within most Western Millennial feminists.<sup>7</sup> The power feminist is a strong and proud state for the movement, but what I find to be problematic for twenty-first century feminists is the emphasis of entitlement and the lack of global perspective. Returning to

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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that the term *Western feminist* does not provide a universalized definition for feminists living within a Western society. I turn to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders*, who states, "Clearly, neither Western feminist discourse nor Western feminist political practice is singular or homogenous in its goals, interests, or analyses" (17). For the sake of this chapter, when referring to *Western feminists*, or *power feminists*, I am referring to those who align with *fad feminism*.

Aimee Carrillo Rowe's, "Subject to Power – Feminism Without Victim," I will discuss how naming Dunham as *the voice* of the Millennial generation provides a strong case study to explore the problematic natures imbedded in the third-wave feminist movement, primarily the platform of personal choice of contradictions as the substance for our individual agency. Even more importantly, it addresses Millennial's lack of responsibility and obligation toward acknowledging the many feminist predecessors, and those who continue to be marginalized today, who have created the very platform we feel entitled to stand upon.

Although Dunham's platform of privilege should not necessarily be held against her, it should also not be overlooked and under-examined. Dunham's stardom has allowed her to take the feminist movement to the forefront of many Millennials' discussions, but it has also created an illusion of feminism that I would refer to as *fad feminism*. In other words, Dunham's success has allowed her to create a sub-discourse of feminism that can only be sustained within the Western system. Even then, it cannot be universalized as pertaining to all Western feminists, but becomes only applicable within the Hollywood realm, or one percent.

Dunham has created platforms for public discourse on various representations of feminism/s. In order to view the areas where her empire has raised feminist discussion, a reread of the major critiques from my first two chapters is imperative. In her memoir-*ish*, Dunham voices her experiences

growing up as a Millennial female with themes of both sexual curiosity and assault where she was forced to silence her narrative by unwillingly revising a chapter of her text. Not only did Dunham face reader-backlash regarding the content of her text, she was forced into a literary categorization due to the very content the female writer was discussing. And similarly, the creation of *Lenny* shows, what I argue is an attempt toward providing a space for the many voices of the feminist movement.

However, one large (and in this case), green elephant stands unnoticed — money. More specifically, Dunham is in a place of such high privilege that she cannot possibly represent even a fraction of the Millennial generation, let alone its entirety. Surely Dunham's memoir-*ish* must have caused her some grief due to the silencing and the temporary stripping of her narrative agency, but what speaks louder is the 3.5-million-dollar advance she was given to voice her life narrative of personal experiences. The multi-million-dollar advance, thus, places a financial value on *the voice* of Dunham, her opinions, and personal experiences that have yet to even be stated. As a result, valuing Dunham's voice inadvertently devalues alternative voices of the Millennial generation that do not align with Dunham's version of being a Millennial. This comparison exposes what mainstream society values as a Millennial narrative and, more strongly, what voices should be silenced. So, when Dunham is faced with a lawsuit that

settles for a minor revision this seems irrelevant when it is placed next to a multi-million-dollar advance.

The same account goes for the creation of *Lenny*. Although it is a step in the right direction in exposing the many faces and voices of third-wave feminists, the very platform it stands on creates a space of privilege and inevitable exclusion. Not only do subscribers need access to the internet, they also need the privilege of time and the safety to voice their opinions. In other words, it takes substantial time to read articles and narrate their own voice to be published and heard. More importantly, a subscriber would need to feel safe enough to voice their opinions about social, political, and economical issues. While growing up in a Western-based environment, we can easily shield ourselves from the oppressive realities facing many females, globally, who do not have the privilege to voice their opinions. My mind goes toward a recent tragedy of an Afghan woman, Farkhunda, who was publically beaten to death because she was falsely accused of speaking poorly about the Karan.<sup>8</sup> High-risk environments, in this case, punish women when there is *potential talk* of a woman speaking her opinion. This is just one example among many, that exemplifies the dangers many women face when voicing their narratives publically. A horrific incident, like Farkhunda's murder, puts my discussion of *Lenny's* contribution toward the feminist progression into perspective. So, a website that prides itself on

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<sup>8</sup> See Zarghuna Kargar in References.

publically voicing their narratives on social, political, and economic issues is only a concept that is sustainable within a Western-centered context.

Certainly *Lenny* has taken proactive efforts toward sustaining the various narratives of *some* third-wave feminists, but what is so crucial to address is how a website, like *Lenny*, can re-inscribe the exclusivity it attempts to avoid. In other words, it becomes almost more dangerous to work within a space that has created an illusion of inclusivity because the necessary awareness of current injustices, like Farkhunda's death, become further marginalized. And placing Farkhunda's story alongside *Lenny's* vision of an inclusive space, I argue, exposes Western third-wave feminists' necessity for a global perspective.

Fad feminists, like Dunham, live within a small realm of optimism, creating an illusion of feminist progression. This illusion can be easily viewed as success within the movement as a whole when fad feminists are solely surrounded by feminists that already align with that privileged lifestyle. Thinking back to the auctioning of her sweater, one can only fathom selling an article of clothing for four-thousand dollars, let alone buying an article for that amount of money. Yet, this auction creates the illusion that fad feminists are pushing the feminist movement forward by throwing money at it. Change derives not simply through donations to abortion clinics, but occurs within the dialogue between feminists, and financial support as the sole answer consequently silences the necessary steps toward any sort of substantial

progression. Therefore, it becomes difficult to accept that Dunham has been cast as the voice of a generation that she can only account for one percent of.

This privileged position seems harmless, but what I find problematic is how fad feminists, like Dunham, have become the leading narrative for the feminist discourse with Millennials as their targeted audience. This became ever-more apparent during the beginning stages of my research. As I began exploring Dunham's multi-modal career through a feminist lens, my research turned away from scholastic readings and moved toward sources within the mainstream discourse. If we turn back to the introduction to this chapter, I have cited pop-magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, and *Harper's Bazaar* as primary sources. In other words, to do research on Dunham is to do research within pop-culture. What this shift in method exposes is the larger shift within the feminist movement.

In return, privileged, celebrity figures have become the dominant feminist voices that Millennial feminists turn to for social, political, and economic advice. Consequently, feminist theorists who account for more than a Western ideological understanding of the feminist movement have been put aside, and the Western-focused interpretation of feminism has become more and more isolated from a global perspective of the movement. My issue is not with the dominant narrative-shift toward fad feminism, but more so with the lack of global perspective. Fad feminism may be the shift in the feminist movement for

the twenty-first century, but what has been silenced during this shift are the feminist predecessors and the current marginalized voices that built the very platform privileged activists, like Dunham, stand upon. This shift toward fad feminism must adopt a historical and global perspective in order for the future of the movement to be sustainable.

My critique on Dunham's position as a strong voice for the Millennial feminist has a wider application than strictly those at celebrity status. Throughout my research, if it has looked like I am dissecting Dunham, it is merely to reveal the same places of privilege I, and many Western, Millennial feminists come from. Thus, it is an obligation and responsibility to understand that our privilege of choice derives from the sacrifices of our feminist predecessors and those still currently silenced. So, through my research and exploration of Dunham, my research concludes with a call for *all* self-identifying Millennial feminists, not simply fad feminists, to acknowledge the responsibility and obligation we have in understanding and voicing where we have been and what we have come from, how it has shaped where we stand, and how we will push the feminist movement forward. And in order to do so, we must understand, and take responsibility for, what comes with being a power/choice feminist in the twenty-first century.

The introduction to this thesis began by observing Dunham as, what Carrillo Rowe refers to as a power feminist. Carrillo Rowe emphasizes that the

power feminist attempts to dismantle the patriarchy through individual power, and Dunham reiterates Carrillo Rowe's concept of the power feminist throughout her multi-modal career, as we have seen. Her ability to voice her individual opinions, freely and safely, stand as signs of improvement within the feminist movement. However, what Dunham's empire seems to fail to acknowledge is the responsibility that comes along with being a power feminist. I undeniably acknowledge the positive aspects surrounding the power feminist but Carrillo Rowe better exposes the obligation we all have for historical awareness by positing:

the question of power has always been central to feminism as the intervention enabled by this claim is that personal experience, which might be taken as individual or unique, is actually a function of socio-political forces that extend well beyond the individual. (14)

What Carrillo Rowe reiterates is how the individual is directly connected to the political realm, and cannot be separated. Therefore, our individuality is affected by the forces that have not only come before us, but also what we currently surround ourselves in, and what will become of the future. And although the future of the movement seems to be the most imperative for feminist progression, the emphasis on how our history has effected the now, and the current injustices occurring globally, must not be overlooked.

Surely, Dunham is in a position of privilege, of being able to voice her opinion on social, economic, and political issues for the third-wave feminist. However, what I find to be problematic with her positioning is Dunham's lack of

awareness toward what, and more specifically, who got her there. What is often overlooked is how Dunham's position of privilege is "generated through the dislocation, forced relocation, and subordination of other women" (Carrillo Rowe 24). And in return, the very power and agency fad feminists use to sustain the third-wave movement derives from "the same conditions that constrain the options of other women" (24). We see this strongly in the alignment of Dunham's online website/e-newsletter, *Lenny* next to Furkhunda's horrific story. More specifically, Dunham's place of power and feminist activism has consequently moved the focus from marginalized feminist voices and has shifted the dominant narrative toward fad feminist conversations of donating money to charity and humorously dressing up as Planned Parenthood doctors for Halloween. This, consequently, has diluted the feminist discourse toward a singular, dominant narrative. In return, a dominant feminist narrative risks the consequence of marginalizing various narratives that need to be heard.

My critique of Dunham derives from a labeling she did not personally create. Surely Dunham does not refer to herself as the voice of her generation, but this is a label that has been cast upon her by her followers. However, I return to my discussion of labeling and categorizing from my first chapter. Because Dunham refuses to categorize herself in her memoir-ish, she inevitably opened the door for her readers to label her and her writing. Dunham's apophatic approach to labeling what she is, consequently, allows her readers and viewers

to label and categorize her as they see fit. This consequence is not solely applicable to her life-writing, but instead carries over to all modes of her personae. Dunham may not have coined herself as *the voice* of a generation, but she has, consequently, allowed her viewers to do so. Thus, her viewers have cast her as *the voice* of the Millennial generation, and with a position of such privilege should come *some* sort of responsibility. In order to avoid falling into a place where I tell Dunham what she ought to do as a Millennial feminist, the conversation surrounding Dunham's obligation is a call for all fad feminists to acknowledge their privileged positioning, and take positive advantage of the dominant narrative they possess.

However, what I admire about Dunham is her unapologetic position of being an apophatic, contradictive persona for her followers. I enjoy a character that I cannot quite put my finger on. However, Dunham can continue this approach while simultaneously recognizing and acknowledging both her feminist predecessors and the silenced voices of the very generation she represents. While recognizing fad feminists' place of privilege, we can see that such a high platform of privilege "necessarily blinds us to our complicity in the suffering of others and the humility to acknowledge that those who are more marginalized than we, likely have access to a more acute understanding of power's operations than we do" (Carrillo Rowe 28). So, Carrillo Rowe's position exposes how privileged, Western third-wavers are missing their counterparts — a

historical and global perspective of the feminist movement. Both positions provide one another with the pieces to the feminist narrative that would otherwise not be accessible without coexistence and collaboration. In return, then, Western third-wave feminists have an obligation to those who have suffered and have been silenced to not only understand their positioning, but to have a stronger awareness of where the feminist movement is headed. Only then can the power feminist push the third-wave dialogue forward.

It is not until we begin viewing our relations not as separated, but interconnected, that the feminist movement can push forward. As Carrillo Rowe states, "If I am dancing on this end of the web, you will feel the vibrations of my movement on that end. The space between us is only an illusion of separation that, if we are brave, we may begin to bridge in new directions" (32). The exploration of Dunham's multi-modal feminist empire does not, by any means, provide an answer to the larger questions of where the feminist movement is headed; rather, I use Dunham's personae as a way to interpret some of the problematic areas of the third-wave feminist/s positioning. Historically, we are at such a crucial time for the feminist movement because we have become comfortable in our positions. This satisfaction should trigger our senses that history will repeat itself if we don't acknowledge the feminist movement outside of the fad feminist realm. Therefore, my research is not the verdict on Dunham, rather a call for more research and conversation surrounding the historical

positioning of the feminist movement and how figures, like Dunham, are shaping the movement as a whole. In return, my exploration of Dunham necessarily believes that a large component to that conversation lies within our responsibility and obligation, as twenty-first century power feminist/s, to acknowledge our feminist predecessors and those currently being marginalized and silenced that exist around the platform we feel entitled to. Thus, a global perspective would allow us to feel the vibrations, globally, that Carrillo Rowe refers to as affecting and creating a mutual interdependence. The future of feminism/s, I argue, may lie within reconsiderations of its past and exposure to its present.

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My thesis concludes with a conversation surrounding the current state of the feminist movement and where I see it headed if we continue down this sheltered path. However, my stance on Dunham and twenty-first century feminists did not begin this way during the preliminary stages of my research. As my introduction states, Lena Dunham's personae cannot be reduced to a singular, tangible identity. Yet, I found myself continuously attempting to pinpoint Dunham.

During my earlier stages of research, I attempted to avoid the conversation surrounding gender, altogether. As a self-identifying third-wave feminist, I found no apparent need to dissect the problematic areas within the

third-wave movement because it aligned with my way of being and knowing. Yet, my research exposed that my relation to feminism was stagnant. My lack of global perspective reiterates the very necessity of discussing the problematic areas within the Western-focused movement. I found that my exploration of the various modes of Dunham's career seemed to historically pinpoint the same problematic nature I discovered within myself, of where the movement is headed if power feminism/s continues down this Western-focused path. I find that, as a movement, the more removed we are from the initial struggles of our female predecessors, the more our vision of the unfathomable struggles and sacrifices that those before us, and currently living, have endured become inevitably blurred. And in return, the feminist movement loses the vital strength that has held us together for generations. My lack of awareness for the necessary dialogue surrounding past and current struggles of marginalized members of the feminist community derived from my lack of global perspective; this exposed why it is more imperative than ever to acknowledge current marginalized narratives and those who have sacrificed and suffered in the past *because* of our removed and entitled positioning.

Where I would like to continue this project is by dissecting alternative aspects of Dunham's multi-modal career. More specifically, we are currently in the preliminary stages of the 2016 presidential election, and Dunham has been seen as a strong voice for the democratic narrative. Naturally, my research would

lean toward a feminist critique of the relations between presidential candidates and celebrity endorsers. In an age where presidential candidates and celebrity figures becomes more and more blurred (Donald Trump is currently running for the republican ticket and rapper Kanye West has announced that he will be running for president in 2020), what becomes the dominant narrative within the discourse of fad feminism is primarily conversations surrounding reproductive rights. Consequently, this leading narrative dilutes the feminist movement to a singular focus.

Which guides me back toward my initial statement of pigeonholing complex identities into a singular, tangible product. This problematic search for something tangible does not solely lie within the conversation of individual identity, but seeps through into conversations of theory, and feminist theory in particular. If we are, like I predict in my conclusion, headed toward a feminist discourse with fad feminism as the dominant narrative, what complex conversations will we be diluting by primarily focusing on a singular aspect of the feminist movement? Yet, my positioning is from a particular discipline that limits my focus and, consequently, constrains my approaches and observations of Dunham's multi-modal career. Seeing Dunham as a microcosm for socio-political observations seems to venture away from an exploration within literary criticism and moves toward an interdisciplinary project.

As my first chapter suggests, I am an unreliable narrator. This is my interpretation of Dunham as it stands today. My subjective positioning hinders my ability to view Dunham through alternative lenses, and can ultimately change depending on historical and contextual changes. My subjective awareness, thus, calls for alternative ways of viewing Dunham's multi-modal feminist empire to expose the gaps within my own research directly caused by my particular positioning.

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