Delusional Girl: Genre and the Representation of Feminized and Feminist Subjectivity

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Abstract

This essay compares the feminized subjectivity and agency that is represented in Lena Dunham's 2014 coming-of-age memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's 'Learned'*, to the more complex depictions found in the dramatic comedy of her fictional show, *Girls*. In its production of a self who progresses towards self-knowledge, the memoir is inextricably shaped by the fantasies of neoliberal feminist individualism. In *Girls*, on the other hand, Dunham represents the contradictions of this kind of subject formation, thus exposing the frictions of contemporary liberal feminism.

Lena Dunham is best known as the creator, writer, and director of her award-winning television show, *Girls*, which aired from 2012-2017. Her fame extends beyond the show because of her constant media presence as a published author, podcast creator, editor of a feminist newsletter, and as a notoriously opinionated public figure. A recent Google search of Lena Dunham reveals that she has, 1) defended a man accused of raping a woman of colour,[1] 2) said "I still haven't had an abortion, but I wish I had," (Ahsan) and 3) apologized profusely for all of these things on her Instagram account and in other social media venues (Arnold). No wonder that she is so often criticized for her white privilege, her narcissism, and her cluelessness on Twitter, other forms of social media, and in the press. Her awkward self-exposure can be powerful art in the context of a fictional television show, but painfully wrong when it is Dunham herself doing it. In one of the apologies, she actually speaks to this division between her artistic creation and the self that is held accountable in social media outlets: "My words were spoken from a sort of 'delusional girl' persona I often inhabit, a girl who careens between wisdom and ignorance (that's what my TV show is too) and it didn't translate" ("Choice").

It is precisely this mistranslation of the 'delusional girl'-persona that interests me. I would argue that Dunham's disruptive persona embodies a neoliberal feminist message of self-fulfilment that constantly stumbles over the contradictions inherent in performing and inhabiting a young female self today. This feminism encourages young women to understand themselves through an ideology of individual agency, pleasure and choice, as Jessa Crispin's *Why I Am Not a Feminist* so cogently argues. While I believe that women can and do make choices about their actions and behaviours that come from empowered knowledge of their identities, desires, and capacities, I see this discourse as inextricable from the neoliberal tendency towards self-promotion, in which cultural (and financial) capital is gained through a performance of

[1] Dunham and her co-showrunner, Jenni Konner, sent a statement to *The Hollywood Reporter* saying, "[w]hile our first instinct is to listen to every woman's story, our insider knowledge of Murray's situation makes us confident that sadly this accusation is one of the 3 percent of assault cases that are misreported every year" (Parker n.p.).

self-assurance, confidence, and relevance.[2] Dunham's immense cultural and economic capital is the product of the work of branding and valuing to which she has devoted her entire oeuvre, from her social media presence to her authorial and directorial work.[3] Thus she functions as an exemplary case study through which to investigate what can be said of the contemporary feminized and feminist self through the popular genres of memoir and television series that she engages.

In this essay, I compare the feminized subjectivity and agency that is represented in Dunham's 2014 coming-of-age memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's 'Learned'*, to the more complex depictions that can be found in the dramatic comedy of her fictional show, *Girls*. In its production of an agentic self who progresses towards self-knowledge, the memoir is inextricably shaped by the fantasies of neoliberal feminist individualism. In the television series, on the other hand, Dunham represents the difficulty of trying to inhabit a prescribed subject formation that is so at odds with the realities that her character encounters. In playing Hannah Horvath, Dunham performs herself with an ironic distance that allows for a different kind of attention to the constant pressure on feminized subjects to value themselves as human capital. This capacity of fiction to embody the frictions and contradictions of contemporary liberal feminism points us towards a feminism that can more generatively create space to be multi-faceted. It does not require feminized subjects to be empowered; rather it is a feminism that can affirm the self as both self-possessed and self-destructive, sexually agentic and deeply confused by contradictory desires.

Not That Kind of Girl

Lena Dunham has used many platforms—open letters, tweets, photo shoots, editorial essays, Instagram notes, podcasts—to perform herself as an outspoken, opinionated, and proactive agent of her own

[2] For an in-depth discussion of feminism's imbrication with neoliberalism, see Fraser and Rottenberg.

[3] The Lena Dunham brand was already so valuable in 2013 that Random House offered her the exorbitant amount of $3.5 million dollars for her memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl* (Bosman).

life. Recently, she posed nude in Central Park in order to raise money for a women's addiction recovery program. After celebrating her new sobriety, she asked her three million followers to comment "with a reason you love yourself" ("Nude"). Through a rhetoric of self-care and positive affirmation, Dunham brands herself as an individual who constantly seeks to make the right choices about her health, her daily rituals, and her sexual habits. Meagan Tyler sees this kind of litany of opinion as constitutive of "choice feminism":

> It doesn't seem to matter what the topic is, people are quick to reframe the issue as one of women's empowerment and right to choose. This provides a neat diversion from talking about the larger power structures and social norms that restrict women, in many different ways, all around the world. (n.p.)

Dunham may in fact believe that she is addressing larger power structures as she uses her celebrity to endorse what she considers to be feminist causes, such as non-Photoshopped lingerie ads,[4] public service announcements about sexual assault, or editorials on the importance of women in science.[5] These micropolitical actions, in which individual choices seem to achieve agency or autonomy, define a certain kind of subjectivity that the authors of *Feminism for the 99%* call "liberal feminism":

> Liberal feminism's […] love affair with individual advancement equally permeates the world of social media celebrity, which also confuses feminism with the ascent of individual women. In that world, 'feminism' risks becoming a trending hashtag and a vehicle of self-promotion… (Arruzza et al. 12)

[4] For a cogent critique of what has been called '#Femvertising'—advertising products through positive messages about and to women—see Andi Zeisler's "Empowertise Me."

[5] This issue of her *Lenny Newsletter* was sponsored by General Electric (Kulp).

Dunham's opinions, about such things as eyebrow dyeing and health food crazes, flow easily in her social media accounts, and also in the genre which has emerged as a 'tell-all' girl chat: the female memoir cum advice- and self-help book. Memoir, which has always been a technology of the self, is, in this confessional gendered iteration, a site of careful curation. That narratorial voice fits into the generic conventions of gendered writing, as Sara Menkedick says:

> the "I" in a woman's writing has the alchemical effect of converting it into traditional women's work—personal essay, memoir—whereas the "I" in a man's work is a rhetorical device, a detached or quirky or "gutsy" narrative decision. It's a wily craft choice for men, a solipsistic indulgence for women. (n.p.)

What is produced is an intimate self that is put on display with all of its quirks and secrets and disclosures for others.

Even though *Not That Kind of Girl*'s story of the fragmented self is seemingly intimate and disclosing, it is a story that Dunham controls and tells often (her Instagram caption says it all: "I love water colors, nightgowns, porridge, hairless pets and telling u 2 much about me"). The reparative trajectory of the book moves from self-destruction to self-care. Throughout her discussion of sensitive topics, such as mental health, masturbation, and sexual assault, Dunham comes across as radically authentic. The memoir is a narrative of progress, of learning through different forms of psychological distress to be an open-minded, feminist, and legible self. So even though there are moments of shame and degradation, the book closes with her speaking, in a mature tone, about her achievement of self-respect.

Dunham's accounts of her past sexual experiences narrate contradictory feelings of empowerment and disenfranchisement. She recounts sexism and sexual violence in the workplace and in the dorm room, with a narrative voice that seeks to impart information, advice, and wisdom to her readers:

> I thought that I was smart enough, practical enough, to separate what Joaquin said I was from what I knew I was. The way I saw it, I was fully capable of being treated with indifference that bordered on disdain while maintaining a strong sense of self-respect. I obeyed his commands, sure that I could fulfill this role while still protecting the sacred place inside of me that knew I deserved more. Different. Better. But that isn't how it works. When someone shows you how little you mean to them and you keep coming back for more, before you know it you start to mean less to yourself. *You are not made up of compartments! You are one whole person!* What gets said to you gets said to all of you, ditto what gets done. Being treated like shit is not an amusing game or a transgressive intellectual experiment. (49, my emphasis)

Even though she recognizes the risky and sometimes negative space of the intimate encounter, she imagines that one should be able to establish sovereignty over it. For someone who has been diagnosed as dissociative (a fact that she shares in the memoir), this realization is a revelation. Having gone through these experiences of fragmentation, of performing various roles and of allowing herself to be split from herself, she has learned to see herself as "one whole person." What is asserted here is a certain kind of ethos, a sense of self and individuality and worth towards which she (and her readers) should aspire.

In arguing for the need to defend oneself from the threat of splitting and fragmentation, Dunham enacts a different type of split, which is the one between a younger and an older self. Dunham the elder is articulate about her self-worth, and frames her memoir within a reparative narration of the move towards unity. She is now aware of how fucked up she was when she was allowing herself to get fucked over by men. Laurie Winer calls this "The Ongoing Autobiography of a Slightly Younger Self." Dunham frames herself as a confidante whose mission is to help her young female readers not make the same mistakes she made:

> And if I could take what I've learned and make one menial job easier for you, or prevent you from having the kind of sex where you feel you must keep your sneakers on in case you want to run away during the act, then every misstep of mine was worthwhile. (xix)

Inherent to this voice and genre is a prescriptive norm that women, as they mature, can and should value themselves and know how to use their cultural, sexual, and social capital.

Dunham's narration of a former self functions as a counterpoint to the maturity of the woman who now recounts her past. In attempting to reflect with wisdom and distance on what were, in retrospect, the most detrimental situations that her younger self encountered, she presents herself as now insightful, self-aware, and in control. The result is that she voids these formative and difficult events of their intensity and urgency. Thus, her memoir ends up articulating a version of a neoliberal self that is, as Rosalind Gill has argued,

> an overly rational and overly unified view of the self, with no space for fantasy, desire or unconscious investment, for splits or contradictions. Indeed, the autonomous, freely choosing subject appears peculiarly affectless, apparently not governed by any forces other than those she could fully articulate if asked to do so by an interviewer. (76)

"Affectless" may not be the first attribute that comes to mind in the case of Dunham, who has been called "a mixed bag of emotions" (Jinje n.p.). Consider, however, this account of an evening:

> Alcohol, fear, and fascination cloud my memory, but I know my tights were balled up and placed in my mouth. I didn't know where he was in the room at certain points, until I did. And he spoke to me, unleashing streams of the filthiest shit I had ever heard leave another human's mouth. Impressive in its narrative intricacy, and horrifying in its predilections.

> This, I decided to believe, is the best game I've ever played. (47)

Despite the details, what seems to be lacking is the affect, the powerful pull of fear and fascination. In recapping the experience with the simple statement "the best game I've ever played," she leaves little space for the "fantasy, desire or unconscious investments" that Gill diagnoses as excluded from neoliberal self-presentation. Is "game" the description that most sums up this complex encounter that impresses and horrifies her? Instead of delving into the ambiguities of power and desire that led her to this situation, she concludes: "[I]ntrigued as I was by this new dynamic of disrespect, at my core I didn't want to be spoken to like that" (48). When, the reader might ask, did she know what her core wanted? Is this a retrospective interpretation, one that rewrites the encounter? Or is it something that she knew at the time?

She may not know what she felt, but what matters is how she tells it. In framing the book as a cautionary tale, she seems to want to prevent women from making the mistakes that she did. But without expounding upon the complexity of desire and abjection that this scene suggests, she forecloses the possibility that her text can speak to the full contradictions and dangerous appeal of the experience.[6] Instead, Dunham's narrator speaks from the position of the knowing subject who can fit past experiences into a larger coherent narrative about growing up.

The genre of feminized self-help memoir forces a self-awareness that is in keeping with the construction of the neoliberal self. So when she justifies her reason for writing the book by saying, "[t]here is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman," (xviii) we need to ask not the question of *why* she wants to tell the story, but *who she imagines herself to be* as she tells it. The coherent older woman, confessing her earlier foibles with the retrospective gaze of someone who better understands what it was all about, performs a version of subjectivity that forecloses an engagement with the messiness of youth, sex, and desire.

[6] A story that achieves the portrayal of the mixed motivations, emotions, and affective responses to power, age, consent, and sex is Kristen Roupenian's stunning "Cat Person."

That Kind of Girl

Not That Kind of Girl, however, is not Dunham's claim to fame. The HBO series *Girls* put her on the 2013 *Time 100* list of most influential people. The show portrays a group of girls (twenty-somethings who do not call themselves 'women') as they fail to get jobs, try drugs, argue with each other and with their boyfriends, have unsatisfying sex, have exciting but doomed sex, offend people, say stupid things about themselves, grow away from each other and from who they thought they were. In this fictionalized space, Dunham creates characters who are not imbued with the depth of psychological drama, but rather who are caricatured (gently, without scathing cynicism) as they struggle with the realities of being girls today. In the weaving of plots within each episode, the narrative arc of a season, and the light humorous touch that she wields as she puts the girls in awkward, silly, or momentous situations, Dunham engages with selfhood, sex, and agency in much more complex ways than in her memoir. In representing their contradictions and confusions, she situates the absurdities of self-performance within the larger structures of sexism, inequality, and American exceptionalism that shape these young women's lives.

Dunham's character, Hannah, embodies the girl who has not learned her lessons, who has not grown up, and who has not learned to protect herself and her identity. She and her friends often believe themselves to be one thing, yet their actions prove them to be another. The camera follows these contradictions without pathologizing them, but rather as part of an exposition of the elusiveness of selfhood and the concomitant difficulty of friendship. Though there is much to be said about the ways in which each of the girls function as composites of the feminized subject as she struggles to consolidate herself, I focus on the depiction of Hannah in order to make a more explicit comparison between her and the narrator of *Not That Kind of Girl*.

In the "Daddy Issues" episode, Hannah is supportive of her father's newly declared gay status until he divulges details of his same-sex encounter. She freaks out in a way that is incompatible with her version of who she thinks she is. Embarrassed, she insists, "I don't have a problem with you being gay. I'm a famous liberal, okay? My beliefs perfectly

align with having a gay father." Her father eagerly agrees, saying, "I know. Remember the picture that we took of you with Hillary Clinton? She loved you."7 Hannah smiles like a proud little girl as she remembers it. In depicting the smugness and certainty about the contours of her politics, this scene caricatures the character's inability to comprehend a fissure in her self-identity.

Hannah, who grandiosely proclaimed herself "a voice of her generation" in the pilot episode, captures the 'delusional girl'-persona that Dunham seeks to depict. She is angry, awkward, goofy, flirty, socially clueless, and self-aggrandizing. In the aptly titled "Role Play" episode, she tries to revive her sex life with her boyfriend Adam by role playing a pickup scene. When it doesn't work and they begin to argue, she explains what kinds of fantasies she was trying to rekindle:

> You used to have all these ideas about me being, like, a little street slut or, like, an orphan with a disease or you said I was, like, a woman with a baby's body or something. I was just trying to do it the way that we used to, the way that sex always was for us […]. I don't have ideas like that. I was just doing your ideas. I was just doing sex the way you wanted to.

Adam remonstrates that he has changed, that she has an old idea of who he is. Now, he says, he just wants to "fuck and be sweet." What he finds off-putting about this role-play encounter is that she was not present: "You were outside your body watching everything."
To this, Hannah responds, "So? What does it matter? If you're getting what you want, what do you care if I'm, like, in my body? You can't be, like, the body police."

One can almost hear echoes of Jacques Lacan's famous "there is no such thing as a sexual relation" (116). What Lacan means is that in sex

[7] For a critique of Clinton and Dunham, see Maureen Callahan's article, in which she says: "Hillary and Lena, both heroes and victims of their own confused narratives. They rapidly shed supporters, readers, viewers. They have been stripped of their feminist bona fides yet are thoroughly unashamed, generational bookends who both firmly believe in their greatness" (n.p.).

there is no union between two embodied present subjects, that the projection of the other is always already the only presence to which one can aspire. When Hannah says to Adam that it doesn't matter as long as he's getting what he wants, she is not passively abdicating her own pleasure, but rather telling him that full presence is not necessarily constitutive of a sex act, though it functions as a powerful fantasy. For her, to be out of her body may be the thing that she wants at that moment. His demand that she be embodied curtails some of the pleasures that they used to attain before their sexual encounters became predicated on domesticated sweetness.

Hannah Tennant-Moore, who is otherwise an astute reader of sex scenes in contemporary literature and film, reads this scene in a limited way that reiterates a version of subjectivity that Hannah undercuts. Speaking of Adam's insistence that falling in love has made them just "fuck and be sweet," Tennant-Moore argues,

> This is an appealing description of sexual intimacy, but it's absurd that Dunham puts these words in the mouth of a twenty-something man who is addicted to sex and loves to dominate women in the bedroom […]. The conversation suggests that Hannah, rather than Adam, has created barriers to vulnerability and mutual pleasure. Any fault in their sex life lies with her.

This is a reading that takes literally Adam's stance that their sexual intimacy is mutual, and that they enjoy it equally and unequivocally. The fault in their sex life may, in fact, lie with Hannah, not because she has damaged their intimacy, but because she doesn't find "being sweet" as sweet as she should. This scene gestures towards a radicality of a sexual desire that seeks to be non-unitary, that resides in the space of performance and the pleasures of not being "oneself."

Viewers will have been reminded of the first season of *Girls*, in which, in "Vagina Panic," Adam masturbates on top of Hannah while calling her an eleven-year old heroin addict. In that episode, she responds as gamely as she can though she's not sure if she's following the fantasy.

The next morning, when she continues the role play, he doesn't even remember it. In that moment, she learns something about the ways in which fantasies don't coincide, and pleasures do not necessarily sync with each other. She is curious, slightly bemused, but willing to continue seeking out interactions with this man who doesn't return her texts.

Some critics were outraged by this scene. In *Bad Feminist,* for instance, Roxane Gay characterizes Adam as "a depressing, disgusting composite of every asshole every woman in her twenties has ever dated […]. The pedophile fantasy Adam shares at the beginning of the 'Vagina Panic' episode is cringe-worthy" (n.p.). There were columns in the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* calling the scene pornographic and bemoaning feminism's demise. A refreshing counter-argument can be found in Elaine Blair's *New York Review of Books* essay, in which she celebrates this scene as "one of the most complicated and intelligent sex scenes" she has ever seen because of the depiction of non-mutually orgasmic sex, and the use of porn elements as an antidote to the heteronormative penetrative sex that is usually depicted in Hollywood (n.p.). She admires the ways in which the relationship is complex, defined more by their funny intelligent conversation and Hannah's interest in him, than by whether she achieves acute sexual pleasure. Blair asserts that feminists need not worry about Hannah, who seems quite capable of taking care of herself. Her argument is similar to that of Stephanie Marghitu and Conrad Ng, who discuss the critical response to the sex scenes: "Accusations of anti-feminism leveled against the series could be attributed to its scenes of unfulfilling sex, which, Sarah Hughes of *The Independent* suggests, are redolent of the protagonist's 'lack of self-worth'" (121). They suggest that these scenes, which do not follow the generic convention of making the sex titillating or gratifying, could be accepted as "a more challenging viewing experience" (121).

I would argue that the feminism of *Girls* resides precisely in this space of the non-mutual sexual encounter. These encounters challenge a viewing audience that expects the show to conform to the norms of the comedy and to the aspirations of the romantic comedy heroine, who will have some funny mishaps on her way to finding the right guy. Instead, sex emerges as a point of friction in which individual empowerment and

self-assertion rub up against what Jacqueline Rose calls the "sexual undercurrents of our lives where all certainties come to grief" (n.p.). The two scenes I have discussed question the kinds of sex that are expected to be empowering or satisfying to a woman. Unlike Dunham as memoirist, Hannah refuses a coherent version of self that would be legible to the man, or even to herself.

Of course, these scenes are not just about sex. They are importantly about what it means to be a young woman who is ambitious, and who wishes to succeed. Both scenes end with comments about Hannah having a job. In the first season, she leaves Adam's house to go to a job interview, in which she jokes about date rape to the man who is about to hire her. She does not get the job. Nor does she keep a subsequent one after offering to fuck the older male boss who gropes all the women in his office. It is not, however, that she misreads the signs and oversteps; rather it is that she picks up on an undercurrent of sexism and disrespect and takes it to an overt level that makes the men uncomfortable. As she describes in her memoir, Dunham has experienced repeated paternalistic, sexualized, condescending treatment in the workplace.[8] In her fiction, she creates scenes in which it appears that the girl has made a mistake, has been deluded about how the world works. These scenes can and should be read as ones in which the girl knows more than others would like to admit about how that world operates.

The dynamics of power and work are enacted between Hannah and Adam in the aftermath of the failed role play when he says that now that he has a job, he cannot take this kind of drama: "What drama? This is just me!", she says. He responds, "Exactly." His job, ironically, is drama, because he has landed a part in a Broadway production. When she says that she too has a job, he disparages it, saying that he doesn't want to be fodder for her Twitter account. Her writing is not a credible profession in his eyes. Whereas he feels passion for his job, she struggles to fulfil her idea of what she wants to do because it does not exist yet. Her desire for role play does not only appear in her sex life. It is also in

[8] Her ability to speak within the #MeToo movement, however, has been diminished by her egregious support of Murray Miller after he was accused of raping Aurora Perrineau. After this, many women decried her comments and her apologies (Kang).

her performance as writer, because the parts for that kind of feminized feminist writer are not yet written. She has to create them for herself.

The power of *Girls* lies in the space of the 'delusional girl.' Funny but not patronizing, incisive but not damning, the show captures the confusions and contradictions of *becoming*. The girls are interdependent and independent, ungracefully entering into the realm that adulthood, work, relationships, and society require. In fiction as opposed to memoir, Dunham does not need to sum it all up. In fact, she can't, as she writes in her memoir: "When I'm playing a character, I am never allowed to explicitly state the takeaway message of the scenes I'm performing—after all, part of the dramatic conflict is that the person I'm portraying doesn't really know it yet" (49).

As the seasons passed, Dunham said that she felt that the girls were growing up. But there is a feminist power in the ways that they can be Bart Simpsons, never growing older, never learning to become people whose lives follow a progressive and redemptive narrative. Hannah and her friends reside in a state of not knowing, of a self-formation that rubs against contradictory pressures and belief systems. Less didactic and knowing than Dunham's memoir, the show is intelligently compassionate and open to the eager, confused, broken, and non-unitary feminized subjectivities that these girls represent. They represent an idea of how a girl could be that is counter to the more didactic and self-assured proclamations that the enterprising Dunham engages as she affirms feminist choice and agency in her memoir. In fiction, a version of a more capacious feminism emerges, one that represents embodied feminized subjects who struggle with—and resist—the pressures that shape Dunham's increasingly problematic self-presentation. The show is evidence that Dunham has the capacity and imagination, if not the will, to expand the parameters of her neoliberal feminism.

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Biography

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