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Volume 7

Issue 3 *New British Feminist Scholarship and Contemporary Politics: Prizewinning and Short-listed Essays from the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland) Essay Competition*

Article 7

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March 2006

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### Recommended Citation

Rodie, Nicola (2006). Uneasy Transvestism? Fashioning a Space for the Single Woman in *Sex and the City*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(3), 59-70.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss3/7>

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## Uneasy Transvestism? Fashioning a Space for the Single Woman in *Sex and the City*

By Nicola Rodie<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

'Uneasy Transvestism? Fashioning a Space for the Single Woman in *Sex and the City*' is essentially an exploration of the ways in which fashion is used within the programme to explore the parameters of the female body, and in particular, to define a sexually fluid space for the single woman. I approach the material from a cultural studies methodology, trying to especially decipher the meanings inherent in the visual language of the programme, and its use of clothing to costume its four female protagonists. Intrigued and influenced by theorists such as Butler, Hollander and Garber, but largely relying on my own interpretation of the material, I consider the ways in which *Sex and the City*'s clothing/fashion helps to rewrite and blur conventional gender constructions, and how its often parodic interpretations of femininity and masculinity help to redefine womanhood (and singledom in particular) as a mutable and liberated space. Concentrating on the character of Carrie Bradshaw, I discuss how fashion functions within the narrative to question compulsory notions of femininity. At the core of my essay remains a nagging uneasiness that even within the supposedly liberating narrative of the programme, it remains the woman's body that must validate itself through clothing. However, I do conclude that instead of being depoliticising, the chameleon-like fluidity of the clothed female body in *Sex and the City* is ultimately empowering – allowing a rare opportunity for the female to represent, and narrate, herself.

*Keywords:* Costume, play, gender

The blonde, curly-haired Carrie first cheekily observes, then strides along, the streets of her City. She wears a pink tutu against the blue skyline: deliberate, girly, outrageous. But just as she begins to really strut her stuff, a bus (carrying an advertisement for her own newspaper column) splashes her from head to toe. Neither she nor the audience was aware of what was going to happen. As such, the overall effect is surprising, subversive, and parodic, as Carrie's photographed image smiles in showering her walking, real one.

The title sequence to HBO's *Sex and the City* sets the tone for a series that has been variously regarded as ridiculous, radical, manipulative, and distasteful. For me, its title is particularly interesting, describing a programme in which the meanings of sexuality and city living are inseparable; or to reinterpret 'sex', a programme in which representations of gender and urbanity are also mutually constitutive. The series was launched in 1997 by HBO, a cable channel whose independently funded status has

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<sup>1</sup> This essay evolved from Nicola Rodie's interest in gender theory, explored on various literature modules at Exeter University, and from her somewhat less academic love for fashion. It unintentionally acts as a parallel piece to her dissertation investigating Jewish masculinity, entitled 'New York, Neuroticism and the Nebbish'. Since graduating in 2005, she has combined work experience in the arts with administrative employment at a local authority, and next year aims to pursue postgraduate work within the American Studies field.

enabled it to broadcast more explicitly violent and sexual material. According to Reuters figures, 10.6 million viewers tuned into the US finale to Season Six (the last of the show's six series), broadcast in February 2004. During its lifetime and beyond, the show has garnered considerable column inches, not only for its jaw-dropping approach to women's brunch-time sex-talk, but also for its distinctive influence on fashion. Carrie Bradshaw has become iconic for her notorious and ever-changing fashion sense, and so it seems appropriate to discuss her characterization from a cultural standpoint, implicitly drawing on theories of costume, transvestism and play, historically used to approach other chameleons of fashion like Madonna and Dietrich<sup>2</sup>.

The iconic tutu of the *Sex and the City* opening thus sets the tone for the fashion stakes of the programme—a combination of bizarre glamour, old-fashioned style, sexiness, and disguise. The clothes in the series, particularly those that Carrie wears, are highly conscious of their constructed status, styled for their wearer and her environment. There is no pretence that Carrie's individual outfits represent a natural femininity: instead, the audience is invited to marvel at the wit and audacity which goes into compiling her eclectic and often remarkable wardrobe. However, by inevitable implication, Carrie and her three fellow single Manhattanites together constitute versions of femininity and womanhood which not only suggest construction and masquerade, but necessarily, by the superlative nature of their adventurous costumes, camp and the 'ubersexual'. The programme forces us to become Robertson's camp spectator, viewing 'through a double identification that is simultaneously critical of and complicit with the patriarchal organization of vision and narration'. (Robertson 1996: 14) But is this identification merely empty play, or does it instead force the programme into more problematic political turf, treading on transvestite toes? In this essay I shall thus consider how *Sex and the City* uses clothing/style alongside reworkings of traditional cultural/mythic narratives to 'fashion' a legitimate space for the single (heterosexual) woman in Manhattan. I also question to what degree the space of New York City is able to negotiate and transcend normative categories of sexuality and difference, and whether the city borders on encoding a district of uneasy transvestism, in which gender is donned and shed by a codeable female body.

### **'New York.... New York! Aren't you gonna miss it?'<sup>3</sup> - *Sex and the City's* multiple narratives**

One of the most subtle ways *Sex and the City* encodes transvestism, is in its discrete invocation of the noir genre. Much of the action takes place at night, where the cityscapes of New York are contrasted with the poetic interiority of Carrie's late night musings in her apartment. She takes on the role of jaded detective, on a never-ending quest to decipher the enigma that is in this case man, not woman. As she writes, she smokes and drinks; she is always alone, she wanders the city, is wounded, has casual sex. She is our comedic Marlowe, her oft-repeated line, 'I couldn't help but wonder', becoming trademark for the single gal's descent into the labyrinth that is late-night Manhattan. Interestingly, in the episode 'A Ring A Ding Ding' (4:16) Carrie contemplates being single and effectively homeless as the girls wander through neon strands of Chinatown, a

<sup>2</sup> A good example of critical debate surrounding these iconic figures is Robertson's *Guilty Pleasures: Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, (see bibliography) but there are many others.

<sup>3</sup> Carrie in 'I Heart NY' (4:18).

location often used to signify psychological dislocation in *noir*. Of course, these *noirish* transactions with the audience are only part of the programme as a whole, but nevertheless, they may act to construct Carrie as a woman in somewhat borrowed (masculine) clothes. Like New York, Carrie's identification is always double. However, while her role is itself ambivalent and questioning, *it* is never questioned: Carrie's narration is the authority of the series, her voiceovers beginning and concluding every episode. Her narrative and sartorial influence then, not only reference a certain transvestism in their invocation of *noir*, they also serve to reconstruct the feminine voice as omniscient and omnipotent. Marlowe may well muse, but Carrie concludes.

Indeed, the city itself shares with Carrie her power as "all seeing eye", as both the lines of Carrie's column and the streets of New York act as pathways of play and transgression for their experimental inhabitants. Manhattan has no room for married couples; they move upstate (The Baby Shower, 1:10), into Brooklyn (Miranda, final series) or worse still, decay in New York itself - both Charlotte's marriage to Trey, and Big's marriage to Natasha, fail in the city. In the episode 'I Heart NY' (4:18), Samantha remarks to Carrie, 'No one actually makes these relationship things work, do they?', to which Carrie replies, 'Sure they're the ones leaving New York'. There is a sense that couple-dom and the city can not cohabit, indeed, In 'Where There's Smoke' (2:1) Manhattan is compared to a holding pen for all the girls' former partners. 'Who would have thought an island that tiny would be big enough to hold all our ex-boyfriends?', says Miranda. New York City then, instead of representing romantic stability, conclusion and commitment, comes to stand for transience, sexual possibility/impossibility, and singledom. Interestingly, this state of transience is neither portrayed as wholly male or female, the city being repeatedly defined as masculine *and* feminine. In the documentary, '*Sex and the City: A Farewell*', which accompanied the final episodes the producers speak of the city as being very much the 'fifth lady' of the show. However, throughout, New York is also constantly reconfigured against the character of 'Big', who seems to represent the flux of the urban. In 'I Heart NY' Carrie considers her relationship with both the city and former lover Big as he prepares to move to California. She tells him, 'You can't leave New York! You're the Chrysler building, the Chrysler building would look all wrong in the vineyard.' He is compared to a Manhattan symbol, an architectural representation of the beauty and power of New York itself. As Harzewski (2004) comments, 'Big, whom the series connects with classic New York—its wealth, arrogance, and power, his tinted windows and driver imbuing him with glamour and mystery—is compared in Carrie's book to the city, his name the first half of a popular Manhattan icon.' And while Harzewski compares the males Big and Aidan as respectively representative of city and country, she fails to note that on many levels Carrie herself comes to symbolise New York. Later in that same scene, Carrie pleads with Big, 'You, me, New York - you owe it to us! And by us, I mean New York and myself.' Big picks up on her self-alignment with the city at the finale of the episode as the pair enjoys a horse and carriage ride through Central Park. 'New York, New York! Aren't you gonna miss it?' she tells him. 'Nah, but I will miss you, kid' he replies. The city and Carrie, like the city and Big, are inseparable, lending its space an air of blurred gender, a space of possibility and transgression - in the episode their carriage must ultimately veer off its designated path in order to get Carrie to Miranda's sudden labour - sex and gender are not contained and defined in spaces within the city, instead they pervade and mingle. Big and

Carrie's leisurely and nostalgic romantic ride celebrating 'very old New York', becomes a race to celebrate the very new, the arrival of Miranda's baby boy. Just as sex-talk infuses the coffee at the girls' weekend brunch sessions, sexuality and its consequences are free here to interrupt the romantic. Sexuality and romance are not represented along masculine/feminine binaries; instead, the dual linking of Big as city and Carrie as city serve to enforce a kind of transvestism, in which New York plays at both normative "female" and "male" subjectivities.

In other episodes, the characters' journeys outside of the city serve to reinforce this blurred subjectivity. In 'Escape from New York', (3:13) Carrie gets lost at the Warner Bros complex, discovering a Manhattan street set, 'I took a wrong turn and somehow found myself right back where I had started, back in New York, back wondering about Big... Sitting on the fake set all my issues felt more real than ever...' Here New York becomes a kind of psychological space as well as a physical one, in which real feelings exist even outside of the authentic - LA is not New York, it is only pretending. However, once again, space and sexuality are irrevocably linked, Big and New York are uttered in the same sentence, and the city and the "masculine" necessarily exist to define Carrie's "feminine". The same can be said of Big in the episode, 'Belles of the Balls' (4:10) in which he is dumped by his Hollywood girlfriend, and visits Carrie for consolation at Aidan's country "retreat". His presence only serves to emphasise their uneasy removal from the city, as he continually plays and sings the song, 'I'm in a New York state of mind'. Far from demonstrating how much he misses his girlfriend, (the song was allegedly their favourite), the repetition of the title lyric within the confines of the country retreat merely promotes Big's dependence on Carrie and the city for continual "masculine" validation.

Throughout the series, Carrie and Big display surprising tendencies towards both normative masculine and feminine qualities. Big admits in the first episode ('Sex and the City', 1:1) that he 'absofuckinglutely' has been in love, while Carrie's surprised head turn towards the audience reveals that *she hasn't*. Big is constantly encoded as a mysterious and enigmatic character, (our *femme fatale*?), who can be obsessive about relationships. Carrie meanwhile, is straight talking narrator. New York seems to allow both these gender "deviancies" to occur, occupying a space which is fluid and ambiguous. Cowlishaw (2001) has argued that John Gray's self-help bestseller, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, operates on traditional linguistic constructs to reinforce man as subject, who acts, and woman as passive object, who feels the consequences of male actions. *Sex and the City* shares much with this "self help genre", but here the relationships between Carrie and audience, Carrie and city and Carrie and Big help to dispel this traditionalist subject-object binary, making the claim for *male feeling* and *female action*. In 'Belles of the Balls', Carrie even suggests, 'Maybe men and women aren't from different planets as pop culture would have us believe... I couldn't help but wonder - are men just women with balls?' Here Freudian theory is turned on its head, the narrator claiming that women are not castrated men, but that men are in fact merely mutated women. At the end of the episode Carrie reconsiders this relationship using language that seeks to rectify her notion of the urban alongside her notion of gender, suggesting, 'Maybe women and men don't live in the same zip code, but we're moving closer.' New York seems to provide a space in which traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, as well as subject-object binaries, can be tested and blurred: offering the

possibility for genders to at least try on different clothes, even if they do not buy them.

Conventional gender boundaries are also perverted in the series' frequent utilization of archaic Western cultural motifs which, drawn from myth and fairy tale as well as contemporary culture, serve to present a rewriting of the kind of discourse upon which these boundaries have been traditionally constructed. In 'A Change of a Dress' (4:15), the narrative annihilates the ideal of the perfect woman as wife/mother. At the opening, instead of proudly displaying her engagement ring as in conventional romantic discourse, Carrie forgets to tell an old friend about her engagement to Aidan, having to be prompted by Charlotte. She wears the ring on a chain around her neck, not on her finger as expected, and it is lost amid several strings of pearls, in a kind of perverse display of Upper East Side wifely femininity (housewife and "Wasp" Charlotte often wears a subtle string, for instance). Carrie does not prioritise the ring aesthetically, so the audience knows she has doubts about the relationship. Later, when she is trying on 'bad wedding dresses' with Miranda, she succumbs to a panic attack and has to be removed from her meringue dress, her body red and itching. We can read two things from this: one, Carrie's body cannot tolerate cheap fashion, and/or two, that she does not tolerate being a bride. Her voiceover questions, 'as progressive as our society claims to be, there are still certain life targets we're still supposed to meet - marriage, babies, a home of your own... Do we really want these things, or are we just programmed?' She questions the constraints of this particular brand of compulsory femininity and reveals the uneasy feelings she has towards her expected social progressions. Moving in with Aidan marks one of these uneasy progressions, as Harzewski notes:

Carrie's one-bedroom apartment serves as a private city, equal parts fashion house, Manolo showroom, and publishing company in miniature. When Aidan purchases the adjacent unit and begins to break down an adjoining brick wall, the effect is one of violation, as if bodily harm is inflicted on Carrie's person. (Harzewski, 2004)

If Carrie's apartment is simultaneously microcosmic city, fashion-house and publishing company as Harzewski asserts, then Aidan's destruction of the wall marks an assault not only on her space, but also on her fashion, her style, and her language: she cannot concentrate on writing, and must yell 'Stop it!', her words eventually overpowering his actions. Just as the title invites the viewer to notice the pun on a dress and address so the narrative works to unite space and costume in Carrie's self-defined identity. Later in the programme, a mockery of a traditional wedding ceremony is played out uncomfortably before the viewer. Carrie and Aidan attend a Black-and-White ball, him in groom-like tuxedo, she wearing a fitted long white gown. Interestingly, her hair is really a sophisticated version of the messy top bun she wore whilst contemplating her reflection in the bridal shop. Again, because of aesthetics, we know the encounter is doomed, and when Aidan asks Carrie to marry him that night (Aidan: 'People fall in love, they get married, that's what they do.' Carrie: 'Not necessarily') she rejects him again, the voiceover musing, 'We had left the world of black and white and now everything was grey.' This line seems fundamentally important, using the language of space, colour and aesthetics to legitimate the series' depiction not only of her relationship with Aidan but with men in general, and subject-object dichotomies as a whole. Just as Carrie's white

dress did 'not necessarily' have to signify a bridal gown, as Aidan wanted it to, her status as a woman does 'not necessarily' hinge on her achieving a husband and children - there is always the possibility for existence outside this 'world of black and white' - there is grey. Aidan reads her display of femininity and the city's simultaneous display of romance as indicative of the naturalness that the two should wed. Instead, Carrie's charade of bridal-esque aesthetics only serves to heighten her so-called "masculine" characteristics - that of independence (linguistic, economic, stylistic), and reluctance to commit. In this instance, Carrie simultaneously illustrates two seemingly contradictory theories of transvestism: firstly, 'that the donning of opposite sex clothes does not undermine but rather reinforces prescriptive gender codes', that a core identity 'shines through despite and even because of the contradictory apparel'. (Bruzzi 1997: 148) This theory assumes that a person's core and prescriptive identities are the same, which is not necessarily the case with 'programmed?' Carrie, whose dressing in ultra-feminine clothes really enhances her core, "masculine" features. Secondly, Carrie's occupancy of 'grey' seems to back up Marjorie Garber's idea that the cross-dresser inhabits a third space, a 'state of perpetual mobility and mutability'. (Quoted in Bruzzi 1997: 50) In conclusion then, the episode 'A Change of a Dress' distorts traditional modes of thinking about male-female subjectivities by positioning Carrie in a sort of transvestite role, in which attire essentially overplaying a "femininity" actually codifies a covert "masculinity". In doing so, her representation asserts Robertson's theory that 'masquerade mimics a constructed identity in order to conceal, that there is nothing behind the mask' (Robertson 1996: 12) - Carrie has no essential femininity. Aidan is rendered powerless because he is unable to distinguish between the signifier and the signified of Carrie's dress, between that which is displayed (bridal availability), and that which is disguised (perpetual mutability).

Fashion aesthetics are also used to contrast the characters of Carrie and Natasha, Big's twenty-something fresh-faced wife, in the episodes 'Twenty Something Girls and Thirty Something Women' (2:17) and 'Attack of the 5'10' Woman' (3:3) in which the varying states of (un)dress of Carrie define her ambiguous and fluid gender identity in contrast to Natasha's white feminine purity. In the former, Carrie is confronted with Big's fiancée whilst dressed for a hoe-down, in bra, skirt and cowboy hat. Her image is athletic to the point of 'ubersexual', revealing a toned abdominal, and the arm and chest bands she wear, as well as her loose waves, hint at the primitive. The image is undoubtedly one of the warrior, as Carrie stands, confused/defiant, alone on the beach. Within moments however she is vulnerable again, vomiting with the shock of the marriage announcement and having her hair held back by ever-present Miranda. The title of the episode negates men completely, and here in this lasting final image, we see an almost "fem-erotic" strategy employed in uniting the two thirty-something women in the face of pretty, but nonetheless sexless, adversity (Natasha). Ultimately, however, aesthetics form the key dynamic of the episode. The displayed feminine body of Carrie, which in fact only heightens her warrior-like athleticism and sexual sensibilities, is set against the disguised body of Natasha, which in turn, seems to emphasise her passive qualities. Carrie's destructive impulses inevitably turn inward, however, as she is sick on the beach, in a display of simultaneous recognition of both her similarity and difference to the twenty-something girl (whose species we saw vomiting earlier in the episode). The episode suggests the possibility for deviance amid assigned gender roles destructive or otherwise: Big, barely featuring, is coded by mute, androgynous neutrals, leaving Carrie to queerize

her body in its overt display of sexuality, fight, camp, vulnerability and mutability.

In 'Attack of the 5'10 Woman' (3:3), Carrie chances on Natasha in a woman's changing room, she in mismatching underwear while Natasha twirls in a prim white dress. As Storr (2002) explains, 'Underclothes are simultaneously private (hidden under the clothes) and public (intended to be seen and admired)... underwear is infused with intense meanings and connotations, of which sexuality, pleasure and propriety may be only the most obvious.' While Natasha's dress reinforces her success as Big's bride, the display of Carrie's underwear precludes her affair with Big, her forthcoming 'sexuality, pleasure and propriety'. Natasha is happy to display her disguised body, her aesthetic validated by her success in the 'the single women's sports pages - The New York Times wedding section'; Carrie tries (unsuccessfully) to disguise her displayed body by wrapping herself in a curtain. Her incapacity to *disguise what is displayed* – her mutable, sexual body - in contrast to Natasha's achievement in *displaying what is disguised* – i.e. a pretend, permanent femininity - demonstrates her inability to fixate her body or her clothing within the confines of her allocated gender and sexual space. Significantly, her self-identification as 'freakin' Annie Get Your Clothes on!' also references a cross dressing narrative (*Annie Get Your Gun*) in which Doris Day's character, in masculine attire, was only able to achieve intense friendship with a woman while she refused her feminine garb. Interestingly, after Annie sheds her male clothing, she is able to gain a male lover - but dressed as a woman, her relationship with her fellow woman then becomes encoded as homoerotic. By referencing this film, *Sex and the City* acknowledges the transvestite possibilities inherent in Carrie's body - and the location of the scene in a changing room only serves to highlight the blurred sexual potential in clothing and display. Interestingly, the changing room by its very impermanent nature is really Carrie's space, not Natasha's.

The changing room also draws on another staple of feminine mythology - that of aesthetic transformation. Moseley (2002) asserts that there are 'discourses and sites conventionally understood as belonging to feminine culture: fashion, beauty, and the fairytale narrative of transformation... the Cinderella motif is a staple of feminine culture, from the childhood fairytale, to the before and after, rags to riches fashion and beauty makeover of girls' and women's magazines'. *Sex and the City* seems to take delight in suggesting then destroying the conventional Cinderella tale, whilst simultaneously suggesting its own alternative discourses of transformation.

In 'Where there's smoke' (3:1), the women try to figure out why sleeping with firemen is a popular sexual fantasy. Charlotte declares, 'It's because women really just want to be rescued.' The girls exchange uncomfortable glances. When Samantha visits the fire station, she is forced to *make* her fantasy happen herself, dressing in the fireman's uniform, breasts exposed beneath dungaree straps, to entice him. When however, the siren sounds, she is forced to relinquish her costume so that the fire-fighters can go to do their job, and is left naked, covering her breasts. According to the book 'The comedy of cross dressing', 'Stoller proffers the opinion that the female transvestite does not exist, that women only cross dress to gain access to the greater social freedoms afforded men.' (Quoted in Bruzzi 1997) However, in this episode, we see Samantha dressing in man's clothes in order to gain access to the fantasies afforded *women*. Similarly, in a parallel strand, Carrie is unsure whether to accept the offer of Staten Island drinks from her latest admirer, a politician. She lets his car drive by her apartment before finally making her

own way to the party, claiming, 'I'm very independent'. Later Carrie realises, 'It's almost twelve, I'm going to miss the last ferry', stumbling and losing her shoe on her way out. She misses the boat, and is forced to accept a lift home from the politician. However, she has to give him directions off the Island. Unlike Manhattan, the Island is configured as a dated and archaic space, where they play decade-old American music and drown in cheap beer. It thus seems to provide a setting in which even Carrie can *allow* herself to be Cinderella-ed, can allow herself a temporary break from mutability. The episode concludes, 'So I guess sometimes a woman absolutely has to be rescued. And sometimes a woman absolutely has to rescue a man.' In both sentences, the obligation rests with the woman. So while in theory Carrie's pronunciation is liberating and empowering, allowing both men and women subjectivity, in practice her language, (much like my essay), is forced to resort to archaic constructs of designated "femininity" and "masculinity", confining the woman to a sense of obligation and limitation. It seems far removed from her earlier declaration, offered at a Manhattan brunch, that 'Did you ever think we're the White Knights, and we have to save ourselves?' Here then, in contrast to dated Staten Island, Manhattan comes to stand for fantasies of independence, not rescue, in which gender is not even linguistically defined ('we have to save *ourselves*') and socialites can stay out past twelve. In this way then, space is rethought and cultural motif inverted to present a kind of distorted Cinderella narrative, in which the fantasy is independence and impermanence of social construct, including gender.

#### 'Trendy by day, Tranny by night'<sup>4</sup>

*Sex and the City*, as well as recording discourse suggestive of transvestism - the city as 'space to be gendered', Carrie's clothes as codifying the masculine, and inverted Cinderella-ed narratives - also represents more traditional forms of cross-dressing, i.e. woman overtly dressing as man. Simpson has argued that cross dressing can signify a kind of misogyny in which the female body is destroyed through its ridiculous representation: 'Much of the entertainment of drag depends upon the improbability and inappropriateness of a man in a frock, wig and "falsies". But this in turn depends upon not just the improbability of a man dressed as a woman but the 'improbability' of the female body itself.' (Quoted in Bruzzi 1997: 159) In *Sex and the City* however, it is woman wearing man's clothes, redirecting the misogynist gaze and instead questioning the codeability and 'improbability' of the male body. In 'Politically Erect' (3:2) Carrie alternates campish imitations of Jackie Onassis suits and shades with playful masculine suits to create an image she deems suitable for a politician's girlfriend. In reality though, the suits serve to ridicule his body more than hers, especially when combined with the plot, which details his (distasteful) desire to 'pee' on her. Here, her cross-dressing as well as her cheeky nods to Jackie indicates a kind of irreverent reversed misogyny, which is biting without being malicious. Here then, Carrie's costumes are used to both reinforce the politician's status as such, undermine his status as a man, and question, just what is so probable about the man's body?

The same question is implicitly posed by 'Cock a Doodle Do' (3:18). Carrie is constantly woken at dawn by crowing, coming from the animal hospital opposite her apartment. She keeps moaning about the 'goddamn chickens' and is repeatedly corrected - 'Roosters - roosters crow.' While 'chickens' carries few gendered connotations, roosters is

<sup>4</sup> Samantha in 'Cock a Doodle Do' (3:18).

emphatically masculine. While she is content to see the world on neutral terms, the world outside is not, and corrects her. The chickens/roosters are crudely paralleled to the transvestite hookers who work the street outside of Samantha's window, 'half man, half woman, totally annoying.' Arguments ensue, the noise of the prostitutes ironically interrupting Samantha's orgasm. While the roosters are continually and emphatically defined, the transvestites are not; indeed, the spaces of their street and Samantha's apartment seem oddly fluid. In 'Are We Sluts?' (2:6) Samantha moves out of her apartment into the Meatpacking District after her neighbours confront her about being effectively a whore. Throughout the series, the Meatpacking District is allied with transgression, homosexuality, prostitution, cross dressing, but perhaps most importantly, fashion. It is here that homosexual Stanford goes to meet Big Tool 4 U (2:12), his internet chat buddy, and manages to have a 'fulfilling brief encounter' based on his choice of stylish underwear. At the end of the episode 'Cock a Doodle Do' then, when Samantha holds a 'kiss and make up party' for her friends and the transvestites, the space becomes wholly an arena for style, not (gendered) (sexual) substance, Carrie giving a twirl to the transvestites to show off her outfit. When Carrie tells Samantha to watch her language, because 'there's ladies present', she points towards the transvestites, not amongst her friends. Whilst obviously playful, the twisting of sexual space is reassuringly subversive, uniting or dividing the characters on their adorned, aesthetic genders not their biological ones. As Hannerz asserts, 'cosmopolitanism is first of all... willingness to engage with the Other.' (Hannerz 1996: 103) The final shot of the New York skyline at the end of 'Cock a Doodle Do' therefore references the series' cosmopolitanism, in which both the biological male and female body can be Other.

**'I have enough trouble figuring out how to be a woman in a man's world without trying to be a woman pretending to be a man in a man's world.'**<sup>5</sup>

To conclude this essay I would like to discuss an episode that openly deals with the issue of transvestism, 'Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl'. The girls attend a photographic exhibition at Charlotte's gallery of 'drag kings - the collision of illusion and reality', which leads them to consider explicit gender relations in their daily lives. While explicitly the story deals with Charlotte's cross-dressing for the artist, and her resultant sexual assertion in wearing men's clothes, the narrative goes beyond this superficial surface, which seems to assert Stoller's theory that female transvestism only exists to allow women access to men's power. When the artist declares 'Gender's an illusion: sometimes a very beautiful illusion', he is looking at Charlotte in her (normal) feminine form - that is, her construction as a woman is potential as illusory as her as a man. To read this line as the dominant argument of the episode however puts the spectator in an awkward position; by laying claim to gender as an illusion, the artist proves Butler's warning that theorising gender can lead to a potentially dangerous rewriting, coding and interpretation of the female body (Butler 1993). However, the episode subtly undermines this coding, in the following lines of the script, Miranda saying 'I'm going to drag myself home' and Carrie claiming 'I was being dragged around by Shaun'. The first line suggests Miranda codifies her own body, that drag/gender is something she *does* to herself. The second suggests that drag is something *done to* Carrie. In this way, the script occupies Garber's third space of mutability in which drag/core gender are both passive

<sup>5</sup> Miranda in 'Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl' (3:4).

and active in construction; subject and object, chicken and rooster.

In conclusion, I have examined the ways in which images of New York, myths of femininity and parodies of male and female costume are consistently utilized in order to present a legitimate space for the single woman in *Sex and the City*, where a kind of covert cross-dressing changing room is used to constitute the aesthetic identity of the Twenty-First century single gal. My aim was not to show that the series demolishes the sense of "masculine" and "feminine": far from it, it doesn't. I intend merely to demonstrate that these characteristics lie on uneven ground, and that the programme tries to negotiate complex relationships between sex and gender that are only rectified in a kind of playful "cross dressing" in which both core and assumed gender is parodied. As Robertson has argued, 'masquerade allows us to see that what gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman but the idea... that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image.' (Robertson 1996:12)

To finish, I would like you to consider Carrie's *Star Wars* fashion homage in the episode 'All or Nothing' (3:10). Carrie is dressed with her hair in two giant buns, one on either side of her head, resembling Princess Leila, traditionally a male fantasy figure removed from sci-fi. But in *realising* the fantasy, not only identifying it, the costume not only negates the fantasy itself, but also aligns Carrie/costume designer (not to mention myself for recognising this identification) to the heterosexual male gaze. A seemingly simple witty outfit, with a bit of close reading, comes to potentially transcribe a transvestite gaze.

## **Filmography**

'*Sex and the City*' (HBO, 1998-2005) Writers/Directors - various. Creator - Darren Star.  
Particular episodes detailed in the essay:

'Sex and the City' - Series 1, Episode 1. Directed by Susan Seidelman, Written by Darren Star.

'The Baby Shower' – Series 1, Episode 10. Directed by Susan Seidelman, Written by Terri Minksy.

'La Doleur Exquise!' - Series 2, Episode 12. Directed by Allison Anders, Written by Ollie Levy and Michael Patrick King.

'Twenty something Girls vs. Thirty something Women' - Series 2, Episode 17. Directed and Written by Darren Starr.

'Where there's smoke' - Series 3, Episode 1. Directed and Written by Michael Patrick King.

'Attack of the 5'10 Woman' - Series 3, Episode 3. Directed by Pam Thomas, Written by Cindy Chupack.

'Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl' - Series 3, Episode 4. Directed by Pam Thomas, Written by Jenny Bicks.

'Are we Sluts?' - Series 3, Episode 6. Directed by Allison Anders, Written by Cindy Chupack.

'All or Nothing' - Series 3, Episode 10. Directed by Charles McDougall, Written by Jenny Bicks.

'Escape from New York' - Series 3, Episode 13. Directed by John Coles, Written by Becky Hartman Edwards and Michael Patrick King.

'Cock a Doodle Do' - Series 3, Episode 18. Directed by Allen Coulter, Written by Michael Patrick King.

'Belles of the Balls' - Series 4, Episode 10. Directed by Michael Spiller, Written by Michael Patrick King.

'A Change of a Dress' - Series 4, Episode 15. Directed by Alan Taylor, Written by Julie Rottenburg and Elisa Zuritsky.

'A Ring a Ding Ding' - Series 4, Episode 16. Directed by Alan Taylor, Written by Amy B Harris.

'I Heart NY' - Series 4, Episode 18. Directed by Martha Coolidge, Written by Michael Patrick King.

'*Sex and the City: A Farewell*', HBO Documentary (USA, 2004).

'*Annie Get Your Gun*', dir. George Sidney (USA, 1950).

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