



Thrift, Imperfection and the Popular Feminist Apartment Plot on Television

By Claire Perkins

Abstract

This paper will explore the ways in which thrift operates as a signifier of a specific type of precarity and imperfection in young women's lives in several popular series associated with the current 'golden age' of women's television production. The twenty-something women of series including *Girls*, *Insecure*, *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, *Can't Cope Won't Cope* and *Search Party*, have all been raised in comfortable middle-class homes and are now living independently in major global, expensive cities. The precarity of the ways in which they dwell, at both a practical and figurative level, is a symptom of what has come to be understood as 'adulting'—where relatively privileged millennials struggle with the rituals and realities of adult life in a starkly neoliberal society. Through a focus on the narrative device of the apartment plot, this paper will examine how the concept of thrift, with its central spectrum of necessity and choice, can illuminate both the everyday practices and the overarching logic of the adulting phenomenon as represented in this wave of television production. By attending to a variety of contemporary series by, for and about women, it will also argue for the ways in which both thrift and adulting can be understood as specifically gendered behaviours.

Keywords: Thrift, adulting, imperfection, apartment plot, *Insecure*, *Girls*, neoliberalism

Perkins, Claire "Thrift, Imperfection and Popular Feminist Apartment Plot on Television", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 11, issue 3–4, 2019: 501–516. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se>

Introduction

The best-known scene in *Girls* (2012–2017) occurs in the first episode (S1, E1 ‘Pilot’), when the middle-class, academic parents of series creator Lena Dunham’s character Hannah explain that they will no longer be financially supporting her life in New York where, two years after graduating college, she works as an unpaid intern. Hannah is outraged. ‘Do you know how crazy the economy is right now? All my friends get help from their parents.’ By the end of the episode she is bargaining with them, explaining that all she needs is \$1100 a month for the next two years in order to finish her memoir. ‘I am so committed to this book that I am willing to get pretty thrifty on this,’ she implores. This pair of scenes have been referred to by numerous *Girls* commentators in the years since the program premiered, with the act of critical repetition discursively positioning them as the core statement in a series that is now understood to be central to the contemporary depiction of white, middle-class women navigating emotional and existential dilemmas. The canonisation of these specific scenes arguably rests upon the way they encapsulate something specific about contemporary *young* women in this situation; which is both the precarity and the entitlement of dwelling in an expensive city under an intensified regime of neoliberal capitalism. In this sense, Hannah’s use of the term ‘thrifty’ is loaded and compelling. Its obvious affect derives from the way in which the viewer is invited to judge her situation, where her proposed thriftiness amounts to no more than accepting a reduced stipend from her parents to continue living without working in one of the most expensive cities in the world. From Hannah’s perspective, though, the proposed financial situation is a sacrifice that is necessary to support her project of self-discovery, where she is, in her words, ‘becoming who I am meant to be’. In this sense, thrift in the series is intimately connected not only to lifestyle but to the more expansive question of *how to live*. In this paper I argue that thrift is evoked in this way in a group of contemporary dramedy series made by, for and about young women, including *Girls*, *Insecure*, *Fleabag*, *Broad City*, *Can’t Cope Won’t Cope* and *Search Party*. Using the HBO series *Insecure* (2016–) as my central example, I examine how thrift is evoked as both a stylistic and thematic trope through the central device of the apartment, or what Pamela Robertson Wojcik calls ‘the apartment plot’ (2010). Attending to the thrifty ways in which the young female protagonists of these series *dwell* can, I suggest, illuminate the logic of ‘adulthood’ that distinguishes the series as products of intensified neoliberalism.

The ‘imperfect’ apartment plot

The Peak TV landscape is crowded with women-centric dramedy series, which has led to a strong discursive impression of the current moment as a ‘golden age’ for women in television, especially in the Anglophone West (see, for instance, Press 2018, Nussbaum 2019). This evaluation, as well as the series themselves, are expressions of what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls ‘popular feminism’, in the sense that both provide conflicted opportunities for gendered issues and discourses to circulate in popular and commercial media (2018). Acclaimed series such as *Transparent*, *The Good Wife*, *Enlightened*, *Divorce*, *Catastrophe* and *The Letdown* function in this way by orbiting around acutely gendered events such as the breakdown of a long-term relationship, the birth of a child, the dramatic loss of a job or a complete transformation in gender or social identity. In exploring the opportunities, contradictions and stresses of these acts of regrouping, these series are all directly engaged with the underlying meaning of thrift, as the question of what it means to thrive (Hunter & Yates 2011: 570). The female protagonists are reevaluating their lives and choices in light of this question, and attempting to forge new pathways. For the midlife, middle-class women who are most often represented in this situation, the economic realities that attend their decisions are not central or definitive. They are able to cope financially without their strategies becoming a narrative focus, with housing being one of the key sites for how this is communicated. In the series featuring women in their twenties, though, the emphasis is different. The younger women of the series I am focusing on are at a different stage in their lives, where they are not regrouping but *grouping*—figuring out who they are and want to be. The logic of thriving is central here also, but so too is the more popular sense of thrift as frugality (Podkalicka & Potts 2014: 227). Because they have less money, the ways in which the younger women cope economically is necessarily more central to their lives, and figures as more of a narrative preoccupation. This works in tandem with how the manner in which they *dwell*, at both a practical and figurative level, tends to be the engine of the drama, as series that are primarily character and observation-driven—qualities that often find these series identified as ‘indie’ or ‘lo-fi’. Again, housing is central to both this set-up and its sensibility.

In the Heideggerian sense, ‘dwelling’ captures the way in which a being is *in* the world—referring to where one is *at home* or has a place. And in these series this place is not just the characters’ physical housing but their city as a whole, which in each is evoked in careful, close-up detail. There are relatively few shots in any of these series that take in a broad, spectacular sweep of their city’s skyline, as is standard for iconic urban series such as *Friends* or *Grey’s Anatomy*. Instead, the city manifests vividly through the details of streetscapes, public transport, cafes, bars and parks. It is through these details that the characters’ economic reality is written, insofar as it is emphatically communicated that they walk and take

the bus or train—dwelling close to the ground, rather than skimming above it. In their apartments, this mode of subsistence is consistently conveyed through a carefully drawn thrift aesthetic, which is the primary visual trope that distinguishes the series as a ‘youth’ or ‘millennial’ cycle in the broader wave of contemporary women-centric television. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock have discussed how television as a medium uniquely allows its viewers to ‘live into’ a place—getting to know it intimately and experientially as an effect of seriality and duration. The effect is central to what they argue is the prominent feature of television’s serial form, which is its ability, quite distinct from film, to ‘moment-by-moment add layers to the sedimentation that is its own history’ (Jacobs & Peacock 2013: 11). As sites returned to again and again, the apartments and houses of television characters are a privileged space for this sedimentation of time, and thus hold a particular power to communicate not just narrative and character information but the affective meaning of the series as a whole.

Girls, *Insecure*, *Fleabag*, *Broad City*, *Can’t Cope Won’t Cope* and *Search Party* have a unique grasp of this fact in the way they render physical place as the index of a more expansive sense of dwelling. Insofar as this careful attention is designed to express a relative lack of material means, attending to the thrift aesthetic of these series can illuminate much about the individual works as well as what they might collectively mean as a wave of contemporary feminist production. And, because this effect in these series by and about young women is so closely tied to the specific space of the *apartment*, I suggest that Wojcik’s notion of the ‘apartment plot’ is a useful category to mobilize here. The apartment plot is defined as a narrative in which ‘the apartment figures as a central device [meaning] that the apartment is more than setting, but motivates or shapes the narrative in some key way’ (Wojcik 2010: 3). While most of the examples that Wojcik and others who have taken up the concept discuss derive from film, she notes that the apartment plot has been a ‘crucial unacknowledged mainstay of television’ from—in the American context alone—*I Love Lucy* (1951) through *The Honeymooners* (1955) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970) to *Seinfeld* (1988) and *New Girl* (2011) (ibid. 3). Crucially for the series under consideration here, Wojcik argues that it is not only the space but also the *temporality* of the apartment that structures events, reflecting something about character temporality—such as being young or single—or shaping the temporality of the narrative through characters moving in or out. This temporal logic hinges on a contradiction between a sense of dwelling—where characters are identified by and with a place of residence—and the sense that their place is constantly changing (Wojcik 2014: 4) and has, I suggest, a specific resonance for contemporary series featuring young women in the way that it highlights both immobility and precarity as defining themes.

The opening shots of *Insecure*’s first episode (S1, E1 ‘Insecure as Fuck’) de-

monstrates this central function of the apartment, mapping protagonist Issa Dee's (series creator Issa Rae) identity onto her thriftily drawn residence. Moving through space in a manner that is classic for the apartment plot—laying out a large urban space before narrowing to focus on the apartment as a microcosm of the city—the shimmering cinematography depicts a montage of South Los Angeles—Randy's Donuts, the Vision Theater, faded weave and fried chicken shops, firmly grounding the series in the place that is fundamental to *Insecure's* exploration of young black womanhood. After introducing Issa in her workplace—a non-profit for supporting black youth called 'We Got Y'All'—the episode cuts to a static tableau shot of the exterior of Issa's home: a faded, low-rise condominium named 'The Dunes' (a real-world Inglewood apartment complex). This specific shot, as well as the location for the next scene, are repeated numerous times through *Insecure's* first two seasons. Inside, Issa is in her bathroom rapping—an activity that is a central aspect of her self-expression and narration throughout the series. In a sequence of three shot-reverse shots Issa regards herself in the mirror and languidly performs: *go Shorty, it's my birthday, but no one cares because I'm not having a party, because I'm feeling sorry for myself...* (S1, E1 'Insecure as Fuck'). As she trails off, the discouragement in her voice is underlined by the echoing acoustics and the mise-en-scene of the small, 1960s-style bathroom: flat lighting from a frosted window, yellow tiles on the wall, blue shower curtain, basic aluminum framed mirror. A couple of thin, limp towels hang on a rail that an old-fashioned hairdryer is also slung into. Over the next few scenes we see the apartment's other spaces, all of which are functional and livable, but similarly cramped, badly lit and aesthetically outdated. The furniture is mismatched and the 1960s styling further evident in the poky kitchen server, narrow decorative shelving and wood-paneled ceiling fan. A lack of storage is made clear in the managed clutter that accumulates on the floor and every surface. In the bedroom, a plastic shoe rack flops over the door and clothes hang from hooks on the walls. A large rug in a Turkish style hangs over the bed, implicitly obscuring damage or grime.

The apartments in which the young women of *Girls*, *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, *Can't Cope Won't Cope* and *Search Party* dwell are all presented in a very similar manner. In each, an outdated aesthetic is prominent in the style of the abode itself and the furniture it contains, and an overwhelming lack of space is evident in the way possessions are arranged and stored. All of the women live with housemates or a partner. I'm arguing that this mode of presentation conveys the theme of thrift in at least two ways. First, the outfitting of these spaces is obviously meant to look inexpensive and cobbled together. The individual styling is often careful and expressive, but furniture appears to be second-hand or cheaply made, and the dingy, period style of the apartments themselves clearly conveys that they are rented, and beyond their tenants' control—or means—to update. In *Insecure*, the point

is underlined by the contrast that is repeatedly evoked between Issa's apartment and that of her lawyer best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji)—a sleek, roomy, high-rise space with formulaic upper middle class styling: floor to ceiling windows, ambient lighting and stainless steel appliances. Second, the fact that these women live this way is positioned as a deliberate choice. The spaces may be small and tired but none would be cheap to rent, located as they are in gentrified or rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New York and London.¹ So the fact the characters live thriftily in these specific kinds of apartments spells out a priority to live in a city that is positioned to be central, possible and intimately connected to their aspirations. The protagonists are all 'finding themselves' but, in this, they are driven by at least one clear value or belief. Hannah in *Girls* is committed to her goal of being a writer. Fleabag is battling to keep open the café that she opened with her best friend before the friend died. Issa says at the beginning of *Insecure* that she works in a non-profit because she 'wants to give back'. In some cases, the outdatedness or implausibility of this goal becomes a key dimension of the series' storyline. But the point is that each *has* a vision for how they want to live, and being located in a metropolitan centre is fundamental to this, and prioritized over material comfort. In this way, the apartments in which they live are central to their projects of *thriving*.

All texts, of course, use setting to convey information about character circumstances and ideals, and the vast number of television series set in urban centres have a particularly acute sense of this logic. This leads to the often-cited cliché that the city is itself 'another character' in the narrative. The effect is perceived through the particular and idiosyncratic way in which a city is presented, which—for common sites like New York and Los Angeles—can vary enormously as a way of conveying defining themes around class and race. The location and presentation of TV characters' residences is the most visible and central channel through which this narrative information is communicated and, in the manner of the effect cited above—whereby television homes become a privileged site for the sedimentation of time and history—it can be argued that *all* TV series set in cities are apartment plots, insofar as 'the narrative could not occur without the apartment' (Wojcik 2018: 3). Wojcik is particularly interested in examples where the apartment is key to the plot's trajectory of events, but I suggest that the style of 'indie' series that I am considering, which are defined by the *lack* of a strong plot, are equally applicable to the concept. In these series, the central dramatic tension lies with the intersection of characters' choices—how they want to live—and their precarity—the structural factors that are holding them back—and the site of the apartment is central to this defining struggle. As an omnipresent visual space, it is a constant reminder of how thrift behaviors are organized along a spectrum of 'choice' and 'necessity'. As Podkalicka and Potts write, when thrift is a consequence of material

scarcity it is not deliberately socially consumed, but when it occurs amidst plenty it functions as a form of social signaling about the moral qualities of the thrifty agent (2014: 231). As a wave of production that is overwhelmingly concerned with the social and emotional dilemmas of characters from staunchly middle-class backgrounds, these series fit most obviously with the latter meaning. Specifically, they take a particular interest in the meaning of thrift within what Yates and Hunter theorize as the ‘moral order’ of late capitalist abundance in America, and in this way function as a form of ‘reactionary thrift’ in which the language of restraint grounds a broad critique of this system (2011: 12).

#adulting

At one level there is nothing unusual about these characters’ thrifty manner of living, which builds on a long and colourful narrative tradition of living cheaply and freely in a big city as a young person—‘the canon of the studio apartment’ as Penelope Green has called it, referencing Anita Brookner, Barbara Pym and Rona Jaffe (2016). In such examples, space and comfort is sacrificed by young women who leave behind a regional or suburban childhood for the possibilities—diversely rendered—of life in an urban centre. Wojcik considers this tradition by attending to how the subcultural type of the single ‘Bohemian Girl’ features in the apartment plot throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Identifying that the single girl is, in the marriage boom era, clearly marked as unconventional, she discusses how a young woman’s choice to live alone in the city at this time represents a provisional state rather than a permanent identity. Linked to Joan Didion’s characterization of the experience of single girls in New York in the 1960s as a ‘reprieve’ from the demands of domesticity and family that shaped their childhoods and—for most—will distinguish their futures, the bohemian state is directly positioned as the choice of white, middle-class girls to rebel against the conventional patterns of their upbringing to temporarily embrace a style of modernity that is closely associated with artistic and intellectual life. Quoting a *Mademoiselle* article from 1960, Wojcik specifies that the Bohemian is, in this way, a ‘well-bred well-educated girl with a cultural bent’ (2010: 152). The place and function of the apartment is central to this subculture in representing an ‘alternative private sphere ... that challenges the association between women and domesticity’ to produce ‘a particularly modern feminine identity’ (148).

The contemporary popular feminist apartment plot differs in important ways from this bohemian precursor to produce a notably different type of feminine identity—one that is clearly distinguished as a product of neoliberal times. Most obviously, young women such as Issa in *Insecure* are not presented to be living out a short-term reprieve from domesticity. As a partial result of the institutionalization

of ‘emerging adulthood’ that I will consider below, women choosing to live in city apartments in their twenties no longer signifies a period of modernity or unconventionality preceding marriage and stability, instead functioning as much more of a norm in itself. As part of this shift, the connotations of freedom and experimentation that attend the bounded bohemian window of the 1950s and 1960s are now overlaid with a strong sense of precarity. Both sets of characters are choosing to dwell in urban centres and living thriftily to support this, but the presentation of the choice is quite different. As Wojcik writes, the messy, under furnished nature of apartments such as Holly Golightly’s in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Blake Edwards, 1961) signifies a rootlessness that is primarily dictated by eccentricity rather than poverty—a ‘wilful perversity’ (2010: 152) that will eventually be safely recuperated by marriage. Apartments such as Issa’s or Hannah’s in *Girls* look different—they are obviously maintained and furnished for as little as possible, but this is done with care and style. These young women are not rootless but settled—indeed, *stuck*—in their spaces. The apartment in this scenario does not just map an indeterminate space of possibility en route to somewhere else; it primarily signifies an enduring state of immobility. From a generic perspective, this immobility can be linked to the ‘indie’ identity of the series, where the principles of transformation and progression that distinguish classical narrative structures are self-consciously rejected in favour of observing the minutiae of characters’ day to day existence. At a sociological level, it makes the series compelling meditations on the related phenomena of emerging adulthood and recessionary culture. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have observed, recessionary media culture typically implies that management of the self can effect positive change, in line with how postfeminist culture suggests that it is individual women (rather than systems of gender hierarchy) that require modification (2014: 2). In their engagement with the logic of thrift, these series push back against both of these commands.

‘Emerging adulthood’ is the term used by behavioral psychologists to describe a ‘new stage of the life span’ that exists between adolescence and adulthood. First proposed by Jeffrey Jansen Arnett in 2000, the period is understood to roughly span the ages of 18-25, and reflects a macro change in what people expect life to be like in one’s twenties. Whereas for most of the twentieth century it was typical for people in industrialized societies to meet standard milestones during their early to mid-twenties—consolidated career pathway, marriage, child(ren), property—it is now the norm to regard this period as one of self-exploration and instability (Arnett 2006: 3-4). While this shifted perception in how one ‘should’ come of age is in no small part the welcome result of civil rights’ advances of the 1960s onward, it is also a clear effect of neoliberal capitalism weakening the social and institutional structures that both supported and restricted young people in this process throughout history. As James Coté has discussed, the deinstitutionalization of the entry

into adulthood has accompanied the rise of individualization as the imperative to rely on one's own resources and sense of agency; to, precisely, *manage* oneself: 'More than ever before, coming of age in the 21st century means learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, capable of making choices and decisions independently from among a wide range of possibilities' (Arnett 2006: 4).

As a sociologically defined life stage, emerging adulthood has a compelling media corollary in the term 'adulting'. Born on social media and defined by the urban dictionary as a verb meaning 'to do grown things and hold responsibilities such as a 9-5 job, a mortgage/rent, a car payment, or anything else that makes one think of grown ups', the term is most familiar as a quasi-ironic hashtag that accompanies posted statements or images of quotidian victories, or failures, in domestic or work spheres, for example: 'I just bought a new mattress and it was expensive #adulting' or 'Just caught myself shouting "Yeh boy" really loud in the supermarket for a box of discounted weetabix. Is this what being an adult is all about? #weetabix #adulting'. Such reports emphasise the individuation of emerging adulthood; the personal toll of the imperative to *be* adult, and the (partially) faux pride when one gathers one's resources—physical, mental or economic—to accomplish a 'grown up' task. The former sentiment, though, just as often leads to the documentation of a hapless *failure* to adult: 'Using an oven thermometer to take my temperature because I don't own a regular thermometer #adulting-fail'. The ironic sense of disappointment that pervades this presentation of self in the terms of adulting underlines emerging adulthood as a state not of positive growth but of immobility. Adulting is temporarily *acting* like an adult, but with a paradoxically ambivalent sense of faith in the authenticity of the concept. In the think-piece culture that has seized upon the term, this paradox is a common focus, grounding numerous explorations of how adulting raises the question of what adulthood actually is, how it has been understood across different generations, and what its markers might be—from owning storage items and household appliances (see Johnson 2015) to skeletal maturity and coming of age ceremonies (see Beck 2016). In one of the most expansive cultural reflections, Anne Helen Petersen has recently considered how the neoliberal logic of optimization shapes adulting in the specific terms of paralysis (2018).

While the internet speak around adulting is not explicitly incorporated into the scripting of *Girls*, *Insecure*, *Fleabag*, *Broad City*, *Can't Cope Won't Cope* and *Search Party*, much of its sentiment is—to the point where the concept arguably underpins both their individual premises and their discursive identity as a group. The logic is evident from their taglines: 'Living the dream. One mistake at a time'; 'Almost getting it kind of together'; 'Nowhere to grow but up' (*Girls* S1, S2, S4), 'She's trying hard AF'; 'Glowing up ain't easy' (*Insecure* S1, S3) and 'The fun can't last forever. Can it?' (*Can't Cope, Won't Cope* S1). The underlying theme

that ‘adulting is hard’ is the distinguishing feature of these series as examples of a shift in programming identified by Lauren DeCarvalho: from the work-*based* to the work-*related* sitcom or dramedy. Where the former are set in one stable work environment, the characters of the latter move in and out of work, highlighting issues of employment and economic survival (DeCarvalho 2013: 368). This identity extends the scope of the newer programming from specific workplace plots to broader issues around how characters choose to live. A key theme in feminist television studies focusing on productions of the 1960s onward is to examine how instances of workplace series like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* historically allowed networks to capitalize on the marketability of certain liberal feminist ideals without engaging with the wider structural implications of social change. As I will cover further below, the issues around thriving and choice that define the newer series put them in an equally conflicted dialogue with feminist discourses. For the moment, though, I want to return to the idea of the apartment plot to consider how it might underpin this subgenre of the work-related comedy or dramedy as a genre with an acute sense of economic verisimilitude.

Thrift and thriving

Insofar as any critical attention has been paid to these young women’s television apartments, it has tended to focus on the ‘authentic’ nature of the spaces, as part of a perspective that acclaims the ‘realism’ of this wave of production. The primary theme in this style of commentary is a focus on the emotional and affective realism of the series, where the protagonists’ defining qualities of anxiety, anger and discontent are celebrated for frankly disclosing feelings and experiences that women have long been encouraged to suppress. The naturalism that is perceived here is in part an effect of an emotionally honest style of character presentation that rejects postfeminist commands to be upbeat and confident, promoting instead a broad sense of ‘imperfection’. But in a related way, it is an effect too of the series’ intense focus on the minutiae of exactly how the characters dwell day to day, which, because of their choice to live in expensive, competitive urban centres, is necessarily focused on issues like getting and keeping work and on making rent. This narrative situation means that being broke is a fundamental part of the characters’ identity, and never far from the choices they make—a notably different identity from the ‘wilful’ poverty of the women of the Bohemian apartment plot. The location and styling of their apartments are a key site for this concern with verisimilitude,² and distinguish the series sharply from other TV apartment plots such as *Sex and the City*, where the freelance writer Carrie Bradshaw’s (Sarah Jessica Parker) improbably large and lovely brownstone apartment on New York’s Upper East Side completely obscures issues of money and opportunity. *The New York Times* took

some of these issues up in a 2016 article that mapped out the floorplan of Carrie's apartment alongside that of *Girls* character Marnie Michaels (Alison Williams)—showing that the latter, located in Chinatown and colloquially known in the show as 'the shitbox,' is less than one quarter the size of the former (Kaysen 2016). In a comment that neatly links the emotional and economic realism of these contemporary television apartment plots, the author claimed that 'as rising rents squeeze young New Yorkers, the TV apartment has become grittier, dirtier, and even more cramped. You could almost say it is angry.'

All the series in this group contain numerous instances where this economic reality structures plot moves and key narrative themes. In Season 4 of *Girls*, for instance, Hannah is accepted into the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop and moves away from the poky apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn that she has occupied, with a variety of roommates, for the entire series. Immediately afterwards, at the beginning of the season's second episode (S4 E2 'Triggering'), her new apartment is the site through which the radical shift in her situation is expressed. Touring rental spaces with a broker, she is floored to discover the amount of space she can afford for \$250 a month, and asks what she could get for \$800. The scene cuts to an even larger apartment, housed in a grand Tudor style house and full of natural light, large flowing living spaces and leadlight fixtures. As she excitedly settles in, she shows Marnie the space on skype, exclaiming that it took her four minutes to do so, whereas 'in New York it would have taken four seconds'. The apartment is—very briefly—the site through which Hannah imagines a whole new lifestyle where she bikes to class, eats grapes for a snack and generally escapes the malaise and discontent that defines her life in New York. 'Honestly,' she tells Marnie, 'I feel like I made the right decision, which is a totally new sensation for me.' 'Iowa is incredible,' she goes on, 'we should all move here and start the revolution.' On the first night in her new apartment, though, a bat startles Hannah and she is forced to sleep on her bathroom floor. Three episodes later, she is back in New York.

Other series use characters' means of dwelling to link their narrative flow even more closely to themes of economic verisimilitude. In *Insecure*, the metaphorical resonance between Issa's place in life and *in space* is continuously riffed upon. The series' opening scenes described above insistently convey a sense that Issa is stuck—in an unsatisfying job, a stalled relationship, and her cramped apartment. Over the course of the first two seasons, she does break up with her partner Lawrence (Jay Ellis) but little about her work or domestic life changes, and the latter in fact becomes a site for the expression of her *increasing* precarity. More so than any other series mentioned here, Issa's financial situation is an explicit theme in *Insecure*, and is frequently drawn attention to in conversation with her friends, as well as through the emphatic visual contrast between the spaces she occupies and others in the series, such as Molly's glossy apartment, the opulent

Malibu Airbnb that Issa and her friends rent out at the end of season one, or the light and spacious place that Lawrence moves into after they break up and he gets a lucrative tech job. The latter is one aspect of how this break up forces a direct confrontation with economic reality that preoccupies much of season two, which takes a growing interest in the gentrification of Inglewood—Issa’s historically black, South L.A. neighbourhood. After the break-up she wants to live alone, but is forced out of ‘The Dunes’ by a rent increase that is in line with the appearance of a new promenade in place of the old neighbourhood stores and other gentrifying developments. In a discussion in the last episode of season two (S2, E8 ‘Hella Perspective’), her friends are blunt about her prospects. Celebrating what the rest of the group are doing with their lives—getting pregnant, getting fit, taking interviews—Issa’s friend Tiffany (Amanda Seales) awkwardly can’t think of anything for her and, when Issa claims she is moving, the others are incredulous: ‘you ain’t got no money!’, another friend Kelli (Natasha Rothwell) exclaims, ‘you can’t live anywhere but way out ... I’m talking Lancaster, West Covina’. Issa is here situated as a definitive victim of gentrification, insofar as her history and identity is linked to a location that is rapidly and formulaically transforming, and that she can no longer afford. The central place of the apartment itself in this is emphasized when Issa and Lawrence visit the vacant space for a final time. With its rundown qualities amplified by its echoing emptiness, and the weight of their past in it hanging in the air, both reflect on how they wanted to be better for themselves and for each other, and how they have each failed in particular ways to live up to the expectations they set.

It is of course common for a scene such as this, where characters survey a now-empty space in which they have lived out many years, to feel nostalgic and emotional. It is a key affective strategy of the apartment plot, insofar as it explicitly prompts reflection upon the characters’ temporal identity and the ways in which they have changed over the course of their time in the space. The affect is particularly acute in the context of television space, for viewers have also spent a substantial amount of time with the dwelling, and can therefore directly empathize with the surreal combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity that a vacated residence evokes. With its keynote of disappointment, this moment in *Insecure* pushes both meanings of *thrift* that I acknowledged at the outset to the foreground, and in a manner that highlights the spectrum between necessity and choice that is at the core of this concept. First, it is made clear that Issa’s frugal way of living is no longer enough to sustain her choice to live in this urban centre. She has been able to prioritize this choice by living thriftily, but this level of control has now been taken away from her. Second, and directly following on from this reality, her nomination of this locale as a space in which she can *thrive* is no longer feasible. The regret of this realization is made evident in a montage that follows the conversation

between Issa and Lawrence where, in a common stylistic move for the series, Issa's speculation upon different scenarios plays out on screen. As the two say goodbye at the door of the empty apartment, Issa imagines Lawrence dropping to his knee and asking her to marry him, followed by the two of them flopping, laughing, onto their couch in wedding clothes, and then entering the apartment with Lawrence carrying a baby boy. In the real turn of events, a second later, Lawrence simply says goodbye and walks away.

The generic nature of the events that Issa imagines foreground how her speculation is occurring through a filter of disillusionment. Set against the long conversation that she has just had with Lawrence, though, the montage does highlight how neither have managed to thrive in the space. As an extended moment of disappointment and regret, the scene is a stark reminder of the extent to which failure and states of imperfection distinguish this wave of comic and tragic-comic production by and about young women. The keynote of *Insecure* is, precisely, *insecurity*. A lot of the popular commentary around the series links this state to Issa's social awkwardness, taking its cue from Rae's earlier web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. Theorising this awkwardness in terms of abjection, Rebecca Wanzo argues for the feminist importance of the affective mode as a strategy of immobility, which disrupts the sitcom's narrative tendency to support a 'domestic status quo or move women toward marriage and greater professional fulfilment' (2016: 33). In the series' first season, this immobility is primarily expressed in terms of Issa's emotional stasis and her uncertainty around her goals and aspirations. As the series continues, though, her paralysis begins to be expressed in more material ways. When her car is wrecked in season two, she has to take the bus and car pool instead of having it repaired. Soon after she takes a second job as a Lyft driver to cover the extra rent when Lawrence moves out. And finally, in a move most critical to the themes I have outlined here, she moves at the very end of season 2 (S2, E8 'Hella Perspective') out of her apartment and in with another ex-boyfriend who is a key character in the series—Daniel (Y'lan Noel), whose couch she uncomfortably sleeps on for the first several episodes of season three. As these developments accumulate, Issa's thrifty behavior becomes less about choice and more about necessity. She is not struggling to survive exactly, but she is struggling to do so within the locale and means of dwelling that the series has established are central to her identity.

It's at this stage in the series, then, that *Insecure's* engagement with the logic of thrift as thriving during an extended period of emerging adulthood becomes most compelling. In all of the series discussed here, the characters' efforts to 'become who they are meant to be'—as Hannah claims at the outset of *Girls*—align with the logic of thriving insofar as they demonstrate a drive for each to live their 'best life.' Angela McRobbie captures both the aspirational and regulatory

dimensions of this nebulous idea with her concept of the 'perfect', as 'a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life' (2015: 9). The principles of individualization, competition and self-discipline are here prominent, with the perfect manifesting as 'a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self, a highly standardized mode of self-assessment, a calculation of one's assets, a fear of possible losses' (McRobbie 2015: 10). In varying ways, these practices underpin practically every storyline of the series I have considered here, extending deep into the minutiae of the emotional, social and economic decisions that make up the low-key action. The widespread emphasis on failure and discontent that defines them demonstrates starkly how the pressure to thrive amidst the moral framework of the perfect is overwhelmingly challenging. This is a point McRobbie herself picks up on when she discusses *Girls* as a 'seemingly realist counter' to the notion of perfection, which instead endorses 'imperfection' through inversions such as the main characters' physical appearance and the series' attentiveness to the reality of earning a living in New York City (2015: 13). McRobbie is critical of *Girls*, though, for ultimately presenting the imperfect as another version of its opposite, in a relatively manicured and celebrity-driven idea of failure. In an important point for the themes addressed in this article, she locates this problem in how Dunham presents imperfection as part of the process of growing up, locating herself within 'a framework of painful youthful femininity, out of which she must, at some point, grow'. This space of 'seemingly endless youth'—or what I have above considered through the ideas of 'adulthood' and 'emerging adulthood'—is, for McRobbie, a western white privilege whereby the support of well-off parents (and other trappings of middle class abundance) effectively exonerates Dunham's characters from the responsibilities that will come later on: 'she does not at this point in time have to be as "driven" in a bid to gain female control and success as her older counterparts' (McRobbie 2015: 15).

The logic of perfection and imperfection that is operative here resonates strongly with the spectrum of thrift behavior. Imperfection is positioned as a *choice*, which manifests at least in part from the attitude of the young women's parents, who either directly or indirectly refuse to financially support their daughters. Put another way, it could be said that the *necessity* of the imperfect lifestyles dramatized in these series extends only so far as the parents' boundaries, which is an observation that sits precisely with the critique of 'emerging adulthood' as a category that some perceive as a luxury only available to those with sufficient means (Syed 2015: 5). This is a theme that is frequently raised in *Girls*, with Hannah's father Tad (Peter Scolari) always the softer parent who can't stand to see her 'suffer' and is quick to respond to her needs. The (single) father of the character Fleabag is the direct opposite—both emotionally and financially distant towards

his daughters, despite the conspicuous display of his considerable wealth throughout the series. *Insecure* sits within the thematic concerns of this wave of production, and foregrounds the qualities of discontent and immobility that I have argued characterize its particular expression of imperfection. With an exaggerated interest in material precarity, though, as well as no evidence of a family support network and a defining concern with the transformation of a black Los Angeles neighbourhood, Rae's series offers a distinctly classed and raced perspective on thrift behavior as both frugality and the imperative to *thrive*. Through the central device of the apartment plot, *Insecure* presents 'adulting' as an experience that is less about '[licensing] self-obsession' (McRobbie 2015: 15) and more about critiquing the moral order of neoliberal capitalism.

Claire Perkins is Senior Lecturer in Film & Screen Studies at Monash University. She is the author of *American Smart Cinema* (2012) and co-editor of six anthologies including *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (2016), *Transnational Television Remakes* (2015) and *U.S. Independent Film After 1989: Possible Films* (2015). E-mail: claire.perkins@monash.edu

Notes

¹Commentaries on these series often take up the function of the show itself in this issue of gentrification. See, for instance, 'Insecure romanticized South LA. Now it's grappling with the side effects' (2018). Tanya Saracho's series *Vida* (Starz) makes this topic its central theme.

²Another key site for this commentary is how the characters are dressed, which also frequently focuses on realism and thrift purchases. See for instance, 'How to Shop Like *Insecure*'s Issa and Molly' (2016) or '3 Reasons Why the Fashion of *Broad City* is so Important – and actually Emblematic of Twentysomething Life' (2015).

References

- Arnett, Jeffrey Jansen (2006): 'Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age,' Jeffrey Jansen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (eds): *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 3-19.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Beck, Julie (2016): 'When are you really an adult?' *The Atlantic*, January 5, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/when-are-you-really-an-adult/422487/> Accessed August 2, 2017.
- DeCarvalho, Lauren J. (2013): 'Hannah and her Entitled Sisters: (Post)feminism, (post)recession and Girls,' *Feminist Media Studies*, Volume 13 (2), 367-370.

- Green, Penelope (2016): 'Tiny Home Test Drive,' *The New York Times*, June 10, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/realestate/testing-the-first-micro-apartments-in-new-york-city.html> Accessed September 11, 2018
- Hunter, James Davison & Joshua J Yates (2011): *Thrift in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jacobs, Jason & Steven Peacock (2013): *Television Aesthetics and Style*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Johnson, Sophie Lucido (2015): 'How do you know you've really become an adult? An illustrated essay,' *The Guardian*, October 3, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/03/adulthood-adulting-millennials-growing-up> Accessed August 2, 2017.
- Kaysen, Ronda (2016): 'Fictional New York City Apartments Get Real,' *The New York Times*, September 16, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/realestate/fictional-new-york-city-apartments-get-real.html> Accessed February 18, 2019
- McRobbie, Angela (2015): 'Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Volume 30 (83), 3-20.
- Negra, Diane & Yvonne Tasker (2014): *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nussbaum, Emily (2019): *I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through the TV Revolution*, New York: Random House.
- Petersen, Anne Helen (2019): 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,' BuzzFeed News, January 5, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work> Accessed January 5, 2019
- Podkalicka, Aneta & Jason Potts (2014): 'Towards a general theory of thrift,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Volume 17 (3), 227-241.
- Press, Joy (2018). *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television*, New York: Atria Books.
- Syed, Moin (2015): 'Emerging Adulthood: Developmental Stage, Theory, or Nonsense?' Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11-25.
- Wanzo, Rebecca (2016): 'Precarious-girl comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics,' *Camera Obscura*, Volume 31 (2), 26-59.
- Wojcik, Pamela Robertson (2010): *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945-1975*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Wojcik, Pamela Robertson (ed.) (2014): *The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press.