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Appropriate Feminisms: Ambivalence and Citational Practice in *Appropriate Behavior*

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Bio

Clara Bradbury-Rance is a lecturer in the Department of Liberal Arts at King's College London and the author of *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). Alongside publishing work on queer and feminist film, television and digital screen cultures, including essays on filmmakers such as Lisa Aschan, Lisa Cholodenko, Maryam Keshavarz, Dee Rees and Céline Sciamma, Clara is a member of the *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* editorial collective.

Abstract

Across her body of work in film, television and digital media, Desiree Akhavan has captured the awkward politics of cultural production for female film and media-makers. She has also however refused to straightforwardly align her work with feminist critiques of dominant cultural production practices, however much she is interpellated by them. Akhavan, a queer woman of color in a racist, sexist and homophobic industry, negotiates both contemporary feminism's potentials for solidarity and its intersectional shortcomings. Akhavan's autobiographical characters wrestle with the need for social justice whilst questioning the "appropriate behaviors" demanded by serious commitments to the cause. Her work reveals the ambivalence of feminist attachments. This article reads the queer feminist politics of Akhavan's work, with a particular focus on her debut feature *Appropriate Behavior* (UK/USA, 2014), through the lens of citational practice. I argue that Akhavan employs citational codes that function in Clare Hemmings's words as a "storytelling tactic", sustaining normative narratives about feminism's recent past. By employing an ambivalent trope that I call citation→disavowal, Akhavan troubles both the

dominant cultures she is excluded from and the viability and legibility of her place within the movements that resist them.

Keywords

feminism, queer, lesbian, ambivalence, citation

Figure 1. Shirin (Desiree Akhavan) despairs over her career. *Appropriate Behavior* (dir. Desiree Akhavan, UK/USA, 2014)

You're Ruining My Twenties

Shirin, the protagonist played by Desiree Akhavan in her debut feature *Appropriate Behavior* (UK/USA, 2014), has been trying to shepherd a group of five-year-old boys towards her laptop for a film screening. The film, perched atop a knee-high nursery table, is *The Kiss* (dir. William Heise, USA, 1896), one of cinema's earliest representations of romance. Having been disabused of the notion that the class she's been commissioned to teach would be more pre-college foundation than babysitting – “they're Park Slope teens, I could lock them in a room with a half-eaten apple and a TicTac and come back to the Mona Lisa” – Shirin must now begin the task of corralling their attention. If they are to take seriously their roles as “kidz movie makers,” they'll need to focus on the Edison Studios' pioneering silent film, all 18 seconds of it, for long enough to be inspired to produce their own masterpiece. Next door, the marginally older girls who make up the “advanced” class work with their teacher Tibet on two enterprising projects: first a shot-for-shot remake of a scene from *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1963), and then a nouvelle-vague inspired dreamscape in black and white. 15 minutes before the end of *Appropriate Behavior*, Shirin finally gives up on tributes to film history, quells any envy of her colleague's Hitchcockian ambition, and acquiesces to the whimsical bidding of the children: a film about zombies and farts. Sitting in her apartment hunched over her laptop, she edits the film together,

a cigarette dangling from her mouth in the quintessential pose of the artist sourcing inspiration from a late-night haze of smoke and caffeine. *Tale of the Lost Fart* is exhibited the next day for an audience of skeptical parents and delighted preschoolers. If this is a cinephilic citation of the past it is a deeply ambivalent one, from a queer woman of color reconciling the place she wants to carve out for herself in a sexist, racist and homophobic industry.ⁱ The otherwise towering influences of Edison and Hitchcock are trivialized in this scene, but with the purpose of trivializing the work of Shirin (and, as I will argue, Desiree Akhavan herself). Is citing the past of cultural production a way of signaling one's place in the present – or of undermining it? After all, Shirin is the archetypal millennial subject: reaching the end of her twenties and discovering that both professional and romantic success remain elusive. And as a bisexual Iranian-American, Akhavan is perfectly poised to explore the intersections of this millennial story. Always assumed to be constrained by personal experience, whilst expected to uphold the impersonal citation practices of legitimized genealogies, Akhavan negotiates the queer feminist politics of cultural production and the limits of its collective imaginaries.

Across her body of work in film, TV and online media, Akhavan navigates the representation of marginalized identity by troubling its seriousness, even as she must dismantle existing political repertoires of visibility and legibility in the process. This includes practices of citation that trouble easy affiliations with and attachments to recognizable queer and feminist histories and stories. Through the character of Shirin, Akhavan asks: What do you have to take seriously in order to be taken seriously? What do you have to make light of in order to bear it? One of a set of young filmmakers heralding a “new queer cinema renaissance”, Akhavan’s work both celebrates and contests the subversive pleasures of queer life.ⁱⁱ Like the films of the New Queer Cinema as described by B. Ruby Rich, Akhavan’s work can be described as “fresh, edgy, low-budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy”.ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike the majority of the early NQC innovators, however, Akhavan’s MO is to put a creative spin on the experience of *multiple* marginalizations at the intersections of sexuality, gender, race and nationality. “There is something really fun about

being a woman of color who is queer who can say those things,” Akhavan has remarked.^{iv} For her characters, being the one to “say those things” verges on self-sabotage – a bold risk to take for comedic effect. In *Appropriate Behavior*, Shirin is accused by her white girlfriend of “playing the Persian card” while only half-heartedly committing to social justice. Her bisexuality is routinely read as mere bi-curiosity, and in the midst of her breakup with Maxine she receives the ultimate bi-phobic dismissal: “this was probably just a phase”. Most significantly, though, *Appropriate Behavior’s* screenplay is careful to assert that (unlike Akhavan) Shirin has no filmmaking training or experience but is just pretending for the sake of a paycheck. Akhavan has written for herself an avatar who not only represents a chaotic combination of professional, romantic and political failure, but also questions her own directorial authority. Shirin is a figure without direction who (as her overbearing surgeon brother likes to remind her) thinks she can just wing it.

Scenes from the above narrative thread in the classroom are dispersed at intervals throughout *Appropriate Behavior’s* achronological plot, juxtaposed with (often equally comic) scenes of heartbreak as Shirin (Akhavan) reels from a breakup with her ex-girlfriend Maxine (Rebecca Henderson). Her colleague Tibet (Rosalie Lowe) displays a seemingly effortless ability to garner the rapt attention not only of her students but also, in a knowing lesbian plot twist, of Shirin’s ex Maxine. In cruel contrast, the childish farce of Shirin’s classroom is juxtaposed with what is presented as the farce of her personal life: she is depicted pouring her drink down her shirt on a rebound date; drinking tequila from a water bottle; and terminating a threesome in favor of a game of monopoly, amongst other absurdities. Like the protagonists of what Rebecca Wanzo calls “precarious-girl comedies” such as *Girls* (HBO, 2012-17) and *Insecure* (HBO, 2016-21) who give us “serious doubts about their ability to be successful”, Shirin is a self-deprecating figure of comic failure.^v

The hazards of young adulthood resonate similarly across a generation of feminist film and media makers such as Akhavan, Lena Dunham, Issa Rae, Michaela Coel, Lena Waithe and

Greta Gerwig, all of whom have made implicitly or explicitly autobiographical work about young women entering their late teens or twenties in the early millennium and bidding to work in the creative industries. Such themes might be seen to indicate something like “feminist representational progress”. But in spite of gestures to diversity, shifting assumptions about domesticity, the expansion of the women’s workplace comedy and increasingly complex depictions of multiple sexualities, Wanzo argues that misleading 1990s postfeminist choice narratives have exposed, especially in the wake of (now multiple) recessions, new fears of growing up too fast or not growing up at all.^{vi} These promises and failures leave contemporary creatives like Akhavan interpellated by feminism but ambiguous in their fidelity to it.

Clare Hemmings, in her book *Why Stories Matter*, argues that feminist history can be understood through the “stories” feminists have told themselves about the movement’s recent past. As I will explore in further detail below, Hemmings argues that these stories are spread – and consolidated – through citation, the “primary technique through which people and approaches are assigned an era, positioned as pivotal to key shifts in theoretical direction, or written out of the past or present”.^{vii} This process of re-writing or writing out via citation pertains particularly, Hemmings argues, to the contributions of lesbians and women of color (and lesbians of color, who are made most invisible in stories of feminism’s “progression”). Citation is what Hemmings calls a “storytelling tactic”, as it sustains narratives about feminism’s direction of travel over the past five decades (and more). If “citation practices produce consensus on the difference between eras of feminist theory”, Akhavan uses a sarcastic citation of *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) to evoke a contemporary feminist critique of postfeminism’s assumed political evacuation and experiment with its rehabilitation.^{viii} Elsewhere, she uses a hesitant citation of iconic memoir *Stone Butch Blues* to question how the politics of the past haunts the queer present.^{ix} By using Hemmings’ work as the theoretical framing of my analysis of queer feminism’s norms and Akhavan’s representation of them, in this article I explore how Akhavan negotiates and exploits citational codes that willfully draw attention to her

own (dis)orientation in feminist and queer cultural histories.

Citing not only masculinist film history (Edison, Hitchcock) but also (post)feminist and queer cultures of the 1990s and early 2000s, Akhavan uses the character of Shirin to articulate her own place in a generation of white straight filmmakers who constitute the face of contemporary feminism. I argue that Akhavan anchors in ambivalence the experience of minority identity and its political calls to action, of overbearing family members ready to condemn at the smallest sign of failure, of the burden of representation within and beyond the film industry. As Stuart Hall parses, identity is premised on identification, on finding parallels and confluences of experience with others. This “structure of identification” is however “always constructed through ambivalence. Always constructed through splitting.”^x Akhavan puts this “splitting” at the center of her work, reconciling an individual autobiographical persona with the perils and pleasures of collective identity. In an article published in 2014, the same year as the release of *Appropriate Behavior*, Jackie Stacey acknowledges: “there are reasons that we might explore for finding this ambivalence especially appropriate for a queer feminist criticism at this current moment (and I can think of many).”^{xi} If queer feminism is a sign under which to do meaningful work, Akhavan gestures to the norms and inadequacies of feminism’s own cultural codes of recognition, particularly as they pertain to the intersections of gender, race and sexuality in the UK and USA in the 2010s.

Akhavan describes *Appropriate Behavior* as a collective work of authorship shared with her producer, director of photography and editor.^{xii} But it is without question Akhavan’s own foundational experience that is being re-authored, the collective goal being, in her own words, to take “the piss out of my horrible clichés and tendencies”.^{xiii} Akhavan’s piss-taking is an act of interrogation: from whom, and how, does she seek to authorize her politics, her work, her identity and her identifications? Akhavan’s characters lambaste the very foundations of her own career trajectory: mocking the hipster Brooklyn crowd for “talking about their Kickstarter campaigns”; dismissing the OKCupid date declaring his desire to use “comedy to bring attention

to social justice issues”. While Akhavan frequently demonstrates her awareness of the role she plays in telling stories that otherwise have not made it to the screen, she rarely neglects to make fun both of those stories and of the pains taken to get them told. Akhavan’s “bad” queerness (to use Maria San Filippo’s term) combines the rebellious aesthetic pleasures of the New Queer Cinema with the political missteps of postfeminist irony.^{xiv}

In the section that follows, I situate Akhavan’s career trajectory against a broader context of queer and feminist cultural production, briefly including New Queer Cinema players such as Cheryl Dunye. I then pause on a key comparison through which Akhavan has been understood in the public domain, Lena Dunham, and how this has influenced Akhavan’s positionality as a queer woman of color negotiating imagined feminist histories of solidarity. From this I proceed to chart three sites of ambivalence that Akhavan’s work explores, reading them through citational practice: feminist anxiety about postfeminist popular culture; lesbian anxiety about bisexual threats to queer seriousness; and the presumption of queerness as whiteness that makes the Iranian-American queer doubly subject to interrogation.

You Told Him I Was a Filmmaker?

Akhavan found her way not on the big screen but online with the web series *The Slope* (Vimeo, 2010-12), co-created – written, produced, directed, starred in and edited – with her then-partner Ingrid Jungermann. Rather than aim to match the aesthetic masterpieces they strived for in their film school assignments – Noah Baumbach is cited as an early influence – the duo rushed through writing, filming and editing each episode in order to stream it on Vimeo within a week of completion.^{xv} The show was funded by Kickstarter and relied on friends and good will; a few years later, Jungermann met the \$14,000 Kickstarter target for her follow-up series *F to 7th* (Vimeo, 2013-14) with the promise to “pay everyone,” explaining: “Ingrid is 35 years old. She’s over her days of asking for free favors”. Akhavan and Jungermann’s work has frequently been hailed as an inheritor of the mumblecore legacy, with its “ultra-cheap DV aesthetics, narrow

focus on the everyday relationship foibles and inarticulacies of a ‘twenty-something’ post-college generation in the era of the text message, email and YouTube”.^{xvi} Indeed, the web series, with its sub-5 minute episodes, is the perfect format for what Claire Perkins calls the “micro-plots” that characterize much of the mumblecore output.^{xvii} Even with a bigger budget and feature-length scope, *Appropriate Behavior* holds onto the “micro” quality as it comedically tussles with the serious work of cultural production – not least in the image of Shirin editing *Tale of the Lost Fart* late at night on a laptop ahead of a next-day screening for the “kidz” and their parents.

Even after the success of *Appropriate Behavior*, which was premiered at Sundance, Akhavan’s television show *The Bisexual* (2016) got off the ground only after relocation to the UK, where it was picked up by Channel 4. Akhavan’s career as a writer-director has been supplemented by acting in often underdeveloped parts for content as diverse as Dunham’s HBO series *Girls*, VOD film *Creep II* (dir. Patrick Brice, USA, 2017) and TV movies such as *The Circuit* (Channel 4, 2016). This breadth of experience reads not only as open-mindedness or spirited collaboration but also, inevitably, as a symptom of the industry’s obligatory hustles. It was her second directorial feature *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (USA, 2018) that won Akhavan the most recognition, including a Grand Jury prize at Sundance, though it seems significant that this was not an autobiographical narrative but an adaptation (of a young adult novel by Emily Danforth), and unlike the rest of Akhavan’s output, centered a white woman.

We might compare Akhavan here to another queer woman of color, Cheryl Dunye, whose relationship to the “film” of filmmaking has also been marked by occasional estrangement. Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman* (USA, 1996) was the first feature by a Black lesbian director to receive theatrical distribution in the USA but did not mark an “endpoint” in a trajectory from DIY video to film; Dunye has continued to move back and forth among low-budget and more industrial media and their associated audiences and platforms, from directing the feminist porn film *Mommy Is Coming*, co-written with Sarah Schulman (Germany, 2012), to directing an episode of lesbian soap *The Fosters* (ABC, 2013-18) on what was then the ABC

Family network. As if in anticipation of this trajectory, Dunye uses her self-styled protagonist Cheryl in *The Watermelon Woman* to parodically question her own status – “I’m Cheryl, and I’m a filmmaker ... um, nah, I’m not really a filmmaker ...” – and to convey her attachment to video technology and its aesthetic.^{xviii} Still, it is particularly notable that Dunye reemerged as a viable industry director in part through Ava DuVernay’s commitment to hiring women on *Queen Sugar* (USA, 2016-22), including Julie Dash, Pratibha Parmar and others. As Jocelyn Taylor writes of African American women’s and lesbian filmmaking, community and reciprocity are enacted in informal feminist networks of cultural production “born from necessity and proximity”.^{xix}

Dunye, Lisa Cholodenko, Jamie Babbit, Angela Robinson and other queens of the queer cult classic have all danced on the fringes of mainstream recognition via crossover shows, many of them helmed by women and people of color.^{xx} Similarly, since completing on *The Bisexual* in 2018 Akhavan has worked mainly as a television director on episodes of other creators’ series. Three of the four shows on which Akhavan is credited were created for streaming services (Hulu and HBO Max) rather than traditionally networked television. Certainly, the affordances of digital culture, from Final Cut Pro (or, in *Appropriate Behavior*, the amateurish iMovie) to Kickstarter, Vimeo and WordPress, have been central to accessibility across different stages of production and exhibition for Akhavan as for many others of her generation. Issa Rae, whose web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube, 2011-13) was picked up by HBO and re-branded as *Insecure*, writes in her memoir that “if it weren’t for YouTube, I would still be at the studios trying to convince executives that Awkward Black Girls really do exist.”^{xxi} Michaela Coel, creator of *Chewing Gum* (Channel 4, 2015-2017) and *I May Destroy You* (BBC, 2020), moved from theater into television by using social media to promote her work and describes the “new television” as a medium capitalizing on the voices given by social media to “outsiders”.^{xxii} Cast and crew of color and particularly Black cast and crew may be recruited “to meet the morals of [a] diversity compass”, Coel remarks, but that doesn’t mean that producers “think to see things from our point of view”.^{xxiii} Recognition must then extend beyond studio execs, whether from

industry peers or fans. Filmmaker Campbell X, director of *Stud Life* (UK, 2012), hailed Akhavan and Jungermann's *The Slope* with a casual endorsement in the marginal comments of the show's Vimeo page – "I have to go out and am hooked!".^{xxiv} Such comments, which endure online years after the expiration of new output, reveal the curious contradictions of ephemerality and endurance that characterize digital forms of engagement. But the shift from web series to studio and network recognition is rarely a seamless one amid the unreliable funding streams of Hollywood, especially for queer women and women of color. If feminist cultural production seems to thrive on a collective imaginary (or an imaginary of collectivity), this doesn't tell the whole story. Through citation, filmmakers can create imagined networks of cultural production premised on shared histories of visual meaning making. But the norms thereby produced and sustained often prove to be alienating rather than empowering.

The Iranian (or was it the Bisexual?) Lena Dunham

In a much-quoted line from the pilot of *Girls*, Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) announces to her parents "I think I might be the voice of my generation ... or, at least, *a* voice of *a* generation." Frequently merged in the public imaginary with her avatar Hannah, Dunham has made a name for herself as a public feminist who celebrates the work of other women – whilst often being scrutinized not for her collaborations but for her perceived narcissism, a regular performance of postfeminism's tension between individualism and solidarity. Overlapping peer recognition and cross-generational citation, she is the go-to feminist interlocutor, styled as such both by her own social media machine and by the journalists who follow it. Accordingly, Dunham reportedly saw *Appropriate Behavior* and then contacted Akhavan to cast her in the fourth season of *Girls* and has since been a frequent point of comparison for myriad commentators on Akhavan's work.

For many, Dunham has practically become synonymous with contemporary popular feminism, its backlash, and the risks and rewards of "over-sharing".^{xxv} Like Akhavan, she began

her career online, producing and uploading videos whilst at college and then making the web series *Delusional Downtown Divas* (YouTube, 2009-10) with friends and borrowed equipment (the difference, of course, being that these friendships also facilitated a screening of the series at New York's Guggenheim, side-stepping its "web" status before it had even found its feet online).^{xxvi} In Dunham's debut feature *Tiny Furniture* (USA, 2010), video artist Aura (Dunham) watches her first YouTube video and reads out the comments left by its viewers; so fundamental is online streaming to the process of de-compartmentalizing work, art, life and politics that it functions here as a crucial signifier of the highs and lows of feminist cultural production.

When a show or a film draws on autobiographical content but has multiple creators, including but not limited to writers and directors, it makes a case for autobiography as a shared site of identification and expression rather than an individualistic platform for self-exploration. In other words, the translation of Dunham's personal story from amateur video to co-written primetime television is the quintessential example of the "writers' room" re-fashioned as a new site of collaborative feminist autobiography. Extending her influence beyond creative work to social media channels such as Instagram and Twitter, Dunham has also exchanged endorsements with writers and artists such as Miranda July and Maggie Nelson among others. Her newsletter *Lenny Letter*, created with frequent collaborator Jennie Konner and published online between 2015 and 2018, had the affective drive of an amateur fan magazine ("*you created this!*" was the tagline), though its role-call was tantamount to a league of celebrity feminists, with contributors including actress Jennifer Lawrence.^{xxvii} Digital culture, with its retweets, pins and hyperlinks, has this kind of citational network as part of its very infrastructure.

While Akhavan's career has similarly demonstrated the necessity and utility of feminist solidarity in a sexist industry – from crowdsourced funding to fellow filmmakers offering supportive comments online to casting invitations – she has also had to negotiate its limits. In interviews and reviews, Akhavan is frequently compared to Dunham. At first glance, being compared to Dunham should be a welcome invitation into a feminist inner circle; Dunham is

one of the most successful feminist writer-director-creators of the twenty-first century. And yet, comparisons between the two risk a flattening out of difference, an *indifference* to sexuality, race and ethnicity and their shaping of feminist embodiment and representation. This approach to difference constitutes the quintessential postfeminist presumption of post-sexism and post-racism of which Dunham's *Girls* itself has been accused. Although other feminist intersections – femininity, fatness, harassment, depression, disability, kink and pregnancy – are carefully attended to with compassion and insight in her work, Dunham has famously made a spectacle of her awkward negotiations of race and racism. Given her reputation for frank admissions, including of her own mistakes, she has responded to criticism in recent years with a corrective, directing her Instagram followers to work by women of color and attempting to decenter her own voice. We could call it an example of digital citation when Dunham's linktr.ee account, linked via her Instagram and displayed to her 2.8 million followers, flags not her own work but “organizations/resources I love and support”.^{xxviii} Even this mobilization of digital citation doesn't alter the imbalance that makes Dunham the likely wielder of such citational power, however: not only to be cited but to be the one who cites others and generates recognition on their behalf.

Akhavan recalls being repeatedly described not as being *like* Dunham but as being her imitator: “the Iranian Lena Dunham” or “the Bisexual Lena Dunham”.^{xxix} The semantics here reduce Akhavan's Iranian identity to a mere qualifier. The optional exchange of “Iranian” for “Bisexual”, moreover, makes sexual orientation and ethnic and national identity into empty identifiers, options in a list. The comparison thus functions through a citational hierarchy, which even the affordances of digital culture have not neutralized. As “Dunham+qualifier” (either Iranian or Bisexual), Akhavan is discursively situated as following and even inheriting Dunham's influence rather than being contemporaneous with her (in fact, they studied at the same time and debuted their web series within just a year of each other). In the world of contemporary feminist film and media-making, then, we see not just the hailing of a generation – Dunham and peers

– but more precisely the invocation of a progress narrative in which Dunham comes first and then leads the way for a (diversified) replacement. Dunham’s whiteness and straightness become that from which the next figure deviates; Dunham is never described as the “White Desiree Akhavan” or the “Straight Desiree Akhavan”. What San Filippo calls Dunham and Akhavan’s “cross-referential branding” reveals moreover a story about feminist lineage that seems to celebrate progress in the form of diversification but relies on the willful forgetting of other potential interlocutors for Akhavan’s work, and a re-narration of order and influence to suit a progressive narrative of feminist media-making.^{xxx}

In *Why Stories Matter*, Hemmings claims that lesbians and women of color are repeatedly constrained by the citational practices that fail to account for their contributions to feminism. “Progress” narratives – as one stage in the transition in feminist “storytelling” from progress to loss to return – provide a correction to “the” feminism of the 1970s by welcoming the contributions of Black feminists and lesbian feminists in the 1980s. However, Hemmings argues, this move relies on ignoring Black and lesbian (and Black lesbian) feminists who were *already* making contributions during that same period. In short, citation helps to conveniently forget as much as it helps to remember. The separation of “Black feminism” and “lesbian feminism” in many such accounts (the lack of an and/or) – is itself a symptom of this narrative constraint.^{xxxi} Citations sustain hierarchies. The frequent citation of Dunham in discussions of Akhavan’s work sustains a progress narrative for feminist visual culture just like the one Hemmings diagnoses in feminist theory: white straight first, Iranian or bisexual to follow. They are rarely presumed to arrive together, or to complicate and inform each other.

The commentators employing the Dunham-Akhavan comparison – where Akhavan is just a variation on a theme already composed by Dunham – seem to overlook that this is precisely what Akhavan works to critique in *Appropriate Behavior* and across her oeuvre. If the film’s title observes the “appropriate behavior” Shirin must perform in order to be a professional in the cultural industry; to be a dutiful Iranian-American daughter; to be a convincing queer

whose bisexuality and closetedness don't count against her, it surely also reveals the imperative to "appropriate" the behaviors of others. Presumptive scripts of feminist, queer and Iranian identity are set by those around Shirin: demands, expectations and assumptions issued by lovers, parents, employers and strangers. These mirror the complex expectations and comparisons leveled at Akhavan as a bisexual Iranian-American filmmaker working productively within the public feminist space but consistently presumed to be following in the footsteps of straight white peers. As I explore in the next section, *Appropriate Behavior* addresses this tension with a hyper-citational style that presents a dizzying array of citations and unlikely pairings, setting us up to expect her adherence to those cultural narratives and then defying them moments later. She thus dramatizes a tension between attachment to feminism and ambivalence about it (or, as psychoanalysis would have it, the inherent ambivalence *of* attachment). As Eleni Palis writes of the historiographic strategies employed by Black American filmmakers Cheryl Dunye, Julie Dash and Spike Lee, "films quotations" function not as "props, but probes".^{xxxiii} If Akhavan similarly *probes* a feminist story that presumes the other texts and figures she has been influenced by, she does so with comic discomfort.

Figure 2. Shirin and Maxine (Rebecca Henderson) on a stoner stream of consciousness in *Appropriate Behavior*.

On Hating Sex and the City

Half an hour into *Appropriate Behavior*, a present-day sex scene between Shirin and a male OKCupid date seamlessly cuts back in time to a past sex scene between Shirin and Maxine. Before long, the flow of the flashback is also interrupted, not by an edit but rather by a phone call. The women immediately abandon having sex to go and collect some weed from their dealer's car outside and then, semi-clothed, get stoned together. The warmth of the lighting that glows on their sweaty skin prolongs the eroticism of the scene, albeit infused with awkward

comedy (indeed, no scene, even the most serious, ever gets away without some kind of snide comment or knowing pause for comic effect). The couple's preparation for smoking together for the first time includes a mutual warning: that the drug makes them muddled, that they "can't hold [their] thoughts still long enough to think them; [they] have to ... chase them." Almost instantly, a random and disorienting ream of pop cultural references is let loose, a stoner stream of conscience.

Shirin inhales her first puff of the pipe and then, in one long, slow breath, exhales the smoke with a question: "have you ever seen that episode of *Sex and the City* where Carrie has to pitch a book for children and she pitches this idea about a little girl with magic cigarettes? ... It's really funny." Maxine responds not to the meaning or (ir)relevance of Shirin's comment on writing, but to its container, the show itself; "I hate *Sex and the City*," she complains, a dismissive suck on the pipe cutting short her response. "Yeah, but you have to admit it's pretty fucking entertaining," Shirin tries again, off-camera, but is cut off once more by Maxine's refusal: "I think it's boring." There is a pause. The camera returns to the face of Shirin, who stares in disbelief. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" she demands. The serious work of politics manifests here as the political work of seriousness. "I hate *Sex and the City* ... I think it's boring" – the position of the "feminist killjoy", she who must boringly repeat her intolerance for the flippant sexism of dominant culture.^{xxxiii} "Who the fuck do you think you are?" – the ultimate defense against the perception of an accusation: who are you to tell me I'm not doing my feminism right? After a beat, however, Shirin's defiant defense of *Sex and the City* is abandoned and she wanders into different terrain with a paranoid stream of free associations: first "oh my god, are you into *Lord of the Rings*?" and then, soon after, "when I saw the film *Precious*..." If feminism is available for citation through cultural narratives that don't quite add up, Akhavan responds through estrangement, making a bid for a certain version of feminist recognition before moving quickly on.

Sex and the City appears frequently in landmark feminist critiques of postfeminist media

culture alongside *Bridget Jones's Diary* (dir. Sharon Maguire, UK, Ireland, France, 2001) and *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002).^{xxxiv} This triad (Carrie, Bridget, Ally) is cited again and again as proof of postfeminism's romantic idealizations, consumerist commitments and professional paradoxes. The citation of the show indicates a generational language shared by many filmmakers coming of age at the turn of the century. Dunham's *Girls*, for instance, invokes *Sex and the City*'s characterizations of four (white, straight, rich) women ironically defined – caricatured, even – through difference. “You're definitely like a Carrie with, like, some Samantha aspects and Charlotte hair. That's like a really good combination,” says Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) in the *Girls* pilot episode. Even as it insistently references its controversial predecessor, *Girls* maintains its claim to woke worldliness by displacing any investment in *Sex and the City*'s postfeminist meaning-making onto Shoshana, whose well-rehearsed naivety is frequently a foil to the other characters, Dunham's Hannah in particular. However, in spite of claims to post-postfeminist critique, any such fluent citation of *Sex and the City* rests on the knowledge of that show's universal appeal and applicability. In these instances, (post)feminism itself seems to become a kind of commodity of citation, increasingly mediated through its cultural signifiers.

Not only is *Sex and the City* in Maxine's words “boring”, moreover, but it is routinely critiqued, like *Girls*, for racism masquerading as colorblindness (“I don't see color, I see conquests”, says Kim Cattrall's Samantha) and for heteronormativity masquerading as liberation. Ubiquitous white straightness marks the show's four protagonists as well as their love interests.^{xxxv} Nonetheless, *Sex and the City* has transcended its own narrowness to circulate in queer and feminist pop culture: a spoof on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo / VH1, 2012-); the Instagram account @everyoutfitsatsc popularizing the ironic hashtag #wokecharlotte; and a scene in Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (France, USA, Iran, 2011) in which four Iranian teenagers dub the show into Farsi for a prohibited underground black market double-bill with Gus van Sant's gay biopic *Milk* (USA, 2008).^{xxxvi} Akhavan makes multiple references to the show, including in every single one of her writing projects except for *Miseducation*, which is set in

the pre-*SATC* '90s. For instance, *The Bisexual's* Leila (also played by Akhavan) has learned all she knows about heterosexuality “from watching six seasons of *Sex and the City*”. Such ambivalent citations abound in *The Bisexual*, in which a (male) character’s masculinity is derided as “amazingly Bridget Jones-y”, and another character is disdainfully described as resembling a “girl from a Judd Apatow movie”. But these references, in their neurotic commitment, always function to comment on heteronormative representational conventions; we are never allowed to forget that this is the most complex of attachments (and that it is bound to be ambivalent, as is part of its “satisfaction”).^{xxxvii} In *The Slope*, Akhavan’s eponymous character Desiree suggests to a lesbian friend that together they could “be just like the *Sex and the City* girls except we’re both Cynthia Nixon”, implicitly reminding viewers that Nixon, rather than her character Miranda, is the only (explicit) point for lesbian identification with the show.^{xxxviii}

In her article “Fans of Feminism”, Catherine Grant analyses the video *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by artist Oriana Fox (USA, 2003), in which four women dress up “as 1970s feminists” whilst lip-synching scenes from *Sex and the City*. Reading Fox’s video through its myriad citations – from *Sex and the City* to a “Judy-Chicago-esque vagina quilt” – Grant captures a tension between activism, empowerment, and consumerism.^{xxxix} Grant uses video to explore artworks that “do not apologize for an interest in feminism, but instead capitaliz[e] on a passionate attachment”^{xl}. A demonstration of attachment to particular cultural objects is a way of exposing or stating – willfully or not – the feminist lineages we see ourselves as belonging to. If particular theoretical texts come to stand in for key moments in the history of the feminist movement, so too do cultural texts take their place in feminist historiography. In Hemmings’s words, “citation practices produce consensus on the difference between eras of feminist theory, however these are valued”.^{xli} This “value” is gauged by the parodic, dismissive or deferential frames within which those citations are contained. Fox’s video mediates this tension through comedy, simultaneously complicating and relishing the fraught layers of feminist fandom.

My own intention here is not to claim that *Sex and the City* is a feminist text (or indeed

that it isn't). My claim is that by citing the show, Akhavan is referencing a readymade citational structure: one in which *Sex and the City* can now be mobilized in order to signify what we might call an intersectional, post-postfeminist ambivalence. “Yeah but you have to admit it's pretty entertaining,” says Shirin about *Sex and the City*. This “yeah but” accommodates everything she knows the citation says of her. Akhavan is citing not only the show but also the feminist critical imaginary surrounding it. In her seminal book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie critiques postfeminism for taking feminism “into account, but only to be shown to be no longer necessary.”^{xlii} In this scene, Akhavan takes “into account” – as in, takes for granted and thus no longer needs to make explicit – these very feminist critiques of postfeminism.

Akhavan's work consistently employs this device (citation→disavowal) as a way of drawing on popular references but distancing them with explicit or implicit critique. In *The Slope*, Akhavan's character “Desiree” demonstrates a similar awareness of having to defend her love of *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-9), the preeminent example of twenty-first century lesbian visibility. With its tagline a quite unambiguous nod to its heterosexual predecessor – “Same Sex. Different City” – *The L Word*'s “lipstick lesbians” are the inevitable queer successors of *Sex and the City*'s predominantly white, upper-class, fashion-forward cast. “I don't like *The L Word* either, but I'm obliged to watch it because it's the only queer programming out there”, says Desiree. The conciliatory “I don't like it either” works in the same way as “yeah but” as a concession to inadequacy and the tired politics of visibility.

Similarly, in the pilot episode of *The Bisexual*, a group of friends seated around a booth at a queer club manage to cite *The L Word* as effortless byword for lesbian culture without even needing to name it. As we come to expect from Akhavan, this citation is also framed with a rapid, almost simultaneous, citation→disavowal: “I hate the show and it should never be used as a point of reference for anything, *but ...*”. *The L Word*'s central characters are used as lesbian personality descriptors – “Beth's a Dana and she's trying to be a Shane” – before the show's name is even mentioned. Assumed familiarity with *The L Word* makes it an easy but

uncomfortable second tongue for a group preoccupied with the psycho-sexual-social dynamics of their community. When a straight man asks them their collective opinion of *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (dir. Abdellatif Kechiche, France, 2013), his question is met with disdain; there is little need for explanation of yet another layer of fraught lesbian cultural recognition. Akhavan demonstrates a keen awareness of the texts that have a hold on the popular imaginary of feminist and queer representation. But she is always one step ahead of any accusation of misguided or uncritical attachment to them.

Pretty Serious Stuff

The stoner scene discussed in the section above is just one of *Appropriate Behavior's* asynchronous interludes documenting past encounters between Maxine and Shirin. We can never quite place the moment in the timeline of the women's abandoned relationship; these flashbacks do not follow their own chronological logic. But slowly and surely, together they build up an insistent sense that the relationship's inevitable demise is produced by three overlapping concerns: sexual intimacy, queer legibility and political seriousness. In one scene, Shirin and Maxine lie in bed together whispering romantic endearments before Shirin changes the tone with the joking repetition of a juvenile meme. "No homo", she says, mocking those who "nullify the gayness of their words" by immediately disavowing their homoerotic threat. Of course, #nohomo reveals not just the homophobia but also the homoerotic anxiety of its speaker. Strikingly, then, it is a tag that is then repeated by both Shirin and Maxine in intimate moments throughout the film. An ironic nod to the inevitability of political missteps, it underpins a relationship dynamic whereby they seem to goad one another to be the first to display their queer inadequacy. Such moments refuse either to trade in what F. Hollis Griffin calls subculture's "good feelings", or to dwell in the bad feelings of necessary political anger.^{xliii} The severity of complaint is always tempered by self-deprecating humor. Maxine's political posturing on their first meeting is provocatively cut short by Shirin with the flirtatious line: "I find your anger incredibly sexy".

Humor is used to dissipate emotional intimacy while the seriousness of political conversation is habitually dissipated with sex. In due course, all of Maxine and Shirin's on-screen sex scenes are prematurely interrupted in some way, by arguments, phone calls, or edits back to the present day.

The most frequently repeated of the film's "flashback triggers", objects that enable a visual and narrative transition from past to present, is *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg's memoir of mid-twentieth-century butch/transmasculine experience. The iconic cover depicts Feinberg's simultaneously defiant, questioning and melancholy gaze. The book – or rather, the book cover as stand-in for its contents and its politics – features several times in *Appropriate Behavior*, conspicuously read by Maxine and conspicuously *not* read by Shirin. It first appears when, after abandoning an awkward attempt at kinky role play, Maxine reclines on their bed to read as Shirin signals her dissatisfaction; next, it crops up on the top of a pile of books in a box as Shirin unpacks in her post-breakup move to a new shared apartment; finally, there is a flashback to the moment of purchase, when, in a New York women's bookstore, a trio of books is placed in Shirin's hands by Maxine as queer must-reads: lesbian erotica, a multiple orgasm guide, *Stone Butch Blues*. An exchange follows:

Shirin: Oh, I don't need new reading material. I'm only up to book two of the *Twilight* series.

Maxine: I'm broadening your horizons.

Shirin: This is some pretty serious stuff here.

Maxine: I'm asking you to read some books. You don't need to get your septum pierced...yet.

Because it is never mentioned by name, *Stone Butch Blues*, even as a literary work, enacts an aesthetic politics of queer visibility. Like the dildo that is similarly used in close-up to trigger flashbacks from present to past, the book – and Feinberg's face on its cover – becomes a

predictable indicator of queer affiliation. Associated with Maxine, it becomes a stand-in for queer seriousness and political commitment; in contrast, in the one scene in which we see Shirin reading, she gives up after a few moments to browse OKCupid for a date. That the match she pursues is the cis male “Brooklyn Boy” anticipates the self-directed accusations of bisexual inadequacy that pepper Akhavan’s work. Shirin has her queerness repeatedly disputed because of both her femininity and her bisexuality, presumed here to roll into one signifier. Maxine on the other hand is described as “manly but a little bit like a lady”, a forthright descriptor of butch style borrowed word for word from *The Slope*, in which Jungermann’s character Ingrid plays a very similar role to Rebecca Henderson’s Maxine. Both Maxine and Ingrid are characterized through their investment in queer political commitment (routinely dressed up as mere political correctness).

The buying of books is this film’s approach to fulfilling a familiar lesbian representational tradition, then, a “pedagogical” trope whereby the primary protagonist is inducted into lesbian desire by a more experienced figure: think *The Killing of Sister George* (dir. Robert Aldrich, USA, 1966), *Lianna* (dir. John Sayles, USA, 1982), *Desert Hearts* (dir. Donna Deitch, USA, 1985), *High Art*, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (dir. Abdellatif Kechiche, France, 2013), *Carol* (dir. Todd Haynes, UK, USA, France, 2015). In *Appropriate Behavior*, the book recommendation is just such a pedagogical move that reinforces a politics of queer legibility: who is doing the teaching and who is doing the learning. When, in another scene, Maxine chides Shirin for using the “incredibly offensive” word “dyke”, unacceptable even/especially for a bisexual, she sets up a hierarchy of queer experience that is loaded with bi- and femme-phobia (whose flipside is, as it happens, a disconcerted disavowal of butchness and/as transmasculinity).^{xliv} Like the stoner *Sex and the City* tribute, such scenes play not only on the tropes of feminist anxiety about the political evacuation of postfeminist discourses as discussed in the last section, but also on similarly configured lesbian anxieties about bisexuality. In short: to whom in this scene is the word “dyke” offensive? Maxine’s accusation disallows Shirin’s own identification with the term dyke, presuming it to be

directed outwards rather than inwards. Parading, in San Filippo's words, "bisexuality's history of discursive effacement and representational deniability", the disparagement of bisexuality is folded into a particular cultural narrative of the inclusions and exclusions of lesbian feminism.^{xlv}

In moments such as this, Akhavan draws attention to the ways in which a certain version of lesbian feminism (stylized as masculine-of-center, characterized as politicized killjoy) has the potential to be both excluding and excluded. Shirin, meanwhile, stylized as feminine-of-center and (imprecisely) characterized as apolitical, wishes to join the club so she can burn it down. Of course, this is another occasion on which Akhavan is spinning stories about lesbian feminism, trying them out for size. What happens for instance if we read Maxine's overbearing and exclusionary tone here as the face of an old-school essentialist "1970s" lesbianism (albeit in the form of what Elizabeth Freeman calls temporal drag – an anachronistic display of attachment to lesbian signifiers now perceived as long gone)?^{xlvi} When it refuses to conform to a "palatable mainstream femininity", after all, lesbianism itself is the sign of anachronism.^{xlvii} If postfeminism is understood by feminism to have acted out "the repudiation of particular figures", including the lesbian,^{xlviii} Akhavan dramatizes this very tension by drawing attention to her own uncomfortable affiliations, charting an ambivalence which Victoria Hesford names as being "between attachment to and estrangement from proper femininity".^{xlix}

Courting familiar stereotypes of lesbian feminist community placemaking, the bookstore as site of lesbian pedagogy later also becomes the location for a social justice workshop Shirin attends only to win back Maxine by proving her commitment to the cause. Inevitably, she fails – both to be a serious enough social justice warrior and to use humor effectively to sufficiently subvert this call to seriousness. As a writer of comedy, someone trying to make it in independent film and television, a bisexual and an Iranian-American, Akhavan reveals a fundamental premise of success: to be taken seriously, you have to take things seriously, especially if you are already not taken seriously. Shirin, and Shirin-as-Akhavan, inhabits a body – queer, female, Middle Eastern – that is always already too serious (can't you take a joke?), and not serious enough (you

can't joke about that).

In *Appropriate Behavior*, Shirin revels in provoking the holier than thou Maxine as a way of defending against her own shame about her closetedness. Soon enough, Shirin is punished for her participation in this charade of lesbian (as) seriousness. “You know what? Don’t bother telling your parents about us. I know you and the more I think about it this was probably just a phase,” she is told by Maxine mid-break-up. This wounds precisely because of the regimes of de-legitimization it calls up.¹ The citation of particular codes, phrases and books, and the avoidance of others, proves commitment to the serious cause of social justice. But that legibility is always premised on an existing lineage, most likely to be white: non-Iranian, non-bisexual. Even political missteps, readily paraded as ironic gestures to inadequacy, are also loaded with a hierarchy of legibility.

Figure 3. Shirin dances with a new date in *Appropriate Behavior*.

I Thought You Were Straight

In a late present-day scene, who knows how long after their breakup, Shirin re-encounters Maxine at a Brooklyn party and must endure the excruciating exchange of indifferent small talk comprised of disingenuous questions about their dates for the evening. Shirin’s is Jon, a buff tattooed white guy who is “spearheading a campaign to bridge the gaps of gentrification in Brooklyn through mass Kombucha brewing” and is “known all over Bushwick for his voguing”. Maxine’s date “T” is also a great dancer, devoted to her West African dance class. “Is she Black?” Shirin asks, before meeting her. “No,” Maxine responds. “She sounds awesome” concludes Shirin, with a deadpan dismissal as she walks away. *Appropriate* behavior becomes, in this scene, an almost parodic act of cultural *appropriation*. Stubbornly refusing to let herself be seen looking on at the pair from the sidelines, a stony-faced Shirin immerses herself in dancing, as the stars and stripes of an American flag glow across her cheeks, projected in cartoonish form

as hipster backdrop to a trendy but lackluster warehouse party.

Soon, we discover that Maxine's date "T" is none other than Tibet, Shirin's hyper-feminine filmmaking colleague-competitor. The comic twist of the scene revolves (I presume) around the presumption that we haven't read Tibet as queer. How many films can we name whose comedy of errors are produced because someone or other isn't read as queer right away; this narrative trick rides on femme invisibility, whilst lesbian progress is presumed to ride on what Jack Halberstam calls the "repudiation" of butchness as lesbianism's stereotypical visual style, as discussed in the last section.^{li} By drawing on the common motif of surprise at the movie's inter-connections, Akhavan also samples and mocks the incestuousness of Brooklyn's lesbian network (think *The L Word's* "Chart", a diagram centered throughout the seasons linking the show's central cast to peripheral characters, and to each other, in a network of sexual connection and coincidence).^{lii} However, it is Tibet in fact who is the first to voice the words "I thought you were straight", immediately calling up Shirin's own insecurity and the implicit affiliation of (out) gayness with whiteness. As a woman of color in a predominantly white space, Shirin must negotiate the gendered and racialized rubrics of lesbian intelligibility. The presumption of her straightness follows a logic – straight-until-proven-otherwise – that attaches not only to her bisexuality, then, but also to her ethnicity.

If liberated gayness is equated with white American privilege, Tibet has carried out a momentary audit of intelligibility on Shirin's likelihood of queerness, revealing Shirin's claims to inclusion to be precarious. But once again, Akhavan does not merely comment from the sidelines on such a dynamic but engages it directly. Shirin is always one step ahead of this always anticipated disavowal of her own belonging. As with the examples of (post)feminist anxiety and queer seriousness discussed in the last two sections, Shirin is not the beacon of appropriate behavior but rather the site of its exceptions. She might be the one to deliver searing critiques – of the employers who only hired her because "they wanted a Middle Eastern person on staff", or of Maxine for "having one of those 'I'm dating an immigrant' moments" – but she is also

frequently the one to invoke her diasporic identity as a site of queer contestation, once again both subject and master of the joke. Shirin hails her Iranian heritage through its exclusions: it is a reason for not coming out (“I’m sorry, what country is it that you get stoned to death if you’re convicted of being gay? Oh, yeah. Wait, I know. It’s Iran”), just as it is a disdainful counter to her mother’s overbearing questioning of her romantic prospects (“this isn’t the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mom. Do you see a hijab on my head?”).

This paranoid reading of Shirin’s own positionality with regards to social justice claims is of course also a symptom of alienation. What the strictures of Maxine’s white lesbian feminism demand is the simultaneous citation and disavowal of stereotypes of Iranian exclusion. In these demands, we see moreover the simplifying reification of what it is to make queer life liveable (to be queer at all – to be queer enough – to be visibly queer – to be named as queer – to name oneself as queer). In Shirin’s responses to these demands, we see a kind of inverted homonationalism that must account for the impossibility of reconciling othered identities with a political framework of queer liveability. This is the horizontal axis of Hemmings’s argument about the misguided chronologies of feminist progress. Not only is there a subject “back then” in need of reform but also a (non-Western) subject “over there”. “We” (white feminists) are free “through imagining others as needing liberation”.^{liii} But Akhavan’s alignment with this “we” as an American-but-Iranian / Iranian-but-American is always already ambivalent in its (mis)placement.

Again, Akhavan mobilizes citation as a way of containing this ambivalence. In an early scene, Ken (Scott Adsit) – the stoner dad who commissions Shirin to teach the kidz movie makers – is intrigued by Shirin’s heritage: “Wow, Iran,” he says. “What do you think of that whole situation?” Ken stands in for both male mediocrity and oblivious white obnoxiousness. When he assumes that she is part of the “underground scene” he’s read about in *Vice*, Shirin refuses to take the bait, telling him instead that “I spend most of my time in Iran watching Disney videos with my grandmother while she untangles jewelry”. Her response sardonically

anticipates his reaction, a face that betrays what he understands as the incongruity of Disney-watching in Iran. It is a defensive citation of a quintessential American cultural export that functions to disband Western assumptions about the Middle East (“that whole situation”). As Hemmings writes, the Western feminist theorist is called to “choose, *or be understood to choose*, pleasure/freedom over violence/constraint”.^{liv} As a visual “theorist” of contemporary feminist life, Akhavan – again via Shirin – seems to manifest the freedom of provocative queerness but Shirin’s inability to come out is also the visible “choice” of constraint. Instead of making this choice, however, she exposes its inherent antagonism, playing with the visible *understanding* of it as a choice in the first place.

You’re not the only one who cares about gay rights

Several recent films by feminist filmmakers embrace a hyper-citational style that seems designed to assert both a political stance and a pop cultural prowess: *Booksmart* (dir. Olivia Wilde, USA, 2019) or *How to Build a Girl* (dir. Coky Giedroyc, UK, 2020) are two prominent examples.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Gloria Steinem, Frida Kahlo, Virginia Woolf and Michelle Obama don bedroom walls, political consciousness worn on the sleeve. Myriad and magpie citations situate the films’ aspirations as knowing, discerning, feminist texts. For their adolescent characters, citing the past is a tactic for imagining yourself into a politicized future, exuding a kind of cultural precocity (often in the absence of social and sexual precocity). In these films, citation is a way of paying one’s dues, a generational nod, a claiming of space in a feminist community, invoked as a present collective even across temporal borders. Citing the feminist canon, counter-canon and everything in between, such intertextual overloads defy accusations of frivolity and apolitical indifference – after all, these teenagers’ heroes include Malala Yousafzai and Ruth Bader Ginsberg. But does this hyper-citational practice, a dizzying array of reverent political and cultural references, risk forfeiting serious political intervention?

This movement towards the mainstream visibility of feminism in popular culture – and

accusations of the political evacuation and deflection that come with that visibility – is the context for my analysis of Akhavan’s work. What marks Akhavan out is how she employs citation not to parade a knowledge of feminist history but to process a conundrum, which becomes a kind of organizing contradiction in her work. From paratextual comparisons with controversial but visible figures of popular feminism (Dunham) to diegetic citations of femininity as consumption (*Sex and the City*) and lipstick lesbianism (*The L Word*), Akhavan negotiates ambiguous bids to recognition in an industry reliant on proof of established relevance. Akhavan’s is not a neat set of citations that remembers an inspiring version of a feminist past or conjures an inspired version of a feminist future.

By citing the literary and pop culture references she is influenced by, Akhavan tells a personal tale that nevertheless is anchored in shared histories of queer and feminist culture: refusing a burden of representation to speak for a marginalized community but dispersing (some of) the individualizing emphasis of autobiographical work. However, she never fails to draw attention to these citations as themselves ambivalent, simultaneously hailing a set of familiar attachments and/as markers of identity then disavowing them before they can give the illusion that she is attempting to be anything like a mouthpiece for her community (a “voice of a generation”, in the words of Dunham-as-Hannah Horvath). Akhavan’s ambivalence questions the imaginary of such a feminist community – torn between the urgency of political affiliations and estrangement from movements that are insincere in their claims to intersectionality.

In *Appropriate Behavior*, Shirin finds that her bids for inclusion are constantly precarious, exposed by citational hierarchies functioning both vertically/generationally and horizontally/geographically. Rather than forcing them into place, Akhavan’s work exposes the awkwardness of the fit. In its whimsicality, ephemerality and promiscuity, this citational practice reveals a crisis of confidence – but a necessary one, diverging from unequivocal orientations and allegiances. Accused by turns of being too serious or not serious enough, Akhavan’s chosen method of resistance is to engage and critique, part of a performance of both alienation and

attachment. Shared references of internalized homophobia – from the digital hashtag #nohomo to the near-canonical words “this was probably just a phase” – are self-deprecating strategies of queer survival, delivered both as wit and as defense. Akhavan mobilizes them as citational wounds, confessing to political missteps. Sara Ahmed posits a feminist citational practice that can “create a crisis around citation, even just a hesitation, a wondering, that might help us not to follow the well-trodden citational paths”.^{lv} Many of *Appropriate Behavior*'s citations create miniature episodes of such a “crisis around citation,” in which we pause on the politics of lesbian pedagogy, the presumed whiteness of queer legibility or the inadequacy of consumer feminism's political interventions. This is a feminist citational practice not just about quietly citing differently, then, but about toying with citation, exposing the citational hierarchies that confine, provoke and yet still seduce us.

Figure 4. Maxine introduces Shirin to some new reading material in *Appropriate Behavior*.

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- ⁱ See Girish Shambu, “For a New Cinephilia,” *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 33.
- ⁱⁱ Stuart Richards, “A New Queer Cinema Renaissance,” *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 1, no. 2 (June 2016).
- ⁱⁱⁱ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xxiv.
- ^{iv} BFI, “Desiree Akhavan on Appropriate Behaviour,” filmed March 26 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dZXEM7iq-w>.
- ^v Rebecca Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics,” *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 2 (September 2016): 34.
- ^{vi} Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy,” 31-2.
- ^{vii} Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 20.
- ^{viii} Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 161.
- ^{ix} Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993).
- ^x Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 47-8.
- ^{xi} Jackie Stacey, “Wishing Away Ambivalence,” *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (April 2014): 39-49, 47.
- ^{xii} The film was written and directed by Akhavan with a story by long-time collaborator Cecilia Frugieule, who also produced. Editing was by Sara Shaw and cinematography was by Christopher Teague.
- ^{xiii} BFI, “Desiree Akhavan on Appropriate Behaviour.”
- ^{xiv} Maria San Filippo, *Provocateurs and Provocations: Screening Sex in 21st Century Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).
- ^{xv} In an interview with Patricia White, Akhavan also cites Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage* (Sweden, 1973) as a narrative influence. See Wolf Humanities Center, “Desiree Akhavan and

Patricia White: What Is Appropriate Behavior?,” filmed September 29 2015, <https://vimeo.com/140859821>. Maria San Filippo, in her reading of *Appropriate Behavior*, draws our attention to the sustained comparison with *Annie Hall* (dir. Woody Allen, USA, 1977). See *Provocateurs and Provocations*, 299-311. San Filippo also notes the unavoidably cross-referential casting of the actress Anh Duong in the role of Shirin’s mother Nasrin, a nod to the indomitable editor Dominique in Lisa Cholodenko’s *High Art* (USA, 1998).

^{xvi} Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 122-3.

^{xvii} Claire Perkins, “My Effortless Brilliance: Women’s Mumblecore,” in *Indie Reframed: Women’s Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, Claire Perkins, and Michele Schreiber (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 139.

^{xviii} See Eleni Palis, “Race, Authorship and Film Quotation in Post-Classical Cinema,” *Screen* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 242.

^{xix} Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet and Thomas Allen Harris, “Narrating Our History: Selections from a Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora ” in *Sisters in the Life: A History of out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, ed. Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 29-46, 35.

^{xx} See Patricia White, ““Invite Me In!”: Angela Robinson at Hollywood’s Threshold,” in *Sisters in the Life: A History of out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, ed. Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

^{xxi} Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (New York: 37 Ink / Atria, 2016), 45.

^{xxii} Edinburgh Television Festival, “Michaela Coel | James Mactaggart Lecture,” filmed 23 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR0kHm3ie95EjiEBFkkwx-6IN7qMSWG5DD9PbKG6OQfAMbKrcHuDXSkEAX8&v=odusP8gmqsg&app=desktop>.

There is a tension here between digital labor and digital opportunity; Francesca Sobande has written of below-the-line commenting as itself a form of labor, and digitally disseminated cultural

production a subsequent “by-product” of that labor. See “Praising, Erasing, Replacing and Racializing Girls: Intersectional Online Critiques and the Ascent of *Insecure*,” in *HBO’s Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power*, ed. Victoria McCollum and Giuliana Monteverde (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 108.

^{xxiii} Edinburgh Television Festival, “Desiree Akhavan on Appropriate Behaviour.”

^{xxiv} The Slope Show, “Shout Box,” accessed 22 November 2021,

<https://vimeo.com/channels/theslopeshow>.

^{xxv} For a reading of the misogynistic implications of this “popular feminism”, see Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

^{xxvi} Delusional Downtown Divas, “About,” *Delusional Downtown Divas* (2011).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111112075602/http://www.delusionaldowntowndivas.com/about.php>.

^{xxvii} Jennifer Lawrence, “Why Do I Make Less Than My Male Co-Stars?,” *Lenny Letter*, 13

October 2015, <https://www.lennyletter.com/story/jennifer-lawrence-why-do-i-make-less-than-my-male-costars>.

^{xxviii} Lena Dunham (@lenadunham), “#Blacklivesmatter Link Below for

Organizations/Resources I Love and Support  Linktr.Ee/Lenadunham,” Instagram profile page, accessed 22 November 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/lenadunham/>.

^{xxix} Barbara Speed, “Desiree Akhavan, ‘the New Lena Dunham’, to Star in Next Season of Girls,”

The Guardian, 29 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/apr/29/desiree-adkavan-new-lena-dunham-girls>.

^{xxx} San Filippo, *Provocateurs and Provocations*, 295.

^{xxxi} According to Hemmings, lesbian feminism is only ever cited as “a 1970s phenomenon” that must be challenged in its essentialism. Black feminism on the other hand must be cited as the very “catalyst” for change needed in the feminist movement, and thus is “constrained by its citation as a 1980s critique.” In other words, the intervention of Black feminism serves a role, is

narrated as a (singular) turning point in feminism's historicizing of its own past. The catch, however, is that in order to follow through with the narrative sequence applied to feminism's recent past – progress, loss, return – lesbian feminism must be citationally “lost”. If its interventions exist, that is, they must be ignored, made absent in the history books. As Hemmings writes: “citation practices secure the chronology and affect central to narrative momentum.” See *Why Stories Matter*, 162-3.

^{xxxii} Palis, “Race, Authorship and Film Quotation,” 235.

^{xxxiii} Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects),” *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010).

^{xxxiv} *Sex and the City* emerges as central to many articles and chapters in this field, particularly between the years 2004 and 2014.

^{xxxv} The famously hyper-sexual character Samantha had some brief lesbian dalliances, but none were sustained; while one of the four stars, Cynthia Nixon, came out following the show's finale, her character Miranda was frequently scripted to find the idea of lesbian sex embarrassing at best and distasteful at worst.

^{xxxvi} Several scholars have been irresistibly drawn to the scene in accounts of the transnational citationality of Keshavarz's lesbian imaginary. See Patricia White, “Changing Circumstances: Global Flows of Lesbian Cinema,” in *Global Cinema Networks*, ed. Elena Gorfinkel and Tami Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

^{xxxvii} Lee Wallace, *Reattachment Theory: Queer Cinema of Remarriage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 111.

^{xxxviii} Nevertheless, Mandy Merck writes: “surely a contemporary situation comedy featuring the erotic life and close friendship of four single women in New York, a series renowned for its sexual candor and the rumored homosexuality of key producers, cannot escape its lesbian

destiny?” See “Sexuality in the City,” in *Reading Sex and the City*, ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 53.

^{xxxix} Catherine Grant, “Fans of Feminism: Re-Writing Histories of Second-Wave Feminism in Contemporary Art,” *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (June 2011): 265-86, 269.

^{xl} Grant, “Fans of Feminism,” 271.

^{xli} Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 161.

^{xlii} Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2009), 17.

^{xliii} F. Hollis Griffin, *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 4.

^{xliv} Indeed, this slippage is explicitly charted in Feinberg’s work. In Akhavan’s film, however, such potentialities are disavowed via throwaway moments of (self)-deprecating humor.

^{xlv} San Filippo, *Provocateurs and Provocations*, 312.

^{xlvi} Elizabeth Freeman, “Deep Lez: Temporal Drag and the Specters of Feminism,” in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

^{xlvii} Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 8.

^{xlviii} Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 138.

^{xlix} Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 85.

¹ See Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not “Just a Phase”* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

^{li} Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 95.

^{lii} See also the documentary *Rebel Dykes* (dir. Harri Shanahan and Siân Williams, UK, 2021), about the London dyke scene in the 1980s, which also “charts” lesbian connection in this way.

^{liii} Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak paraphrased in Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 126.

^{liv} Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 123. Emphasis added.

^{lv} Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 148.