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***Friends* Reconsidered: Cultural Politics, Intergenerationality, and Afterlives**

Shelley Cobb, Neil Ewen, and Hannah Hamad

Abstract

With the passing in 2014 of the twentieth anniversary of its debut episode, the iconic millennial sitcom *Friends* retains a rare cultural currency and remains a crucial reference point for understanding the concerns of Generation X. This special issue, therefore, interrogates the contemporary and historical significance of *Friends* as a popular sitcom that reflected and obfuscated American fin de siècle anxieties at the time, and considers the lasting resonance of its cultural afterlife. Its abiding impact as millennial cultural touchstone can be seen in its persistent ability to find new generations of viewers and its manifest influence on myriad extratextual phenomena.

Keywords

Friends, television, generations, cultural politics, Gen X, Millennials

In the 2016 romantic comedy *How to be Single*, Robin (Rebel Wilson) is on a mission to help Alice (Dakota Johnson) enjoy the benefits of being single in New York. When Alice protests, “Technically, I’m not single; we’re just on a break,” Robin replies sarcastically, “Uh, there’s no such thing as a ‘break,’ season-three-Ross.” Referring to the long-running joke about *Friends*’ central couple’s on-again-off-again relationship, Robin invokes the famous sitcom without ever using its title, in the confident assumption that her intended audience, both diegetic and extradiegetic, of twenty-something millennials, will at once recognize and appreciate the reference.

With the passing of the twentieth anniversary of its debut episode in 2014, the iconic series retains a rare cultural currency due to ongoing repeats on syndicated TV, and remains a crucial touchstone for understanding the concerns of Generation X. The significance of *Friends*’ syndication history cannot be overstated with respect to its ongoing cross-generational cultural importance. It derives enormous profits from syndication all over the world (for more on this, see Kunz

2007; Lotz 2014; Vogel 2015), and while this is in some ways typical of the economic model with which U.S. network television has been so successful, *Friends* is nonetheless an exceptional example, especially in terms of its cultural reach across the boundaries that separate the generational cohorts to which it continues to speak, and as one of the last iterations of the syndication profit powerhouses on which this U.S. system of television production and financing has depended since the 1970s.

For such a long-running, popular and important show, however, the body of dedicated *Friends* scholarship remains relatively small and was largely produced during or soon after the show's initial run. More than ten years after its finale, the show's popularity around the world continues unabated even as other sitcoms of its era have faded. As such, this special issue seeks to renew the scholarship on *Friends* by critically evaluating its fin de siècle politics and its sustained cultural currency. *Friends* epitomizes a postmodern ironic mode prevalent in the 1990s, which, we argue, served as comic cover for the ways in which the text reflected and engaged with the wider socio-cultural currents of its era in terms of economics and identity politics. The show's continued resonance since it ended is maintained in part through the postfinale celebrity lives of its stars as well as its influence over subsequent ensemble sitcoms. Many television comedies of the post-*Friends* era make jokes referencing their predecessor, including *Scrubs* (NBC 2001-2008, CBS 2009-2010), *The Office* (NBC 2005-2013), *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005-2013), and *Master of None* (Netflix 2015)—to name just a few.

The central concern of this special issue, therefore, is to interrogate *Friends*' significant presence in the contemporary television and cultural landscape, and to consider it as a historical text that speaks to shifting notions of generational identity. As such, the articles herein collectively consider the sitcom as both a product and producer of its times as well as a resilient cultural touchstone. Although other American sitcoms of its era—such as *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998) and *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998-2006)—retain a certain level of currency through reruns and reunions, no other show has achieved the breadth of impact that *Friends* has on succeeding generations of audiences in terms of speaking beyond those it spoke to directly during its initial broadcast run.¹ While Jerry Seinfeld has taken

Millennials to task for being “too PC” and “not being able to laugh” (THR Staff 2015), and the *Will & Grace* “Get Out the Vote” reunion in September 2016 (and its return for series nine in 2017) prompted some to ask whether its style of humor in relation to gay men is out of date and anachronistic to contemporary audiences (D’Addario 2016), *Friends* has remained widely popular among its Millennial fans, even as it has been critiqued for being sexist and homophobic (Baxter-Wright 2017). It has given rise (in the United Kingdom) to the well-attended annual “FriendsFest”—an immersive *Friends*-themed fan experience that allows visitors to inhabit Monica and Rachel’s apartment, to recreate the iconic title sequence, to drink coffee in Central Perk, and much more besides. Meanwhile, a recreation of Central Perk features as part of the Warner Bros. Studio Tour in Los Angeles, while replicas of the coffee shop have sprung up in China, Australia, and the United Kingdom. And in recognition of the show’s ongoing and persistent appeal to new generations of audiences, in 2016 *New York* magazine posed the pertinent question “Is *Friends* Still the Most Popular Show on TV?” in its investigation of “Why so many 20-somethings want to stream a 20-year-old sitcom about a bunch of 20-some- things sitting around in a coffee shop” (Sternbergh 2016), a phenomenon that has only grown since the show debuted on Netflix United Kingdom in January 2018.²

Sternbergh’s article begins with an anecdote about a television critic returning to his high school and asking the current students what they watch on Netflix—the answer: *Friends*. The germination of this special issue was our collective identification of the efficacy of *Friends* as a teaching text in our own classrooms—each of us experiencing it as the only television text from our respective youths that we can still rely upon as familiar, recognizable, and engaging to students. In fact, detailed textual knowledge of *Friends* seems to operate among them as a noteworthy form of popular cultural capital. The expansive fanbase of the series is not just Anglo-American, of course, it is global. Polls in China put it as the most popular U.S. television show there (Tan 2011), and it was also recently the most watched English show on Indian TV (Choudhary 2016). In a poll of international students, Kaplan International found that of those who said they used television to learn English, 26% (four times the second-place show) said they learned English through *Friends*

(KBlog 2012).³

There is no doubt that twenty-first century multiplatform television has helped enable the continuing global reach of the series. It airs on Comedy Central in the United Kingdom and India, Netflix in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada, and the streaming service Stan in Australia; it is also widely available on DVD, and no doubt many viewers watch it via illegal digital practices (Lotz 2014). Of course, during its initial run on NBC it reached millions of viewers weekly and was part of NBC's second successful Thursday night "Must-See TV" line-up of the late twentieth-century and the declining Network era (Lotz 2007), airing within NBC's Thursday night line-up between *Seinfeld* and *ER* (the latter of which is a key network text in the scholarly debates about quality TV of this period) all of which "generated large audiences and [gave] kudos to the broadcaster" (Horan 2007, 115). The audiences for *Friends* and the kudos for NBC held up through a time of significant change for American network television with the creation of new networks Fox, the WB, and UPN that focused on the "niche-programming" of teen oriented television, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB 1997-2001; UPN 2002-2003) and *Dawson's Creek* (WB 1998-2003), and shows with all, or nearly all, African American casts, such as *Living Single* (Fox 1993-1998) and *Martin* (Fox 1992-1997; Lotz 2014). After *Friends'* finale in 2004, the November sweeps showed NBC in third place among the big three American networks for the first time since 1994, not insignificantly the year that the show first aired (Sandler 2007).

Despite its vast, global, and enduring popularity, as well as its continued cultural resonance, sitcom scholarship on *Friends* remains limited in both quantity and scope. Of the scholarship on sitcoms of the 1990s and the 2000s, *Seinfeld* is regularly considered in relation to postmodernism (Morreale 2010), *Will & Grace* has been analyzed for its representation of sexuality (Provencher 2005), and *Sex and the City* is often considered the quintessential sitcom for analyzing millennial gender politics. In much of the literature on the sitcom, *Friends* is a necessary but peripheral consideration. Moreover, it is often used as a (negative) counterpoint to the cult artistic status of *Seinfeld*, which is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, reinforced through the combined (masculine) authorial status of creator-producer Larry David and star Jerry Seinfeld (Skovmand 2008).

Seinfeld has been widely discussed, analyzed, and lauded for its self-referentiality and postmodern aesthetic, as well as its apparent progressive politics, which critics have argued were unique and genre-changing at the time (Lavery and Dunne 2006). We do not dispute those claims. However, we do take issue with the relative elision of *Friends* in sitcom scholarship: especially the notion that because of its “normative” content and style, it is unworthy of sustained criticism and interrogation. As such, we have organized this special issue to account for the complexity and variegation in *Friends*’ treatment of gender, race, class and generational politics, as well as the influence of its generic and screen-culture afterlives to reinsert *Friends* into critical discourses of television comedy, in particular, and television studies more widely.

The show’s limited ability to generate scholarly interest and its perennial fanbase are both, paradoxically, a result of its representation of twenty-something life as “a haven in an adult world full of demands, sexual, careerwise and otherwise—a haven in which the six singles are encapsulated in a bubble of security” (Skovmand 2008, 9). In many ways, *Friends* seems disconnected from its own cultural zeitgeist. Beginning in the aftermath of the death of Gen-X pop culture icon Kurt Cobain, the show’s characters appear to operate at discursive, sartorial, and philosophical odds with the grunge-fan, slacker aesthetic, and ethos so commonly associated with Generation X, notwithstanding the fact that its ensemble are clearly members of this cohort by age. For many critics, *Friends*’ “content is not ultimately reflective of the cynicism, irony, and social ennui said to fundamentally characterize Gen X” (Shugart 2001, 137). A line was drawn under this in March 1995 when David Schwimmer, who played Ross Geller in the series, explicitly disavowed the Gen-X label in an appearance by the cast on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It has been argued that the series makes a “commercial attempt to represent X-ers” (Shugart, 137), encapsulated by Central Perk, the coffee house in which all six characters spend so much time together, a setting that “helped feed the ‘espresso-culture’ of the 1990s and elevate the coffee house to a national icon” (Sadler and Haskins 2005, 205–06). This commercial appeal to X-ers is compounded by the fact that six twenty-somethings would be extremely unlikely to be able to afford to live in midtown Manhattan.

Significantly, the show's setting is also a heavily whitewashed fantasy of New York, with no regular characters of color, and white faces dominating among the extras in the background. This is of course true of most "mainstream" sitcoms of this period beyond



Figure 1. While sitting in their usual spot in Central Perk, the friends indulge in nostalgia by humming the theme tune to *The Odd Couple* (ABC 1970–1975), a show that received popular recognition in syndication during the childhood years of Generation X (S1 E12 “The One with the Dozen Lasagnas”).

Friends.⁴ From iconic progenitor *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993) to the more recent *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005-2014), many late twentieth-century and early new millennium sitcoms moved away from the suburban locations of family sitcoms at the height of the network era (e.g., *Leave It to Beaver* [CBS 1957-58, ABC 1958-63], *The Brady Bunch* [ABC 1969-1974], and *Family Ties* [NBC 1982-1989]) and toward urban milieus (Figure 1). This shift, as Michael Tueth writes, could be attributed to “the decline in the urban crime rate, the increase of mass transit in many cities, the renovations of downtown areas, the revival of older city neighborhoods, and the return of many baby boomers and Generation X members to city dwellings” (Tueth 2000, 104). Problematically, however, Tueth does not mention any of the sitcoms featuring African American casts, which, as noted above, were

an important feature of the changing television industry of the period. What he calls revival and return could also be called “gentrification” and critiqued as such while it is normalized in the comfortable, if not affluent, representation of these characters’ lives.

Arguably, beginning in earnest with the landmark publication of Angela McRobbie’s (2004) “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” the study of postfeminist media culture has, at the time of writing, been a central focus of feminist media studies for almost fifteen years. With its regular use of ironic dismissal to make jokes about feminism, gender equality, and sexuality, and its general depoliticization of those topics, *Friends* is inarguably a symptomatically postfeminist text (Rockler 2006). And yet, despite its earlier start date and its early use of some of the most culturally ubiquitous postfeminist tropes, other television and film texts have been more important to the critical literature on postfeminism, including *Ally McBeal* (FOX 1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004), and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001). A recurring intervention of this special issue is our interrogation of *Friends*’ complex postfeminist politics, which are simultaneously obvious and obscured throughout the show’s run. For example, the carefully calibrated gender balance of the show may have kept *Friends* from signaling its postfeminist credentials as twenty-first century postfeminist media culture became increasingly gender bifurcated, exemplified by the rise of “the bromance” (*Wedding Crashers* 2005 and *I Love You Man* 2009) as a masculine equivalent to the ubiquity of the postfeminist female-friendship “chick flick” (e.g., *Bride Wars* 2009 and *Bridesmaids* 2011).

Although an ensemble show that ultimately centers the romantic relationship between Ross and Rachel, *Friends* nonetheless begins with a female friendship when Rachel becomes roommates with her high school friend Monica. It is then that the show establishes its gender balance, setting the stage for its key romance plots. Rachel, who must leave her wedding to join the group in the pilot episode, must also leave her new job in France at the end of the series to rejoin her friends in the finale. Early critics of the situation comedy argued that sitcoms are a conservative form that must end where they begin⁵: a characterization of the genre that has been widely debated, but rings true in the case of *Friends*. Its self-enclosed narrative visualized in the finale through the six friends with arms around each

other in Monica's apartment (having quickly dispensed with the presence of Phoebe's husband Mike with an offhand joke) keeps the series tied to its early years in the mid-1990s. Consequently, *Friends* is dissociated from twenty-first century America. In his *New York Magazine* piece, Sternbergh (2016) interviews a Millennial fan of the sitcom who says,

The '90s were a great time . . . If you think about it, back then there was little conflict. It was pre-9/11. You could smoke on airplanes, you could smoke in restaurants. Bill Clinton was in the White House. He was the best president of all time!

The continued heavy syndication of the show at the time of writing relies on a post-modern ironic mode of address and identity that contributes to a wider nostalgia for the 1990s and that decade's association with a 'simpler' time, before 9/11, before Web 2.0, and before the financial crisis of 2008—a nostalgia that glosses over the racial tensions of that decade.⁶ The articles in this issue collectively interrogate the contemporary and historical significance of *Friends* as an iconic sitcom that reflected and obfuscated American fin de siècle anxieties for the duration of its initial run, and they consider how its cultural afterlife and persistent ability to find new audiences reflects an anxious nostalgia for pre-Great Recession politics and economics.

Hannah Hamad's "The One With the Feminist Critique: Revisiting Millennial Postfeminism with *Friends*" interrogates the series' negotiation of tropes of postfeminist gender discourse and argues for *Friends* as an urtext of millennial postfeminism. Building on this argument in "'I'd Like Ya'll to Get a Black Friend': The Politics of Race in *Friends*," Shelley Cobb interrogates the overwhelming whiteness of the show and the exceptionality of Charlie Wheeler's hyperclass mobility as emblematic of the postracial politics of postfeminism. Neil Ewen then turns the focus to shifting economics and cultures of labor in *Friends* in "'If I don't input those numbers . . . it doesn't make much of a difference': Insulated Precarity and Gendered Labor in *Friends*," arguing that Chandler's constant crisis of masculinity is related to changing patterns of work in the wider economy of the late 1990s. Furthering the analysis of the representational politics of gender in the show and its significance within postfeminist media, Lauren

Thompson considers the importance of the sitcom set and design in her article “‘It’s Like a Guy Never Lived Here!’: Reading the Gendered Domestic Spaces of *Friends*.” The issue concludes with Alice Leppert’s “*Friends* Forever: Sitcom Celebrity and Its Afterlives,” in which she analyses the post-*Friends* celebrity identities of the ensemble cast and their negotiation of the show’s continuing ubiquity that both keeps them famous and limits the mobility of their stardom, constrained as it is by the nostalgia that keeps the show in syndication.

Through analyses of gender, race, class, generations, ageing, cycles, and celebrity, the articles that comprise this issue argue that *Friends* belies its own postmodern ironic self-representation of meaninglessness—evinced by episode titles that begin “The One With,” protesting its memorability/forget ability—through its ability to speak to its historical moment and to have a lasting relevance beyond its own conclusion.

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Notes

1. For more on the centrality of reruns to American television, see Kompare (2005, 2010).
2. For information on FriendsFest, see Gee (2016); for the story on Jerry Seinfeld, see THR Staff (2011); for critiques of the *Will & Grace* reunions, see D’Addario (2016) and McLean (2017).
3. For an analysis of differing interpretations of *Friends* between American and Indian viewers, see Chitnis et al. (2006)
4. By “mainstream” sitcoms, we mean those on the three main American broadcast networks—NBC, ABC, and CBS. During the 1990s, sitcoms with all or largely African American casts appeared on the new networks of FOX, UPN, and the WB.
5. See Eaton (1978) and Grote (1983).

6. For a counterpoint to this nostalgic view of the 1990s, see the ten-hour documentary *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), which goes to lengths to convey a more candid sense of the grim realities of racial tension, social unrest, and inequality in 1990s America.

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