“YOU KNOW YOU LOVE ME”: SURVEILLANCE AND SPECTATORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY TEEN GIRL TV

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 24, 2015
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary teen girl television shows about surveillance allow for an exploration of how girls constantly negotiate between their own positions as spectators and their objectification through surveillance and in media representation. From celebrity photo leaks to magazine covers on sexting, public discourse on girls, surveillance, and technology is riddled with anxiety about privacy, visibility, and sexuality. Mainstream media obsess over the many dangers besetting girls today, their vulnerability to exploitation by surveillance, and their corresponding need for protection and policing. Simultaneously, however, that same media insists both on girls’ constant visual and sexual objectification and their position as empowered, independent consumer-spectators. This thesis traces such themes of surveillance and spectatorship through Gossip Girl (2007-2012), Pretty Little Liars (2010-present), and Veronica Mars (2004-2007), three popular prime time teen dramas that centralize girls’ relationship to surveillance and visibility. I will explore how surveillance functions to objectify, value, and control teenage girls, and how female viewers’ relationship to the shows complicates and recapitulates those functions. These teen girl TV shows ultimately allow for the consideration of the complex ways that surveillance both exerts control over and affords agency within girls’ relationships to their own visibility.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professors Caetlin Benson-Allott and Lori Merish for their guidance and support, both intellectual and emotional, throughout the writing process. Many thanks as well to Professors Brian Hochman, Pamela Fox, Michael Collins, and Sherry Linkon.
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INTRODUCTION

In the season two episode of *Gossip Girl* “The Dark Night,” Brooklyn outsider Dan Humphrey (Penn Badgley) encounters three impeccably-dressed tweens in Central Park. His on-again-off-again relationship with Upper East Side It Girl Serena van der Woodsen (Blake Lively) is newly back on, and the girls, whom he has never met, berate him for getting back together with her. They whiningly tell him, “Don’t you know she’s just going to lie to you again?” and “She doesn’t respect you.” He asks who they are, and they respond, “We read about everything on Gossip Girl,” the powerful gossip blog that posts tips, photos, and videos about the Upper East Side in-crowd sent in by any member of the general public. One of the two brunettes declares to Dan, “We’re on your side. Except for her,” gesturing to her blonde friend. “She’s a Serena.” After Serena rejoins Dan, and the tweens leave, Serena asks, “What was that?” Dan tells her, “That was Gossip Girl.”

This short scene emblematizes the way that contemporary teen girl television shows about surveillance dramatize the relationship of young female viewers to the media they consume and to their own visibility within that media landscape. The tween spectators, stand-ins for *Gossip Girl*’s actual viewers, see the social surveillance enacted by the Gossip Girl blog on the show’s wealthy and glamorous protagonists as an entertaining yet serious drama, and the scene cheekily satirizes the extent to which fans emotionally invest in spectatorship. That the blonde girl identifies as “a Serena” not only highlights the level of identification that occurs between fan and character, but also the extent to which identification can hinge on a viewer’s ability to recognize themselves in a character. The overwhelmingly white, middle-class and conventionally-beautiful lineup of teen girl TV characters, then, constructs an ideal viewer and, more broadly, an ideal model of girlhood that meet those normative standards. The *Gossip Girl*
tweens must be either “a Serena” or “a Blair,” Serena’s brunette best friend and sometimes-nemesis (played by Leighton Meester), because those are the two options made visible, valuable, and available for consumption by surveillance. Teen girl TV leaves little room for deviation from the norm if one wishes to achieve the value and recognition conferred on the Upper East Siders by their perpetual visibility. Dan’s assertion that these girls are, themselves, Gossip Girl captures the dual nature of surveillance on the show.¹ The Gossip Girl blog establishes ubiquitous surveillance on the Upper East Side; everyone is watching each other and has the power to disseminate information through Gossip Girl almost instantaneously. The tweens are Gossip Girl because they possess the power to watch, to surveil others and police them. But in another sense, they embody Gossip Girl because they have been constructed in her image. Their carefully assembled outfits reflect the images of Blair and Serena posted to Gossip Girl; the tweens strive to embody the model of girlhood made desirable and valuable through its constant visibility. Their spectatorship has made them both subject and object of surveillance, and even as the show self-reflexively dismisses their concerns as trivial, the girls take pleasure in this duality.

Contemporary teen girl television shows that integrate surveillance into the very fabric of their narratives allow for an exploration of how girls actively negotiate their role as subjects and spectators in a media landscape that both demands and punishes their sexualized visibility. From celebrity photo leaks to magazine covers on sexting, public discourse on girls, surveillance, and technology is riddled with anxiety about privacy, visibility, and sexuality. Mainstream media obsess over the many dangers besetting girls today, their vulnerability to exploitation by surveillance, and their corresponding need for protection and policing by surveillance. Simultaneously, however, that same media insists both on girls’ constant visual and sexual

¹ The Gossip Girl series final reveals that Dan himself has been Gossip Girl all along. The revelation has the potential to elucidate the unequal gender dynamics of surveillance and media objectification, but as I will discuss below, the show ultimately downplays patriarchal power and asserts visibility as value.
objectification and, through a postfeminist rhetoric, their position as empowered, independent consumer-spectators. This thesis traces such themes of surveillance and spectatorship through *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-present), and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), three popular prime time teen dramas that centralize girls’ relationship to surveillance and visibility. Surveillance Studies scholar Zygmunt Bauman writes in *Liquid Surveillance*, “In our times… the updated and adjusted version of Descartes’ cogito is ‘I am seen (watched, noted, recorded) therefore I am’” (130). The young female protagonists of all three shows inhabit worlds of ubiquitous and inescapable surveillance; it is simply a fact of everyday life. Although Bauman’s assertion may carry more positive or negative connotations based on the shows’ narrative contexts, it remains true for the girls that there is no existence without visibility. The shows depict them as vulnerable to exposure and control, but not without agency, under an ever-present, objectifying gaze. Within the shows and outside of them, girls must constantly negotiate between their own positions as spectators and their objectification through surveillance and in media representation. Visibility both enacts control over and confers privilege onto girls; and it can be both desirable and dangerous. Teen girl TV shows that narrativize surveillance provide a lens through which to parse out the complexities of that relationship.

Each of the three shows engages surveillance differently, and here I will provide a brief account of how surveillance functions in the series, particularly in relation to their girl protagonists. *Gossip Girl* centralizes surveillance as a social mechanism. As described above, the Upper East Side teens surveil each other, contributing to and reading the powerful gossip blog that tracks the movements and activities of the social elite. The Gossip Girl blog provides a forum for social manipulation and exposure and is often deployed by the protagonists, male and female, against each other. Blair and Serena, particular targets of Gossip Girl, treat the blog as
an invasive but unavoidable source of drama in their lives, while welcoming the social standing it bestows and reinforces. Surveillance, then, is diffuse and ubiquitous, simultaneously an unwanted invasion of privacy and a desirable conferral of celebrity status.

Surveillance in *Pretty Little Liars* poses a much more explicit threat to its four female protagonists, the titular Liars - Spencer Hastings (Troian Bellisario), Aria Montgomery (Lucy Hale), Hanna Marin (Ashley Benson), and Emily Fields (Shay Mitchell). After the disappearance and ostensible death of their best friend Alison DiLaurentis (Sasha Pieterse), the Liars are stalked and bullied by a mysterious figure known as ‘A.’ ‘A’ knows all their secrets, past and present, and seems to see and hear everything through elaborate surveillance equipment revealed multiple times throughout the series. ‘A’s’ gender is unknown (there are both male and female suspects), but the Liars use female pronouns most often. ‘A’ communicates largely through text, email, or physical messages strategically delivered to emotionally, socially, and physically manipulate the Liars. The Liars fight back against ‘A’s’ abuse in attempts to uncover her/his true identity, and while the show has built up to many theatrical reveals, the mystery is never truly solved and ‘A’s’ ubiquitous surveillance continues.

*Veronica Mars* brings more traditional surveillance to the foreground through its eponymous hero (played by Kristen Bell), a teen girl private detective. Veronica takes on adult cases from her father’s detective agency in addition to helping her more downtrodden classmates and enacting a kind of vigilante justice in her high school community. Multiple sex-tape storylines emphasize girls’ particular vulnerability to surveillance, and Veronica uses her detective work to resist and punish those who would objectify them. Throughout the first season, which I will focus on here, Veronica uses surveillance to solve the mystery of her best friend Lilly Kane’s (Amanda Seyfried) gruesome murder. The show politicizes surveillance more
explicitly than the other two shows, narratively engaging the danger it poses and the possibilities for resistance it offers.

The following sections of this thesis explore how surveillance functions in *Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl, and Veronica Mars* to objectify, value, and control teenage girls, and how female viewers’ relationship to the shows complicates and recapitulates those functions. The first section discusses how *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars* depict girls’ ambivalent relationship to their own objectification by surveillance and their negotiation between their roles as both subjects and objects of the gaze. By examining moments of non-consensual visual surveillance, I consider how the two shows engage the voyeurism and identification of their young female spectators. In *Pretty Little Liars*, scenes in which the Liars confront surveillance footage and photos of themselves solidify the viewer’s identification with the Liars’ gaze, and emphasize the foreclosure of voyeuristic pleasure for spectators encountering their own objectification. However, the show suggests that even under the ubiquitous gaze of surveillance, girls can reclaim and take pleasure in their own gaze. *Veronica Mars* dramatizes the power of surveillance to enact violence on the young female bodies it objectifies, and offers teen detective Veronica as a heroine able to utilize surveillance technology for her own empowerment. However, even as the show critiques patriarchal voyeurism, it simultaneously reinforces girls as objects for consumption through its explicit depiction of girls in sexual and violent situations.

The second section addresses how surveillance functions to assign values to girls’ bodies based on race and class, and specifically, to reinforce the valorization of white girlhood. While *Veronica Mars* explicitly confronts racial and class differences and politicizes the use of surveillance, its construction of Veronica as non-normative class outsider obscures the extent to which her white privilege is the source of her agency. *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* both
take on a post-racial discourse that fails to acknowledge racial difference, eliding the particular vulnerability of non-white bodies to institutional surveillance and again, erasing the protections afforded by white privilege. *Gossip Girl* ultimately constructs visibility as a desirable form of social capital without acknowledging the centrality of whiteness and class privilege in determining such a positive relationship to surveillance.

The third section considers the disciplinary function of surveillance to enact control over girls’ bodies, particularly with regard to their sexuality and embodiment of a “correct” femininity. In *Gossip Girl*, surveillance functions to map and regulate girls’ movements and social relations. An episode in which a young teen sets out to lose her virginity highlights surveillance as a means of policing girls’ sexuality. However, the show constructs girls as the source of their own policing, obscuring larger patriarchal forces that benefit from the disciplinary practices of femininity. *Pretty Little Liars* confronts Liar Emily Field’s unique vulnerability to the disciplinary power of surveillance as a gay teen. Surveillance enforces her internalization of heteronormativity and threatens to strip her of the power to define her sexuality for herself.

The final section turns beyond the TV texts themselves to the shows’ transmedia marketing campaigns. I argue that the shows rely on girls’ willingness to expose themselves to corporate data surveillance through social media activity and other online participation and consumption. Marketing ploys devoted to selling clothing from the shows reveal a capitalistic investment in constructing a model of femininity based on commercially-viable forms of consumption. *Pretty Little Liars*’ record-breaking social media campaigns embody the reduction of television viewers to data-doubles, valued based on their consumer choices. The targeted marketing developed from girls’ online profiles reflects back to them and reinforces an ideal girlhood defined by its consumption. *Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl, and Veronica Mars*
commercially depend on girls’ vulnerability to surveillance even as they narrativize and critique that relationship. These teen girl TV shows ultimately allow for the consideration of the complex ways that surveillance both exerts control over and affords agency within girls’ relationships to their own visibility. Girls within the shows and outside of them constantly negotiate the complex terrain of spectatorship and representation, viewership and visibility, in which they are always both subject and object. The functions of surveillance within the shows to objectify, value, and control girls’ bodies conspire to reinforce and enforce dominant cultural scripts about girlhood that foreclose possibilities for girls to construct an identity outside of such mainstream prescriptions. And by elucidating the mechanisms of those functions, we can begin to reopen possibilities for resistance.
Getting the Money Shot: Identification, Voyeurism, and Visual Surveillance

The season one finale of Pretty Little Liars, “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” opens with a tracking shot of a window, quickly identified as opening into the bedroom of Spencer Hastings as the camera glides toward the glass. The Liars are perfectly framed by the window pane, sitting atop Spencer’s bed and crowded around a laptop. A quick cut moves the viewer into the room, closer to the girls, and another takes us over their shoulder to see what they are watching. On the laptop screen appears surveillance footage of their peer and rival Jenna Marshall (Tammin Sursok) blackmailing her stepbrother Toby Cavanaugh (Keegan Allen) into continuing their sexual relationship. This quick succession of shots takes up no more than the first fifteen seconds of the episode, but it encapsulates much of the tension at the heart of teen girl television shows that centralize narratives of surveillance, voyeurism, and visibility. Pretty Little Liars and Veronica Mars depend, to varying degrees, on the construction of girls as both subjects and objects of the gaze. Moments such as the one described above formally and narratively enact a negotiation between the distance of voyeurism and the intimacy of identification, between objectification and spectatorship; these categories are never entirely separate for girls within the TV narratives or for the girl viewers that watch them. Storylines on Pretty Little Liars and Veronica Mars that centralize the non-consensual visual surveillance of girls effectively narrativize this spectatorial tension and shed light on the shows’ gendered modes of addressing their audiences.

Film has traditionally been theorized as a voyeuristic medium, and although television may produce a different configuration of looking relations, feminist spectatorship theories of both film and television are useful here for approaching these shows’ ambivalent relationships to the gaze. Laura Mulvey’s foundational psychoanalytic configuration of Hollywood cinema as
dominated by the objectifying male gaze, which fetishizes and voyeuristically punishes women in order to contain them, has been revised and reinterpreted in the past decades to consider the ramifications of female spectatorship in cinema and television. Mary Ann Doane, still considering male-dominated Hollywood film, suggests that women connect to media texts primarily through identification as opposed to voyeurism. She argues that “the female spectator has basically two modes of entry: a narcissistic identification with the female figure as spectacle, and a ‘transvestite’ identification with the active male hero in his mastery” (Doane, “The ‘Woman’s Film’” 79). Doane writes that the ‘woman’s film’ problematizes both positions by placing women in central positions of narrative agency, as I will discuss further below in relation to the female protagonists of teen girl TV shows. As apparatus theorists, both Mulvey and Doane may insist on the specificity of the spectatorial positions they theorize to the cinematic medium. And in fact, writing on feminist television criticism, Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D’Acci, and Lynn Spigel suggest the possibility that TV constructs an essentially different subject position for the viewer because “television as a medium is organized around female desire” (Brunsdon 6). Its placement in the traditionally-feminized domestic space and long history of female-oriented genres such as the soap opera have shifted television away from “soliciting visual pleasures that [objectify] female characters and [encourage] ways of seeing based on voyeurism and fetishism” (Brunsdon 6). I would argue, however, that patriarchal modes of address dominate much of current television programming, especially considering the era of hyper-masculine ‘quality television’ that began with The Sopranos and continues today with shows like True Detective, making Mulvey’s and Doane’s accounts of female film spectatorship salient within television scholarship as well. Nevertheless, it is certainly worth noting that feminized television genres in
particular, such as the soap opera and teen television, have historically offered alternative kinds of spectatorial pleasure that specifically engage their female audiences.

Feminist spectatorship theory has increasingly tried to account for the agency of female viewers, and Christine Gledhill’s concept of negotiation as a “model of meaning production” is particularly salient for television shows that thematize girls’ conflicted relationship to the gaze (Gledhill 114). Gledhill proposes that “the term ‘negotiation’ implies the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take… Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (114). I see the “competing frames of reference” to which Gledhill refers formalized in “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” in the moments the camera shifts from peering in through the window to offering the Liars’ point of view, embracing their own voyeuristic gaze. The show itself, in addition to its viewers, constantly negotiates between girls as subjects and objects of the gaze. As Gledhill notes, it is unproductive critical work simply to argue the degree to which a media text is progressive or conservative, and I hope not to be a part of popular discourse that brands things as “good” or “bad” feminism. Instead, the critical space of negotiation, inhabited both by the shows themselves and their young female viewers, allows for consideration of the role of surveillance in reflecting and constructing girls’ ambivalent relationship to visibility, vision, and pleasure.

While the spectatorship theory outlined above addresses the experience of women (and often without regard for differences in race, class, or sexuality, which I will address in later chapters), it offers productive insight into teen girl television’s modes of address to young female viewers and the function of female-oriented genres. However, looking relations - the dynamic between seeing and being seen - can often create distinct pleasures and anxieties for
girls as opposed to women, although the line between the two categories is ambiguous in a culture that traditionally constructs girls as sexual objects and infantilizes women. The teenage protagonists, therefore, encounter adult situations and are largely portrayed by adult actors, but they ultimately represent a model of girlhood. Sarah Projansky’s *Spectacular Girls* and the work of other girls’ media scholars considers the specificity of girls’ representation in the media and their relationship to those images. Projansky describes the many ways that girls are “spectacularized” in contemporary media culture, all of which play out in the shows that narrativize girls’ constant exposure to surveillance. Projansky writes,

> First, media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such media turn girls into spectacles - *visual objects on display*. Second, some mediated girls are also spectacular, as in *fabulous*. The can-do girls’ achievements, athletic abilities, intelligence, and self-confidence dazzle. Third, some girls are spectacles, or *scandals*….

Politicians and pundits worry about teen pregnancy, sexting, and online pedophiles… All this is part of the spectacularization of girlhood in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture: the discursive production and social regulation of the girl as a fabulous and/or scandalous object on display. (6)

Surveillance in *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars* engages directly with these forms of spectacularization, reproducing them within the narrative and dramatizing real girls’ lived experiences and anxieties in relation to their own spectacularization. Projansky importantly notes that “not all girls are spectacularized in the same way,” and I will directly address the shows’ constructions of race and class in relation to surveillance and visibility in the following chapter (7). One of the primary ways that both shows reflect on the ubiquitous presence of girls’ images
is through narratives about non-consensual visual surveillance and voyeurism. The shows negotiate between the TV viewer as voyeur and, in her identification with the girl protagonists, as object of voyeuristic surveillance, ultimately depicting surveillance as a loss of control over one’s representation and one’s body. However, in our postfeminist media landscape, the “can-do girls” to which Projansky refers are not merely passive objects of the gaze, nor do they always have to take on a masculine spectator position in order to subject others to their gaze. Surveillance is a constant presence for the girl protagonists in both shows, and *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars* explicitly problematize the loss of consent and control that surveillance entails, offering the girls’ active gaze as form of resistance.

In *Pretty Little Liars*, “For Whom the Bell Tolls” introduces the viewer to a series of mysterious surveillance videos, the ramifications of which reverberate throughout the series, currently in its fifth season. At the end of the previous episode, “Monsters in the End,” the Liars discover a small flash drive contained in a lunch box sitting at the center of a large, empty storage unit. The stark, high-angle image from the girls’ point of view highlights the irony of the immense power contained in such a small device. The flash drive physically represents the hyper-mobility of data (in this case, video surveillance files), its ability to be endlessly duplicated and to belong to anyone. In the scene that spans the end of “Monsters in the End” and the beginning of “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” the Liars discover that it contains footage of them, obtained without their knowledge over many years. In Spencer’s bedroom, a POV shot of the laptop screen reveals a brief clip, filmed from outside a window (recalling the opening shot of the Liars watching the laptop), of the girls, including Alison, playfully interacting in one of their bedrooms. A reaction shot shows the girls’ disgusted, but hypnotized faces, solidifying the
viewer’s formal identification with their perspective in this moment, including their distressed reaction:

Aria: We’re young girls in our bedrooms changing clothes.

Spencer: Exposed

Hanna: Do you think someone was watching us and getting off on it?

Spencer: Well, we all know who had a thing for younger girls.

Emily: I feel sick.

Our identification with the Liars in this scene comes from our position as subjects of a shared televisual gaze (through the POV shot) and extends to their position as objects of the gaze. The show here critiques the spectacularization of girls as well as the voyeuristic gaze that sexualizes them against their will. The show also refuses to show the most egregiously exploitative footage of the Liars; we do not see them changing clothes or more physically exposed than usual. We understand the invasion of privacy that occurred, but do not partake in the voyeuristic pleasure or discomfort of seeing them overtly sexualized. This may be in part due to the show’s kid-friendly network of ABC Family, but it seems to me to be intimately related to the show’s target female audience. Doane argues that female spectators cannot experience voyeurism in the way that male spectators do because, “for the female spectator, there is a certain overpresence of the image - she is the image” (Doane, *Femmes Fatales* 22). Within the diegesis, this overpresence is explicit; they are actually watching themselves through the lens of the voyeur and thus cannot experience any kind of pleasure from the image. But the show’s formal strategy of showing us the video from their POV, as well as the unwillingness to sexualize the Liars overtly, indicates an acknowledgement that this foreclosed experience of voyeurism extends to the show’s female viewers. Our identification with the Liars watching the video supports our identification with the
Liars exposed by the video, and vice versa. *Pretty Little Liars* thus enacts, through this moment of non-consensual visual surveillance, the spectatorial bind in which girl viewers are placed by mainstream media that spectacularizes their image and constructs them as objects for consumption.

The show emphasizes the relationship between ubiquitous visual surveillance of girls and girls’ representation in the media, as well as the control that both forms of exposure exert, through its depictions of ‘A’s’ various lairs. In the season two finale, “UnmAsked,” Spencer and Mona (Janel Parrish) enter a seedy motel room, the walls of which are plastered with photos of Alison and the Liars, as well as newspaper clippings about Alison’s murder. The sinister music climaxes as the camera circles Spencer, who stands in the center of the room and turns to see their pictures on all sides. The camera cuts to her point of view, panning in a circle to take in the overwhelming array of images; jump cuts within the pan, presumably from one wall to the next, create the sense that the pictures go on forever - there is no way to take them all in with a single shot. The scene visually and aurally heightens the sense of danger associated with surveillance as well as the feeling that these walls of images are closing in on Spencer. In this moment, surveillance and the voyeurism it enables pose an overwhelming threat to girls. The room also contains a dollhouse with five dolls resembling Alison and the Liars inside. The doll motif recurs throughout the series, and always suggests that the girls are being controlled by ‘A’ as toys in her game; the girls are literally objectified, or made into objects. By visually pairing the dolls with the surveillance photos, the scene emphasizes the connection between visual objectification and the control of girls’ bodies.

A similar scene in the season four mid-season finale, “Now You See Me, Now You Don’t,” finds the four Liars entering what they believe to be A’s new lair. Blown-up photographs
of Alison posing for the camera line the entranceway to the apartment, and inside, A has constructed large “timelines” for each of them. Spencer says, “All our secrets, private moments. A is documenting everything,” as a series of close-ups reveal surveillance photos of the girls and their families all organized and labeled chronologically. The timelines recall Facebook’s timelines, that are similarly meant to track important events through photos and posts in addition to being a social hub, creating a connection, if not a direct comparison, between the sinister surveillance to which the Liars are constantly subject and the more mundane surveillance to which girls regularly subject themselves. A three-monitor computer system forms the centerpiece of the room, and Spencer tells the others, “That’s How ‘A’s’ been watching us.” Apparently discerning whatever is on the computer screens, Emily adds questioningly, “‘A’s’ monitoring the police? Watching the streets? Our alarm systems?” Spencer responds, “That’s how ‘A’ is everywhere.” The combination of visual and data surveillance is of note here. As opposed to ‘A’s’ first lair, in which Spencer and the viewer along with her were bombarded by the sheer proliferation of their own images, this lair emphasizes the way that visibility is imposed through technology. There is no clear distinction made between ‘A’ “watching the streets,” perhaps by accessing CCTV feeds, and monitoring alarm systems. Both visual and data surveillance contribute to the ability to track, and potentially control, girls’ movements, and thus their bodies. The timelines and computers may indicate less narrative concern with the visual objectification of girls’ bodies, but the posed pictures of Alison, both on the wall and in a large photo album the Liars find, serve as a reminder of her visual availability for consumption. A series of plot twists in the ensuing episodes reveal that the apartment and surveillance equipment belong not to ‘A,’ but to Ezra Fitz, who has been secretly investigating Alison and the Liars for a book he plans to write about the murder. While this makes little narrative sense, it does emphasize that the girls
are subject to surveillance on multiple fronts. By the nature of an ongoing soap opera such as this one, the girls continue to seek out ‘A’ and never uncover her (or his) identity. Thematically, such delayed gratification leads to the sense that surveillance is truly inescapable, in part because it cannot be confined to a single source. Even as Spencer combs through the pictures in ‘A’s’ motel room, or Hanna tries to hack into Ezra’s seemingly all-powerful computer, the Liars exist in a constant state of fear, anger, and disgust at their own objectification. They can resist the voyeuristic gaze of surveillance, but they cannot escape it.

Even as *Pretty Little Liars* engages girls’ negative reactions to voyeurism, it does not entirely eschew the pleasure that can be found in voyeurism as well. Returning once again to the opening scene of “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” the camera takes on the Liars’ point of view as it focuses entirely on the laptop screen showing the video of Jenna seducing and blackmailing her stepbrother Toby. A series of shot-reverse-shots show the Liars with eyes glued to the screen and the video in which Jenna sensuously removes Toby’s shirt. The video ends after the viewer is given a long glimpse of Toby’s bare chest before Spencer disgustedly commands, “Turn it off.” The Liars are certainly not meant to be understood as explicitly experiencing pleasure from watching this video, and again, it refers to what Doane calls “overpresence;” the Liars identify with Jenna’s objectification by the video and so do not take pleasure in it. However, the Liars quickly turn to discussing how they will use the video against Jenna for their own benefit; like A, they subject Jenna to their voyeuristic gaze in order to manipulate her. Furthermore, it is hard to deny that the show is appealing to some kind of voyeuristic desire on the part of the female viewer as the camera lingers on Toby’s bare chest. Significantly, we also see Toby in a moment of vulnerability, while Jenna plays the dominant role, further emphasizing his status as object for consumption. In fact, the *Pretty Little Liars* camera frequently highlights the uncovered, well-
sculpted male bodies that surround the Liars, acknowledging female sexual desire as a driving factor for girls’ within the show and those who watch it. Showrunner Marlene King has acknowledged the show’s “wish fulfillment aspect” specifically with regard to the Liars’ frequent relationships with older men, and the show actively acknowledges and works to fulfill girls’ desire to look (Goldstein).

Narratively, Pretty Little Liars works to identify the viewer with the four girl protagonists as both unwilling objects of the voyeuristic gaze of surveillance and subjects of their own desiring look. Formally, however, one of the show’s most definitive conventions is its use of point of view shots of the Liars from afar, a strategy that aligns the viewer with the anonymous voyeurs constantly surveilling the Liars. Our formal association with ‘A’s’ point of view is most explicit in the short, gimmicky scenes that end most episodes, in which the camera moves as if it were ‘A’s’ eyes. We see ‘A’s’ gloved hands extending from below, and the characters with whom she interacts speak directly into the camera. Less explicitly, however, frequent tracking shots or long shots of the girls take on ‘A’s’ point of view or that of another antagonist, often cued by sinister music. Occasionally, these shots might appear to be taken on a (diegetic) recording device, with a flashing “record” marker in a lower corner, indicating the presence of formal surveillance equipment. The subject of the point of view shot, if revealed by a reverse shot, may also be a character we suspect of foul play but who has not been confirmed as “for” or “against” the Liars, or the shot could serve to suggest a new suspect. Regardless, characters initially hidden by a point of view shot are not to be trusted, at least until proven innocent by one of the show’s many elaborate twists. The show uses this formal convention to build suspense, as its central narrative mystery is the question of who is surveilling the Liars. These point of view shots create a kind of exhilarating frustration for the viewer forced to take on an unknown
perspective when we most identify with the characters being watched. To return again to the opening shot of “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” then, an interesting shift occurs when the tracking or long shot of the girls from outside a window or across the street is not revealed to be from anyone’s point of view; the gaze simply belongs to the camera and to us, the television audience. The omniscient gaze of the show blends into the ubiquitous gaze of characters who are constantly surveilling the Liars.

Even as these conventions potentially highlight and exploit the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer, they may in fact serve to heighten a narrative paranoia that undermines the formal operation of voyeurism. Film scholar Garrett Stewart suggests that the ubiquitous presence of surveillance technology in the film genre he dubs “surveillance cinema” actually serves to “deflect any twinge of voyeurism onto the diegetic paranoia of invaded privacy” (Stewart 11). From this perspective, the scenes in which we take on A’s (or another surveiller’s) point of view allow us, the television viewers, to project our own voyeurism off of ourselves and onto ‘A,’ the embodiment of the show’s paranoia, even as we are implicated by the shared gaze. For Stewart, though, the deflection need not occur through such an explicit source of surveillance as ‘A.’ He refers specifically to a scene in The Bourne Legacy in which the protagonist looks up at a hidden security camera someone has pointed out to him. Stewart writes, “No reverse shot locates the hidden camera. It’s as ubiquitous as narrative omniscience itself” (Stewart 11). From this perspective, the ambiguous relationship between ‘A’s’ point of view and the show’s omniscient gaze allows the viewer’s voyeurism to be subsumed into that of the surveilling characters in the narrative even when those characters are not diegetically present; we, the viewers, do not subject the Liars to voyeurism ourselves, but the surveillance that surrounds them does. Stewart’s theory certainly seems operative in Pretty Little Liars, although it does not account for the specificity of gender
in voyeuristic looking relations. As mentioned above, Doane argues that female spectators cannot experience voyeurism in the traditional (masculine) sense. Writing about the ‘paranoid woman’s film’ - mainly classic melodramas such as Rebecca - she suggests that genres that centralize a female protagonist and place her in “a position of agency” inherently challenge her objectification and downplay the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of women in mainstream Hollywood film dominated by the male gaze (Doane, ‘The Woman’s Film’ 70). Thus, Doane writes, “a certain de-specularization takes place in these films, a deflection of scopophiliac energy in other directions, away from the female body… the aggressivity which is contained in the cinematic structuration of the look is released or, more accurately, transformed into narrativized paranoia” (70). To put Doane and Stewart in conversation, then, the frustration of the voyeuristic gaze in women’s genres finds an outlet in narrative paranoia, which in turn allows the viewer to deflect their voyeuristic desires onto the diegetic surveillance technology. The presence of surveillance in Pretty Little Liars, and in teen girl TV more generally, creates a cycle in which voyeurism is simultaneously condemned, engaged, and deflected. In its overall embrace of the Liars’ perspective, the show reflects on and critiques the danger posed to girls by ubiquitous surveillance and media representation. However, it does not deny the gaze of its female viewers even as the narrative paranoia, heightened by the show’s formal conflation between the omniscient gaze of the camera and the voyeur’s gaze, deflects any deep sense of voyeurism on the viewer’s part. Pretty Little Liars thus actively negotiates, both formally and narratively, between the complex positions of girls as subjects and objects of the gaze in a media landscape that insists on their spectacularization.

More explicitly political than Pretty Little Liars in its thematic engagement with voyeurism, Veronica Mars overtly rejects the objectification of girls through visual surveillance
and suggests the possibility of agency through a reclamation of the gaze. However, its mode of address is less feminized and the show therefore engages the voyeuristic impulse of the viewer differently. The show features Veronica’s narration and, early in the series at least, frequent flashbacks to her memories of Lilly, fully positioning hers as the central perspective of the show. The pilot introduces the viewer to the gruesome murder of Lilly Kane, Veronica’s best friend and the daughter of Jake Kane, CEO of the tech company responsible for the “invention and perfection” of online streaming video (“Pilot”). In part because of that Kane Software technology, a police video of Lilly’s dead body - blonde, beautiful and bloodily mutilated at the scene of the crime - goes viral. Through this series of events, the show immediately creates a parallel between the violence of Lilly’s murder and the violence of the general public’s voyeuristic fascination with the video - as well as the technology that facilitated its proliferation. The pilot episode also reveals that Veronica lost her virginity when she was slipped a date-rape drug at a party and raped. In the soft lighting of another flashback, we see Veronica, with long blonde hair and a simple white dress, waking up to find her underwear on the floor beside her as a tear slides down her cheek. From the flashback, the camera cuts directly to a shot of Jake Kane exiting a seedy motel room where he is presumably cheating on his wife, and then to a reverse shot of Veronica, now with a shorter, edgier haircut and a more alternative, less feminine outfit, surveilling him through an oversized zoom lens, as her narration declares, “I’m not that girl anymore.” The pairing of image and narration here emphasizes the central role of surveillance in Veronica’s reclamation of her own power and agency. Her surveillance of Jake Kane in particular, the most powerful man in Neptune, demonstrates her ability to upset the traditional patriarchal looking relations that construct her as an object for consumption (or rape). Another flashback reveals that when Veronica goes to the Sheriff’s department to report the rape, the
incompetent and corrupt Sheriff Lamb derides her for expecting that he would do anything about it, particularly because taking action would involve “[rounding] up the sons of the most important families in town.” The camera cuts from Veronica’s crying face to a courtroom scene in the present, in which Veronica has replaced the surveillance footage Sheriff Lamb needs to convict two shoplifters with footage of one of his employees engaging in sexual acts with a prostitute. Veronica sits in the gallery, smirking at his humiliation. The involvement of the Sheriff’s department in perpetuating a culture toxic to girls’ survival (the department was also responsible for leaking the video of Lilly’s corpse) underscores the institutional nature of patriarchy and girls’ exploitation, and the show suggests that Veronica’s use of surveillance undermines and resists those structures.

*Veronica Mars* overtly works to empower the young (white) female gaze in the face of social forces that would contain it, but the straightforward reversal of the gaze may simultaneously reinforce a traditional active/male, passive/female construction of looking relations. While *Pretty Little Liars* formally engages the specificity of girls’ relationship to voyeurism, thus challenging the patriarchal looking relations that dominate much of mainstream media, *Veronica Mars* critiques and reverses the voyeuristic gaze. Veronica’s change in appearance from her softly-lit flashbacks to the grittier present displays her shift away from the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of traditional femininity and toward a more masculine subject position. The show certainly challenges the conventional masculinity of the hard-boiled detective - Veronica’s sexuality and femininity are acknowledged throughout - but there still seems to be a dichotomy between Veronica the detective and girls as objects of the gaze. Andrea Brathwaite suggests that Veronica is “caught between and determined by the competing demands of girlhood and detecting,” implying a mutual exclusivity, as opposed to a negotiation in Gledhill’s
sense, between the two categories, perhaps determined by the difference in being seen and seeing (Brathwaite 140). Again, the show narratively acknowledges and critiques the social forces that construct girls in this way, but by simply reversing the gaze, the show does not structurally undermine traditional associations of power and pleasure with the male gaze. As Doane suggests, the reversal inherent in Veronica’s appropriation of the gaze “remains locked within the same logic” (Doane, Femmes Fatales 21). Because the show maintains a dichotomy between traditional girlhood and detection, with Veronica as a kind of superhero differentiated from all other girls, it calls attention to “the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting [Veronica as an aberration] whose acknowledgment simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy. And an essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look” (Doane 21). Even though Veronica as an individual can claim the gaze as her own through her use of surveillance, the show does not undermine the logic of the gaze that has traditionally assigned power to men. Veronica’s brief mention of her failure to obtain the “money shot,” the surveillance photo that proves the infidelity the private detective has been hired to discover, implies the continuation of this logic; the pornographic and economic connotations of the term reveal the profit to be found in voyeurism that valorizes phallic power and objectifies female bodies (“Pilot”). Veronica’s desire for the money shot demonstrates that she has joined the ranks of those who profit from voyeurism without truly upsetting the system that benefits from the objectification of women’s bodies.

The resolution to the mystery of Lilly Kane’s murder, in the season one finale “Leave it to Beaver,” captures much of the tension in the show’s engagement with voyeurism and the

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gender politics of the gaze. In her dogged quest to discover the killer, Veronica finds two tapes that Lilly had hidden in her bedroom. The first shows Lilly in her boyfriend Logan Echolls’s (Jason Dohring) pool house on the day of her murder discovering the hidden cameras placed around the bed in order to secretly record the sexual exploits that occur there. The tape cuts off when Lilly presumably finds the tapes and removes them. The next tape, filmed before the first, reveals that Lilly was having an affair with Logan’s father, movie star Aaron Echolls. Veronica quickly discerns what must have happened and a flashback/fantasy shows Lilly taking the tapes back to her house, where Aaron Echolls murdered her in a fit of rage when she refused to give them back. From this chain of events emerges an explicit critique of the powerful older man who strips a girl of her agency, first by filming her without consent, and then by killing her for trying to regain control over her own image as well as his. Aaron’s voyeuristic impulse is tied directly to his murderous instinct, both motivated by a desire to contain and control her. In Veronica’s flashback/fantasy, when Aaron demands that she return the tapes, Lilly tells him he “can watch the tape on ‘Access Hollywood’ along with the rest of America.” This threat reveals a contradictory bind in which Lilly is placed by her situation. She understands the value that would be placed on a sex tape between an older male movie star and a beautiful underaged girl - in other words, she understands celebrity and the commodification of her own sexuality. Releasing the tape would assert the agency of which Aaron has stripped her, but in taking advantage of a mainstream media audience’s voyeuristic desire, it would also be an acceptance of her own objectification.

The show itself enacts something similar in its fulfillment of the audience’s own voyeuristic desire and depiction of girls being punished for their resistance and agency. As Veronica and Duncan, Lilly’s brother, watch the tapes of Lilly together, a series of shot-reverse-
shots depict their discomfort at seeing their friend and sister in a sexually compromising position (before they realize the true gravity of what they are watching) and the video itself. The videos cut frequently between shots of the bed from different angles, and the clip of Lilly and Aaron having sex reveals a close-up of Lilly’s face and chest, covered by a bra, on top of Aaron. The explicitly sexual images pushes the limits for a network teen TV show. The show is, of course, critiquing the non-consensual visual surveillance of girls, but it does not stop short of delivering the same voyeuristic image it critiques, as *Pretty Little Liars* does do to a large degree. Similarly, the show critiques the systems that would punish girls’ agency even as it engages what is conceived in traditional film theory as the (male) voyeuristic desire to see women punished. Throughout the first season, flashbacks explicitly display Lilly’s gruesome head wound, and in “Leave it to Beaver,” we are given the narrative and voyeuristic ‘satisfaction’ of seeing the crime in full, as Aaron bludgeons Lilly in the head with a heavy ashtray. The show, then, fulfills to a large degree a voyeuristic desire in which, Doane would argue, female viewers cannot take the same pleasure as men, perhaps indicating a detective series’ more traditionally masculine mode of address than a soap opera like *Pretty Little Liars*. According to Doane, even in mainstream Hollywood films that feature a female protagonist, “the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization” (Doane, “The ‘Woman’s Film’ 72). This convention is enacted not only through Lilly’s murder, but through Veronica’s detective work. At the end of the finale, in a particularly violent and suspenseful scene, Veronica is almost killed by Aaron Echolls, who tells her, “I’m not going to let a seventeen-year-old piece of ass ruin my life.” Aaron denies Veronica’s power by verbally reducing her to her sexualized body. Again, the show constructs Aaron as a villain and powerfully critiques the patriarchal violence he represents. But it also dwells on Veronica’s
moments of peril and her terror at Aaron’s hands, submitting to, as much as it critiques, the voyeuristic impulse to punish the girl who looks back.

All three season finales of *Veronica Mars* centralize Veronica’s victimization and her rescue or defense by a male character. Veronica’s father nearly dies heroically rescuing Veronica from Aaron Echolls at the end of season one; season two concludes with the discovery of Veronica’s rapist, who is close to shooting her until Logan arrives; and the finale of season three features Logan beating up a man responsible for filming and distributing a sex tape of Veronica. These narrative climaxes accentuate a tension in the show between its commitment to empowering its young female protagonist through her reclamation of the gaze, and its engagement with masculine voyeuristic desire. Surveillance serves as the primary means of Veronica’s empowerment, but its function in the show may not truly undermine the patriarchal scopic regime that traditionally constructs girls as objects for consumption. While *Pretty Little Liars*, engages a more feminine mode of address to explore the tension between girls’ simultaneous position as subjects and objects of the gaze, the two shows together shed light on girls’ relationship to their own spectacularization, to return to Projansky’s term. The integration of surveillance into the heart of teen girl television narratives invites exploration of where there is room for girls’ agency within a media landscape that subjects them to constant visual surveillance and objectification. Both *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars* reflect and enact the struggle in which girls must engage to reconcile their own position as subjects and spectators with a powerful cultural insistence on their objectification.
Girls Worth Looking At: Race, Class, and Visibility

While the previous chapter analyzed the way that surveillance functions in teen girl TV to objectify girls’ bodies, I turn now to the way that it serves to assign values to different kinds of bodies based on race and class. Surveillance studies scholar David Lyon suggests that “gendered, racialized, and class-based divisions may be mitigated or reinforced by contemporary regimes of governance and associated routines of surveillance,” suggesting that the integration of surveillance into these television narratives may have important ramifications for the representation and construction of intersectional identity categories (63). Invoking the work of Gary T. Marx, Lyon writes that the media that confront surveillance “remind us about power relations and struggles over meaning; that in contexts where egalitarianism and democracy are valued, surveillance practices are… viewed differently depending on whether they are involved in care or control” (141). Veronica Mars, Pretty Little Liars, and Gossip Girl all traverse a continuum between “care” and “control” in their representations of surveillance in ways that both resist and reproduce dominant ideologies about race, class, and gender. These dichotomous functions of surveillance are usefully understood in the context of Sarah Projansky’s writing on the spectacularization of girls in the media, who often seem to be “caught between anxiety and adoration” (Projansky 61). For the young, beautiful, middle-class, white girls most ubiquitous in the media, then, visibility and surveillance are popularly constructed as a kind of care, or protection. Even as all three shows draw attention to the way that surveillance is also used to control girls’ bodies, they obscure their own contribution to the dominant construction of middle-class white girls as those “worth looking at” and worth protecting (Projansky 57). In doing so, they marginalize the relationship of non-white or working-class girls to their own visibility and invisibility. Of the three shows, Veronica Mars is the only one that explicitly
politicizes surveillance. The show depicts surveillance as influenced by, but also potentially able to uncover, institutional racism and classism; but in failing to problematize or even acknowledge the role of Veronica’s white privilege in her ability to resist her own objectification and assert agency, the show ultimately reinforces the invisible hegemony of whiteness and the middle-class identity with which it is associated. Veronica’s murdered best friend Lilly Kane and *Pretty Little Liars*’ Alison DiLaurentis serve as models of what Projansky calls “girls in peril,” who are depicted “not only as vulnerable but as celebrities themselves, famous at least for a brief time because of something horrific that has happened to them” (83). Alongside the protagonists, Lilly and Alison reinforce popular media’s construction of “young white (usually blonde) girls” as those “who most need protection and most deserve adoration” (Projansky 60). All three shows foreground beautiful, white, at-least-middle-class girls, but they all also feature non-white or racially ambiguous characters in major or supporting roles. However, the post-racial perspective embodied by *Pretty Little Liars* ultimately reasserts the higher valuation of white girls’ bodies. *Gossip Girl* similarly obscures any identity-specific consequences of surveillance in its overt suggestion that visibility is power, largely ignoring the ways that visibility can have different impacts based on one’s race and class. In his book on white representation, *White*, Richard Dyer writes that “the claim to racial superiority resides in that which cannot be seen” (26). Whiteness must be simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, unmarked as racial category, in order to claim a normative, and thus dominant, status against which all (non-white) races are defined as “other.” All three shows ultimately reassert a white racial hegemony by narrativizing white girls’ ubiquitous visibility through surveillance without naming whiteness as such. In doing so, they reinforce the notion that middle-class, white girls are the ones most exposed to surveillance, most
worthy of visibility, and most able to benefit from it, all while obscuring the extent to which girls’ race and class determines this relationship.

*Veronica Mars*, more than most teen television, directly confronts class-based and, to a lesser extent, racialized conflict and identity. In the pilot episode, Veronica’s voiceover narration describes the show’s fictional setting of Neptune, California as “a town without a middle class.” At Neptune High, Veronica tells us, “your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires… If you’re in the second group, you get a job: fast food, movie theaters, mini marts.” This division is implicitly racialized by the show’s focus on two distinct social groups, the exclusively-white and wealthy 09ers - residents of the elite 90909 zip code, acknowledging the geographic segregation of Neptune - and the Latino PCH Biker Gang led by Eli “Weevil” Navarro. Like Veronica, her African-American best friend and sidekick Wallace Fennel serves as a kind of liminal figure, positioned between the dominant social groups, but his job at the local mini mart reinforces the color line (ruptured by Veronica herself, as I will discuss below) between the haves and have-nots in Neptune.\(^3\) The show highlights the extreme level of social segregation at Neptune High when Ms. Dent (played by bi-racial actress Sydney Tamiia Poitier), Veronica’s journalism teacher, tells an 09er, Caitlin Ford, doing interviews for a student poll, “Remember, that we are a multicultural school with a diverse population of students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds” (“Credit Where Credit’s Due”). Caitlin asks for her meaning, and Ms. Dent responds, “Meaning, don’t just interview your friends.” In the context of working on the school newspaper, their conversation not only sheds light on the rigid class-

\(^3\) In the second season, Jackie Cook (Tessa Thompson), an African-American girl and daughter of a wealthy professional athlete, arrives in Neptune and seems to similarly rupture the show’s strict color line. However, it is later revealed that while Jackie claimed to have grown up on the Upper West Side of New York City with a successful model mother, she is in fact the daughter of a waitress and has a young son of her own. So Jackie may initially seem to expand the options for characters of color on the show, but ultimately reinforces the racial hegemony it purports to expose as well as the stereotype of the young, unwed black mother.
race-based social boundaries at the school, but on how those boundaries are perpetuated by representation and those with access to media production. Caitlin, played by Paris Hilton in a cameo role, has the ability to perpetuate the invisibility of those who do not look and live like she does by featuring the experience and perspective of other rich, white students. Their exchange - Caitlin’s disregard and Ms. Dent’s concern for diversity - subtly emphasizes that visibility reinforces the hegemony of the dominant group, in part through obscuring the representation of those with less power.

While the school newspaper may represent the social consequences of visibility on a small scale, *Veronica Mars* thematizes the unequal institutional deployment of surveillance and law enforcement as well. In the pilot, two members of Weevil’s gang rob the mini mart where Wallace works. Wallace secretly notifies the police, and the two young men are arrested because of security footage showing the theft. As mentioned above, the mini mart has already been established as a raced and classed space, associated with the working-class students of color that work there. Although the surveillance tape, in this situation, does accurately capture a crime, I would argue that the show still manages to at least challenge “the very possibility that surveillance could be neutral,” as Lyon suggests is a prominent trope in surveillance narratives, primarily through the association of institutional surveillance and corrupt law enforcement (Lyon 146). The arrest of the two men in the pilot serves to emphasize the vulnerability of working-class people of color to institutional surveillance, particularly when considered alongside the show’s depiction of the relationship between the 09ers and the Sheriff’s department. In the show’s second episode, “Credit Where Credit’s Due,” Sheriff Lamb and an officer arrive at an 09er party on the beach. As the teens scatter to avoid arrest for underage drinking, the officer asks if they’re going to stop the students, but Lamb declines, and says they will take the kegs and
throw their own party. From this exchange, the show immediately cuts to Weevil and his cousin Chardo playing video games as younger kids run around them; Lamb arrives at Weevil’s house to arrest his grandmother, a domestic worker who has been accused of credit card fraud by her employers, the Echolls. Weevil, who made a brief and contentious appearance at the 09ers party, asks Lamb, “Guess you busted all those rich kids already, huh?” The show villainizes Lamb for his classist and implicitly racist law enforcement practices, suggesting that the surveillance techniques deployed by a corrupt institution can hardly be deployed with any level of neutrality.

Through Veronica’s detective work, the show simultaneously offers surveillance as a means of uncovering systemic, institutional inequalities and corruption. In her essay on marginal perspectives in Veronica Mars, Caralyn Bolte suggests that Veronica’s “desire to achieve truth at all costs,” which she exercises through surveillance, “is essential to recognizing the real ills of society” (107). In the pilot, for instance, Veronica helps Weevil’s friends by replacing the surveillance footage of them shoplifting with footage of one of the Sheriff’s officers engaging in sexual acts with a prostitute, causing the case to be thrown out. The show generally constructs Veronica as devoted to protecting, through her own subversive use of surveillance, those victimized by the system against those who benefit from it, and exposing the system’s bias in the process. In “Credit Where Credit’s Due,” Sheriff Lamb and Veronica’s father Keith believe that Weevil committed the credit card fraud for which his grandmother has been arrested. When Veronica suggests that Lamb may have set Weevil up because of a personal grudge, Keith tells her, “Honey, I started picking up Eli Navarro when he was twelve,” referencing Weevil’s long criminal history. Veronica commits herself to proving Weevil’s innocence in opposition to stereotyping assumptions of his guilt, and ultimately does so by obtaining attendance records and hotel bills that incriminate Weevil’s cousin Chardo. To some degree, this only suggests that
stereotypical assumptions of criminality were directed towards the wrong Latino gang member, not that they were fundamentally misplaced, and throughout its three-season run, the show vacillates between embracing and challenging racist and classist stereotypes. In the season two premiere, “Normal is the Watchword,” Veronica uses audio surveillance to expose a group of wealthy, white parents who faked positive drug test results to get less-privileged, mostly black students kicked off the basketball team and make room for their own children. The episode emphasizes the benefits of institutional access and support for the white upper-class, and Veronica uses surveillance to undermine institutionalized racial and class injustice. Andrea Brathwaite, writing about the show’s imbrication of the detective and teen genres, suggests that this attention to systemic and institutional problems arises generically in detective fiction. She writes, “Through its gritty and dark realist aesthetics, archetypal hardboiled fiction consciously and explicitly critiques its cultural context; instead of considering crime an aberrant act by a solitary damaged individual, the hardboiled novel presents it in causal relation to wider patterns of social and political corruption, as a response to complex and changing social conditions” (Brathwaite 137). Veronica Mars’s genre, through this lens, produces its unique (among teen girl TV shows) politicization of surveillance, even though contemporary detective TV more often eschews the political bent of its literary forerunners. Brathwaite argues that the narrative of the young female detective “recasts [the] hardboiled crime trope into an indictment of violence against women,” and I would add that the show makes a conscious effort to critique not just gendered, but racial and class oppression (135). However, by offering Veronica, the ostensible class outsider, as uniquely positioned to expose and indict injustice, the show in fact obscures the racial hegemony it professes to challenge.
The dichotomy between “girlhood and detecting,” that Brathwaite suggests gives the show its feminist perspective, relies on a specific construction of idealized white girlhood that the show does not explicitly acknowledge, despite its openness about race and class in other matters (140). Veronica’s move from insider to outsider, from ‘normal’ girl to girl detective (perhaps the central conceit of the show in its first season), depends on her possession of a normative identity and appearance. As mentioned in a previous chapter, flashbacks to the night of and morning after Veronica’s rape feature her with long blonde hair and a simple white dress - the ideal of “imagined young white feminine innocence” (Projansky 60). The scene is followed by a cut to the present, where Veronica surveils an unfaithful husband and her voiceover narration proclaims, “I’m not that girl anymore” (“Pilot”). Veronica is no longer part of the 09er crowd (a group to which she had only the social capital, not the parental income, to belong) and exists on the fringes of Neptune High’s social world. However, despite her shorter hair and edgier clothes, Veronica still looks a lot like that girl in the flashback - white, thin, and beautiful. Other characters that fall into Neptune’s “have-not” demographic recognize this about Veronica when she herself does not. When Veronica, presenting herself as a friend, doubts Weevil’s innocence in the credit card fraud case because of his “reputation,” he challenges her. He says, “Be honest, Veronica, you think you’re this big outsider, but push comes to shove, you’re still one of them. You still think like one of them” (“Credit Where Credit’s Due”). Similarly, when she initially refuses to help Kelvin, one of the African-American basketball players falsely identified as taking drugs, he suggests that her outsider status is just “some big old act” for her (“Normal is the Watchword”). Even though the show does not discourage viewers from seeing some truth in Weevil’s and Kelvin’s accusations, it reinforces her as a vigilante hero outside the mainstream. As mentioned above, Veronica ultimately takes on both of these cases and proves
Weevil’s and Kelvin’s innocence; she seems spurred by their accusations to prove that she is still ‘one of them,’ marginalized by the mainstream and on the side of racial and class justice. What goes unsaid in their accusations, and throughout the show, however, is that Veronica’s whiteness provides her the privilege, that racially-othered characters do not have, to move between insider and outsider positions.

Bolte argues that Veronica’s ability to successfully integrate the dichotomous identities of high school girl and detective “is a result of Veronica’s belief in fluidity of identity, her unwillingness to be shackled by categories established by the social structures from which she is alienated” (106). Bolte obscures, however, that Veronica’s fluid identity - her ability to move between social groups, to transgress class boundaries, as well as to use her identity to practice investigation - is entirely a result of her white privilege. Veronica’s whiteness (an integral part of her normative attractiveness and femininity) allows her to claim an identity as a class outsider without it being permanently marked on her body. While Wallace graduates from social liminality to more mainstream acceptance by joining the basketball team (a progression that largely reduces him to a stereotype within his already-stereotypical sidekick role), Weevil’s racial identity permanently marks him as an outsider to the elite 09er clique; even if he attained the social or cultural capital to join their ranks (as Veronica does by dating Duncan), he would still be othered by his appearance. Veronica’s whiteness not only allows her to traverse class boundaries, it allows her to use her femininity to manipulate people in her surveillance and detective work. Brathwaite writes, “Veronica constantly mimics social ideals of femininity and feminine behavior [as] her means for taking over the typically male position of detective, for the threat of her ‘wrong body in the expected place’ is mitigated by her parodic performance of girlishness” (143). The ‘wrong body’ to which she refers, citing Linda Mizejewski, implies the
expectation of a male detective disrupted by the presence of a female body. However, Veronica’s performances of girlishness rely entirely on the fact that she possesses exactly the “right” body - petite, blonde, attractive, and white - to gain the access and attention she needs to do her job. Brathwaite specifically cites the first season episode “The Wrath of Con,” in which Veronica switches between disguises as a ‘dumb blonde’ in a tight pink sweater and short skirt, a gamer in an anime-style schoolgirl outfit and black wig, and a conservatively-dressed student touring a college. Veronica’s normative whiteness allows her unmitigated access to various public and private locations (a college campus, a local video game bar), and gives her a high level of control over whether she is viewed as “respectably” feminine or in a highly sexualized way. Her ability to control the perception of her body relies on whiteness existing as a kind of blank slate on which various characteristics can be written without leaving an essentializing mark. She can behave as a ‘dumb blonde’ without that connotation being permanently branded on her. As Dyer suggests, the power of whiteness lies in its simultaneous invisibility and ubiquitous visibility, and Veronica’s detective work embodies this contradiction. She utilizes the unmarked nature of her whiteness to achieve visibility on her own terms. The central role of her racial identity in her detective work reveals that Veronica’s ability to empower herself through surveillance is predicated on her whiteness; she gains the ability to look back, to reclaim the gaze that objectifies her through her normative identity, not through her class outsider status as the show and its critics seem to suggest. Even as the show politicizes surveillance and, specifically, exposes the danger posed to marginalized groups by the hypervisibility of institutionalized surveillance, Veronica Mars leaves white hegemony largely intact by suggesting that whiteness is a condition of resistance and empowerment.
The beautiful blonde “girls in peril” on *Veronica Mars* and *Pretty Little Liars* further serve to assert the unmarked dominance of whiteness, and, specifically, white girlhood as that worth looking at and worth protecting. In *Spectacular Girls*, Projansky uses “girls in peril” to refer to the dead or kidnapped girls frequently depicted on magazine covers as both vulnerable and glamorous. Both shows narrativize the media spectacularization of Lilly Kane’s and Alison DiLaurentis’s tragedies. After a flashback in *Veronica Mars*’s pilot episode explaining Lilly’s mysterious death, Veronica adds in voiceover, “But everyone knows this story. The murder of Lilly Kane. It was on the cover of *People* magazine. It made *Entertainment Tonight*. The town flooded with journalists.” The show uses the “girl in peril” trope self-consciously, acknowledging the audience’s familiarity with the narrative but without undermining the story’s sense of drama. In a similar narrative move, but with less self-conscious snark, the pilot of *Pretty Little Liars* takes place one year after Alison’s disappearance. The first shot after the opening credits shows the front page of the *Rosewood Observer* newspaper featuring a smiling close-up of Alison with the headline “Still Missing.” Aria remarks on the media coverage, saying, “On the news, they’re calling it the anniversary of Alison’s disappearance, like it’s a party or something;” and later she sees a “Missing” poster on the wall of a bar, again with Alison’s photo and the words, “Would now be sixteen.” As Spencer notes, Alison is “gone but she’s everywhere;” the “girl in peril” remains hypervisible in the media. Significantly, Lilly Kane comes from one of Neptune’s wealthiest families and the Liars’ community is solidly upper middle-class, so both missing girls have the class privilege to attract continued media attention. Projansky argues that the cultural treatment of girl celebrities - including these girls in peril and who are necessarily white- represents a constant vacillation between anxiety over and adoration of girls, captured in the kind of ubiquitous media coverage depicted in *Veronica Mars*. 
and *Pretty Little Liars*. The media constructs an idealized middle-class, white girlhood that is in need of protection, and as Projansky suggests, “the more pervasive this ideology, the more it obscures other versions of girlhood” (Projansky 187). Both shows use narratives of surveillance to evoke the cultural anxiety over the sexuality and safety of middle-class, white girls in peril, further asserting both the value and the objectification of middle-class, white girls’ bodies.

Lilly Kane and Alison DiLaurentis both become celebrities in their suburban towns for their tragic deaths. According to Projansky, “As celebrities, even if they are only celebrities for fifteen minutes, these [girls in peril] seem to be entirely available to us; both their bodies and their selves are public - they belong to us” (Projansky 60). Surveillance in *Veronica Mars* and *Pretty Little Liars* serves to narrativize the making public of girls’ bodies and its connection to anxiety over white girls’ sexuality. In the season one finale of *Veronica Mars*, “Leave It to Beaver,” a flashback depicts Lilly complaining to Veronica about her mother’s obsessive snooping - it’s own form of domestic surveillance. Lilly says she has been leaving “phone numbers on matchbooks for Tyrone and Leroy and Chico around the room” to give her mother “a little drama in her life.” Lilly has made up the names, but, she says, “they seem to really upset Mom.” Lilly’s tactic of using stereotypically non-white names and her mother’s negative reaction reveal the racialized investment in protecting her sexuality, which is inseparable from protecting her whiteness. Like Lilly, Alison is hypersexualized, and frequently linked to dangerous older men, a characterization that potentially places at least some of the responsibility for their victimization on their own shoulders. In “The First Secret,” a season two episode that takes place before Alison’s disappearance, we learn that Alison was receiving text messages from ‘A’, the first of which reads, “I’m watching you.” By asserting that her body is public, the text message simultaneously calls attention to Alison’s availability “for our consuming pleasure”
and “insists on a protectionist response” (Projansky 60). As I explore in the first chapter, girl spectators’ may experience the voyeurism implicit in this moment differently than adult or male audiences; however, I would argue that the shows still contribute to cultural narratives that value white girls’ bodies over the bodies of non-white girls; so even if young female viewers do not experience the adult “protectionist response” to which Projansky refers, the shows invoke, and at times critique, a rhetoric about their own vulnerability and sexuality with which girls are familiar. The opening credit sequence of *Pretty Little Liars* ironically evokes the extent to which the imperiled girl’s body becomes available for consumption even as it reinforces the white body’s value. The brief montage depicts a series of close-ups of a white female body - it appears to be a mannequin, and implies Alison’s corpse - being beautified before being placed in a coffin. First mascara is put on one eye, then the lips brushed with color, a high-heeled shoe fastened, finger-nails painted, and long blonde hair curled with an iron. Even, or perhaps especially, after death, the young white girl is styled “to be looked at,” to invoke Mulvey. The perfect hair and makeup reveal the idealization of this girl, her worthiness of adoration. The montage editing reduces the girl to the pieces of her body, breaking her up into consumable parts. This construction of girls’ femininity, however, is predicated on an ideal of innocent white girlhood, the representational ubiquity of which asserts its worth and desirability. The narrativized surveillance and spectacularization of Lilly Kane and Alison DiLaurentis both comment on and reassert the innocent white ideal, as well as the girlhood sexuality that threatens to disrupt it.

Lilly and Alison reinforce Projansky’s notion that whiteness is “a condition of [the girl star’s] visibility,” but *Pretty Little Liars* ’ Emily Fields, played by Shay Mitchell, challenges the claim to some degree (43). While Emily’s character in the book series is white, Mitchell herself
is half-Filipina and half-Western European (Chau). For the vast majority of the show, however, Emily’s ambiguous racial identity goes unmentioned, evoking a post-racial world in which race does not affect girls’ vulnerability or empowerment through visibility. Emily - a star athlete, sweet girl-next-door, and a lesbian - is, for the most part, equally subject to ‘A’s’ torment and has equal access to resistance compared to her white fellow protagonists. The show thus has the potential to undermine the construction of white girls as those worth looking at and protecting; but by failing to acknowledge her race, it erases any specificity in the relationship between girls of color and visibility, and depoliticizes the consequences of surveillance. Projansky suggests that the media makes use of racially ambiguous girls for their presumed broad appeal to non-white audiences, writing, “these girls’ racialization is a marketing tool, but not a topic of discussion” (73). *Pretty Little Liars* engages this notion both in its production and within the narrative. A casting breakdown reportedly revealed that producers were searching for “Asian, Hispanic, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern or Native American” actresses to play Emily from the start (Chau). The list of various non-white (and non-black) ethnicities certainly provokes accusations of tokenism and undermines hope that the show would address the specificity of racialized experience. In the season four episode “Gamma Zeta Die!,” Emily meets with a college admissions advisor who helps to “rebrand” her now that she is ineligible for swimming scholarships. He suggests that she look into a “Polynesian Studies major” at one school, and asks, “Are you Hawaiian?” She responds, “Filipino, Korean, Irish, Scottish… I’m not really interested in Polynesian Studies.” He tells her, “There’s no harm in faking it for a while.”

4 Interestingly, Emily’s racial otherness is accentuated by her relationship with Maya St. Germain, whose racial identity is unnamed on the show, though she is played by light-skinned African American actress Bianca Lawson. One of very few characters of color and bisexual, Maya potentially expands models of girlhood offered by the show. However, her sexual forwardness and experience as well as her drug use simultaneously reinforce stereotypes of African-American women as exotic and hyper-sexual. By masking such stereotypes in a post-racial discourse, the show further bolsters white hegemony.
exchange reasserts both the benefit of non-white racial ambiguity and Emily’s desire not to be defined by her race (she wants to study biology). His assertion that there is “no harm in faking it” reduces her ethnicity to a marketing tool. The audience is not meant to agree with his stance - Emily seems proud of her mixed heritage and taken aback by his suggestion. However, the show has otherwise established a world in which Emily’s racial identity seems to carry no essentialized connotations and to invoke no particular discrimination. Thus, even as she challenges “the whiteness of the can-do girl,” she contributes “to a postracial discourse that makes racial difference (only) a commodity” (Projansky 77). Emily does, however, face discrimination for her sexuality, and the show openly critiques heterosexism and acknowledges how Emily’s relationship to surveillance is determined, at least in part, by being a lesbian. The show’s willingness to confront this aspect of Emily’s ‘otherness,’ her sexual non-normativity, tellingly contrasts with its masking of racial difference through a postracial attitude. Projansky argues that the spectacularization of racially-ambiguous girls without attention to their “specific racialization” in fact works to “deny rather than to acknowledge racial difference” (Projansky 77). So even as Emily challenges the racist notion that white girls are the ones most dangerously subject to surveillance - and thus, worth looking at and worth protecting - the masking of her non-white racial identity through postracial discourse ultimately fails to challenge the unstated dominance of whiteness.

*Pretty Little Liars* takes place in the fictional but evidently upper-middle class Philadelphia suburb of Rosewood, allowing the show to eschew class differences almost entirely and silently reinforcing the normativity of specifically upper-middle class white girlhood. *Gossip

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5 The following chapter addresses the role of surveillance in Emily’s coming-out.
6 It seems worth noting that Troian Bellisario, who plays Spencer Hastings, is bi-racial as well; her mother, actress and producer Deborah Pratt, is African-American. The Hastings, however, embody a stereotypical WASP identity, further erasing racial difference through casting as well as narrative.
Girl, however, centralizes class differences, but has a similar effect of erasing racial difference in its unremitting valorization of elite white girlhood. Gossip Girl’s narration, voiced by Kristen Bell, ostensibly offers a satiric lens through which to critique the classism of the “Upper East Siders” whom she addresses. When Nate Archibald’s family loses its fortune and Nate is discovered squatting in his family’s now-empty house, Bell’s voice alerts us, “Poor little Nate is - yuck - poor” (“Chuck in Real Life”). When Blair loses her Queen Bee status at NYU in the show’s third season, she bemoans that “the minute you cross 14th Street people forget there's a class system” (“The Freshman”). The exaggerated overttness of their comments is meant to be a source of humor more so than identification, potentially calling attention to the constructed nature of class boundaries. Even as the show satirizes the classism of the Upper East Side, it also reveals the material consequences of rigid class boundaries for those outside of the elite class by dramatizing the different effects of surveillance. However, Gossip Girl tempers its ostensible politicization of surveillance by eliding race as a factor. In the season one episode “School Lies,” a group of students break into their prep school pool to throw an after-hours party. The school administration finds a cell phone containing photos of the party that incriminate all of the Upper East Sider protagonists and Dan Humphrey, the middle-class Brooklyn resident who attends their school on scholarship. The wealthy students all agree to remain silent about who started the party, doubting that there could be any real consequences for their actions, despite threats of expulsion. Dan, however, does not have the same security. He tells Serena, “We are not in the same boat here. I’m on a partial scholarship, my parents have no way of buying my way back into this school or any other.” The storyline makes explicit the differing consequences of visibility based on social class, drawing attention to Dan’s distinct vulnerability. However, the fact that the pictures are found on a cell phone left by a student undermines the institutional
nature of much surveillance, particularly in urban spaces like Manhattan. As Lyon suggests, “in going about life in urban spaces, surveillance is experienced constantly,” and not neutrally (95). Lyon offers the example of CCTV screens in the UK, writing that “if you are young, black and male, for instance, it is more likely that your image will come up on CCTV screens than images of other group members also on the street” (94). The racialized nature of surveillance is ignored entirely because of Dan’s whiteness, but the cell phone photos in “School Lies” do enact a kind of social sorting similar to that of institutional surveillance, singling out Dan as uniquely vulnerable. However, the episode ultimately downplays the consequences of even these class divisions when Serena selflessly admits to starting the party in order to protect Dan. Serena is let off with some community service hours, instead of the promised expulsion, and Dan sarcastically calls the lowered sentence “shocking.” They flirtatiously banter about their “upstairs/downstairs” dynamic and the special treatment Serena and those like her receive. When a private car sent by Serena’s mother arrives just as Serena insists on her equal treatment, Serena tries to prove her point by telling the driver, “It’s ok, I’ll walk.” Their exchange again makes explicit that, yes, the wealthy Upper East Siders do receive special treatment and have privilege inaccessible to those without their financial resources. However, it simultaneously indicates that these differences are all in good fun. Dan ultimately faces no different consequences, and the difference between he and Serena is simply that she is driven home in a fancy car and he takes the subway. This narrative works, in part, because of Dan’s whiteness. Like Veronica Mars, Dan is unmarked by class and bears no physical distinction from his wealthier peers. Dan may not have their class privilege, but he shares the white privilege that allows him to move freely between Brooklyn and the Upper East Side. By offering Dan as the principal class outsider, Gossip Girl obscures race as inseparably tied to the class structure the show exposes and satirizes.
Vanessa Abrams (Jessica Szohr), Dan’s ambiguously mixed-race childhood best friend, is the only non-white principal character on *Gossip Girl*, and her presence complicates the valorization of whiteness on the show without truly undermining its invisible hegemony. Vanessa is never able to assimilate into the Upper East Side community to the extent that Dan and Jenny, his blonde and beautiful younger sister, are. However, she largely embraces her outsider status, and, as an amateur documentary filmmaker, she turns her own surveilling gaze on the Upper East Siders. From her position of relative invisibility, associated with her race and class, Vanessa can observe and document the hyper-visible elite - ostensibly an exertion of her agency, although she still requires Dan’s connections for entry into their community. But when Vanessa attempts to manipulate surveillance in the same way that the Upper East Siders do, particularly as blackmail, she repeatedly fails and is dramatically shunned by the white protagonists.⁷ In one rare occurrence, Vanessa enlists Blair’s help to use illicit surveillance footage to protect Nate Archibald, a sometime love interest to both girls. When Vanessa inadvertently derails Blair’s scheme, Blair angrily tells her, “I told you to do nothing,” stripping her of any agency within their Upper East Side world (“The Ex-Files”). The show continually reinscribes Vanessa as an outsider unable to join the white, wealthy community to which Dan and Jenny can gain access because of their race. To some extent, Vanessa dramatizes the effect of race on one’s relationship to surveillance; she is excluded from the power and protections conferred on Upper East Siders by virtue of their visibility in a way that even Dan and Jenny are not. However, as with Emily in *Pretty Little Liars*, Vanessa’s race goes unmentioned on the show; her outsider status is only ever explicitly connected to her class background. Her exclusion from the Upper East Side community, then, reinforces the valorization of white girlhood without ever acknowledging the centrality of race to that social configuration.

⁷ See *Gossip Girl* episodes “The Ex-Files,” “Goodbye, Columbia”
While *Gossip Girl* gestures toward the politicization of surveillance, the narrative centralization of the Gossip Girl blog and the constant threat of surveillance it poses ultimately construct visibility as a desirable form of social capital. The show thereby reinforces the valuation of white girls’ bodies that is established by ubiquitous media representation, obscuring the role of class and white privilege in securing the benefits of visibility without the dangers. In the season two finale, “The Goodbye Gossip Girl,” Gossip Girl has been spreading the news of Serena’s brief jail stint, and Blair tells her, “You’re famous because you were arrested.” Because of Serena’s whiteness and wealth, her criminality does not become essentialized; it merely serves as its own form of cultural capital that attracts the paparazzi, emphasizing both the public adoration and anxiety over her girlhood. Blair remarks that Gossip Girl has “plagued [Serena] more than anyone,” reinforcing the notion of the beautiful, blonde, white girl as the one most worth looking at. In this context, Blair refers to Gossip Girl’s attention negatively; the blog invades their privacy and makes them into spectacles. However, when Gossip Girl issues a blast at the students’ graduation assigning them all insulting superlatives, Serena becomes particularly upset at her label as “totally irrelevant” after today. Visibility, achieved through the constant surveillance of Gossip Girl, is relevance for Serena, whose normative appearance and wealth mitigate any negative consequences of being seen. In the same blast, Gossip Girl calls Dan “the ultimate insider.” Dan contests the superlative, but Blair reminds him, “You’re friends with Nate Archibald, you played on the soccer team, you got into Yale… You got published in *The New Yorker*… plus you dated the most popular girl in school.” Once again, the role of Dan’s white privilege in his insider/outsider position goes unstated; Dan, too, benefits from surveillance as his presence on the Gossip Girl blog assures his place in the social world of the Upper East Side. The series finale reveals that, in fact, Dan was Gossip Girl all along, and created the blog in
order to write himself into that elite social circle. Dan is quickly forgiven by the rest of the Upper East Siders for the social destruction he has wrought over the years and they once again acknowledge his insider status in spite of his Brooklyn background. Both his whiteness and his maleness allow for such total assimilation, though neither is explicitly acknowledged. Even as *Gossip Girl* superficially attends to class differences, its depiction of surveillance as a form of social capital largely obscures the institutional racism and classism that manifests itself in real-life urban surveillance practices. By promoting the hyper-visibility of privileged white girlhood as desirable, the show reinforces the invisibility of working-class girls of color while eliding the potential negative effects of surveillance on all girls.

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8 Dan’s ability to become an insider contrasts sharply with the inability of lower-class girls and young women on the show to do the same. The characters of Juliet Sharp (season four) and Ivy Dickens (seasons five and six), young white women from lower class backgrounds, attempt to hide their lowly origins and join the elite Upper East Siders, in part by manipulating them through the Gossip Girl blog. Unlike Vanessa, they are not marked by racial difference and they temporarily assimilate. However, when the Upper East Siders discover the young women’s deception, they use Gossip Girl to socially destroy Juliet and Ivy. Jenny Humphrey, too, faces a much different fate than her brother, ultimately banished from Manhattan (and the show) by Blair. These storylines, along with Vanessa’s, highlight the complex interplay of femininity, race, and class in the valuation of girlhood through visibility and warrant further consideration.
“Our Bodies Are Not Our Own”: Girlhood Sexuality and the Disciplinary Gaze

In the Season One episode of Pretty Little Liars “Know Your Frenemies,” ‘A’ forces Hanna, who formerly had an eating disorder, to eat six cupcakes in one sitting. This short scene demonstrates the kind of bodily control ‘A’ exerts over the Liars throughout the series, and exemplifies how surveillance functions in teen girl television as a disciplinary tool to regulate the body. In her feminist extension of Foucault’s conception of the disciplinary society, “Foucault, Feminism and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Susan Bartky writes, “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and no one in particular” (Bartky 75). In Pretty Little Liars, ‘A’ serves as the distillation of that diffuse disciplinarian. Later in the series, ‘A’ is discovered to be an anonymous team of people, but even early in the series, we are led to believe that ‘A’ could be anyone - no one is free of suspicion and thus the Liars are always potentially being watched. In “Know Your Frenemies,” Hanna finds a note from ‘A’ in her locker ordering her to “Go to 21 Main St. Ask for Hefty Hanna’s Order” immediately after a conversation that leaves Hanna fearing that her mother Ashley will go to prison on felony charges. The use of Hanna’s old nickname implies that not only does ‘A’ see everything in the present, but s/he has always seen everything and knows the secrets of the Liars’ past as well. Knowing that ‘A’ has discovered Ashley’s crime, Hanna follows the directions. The moment she walks out of the bakery where ‘A’ has directed her, Hanna receives a text instructing her to “Sit there and eat every one,” and we see that ‘A’ has ordered six cupcakes with frosting pigs drawn on the top. The timely arrival of ‘A’s’ text prompts Hanna to look around her, searching for evidence of ‘A’s’ whereabouts. ‘A’ seems to be everywhere and see everything.
We cut back to Hanna two cupcakes in, looking dejected as she bites into her third, and three anonymous high school boys in letter jackets point and mock. A flashback shows Hanna, sad and overweight, having just eaten an entire pie. Alison walks in and catches her trying to hide the empty pie dish, and sympathetically tells her, “You don’t have to feel this way. I can show you how to get rid of it.” As Hanna later explains, Alison showed her how to throw up after binge eating. In the present as well as the flashback, the disciplining of Hanna’s body occurs not only through the more insidious surveillance of ‘A,’ but through her visibility to others that enforce patriarchal body norms through various practices. The jocks oinking at Hanna as she eats exert a patriarchal gaze that denigrates female consumption, indirectly encouraging her to purge in order to avoid their derision in the future. In flashback, Alison expresses sympathy for Hanna, who breaks down crying in her arms, and offers purging as a solution to Hanna’s problem. By telling her “You don’t have to feel this way,” Alison places the onus on Hanna, not to resist oppressive body norms, but to live up to them. Bartky describes femininity itself as a “disciplinary project” that is not only imposed externally but is “taken up and practiced by women against the pervasive background of bodily deficiency” (Bartky 71). Alison reinforces the notion that Hanna’s body is deficient and offers purging as a way for her to self-regulate, the ideal effect of the constant visibility imposed by a patriarchal disciplinary society, according to feminist critics of Foucault. Hanna becomes the “docile body” produced by disciplinary surveillance, the body that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 136). The episode returns to Hanna in the present, and the despair on her face as she eats the final cupcakes highlights the lack of control she feels in that moment, the extent to which she is subject to ‘A’s’ will. She receives another text from ‘A’ reading “You know how to get rid of it,”
recalling Alison’s offer in the flashback and reinforcing the notion that girls enact a disciplinary gaze on each other.

‘A’ uses Alison’s words to manipulate Hanna into binge eating, and purging becomes the means of “improving” her body, initiated externally by Alison and ‘A,’ but an act that must ultimately be executed by Hanna herself. Hanna goes into the bathroom, and as she looks into the mirror, the camera racks focus to the toilet behind her, evoking her own focus and the psychological lure of purging. But she resists the temptation, angrily kicking in the door of the stall and roughly pulling out a paper towel, on which ‘A’ has written “Oink oink.” Hanna’s exposure to ‘A’ seems to extend even here, but as she pulls down the next paper towels she finds it covered in hundred dollar bills - the money Hanna lost and that will protect Ashley from arrest. Hanna stuffs the money in her purse and leaves the bathroom triumphant - she got the reward without having to compromise herself by throwing up. Much of the feminist revision and recuperation of Foucault’s work uncovers possibilities for resistance within his model of the disciplinary society and the docile bodies it produces. As Margaret McLaren writes in *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, “Power produces not only docile bodies, but resistant bodies,” and Foucault asserts that power is not unidirectionally imposed from above but in fact, comes from below (83). Even under ‘A’s’ constant gaze, Hanna has agency and is not bound to follow ‘A’s’ orders. That Hanna finds the money even though she doesn’t actually purge may indicate a shortcoming in ‘A’s’ vision, or just that ‘A’ was more concerned with Hanna’s public humiliation and self-doubt, but she views it as a small victory in ‘A’s’ game. The victory, however, and the resistance to ‘A’s’ rules that it represents, is tempered by Hannah’s continued exposure and vulnerability to ‘A’s’ disciplinary surveillance, and, on a metatextual level, by Hannah’s complete adherence to patriarchal body norms. Ashley Benson is no longer wearing
the padding she dons in the flashback, and with her styled blonde hair and perfectly made-up face, she physically adheres to the disciplinary practices of femininity.

To varying degrees, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Veronica Mars* all address the power of surveillance to control girls’ bodies and regulate their sexuality. Writing from the perspective of specifically working-class girls and women, Vivyan Adair suggests, “Ultimately, we come to recognize that our bodies are not our own; that they are, rather, public property” (Adair 33). In many ways, her assertion applies to all girls, and this section addresses how surveillance functions in teen girl TV to strip girls of ownership over their bodies, though never without possibilities for resistance. Their lives and sexualities become public, sometimes without their consent and sometimes with it; and the shows explore not just the consequences of unwilling exposure, but the anxiety that arises when girls choose to make their lives public. Whether through self-revelation or more active resistance, all three shows consider ways of exerting agency under ubiquitous surveillance. By no means does Foucault’s disciplinary society, ideally manifested in the Panopticon prison structure in which prisoners can be constantly monitored from a central watchtower, map neatly and without tension onto the world of these shows, but it does offer a lens through which to approach the effects of constant surveillance on girls. As McLaren suggests, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* is centrally concerned with “the way that social norms operate on the body,” and teen girl TV similarly depicts how girls’ sexual behavior is influenced and regulated by surveillance-enforced social norms (McLaren 81). David Lyon and Zygmunt Bauman aptly challenge the applicability of Foucault’s 1979 text to contemporary society, in which surveillance is not limited to enclosed

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9 While I will not be discussing *Veronica Mars* in this section, the season one episode “Like a Virgin” dramatizes a policing of girls’ sexuality through surveillance similar to what we see in the *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* episodes described here. The show depoliticizes the disciplinary power of surveillance to control girls’ bodies by emphasizing the discipline that girls enact on each other and deemphasizing the patriarchal structures that benefit from such policing.
spaces such as prisons and schools, nor does most surveillance actually see people; it obtains and processes data. Certainly, these shows do not confine surveillance to institutionalized spaces, but they do focus largely, if not entirely, on visual surveillance and the effects of perpetual visibility for girls. Much of contemporary surveillance studies, including the work of Lyon and Bauman, largely fails to address gender-specific consequences of exposure to surveillance. Foucault’s work similarly elided gender, but as Adair¹⁰ points out, his model of a disciplinary society sheds light specifically on the way that women and girls are disciplined to be feminine subjects. I will use Foucault’s model, particularly as it has been reworked by feminist scholars, here to the extent that it applies to the worlds of Gossip Girl and Pretty Little Liars and that it exposes the intersecting disciplinary practices of femininity and sexuality depicted on the shows.

In Gossip Girl, technology itself, in the form of the Gossip Girl blog and all those who contribute to it, forms a kind of panoptic structure. While Gossip Girl does not literally, physically confine the Upper East Siders who star in her blog, she tracks their movements and behaviors, which ultimately serves a regulatory function. Writing about the function of gossip in women’s literature, Giselle Bastin suggests that gossip has the ability “to map social perimeters and survey insider/outsider relationships,” both major aspects of Gossip Girl’s role on the show and an ability that engenders the policing of those relationships (Bastin 116). The pilot episode of Gossip Girl opens with Kristen Bell, in voiceover as the eponymous narrator, declaring as she does in every episode, “Hey Upper East Siders. Gossip Girl here.” Immediately, the audience is welcomed into an insider status explicitly based on location (and all of its class connotations). She continues, “One of my many sources, Melanie91, sends us this: Spotted at Grand Central, bags in hand: Serena van der Woodsen… Don’t believe me? See for yourselves. Lucky for us,

¹⁰ Adair’s “Disciplined and Punished” uses Foucault’s argument to suggest that systems of power police working-class women through bodily inscriptions of poverty.
Melanie91 sent proof. Thanks for the photo, Mel!” During the voiceover, the camera shows a young brunette following and snapping a photo of Serena at the train station, just returned from a year at boarding school. Gossip Girl immediately establishes that her power extends beyond herself to her “many sources” that serve as her eyes and ears everywhere. Briefly, we see the image of Serena on the screen of Melanie91’s cell phone, until the camera racks focus to Serena herself. Bastin conceives gossip itself as a form of surveillance, and the show makes the connection explicit; Gossip Girl, a blog that aggregates and disseminates gossip, relies on everyday technology like cell phones being used for surveillance at any given moment. The literal blurring between the camera’s gaze and the gaze of the cell phone lets the television viewer take on the role of surveiller; as in the opening narration, we are formally conflated with those who follow and contribute to Gossip Girl. Bell’s narration refers to Serena as “Our ‘It’ Girl,” the possessive pronoun indicating ownership and the title affirming Serena’s ultimate insider status. Gossip Girl not only maps but constructs Serena’s status, and does so in contrast to that of Dan Humphrey, who sees Serena at the train station and whom Gossip Girl refers to as “Lonely Boy.” She reveals that Dan is in love with Serena, and sardonically laments, “If only she knew who he was. Everyone knows Serena and everyone is talking.” The camera cuts to a brief montage of various teens on the streets of New York looking shocked as the news of Serena’s return is delivered to their cell phones. In just these opening minutes of the series, Gossip Girl establishes the complete lack of privacy in this Upper East Side world. While the ability to track, map, and regulate relationships is somewhat centralized in the figure of Gossip Girl, her disciplinary power lies in the constant visibility she engenders through her sources. Foucault writes that within the Panopticon, “inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (Foucault 201). These opening moments of the series establish
that the power of Gossip Girl’s surveillance lies in its diffuseness, in the fact that anyone can momentarily embody the disciplinarian by engaging in Gossip Girl’s game. Gossip Girl could not exist without those who are vulnerable to her participating in the surveillance of others.

Gossip Girl’s power to track people’s movements through constant surveillance and to construct, as much as survey, the power dynamics of social relations contributes to her role as an arbiter of social norms. Her snarky narration reinscribes, even as it superficially critiques, the rules of their Upper East Side community. By asking, for instance, “Doesn’t Chuck know a party’s not a party til someone crashes?” Gossip Girl determines what kinds of events earn social capital - a value raised by the visibility of being on Gossip Girl in the first place (“Bad News Blair”). In the episode in which Serena and Blair attend their debutante ball, Gossip Girl declares, “It’s that time of year again when the mere act of descending a staircase means you’re a woman” (“Hi, Society”). Ostensibly, Gossip Girl is satirizing the cotillion tradition through the absurdity of her assertion. However, for the characters within the show, the tradition carries weight, and so viewers are emotionally invested in the social rules even as Gossip Girl lightly mocks them. Dan may find the debutante ball to be “totally classist” and “antiquated,” but his little sister Jenny, who longs to join Blair’s elite clique, calls it “everything a girl could ask for.”

The attention and visibility of the Ball afforded by Gossip Girl, satirical or not, ultimately reinforces its genuine social value. Significantly, a Debutante Ball is meant to be a girl’s entrance into public society and, as Gossip Girl notes, her entry into womanhood. It also signals her eligibility for marriage, traditionally the only acceptable public expression of female sexuality. The Ball, then, reinforces the notion that girlhood, and girlhood sexuality in particular, is meant to be private. By reinscribing the symbolic meaning of the Ball, even ironically, Gossip Girl helps to construct, or at least bolster, the social norms that regulate girls’ bodies. Bastin
notes that gossip is used to “define the guidelines of what constitutes acceptable and non-
acceptable forms of behavior,” and the publicity afforded by Gossip Girl is frequently used to
police girls’ sexuality on the show (Bastin 117). In the pilot episode, Chuck sees Jenny for the
first time at a party. Finding her attractive, he asks a friend, “ Anything about her on Gossip
Girl?” The friend responds, “ No... ‘ til you’re done with her,” the assumption being that Chuck
will seduce her and the encounter will end up publicized on the gossip blog (“Pilot”). Her
absence on Gossip Girl carries a connotation of innocence as well as anonymity; her life up to
now, theoretically, has been private. The language of the friend’s response strips Jenny of her
agency in the matter of her sexuality and its publicity. Chuck will happen to her and, because of
the ubiquity of Gossip Girl’s diffuse surveillance, it will be put on Gossip Girl. Jenny’s ability to
control what she does with her body seems intimately connected to her ability to decide whether
those decisions are public or private; surveillance, in the form of Gossip Girl, takes that control
away from her.

The Season Two episode “There Might be Blood” further reveals the policing function of
surveillance with regard to girls’ sexuality, as well as the oppressive self-policing that results
from ubiquitous surveillance. Bastin suggests that gossip functions panoptically, “ in a two-way,
or multi-directional motion; as a form of micro-surveillance, gossip preserves social order from
without, but also from within through the self-governing of individuals” (Bastin 119). Again,
Gossip Girl literalizes Bastin’s analogy between gossip and surveillance, and, as mentioned
above, the Gossip Girl blog fills the role of inscribing and enforcing social norms and relations.
But those norms only carry weight if they are internalized by, in this case, Gossip Girl’s largely
young female users. In “There Might Be Blood,” Blair babysits a young teenager, Emma, who
has decided that she needs to go out and lose her virginity that night. Emma’s friend has been
bragging about plans to lose her virginity to a Lacrosse captain, and Emma does not want her friend to “beat” her to it. On her way out the door, with a fake ID and against Blair’s wishes, Emma declares, “This body is open for business.” While Emma’s commercial language to describe her sexuality may be troubling, she also clearly expresses her own agency, as if her body is her property to “open” to whomever she wants. Blair’s primary goal for the rest of the episode becomes to stop Emma from losing her virginity, a conscious, if potentially misguided, decision made on Emma’s part. Blair, then, serves the role of policing Emma, who has largely internalized the norms exposed and imposed by Gossip Girl. Emma tells Blair that she has decided to change her plans, and attend one club before the other, after she “checked out Gossip Girl,” and she later tells Chuck in awe, “I read about you on Gossip Girl,” before attempting to seduce him. Emma learns from Gossip Girl where to go and how to behave, internalizing the social values constructed and reinforced by the blog. We’re meant to view her as silly and naive for being taken in by Gossip Girl to this extent, while Blair and Serena, our main points of identification, theoretically resist such manipulation. The show thus downplays Gossip Girl’s power to control girls’ actions by belittling the girls who take it seriously.

Simultaneously, however, other people use the blog to regulate her movements. When Emma manages to escape Blair’s watchful eye, Serena tells Blair that she “put out an APB on Gossip Girl with Emma’s Facebook picture on it. Every girl in Manhattan will be on the lookout.” Serena uses the language of law enforcement to describe Gossip Girl, literalizing the blog’s policing function. Significantly, Serena refers to Gossip Girl’s users as “every girl in Manhattan,” although we know that male characters on the show receive Gossip Girl blasts as well. By feminizing the blog’s readers/sources, Serena reinforces the notion that girls are primarily responsible for policing each other - here, perhaps, positively, in the sense of “saving”
Emma from losing her virginity. However, the feminization of surveillance used to discipline girls’ sexualities seriously obscures the patriarchal values that are upheld by such policing. Serena receives word that Emma used her credit card at a bar, emphasizing the power of data surveillance, not just visual surveillance, to regulate girls’ movements. After Emma narrowly escapes Blair again and leaves the bar with a stranger, Blair assures Serena, “We’ll save Little Red Riding Hood from the Big Bad Wolf.” The narrative Blair offers, then, is one of young female innocence victimized and corrupted, undermining Emma’s assertiveness and agency with regard to her sexuality.

Blair and Chuck ultimately convince Emma to leave with them instead of having sex with the random man she picked up at the bar by showing her the latest Gossip Girl blast revealing that Emma’s friend has already lost her virginity. Outraged, Emma asks, “She lost her virginity and her Gossip Girl cherry in the same night? How did she get on Gossip Girl?” As with Jenny, the show reinforces the connection between sexuality and publicity. To lose her virginity is also to lose her privacy, but here, Emma views both as positive, desirable developments. However, Blair has used surveillance to prevent her from exerting her agency with regards to both her sexuality and her privacy. Blair comforts a disappointed Emma by explaining that she should lose her virginity to someone she loves, comparing her favorably to her friend, whom she calls, “the Lacrosstitute;” and in doing so, Blair teaches Emma the “right” way to exert her own sexuality by degrading the choices another girl has made about her own body. Significantly, they are only able to critique those choices, a disciplining practice, because it has become public through Gossip Girl’s surveillance. Again, the show suggests that girls primarily police each other, denying the larger patriarchal structures that most benefit from the social norms that regulate and obscure girls’ sexuality. For a show largely centered around girls’ ambivalent
relationship to visibility, “There Might Be Blood” more conservatively associates a “right”
girlhood with privacy and a “deviant” girlhood with publicity. The episode constructs this
dichotomy as a choice for girls to make, but its moralism denies that there could be any
empowerment found in choosing publicity and active sexuality. Doing so both obscures the
powerful nature of panoptic surveillance and the internalization of oppressive norms it
engenders, and strips girls of active possibilities for resistance.

As discussed in the second chapter, the stakes of visibility for wealthy, white girls like
Gossip Girl’s Serena and Blair are relatively low; their privilege protects them from most serious
consequences and they are largely able to use publicity to their advantage. Pretty Little Liars’
‘A’ is a much more explicitly vindictive source of disciplinary surveillance than Gossip Girl, but
even so, the suburban, upper-middle-class status of the Liars imposes norms of decorum and
conformity. Throughout the series, the Liars challenge their parents concerns about what the
neighbors and community will think of their daughters’ behavior. The adults on the show
frequently express anxiety over what their children will choose to make public, especially with
regard to their sexuality. The stakes of imposed privacy are perhaps highest, however, for Emily
Fields. The role of ‘A’s’ surveillance in Emily’s sexual self-discovery and coming-out narrative
reveals the particular vulnerability of queer teens to the disciplinary power of surveillance. In the
third episode of the series, “To Kill A Mocking Girl,” Emily is sexually assaulted by her
boyfriend Ben in the women’s locker room (an incident that receives shockingly little narrative
attention), before Toby Cavanaugh intervenes and she breaks up with Ben. Later, Emily attends a
party with her new neighbor Maya St. Germain and they find themselves in the photo booth. The
show’s camera takes on the perspective of the photo booth camera and we see Emily and Maya,
who share a palpable chemistry, head-on, preparing for their photos. Primping herself and
looking directly into the camera, Maya says, “I’ve gotta prepare. If this comes out decent I’m going to cut mine out and replace the one on my driver’s license.” A series of flashes and freeze frames indicate the photo booth snapping their pictures, but we see them turn to kiss each other in live action. Their flirty interactions contrast sharply with Emily’s earlier encounter with Ben, in which he attempted to strip her of control over her own body. In the photo booth, Emily freely chooses to act on her feelings for Maya. The photo booth itself captures something of the tension between privacy and publicity that influences the narrative of Emily’s sexuality. As Maya styles herself for the photo, which she hopes to use for her license, she contributes to the sense of the booth as public. They are at a party, and the photos will be lasting evidence of their kiss.

However, the booth also provides a sense of privacy, and Emily is able to exert more control in that moment than she was with Ben. The camera cuts to outside the booth, which dispenses the photo strip, including a picture of them kissing. Immediately, an anonymous figure, visible only from the shoulders down, grabs the strip, just before Emily and Maya exit the booth. Emily frets over the missing photos; possession of the photos is simultaneously possession of information that Emily has yet to name for herself. The missing photos threaten Emily’s ability to determine how and when her sexuality is interpreted.

At the end of the episode, we see ‘A’’s gloved hands press a button on a printer and countless pages emerge. ‘A’ lifts up one of the seemingly-blank pages to reveal copies of Emily’s photo strip. The camera pans up to the wall, plastered in hundreds of reprints of the strip in various sizes. The image highlights the speed and ease with which images proliferate in the digital age. Pictures are endlessly reproducible, and this scene reveals how quickly one can lose control over photos that are perhaps intended to be private. Again, such a loss of control has particularly threatening consequences for Emily. In the following episode, “Can You Hear Me
Now?” Emily finds the original photo strip in her science textbook and is distraught that somebody has seen them. She expresses her anxiety to Maya, who is offended that Emily cares so much; Emily’s need, as she sees it, to keep the photos, and therefore the kiss, private makes her less able to build a relationship with Maya. When they encounter each other on a deserted street later, Maya tells Emily, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do right now. Hug you or shake hands. I mean, there might be all sorts of security cameras around.” Maya’s subtle sarcasm hints at an underlying assumption of this show, as well as *Gossip Girl* and *Veronica Mars*:
surveillance is ubiquitous, even outside of ‘A’s’ malevolent gaze. As McLaren notes, “the pervasiveness of the disciplinary gaze results in self-monitoring,” and Maya’s comment suggests that, whether or not there are actual security cameras observing them, Emily’s internalization of the threat of surveillance prevents her from expressing any kind of homoerotic desire (McLaren 107). “Presumed heterosexuality,” according to Bartky, is central to the normative femininity imposed and policed by patriarchal disciplinary practices, and Emily seems to self-policing according to such norms (Bartky 81).

The show, however, tempers the disciplinary power of surveillance when Emily is counseled not to care about being seen. Maya’s tone in the above scene challenges Emily to ignore the threat of surveillance, and the show encourages the audience to admire Maya’s fearlessness in pursuing Emily even as we sympathize with Emily’s hesitation. In a thinly veiled reference to her sexuality, Toby tells Emily not to do things because people are watching, but because of how they make her feel. He says, “Forget about the idiots. They’re going to see what they want to see. Even if you completely changed everything, they wouldn’t be happy. They don’t want you to change. They want you to go away.” From this perspective, visibility is inevitable, but one should throw off the internalized disciplinary gaze because it can never be
satisfied. While Toby is also referencing his own social pariah status (and, as discussed in the previous chapter, Emily’s mixed racial identity goes largely unmentioned in the show), there is something powerful in the show’s tacit acknowledgement that society largely erases queer girls of color like Emily. Because of her racial and sexual identity, Emily can never live up to the imposed standards of white, hetero-, and gender normativity; the disciplinary gaze of a white patriarchal society can only attempt to erase her. The resistance that Toby and Maya offer lies in accepting visibility while simply rejecting its power to police. However, the mindset they both suggest and enact is largely one of individual, personal empowerment. Even as Toby acknowledges a larger, communal antipathy toward the identity Emily represents, his suggestion to “forget about the idiots” dramatically downplays the structural and systemic oppression she still faces by focusing on the prejudice of ignorant individuals. Undoing the internalization of the dominant white, heterosexist gaze is likely not as simple as it is here made out to be. The show, then, challenges the disciplinary power of surveillance within the narrative by advocating individual resistance, but simultaneously obscures the institutionalization that gives disciplinary practices much of their power.

Even as the show encourages individualistic rejection of oppressive norms policed through surveillance, it suggests a second reason for Emily’s anxiety over the missing photos. When Maya asks Emily if she is upset about the pictures or about the kiss itself, Emily tells her, “I liked the kiss but I don’t know what the kiss means.” Emily expresses her desire to self-determine before surveillance exposes her to determination by outside forces. She wants to control the story of her own sexuality. In his essay on television’s queer teens, Glyn Davis suggests that because queer sexuality is never assumed, the coming-out narrative traditionally tends to be the only one told about gay characters. Davis specifically explores “the power of
language in facilitating the formulation and construction of queer identity” (Davis 133); he argues that the “enunciation of queerness” in coming-out stories is central to the characters’ self-recognition (131). The missing photo strip, then, threatens to strip Emily of her power to enunciate her own queerness; the picture of her kissing Maya articulates a homoerotic desire that would presumably be read as equivalent to a homosexual identity, despite the fact that Emily has not yet formulated or taken on that identification herself. Her anxiety about surveillance need not be read entirely as a form of self-regulation in accordance with disciplinary practices, but as based in her desire to define herself. Visibility is not inherently problematic for Emily, but she desires to control the terms of her visibility. ‘A,’ the show’s representative of a culture of ubiquitous surveillance, drastically challenges that control by sending a copy of the photo strip to Emily’s mother, Pam Fields, whom Emily has not told anything about her sexuality. However, the show recuperates Emily’s traditional coming-out narrative to a large degree when she finally and repeatedly articulates to her father, “I’m gay.” This admission, not ‘A’s’ intervention with the photo strip, directly incites the conflict with her conservative parents, in part because Pam felt more able to deny what the pictures could mean. The show privileges Emily’s verbal enunciation of her identity over the leaked photos, of which Emily had lost control. Even as Pretty Little Liars acknowledges the inevitability of visibility through surveillance, it stresses the importance, and at times at least, the possibility, of achieving that visibility on one’s own terms. The narrative of Emily’s coming out suggests some of the ways that surveillance exerts a social control over its subjects, in ways that can be particularly oppressive to queer teens, whether by reinforcing a heteronormative self-monitoring or by stripping teens of their ability to name their own identities before they are labeled by others. As Davis indicates, however, the coming-out narrative itself can in fact serve to reinforce what Bartky calls “the regime of institutionalized
heterosexuality,” even as the need for it arises out of that same regime (Bartky 72); coming out is necessary in a heteronormative society that assumes straight identity, but telling and re-telling the coming-out story in teen TV can ultimately reinforce the assumption. So even as Pretty Little Liars works to critique and undermine the disciplinary power of surveillance in girls’ lives, it ultimately reproduces many of the same values and social norms it seems to challenge.

Lyon cites John McGrath when he writes that, in our contemporary society, we “inhabit more and more a ‘surveillance space’ that is beyond ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Lyon 153). His description mirrors a state particularly recognizable to teenagers. As Davis and Dickinson write of teens in their introduction to Teen Television, “Theirs is a life of distinct limitations (of having to go to school, having to be home at certain times) and yet, concurrently, it is a phase when autonomy and a certain (although extremely managed) notion of individuality is expected” (Davis 3). For girls, whose lives, bodies, and sexualities have always been carefully policed, the distinction between private and public is perpetually fraught. Television narratives about surveillance explore that boundary, including both the consequences and the desirability of making one’s private life public. Gossip Girl and Pretty Little Liars both dramatize the power of surveillance to impose social norms and enforce their internalization, but they also largely reduce this power to an individual level. Bartky argues that femininity is often not read as a disciplinary project because there are no clear “authorities” who enforce it; she writes, “The absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural” (Bartky 75). In fact, the normative practices of femininity are simultaneously imposed and voluntary. While both shows navigate the tension between girls’ agency under ubiquitous surveillance and their social control by its gaze, they ultimately obscure the patriarchal
underpinnings of the disciplinary practices of normative femininity. In doing so, they soft-sell surveillance, presenting it as inescapable but insignificant, oppressive but resistable. The largely young female audience of these shows, then, may be prompted to ponder her own vulnerability without truly questioning the extent of her own agency in the face of constant visibility.
“Keep Your Phones Close”: Transmedia Marketing, Femininity, and Consumer
Surveillance

The young female audience members of shows like Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl and Veronica Mars have grown up online; they use Facebook and Twitter; many have smartphones that text, take pictures and video, and allow them to consume media and make purchases online. Much of their lives unfold in networked spaces that exist beyond traditional distinctions between private and public. In her essay “Surveilling the Girl via the Third and Networked Screen,” Leslie Regan Shade notes, “The cell phone enables constant connectedness via texting and chatting, and has become an intrinsic facet in youth’s everyday lives: its functionality fuses with identity formation and friendship safeguarding” (263). Digital connectedness, and the surveillance it entails, is an irrefutable fact of life for most girls - at least those middle class girls targeted by mainstream media. Technological visibility is inescapable and, for many, desirable. Teen girl TV shows about surveillance engage this reality and respond to the way that their target demographic actually uses technology. So even as the shows explore the potential of networked technology to objectify, value, or control the young female protagonists on these shows, technology also functions positively, in mundane but significant ways.

On Pretty Little Liars, for instance, the girls’ relationship to personal technology is not always troubled by the threat of ‘A’s’ surveillance. As Hanna complains to her mother, who refuses to buy her a new iPhone, “You’re cutting me off from the world… I can’t go around without a phone. That’s like going around without a brain. Or shoes” (“Eye of the Beholder”). For Hanna (a serious shoe-lover) a phone is an extension of herself and the way that she connects to the world. Even though ‘A’ seems to have access to the contents of all digital devices, cell phones and laptops on the show do not always carry the sinister undertones that assert the girls as
objects of surveillance. The numerous extreme close-ups of digital screens not only serve to encourage the viewers’ identification with the Liars’ relationships to technology, but also to emphasize the centrality of technology to relationships and identity. Hanna, grieving over her break-up with Caleb, deletes him from her cell phone contact list, and we see her hand navigating the cell menu through her point of view. The dramatic moment signifies a decisive end to the relationship and Hanna hesitates to go through with it. Cutting between Hanna’s face and her view of the phone places the viewer squarely within the intimate relationship between a girl and the phone that exists as an extension of her self; deleting the contact is cutting Caleb out of her life. Technology also serves to solidify their friendships and offer protection, particularly through the girls’ frequent use of S.O.S. text messages. Whenever one of them sends an S.O.S., all of the other Liars flock to her no matter the circumstances. Aria reminds the girls to “keep your phones close” as they split up on a potentially dangerous mission in the Season Two finale, highlighting the security offered by their phones, as well as their necessity. Technology certainly serves as a site of exposure and constant surveillance on the show, but it simultaneously allows for intimacy, agency, and protection.

Not only does such a portrayal of the value of technology for girls respond to and reflect their experience, it aligns with the commercial needs of these teen television series. As Lyon suggests, marketers and corporations behind the shows “have a high level of interest in seeing surveillance sold as soft and benign” (Lyon 154). The transmedia marketing strategies of Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl and Veronica Mars all rely on girls’ access to technology and their willingness to make themselves vulnerable to surveillance through social media and other forms of online consumption and participation. As many media scholars of teen TV suggest, the teen genre has a long history of transmedia marketing tactics; referencing official paratexts such as
exclusive interviews with the actors, or affiliated music releases, Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein assert that contemporary teen television is “essentially multi-media in nature” (Ross 12). According to Bill Osgerby, such strategies are part of a larger project of constructing and appealing to the most valuable consumers. Looking back to the advent of the teen girl genre, Osgerby writes, “The torrent of ‘teen girl’ TV shows produced during the late 1950s and early 1960s, then, was just part of a wider business machine geared to reaping profit from a new, lucrative consumer market” (Osgerby 75). For this reason, early (and contemporary) teen TV shows featured white, middle-class characters; “teenage culture” was essentially the culture of a “leisure class,” because that was the class seen as possessing the financial power that appealed to TV advertisers (77). Osgerby suggests that the femininity constructed by early teen girl TV shows “was characterised by a kind of ‘consumerist hedonism,’ young women using the products and resources of commercial youth culture to carve out a space for self-expression and personal pleasure” (82). Teen girl TV today is similarly invested in constructing a femininity based in consumption, although now technology drives more of that consumption. In an increasingly-saturated media market, network and cable television shows depend on young female viewers not only to watch the show (whether live, time-shifted, or online), but to engage in social media campaigns, join online fan communities, and purchase products advertised on their official websites. Such online activities expose fans to corporate surveillance that is then used to market directly back to them, reinforcing a model of femininity legible through acts of commercially-viable consumption.

Teen girl television frequently showcases the fashion of its heroines, one of the more explicit ways that it attempts to construct a model of femininity based on consumption. When Gossip Girl premiered in 2007, the CW launched a fashion-based marketing campaign on the
show’s official website, where fans could purchase the clothes from each episode. The New York Daily News reported that the website “is a virtual shopping mall for the wanna-be gossip girl” (Kinon). The caption on an image of the show’s model-esque stars reads that the cast “aren’t the only ones who get to sport the chic prep-school look.” The article constructs purchasing the clothing as a means of becoming like the characters in the show, solidifying fan identification. The website offers a “look for less” option, that showcases mid-range versions of the designer products featured on the show, and the article suggests this as a way for the show’s largely middle-class viewership to “join the couture club” (Kinon). The fashion, then, allows the female viewer to embody an aspirational femininity, defined by the right kinds of consumption. When executive vice president of marketing and brand strategy for the CW Rick Haskins asserts that, “With our audience, we know fashion is very much at the top of their minds,” he inadvertently reveals that their marketing strategy not only reflects but constructs an ideal viewer-consumer. The show purposefully puts fashion at the top of its audience’s mind by explicitly highlighting couture brand names within the show and making fashion the center of their campaign. The ideal viewer constructed by the show, through its transmedia marketing, invests - financially and ideologically - in fashion as central to her feminine identity. Consumption becomes the means of expressing the ‘right’ kind of girlhood, the girlhood constructed, recognized, and valued by mainstream teen girl television and enforced by online corporate surveillance.

Both Pretty Little Liars and Veronica Mars have inspired devoted fan interest in the fashion showcased by the series. Aeropostale, a clothing store aimed at teens, launched a Pretty Little Liars-inspired collection and fan blogs identify where the clothing from the show can be purchased. Veronica Mars, which aired on UPN for its first two seasons before moving to the
newly formed CW network for its third and last, did not initially have the network funding or attention for elaborate transmedia marketing campaigns. In “Fashion Sleuths and Aerie Girls: Veronica Mars’ Fan Forums and Network Strategies of Fan Address,” Jennifer Gillan describes online fan forums on which fans would figure out for themselves where Veronica’s clothes were from. She notes that fans “feel savvy when they identify in which brands the characters are outfitted,” and by finding sales or eschewing mainstream labels like Abercrombie & Fitch, fans identify themselves with Veronica’s ostensibly anti-establishment style and personality (188).

When the show moved to the CW, and greater cross-promotion was taken on by the network, Gillan notes that fans responded negatively because having the clothing identified by the network took away their perceived agency as consumers. However, their discontent belies the extent to which, even without official network campaigns, the show enacts a kind of discipline that prompts young female viewers to construct their gendered identities through online participation and consumption. And again, the show promotes a “right” kind of girlhood, with the normative racial, class, and otherwise physical characteristics embodied by the petite, white Kristen Bell. Gillan writes that fans express ambivalence “that the ways their bodies are marked by race, ethnicity, and ancestry will frustrate their desire to adopt mainstream identities, leaving them feeling as if they are poor imitations of an ideal TV type” (192). Female fans’ internalization of white, patriarchal body norms causes frustration at their inability to embody the feminine ideal; such norms are reinforced and enforced through surveillance, whether it is corporate data surveillance or the “lateral” surveillance enacted between peers. The MacArthur Foundation Digital Youth Research Project reported in 2008 that youth’s “online communication is conducted in a context of public scrutiny and structured by well-developed norms of social appropriateness” (qtd. in Shade 265). Even the spaces that seem free from corporate interests or
control are subject to an interpersonal surveillance that can promote disciplinary practices of femininity.

While fashion-based marketing campaigns directly encourage consumption - and a model of femininity based on consuming correctly - TV shows today most widely rely on social media activity to expand and mobilize their fanbase. *Pretty Little Liars*, in particular, has been hugely successful in this regard. As discussed above, everyday technology within the narrative is largely depicted as a site of autonomy and connection, a depiction that extends to the show’s transmedia marketing campaigns. All of the main actresses have massively-popular Twitter and Instagram accounts with which to interact with fans, encouraging viewers’ own online participation and self-revelation. Celebrity-driven tactics rely on a presentation of authenticity and the assumption that the actresses themselves control their social media profile. Troian Bellisario’s Tumblr, for instance, contains her artistic photography alongside selfies and candid behind-the-scenes photos from the *Pretty Little Liars* set, constructing a carefully curated but ostensibly authentic sense of the actress who plays Spencer. The show’s marketing promotes fan investment in knowing these actresses through their online presence, reinforcing social media as an important site of identity construction and self-revelation over which one can maintain control. Such tactics assert that, as Lyon suggests, “self-revelation is innocent, even as customer relationship marketing seeks new ways of inducing people to self-reveal to them” (Lyon 154); one’s social media profile is deeply vulnerable to surveillance. An early Twitter campaign for the show captures the dual positioning of girls as watchers and watched that dominates the show’s narrative and its relationship to fans. Philiana Ng writes for *The Hollywood Reporter*, “ABC Family execs noticed viewers posting photos of ‘A’s from their lives and launched an ‘A Is Everywhere’ contest in 2011, with a set visit as a prize; 753,554 fans posted on the Facebook app, generating 2.32 million views and
4,975 submissions. A poster of the top 50 images was created” (Ng). The campaign highlights girls as constantly subject to surveillance in their own lives and offers them a chance to resist publicly, exposing their ‘As’ as ‘A’ has presumably been exposing them. The title also serves as a reminder of the ubiquity of surveillance - one may not be able to escape ‘A,’ but one can undermine their power. Social media becomes the tool by which one resists ‘A’s’ power to expose, but it is simultaneously the means by which one exposes oneself to further surveillance.

The show’s most successful campaign to date, #WorldWarA, built up to the season four mid-season finale in August 2013. The hashtag was featured on-air and created suspense for an upcoming major reveal. The episode “Now You See Me, Now You Don’t,” which seemingly revealed Ezra as ‘A,’ drew 1.97 million tweets, a record for any scripted television series (Ward). Ng reports, “Knowing viewers shared photos and videos of reactions to past reveals, the network compiled a digital mosaic of Ezra on Facebook after the show aired” (Ng). The mosaic itself, constructed of thousands of fan reaction shots, serves to valorize fan visibility to some degree. Sending in a picture of oneself allows one to join the fan community and be a part of the show. However, it simultaneously turns that picture - and thus, that fan - into a pixel, a piece of data, visually metaphorizing the most prevalent form of surveillance - that which reduces people to data.

Tech users of all ages are well aware of corporate surveillance practices such as data mining but still engage in activities that make them vulnerable to it. Lyon acknowledges that the data collected through social media or other online activity “may seem trivial (shopping preferences, for example), but when combined with others may help build a (rather partial) profile… It is a profile that, in many cases, simply suggests what sort of person is here. The category, not the character, is all-important” (Lyon 101). Certainly, much work in contemporary
surveillance studies fails to consider deeply the specificity of women or girls’ relationship to surveillance, and Lyon’s off-handed reference to the seeming-triviality of shopping preferences obscures the extent to which normative femininity is largely constructed around consumer choices and enforced through surveillance. The targeted advertising companies use to profile online consumers, Lyon suggests, “may influence desires in new ways, [but] may also shape actual behaviours of certain social groups as individuals are encouraged by feedback to fit the expected patterns” (Lyon 101). Feminine social norms are continually reinscribed by the corporations and institutions that financially benefit from a consumption-based ideal of girlhood. Bauman reiterates that surveillance-based marketing practice are a “restrictive, panopticon-style undertaking,” but notes that “all that targeting, of course, only applies to fully fledged, fully feathered consumers” (Bauman 126). Those determined by surveillance not to be of consumer value are excluded from the economy of exchange that does, in fact, confer privilege onto those who embody the proper forms of consumption. The “data-double” constructed out of a person’s online or networked choices and movements “refers to individuals but simultaneously is only a kind of tool - useful or not to institutions,” and “those who don’t conform to expectations” are cut off (Lyon 114, Bauman 123). While capitalist society has long viewed white, heterosexual, middle-class and otherwise normative girls as a valuable consumer market, data surveillance serves to further marginalize girls outside of those categories, and girls unwilling or unable to participate in ways “useful” to institutions.

Bauman describes our society as one “notorious for effacing the boundary that once separated the private from the public, for making public exposure of the private a public virtue and obligation” (30). But Bauman elides, here, that for women and girls in particular, exposure can have uniquely oppressive consequences, from objectification to victim-blaming and other
disciplinary practices that enforce feminine social norms. However, visibility also confers privilege and value onto raced and classed female bodies; and exposure over which one maintains control can offer empowerment and connection. Girls’ relationship to surveillance and the visibility it both allows and imposes is always ambivalent. Lyon suggests that “contemporary surveillance occurs in contexts that are already media-saturated… Some [media] help us grapple with the ‘gaze’ more intelligently, some help the gaze drift out of focus. Some aid critique, some aid complacency” (Lyon 155). Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl, and Veronica Mars together represent a significant faction of contemporary teen girl TV that self-consciously grapples with the gaze through its depiction of surveillance. These shows aid both critique and complacency, engaging girls’ struggles to control the terms of their own visibility while simultaneously encouraging girls to expose themselves to consumer-driven surveillance that undermines their agency. The shows’ broad depoliticization of surveillance undermines their power to resist and challenge patriarchal forces that objectify, devalue, and control girls’ bodies, but they also insist on girls’ ability to exert agency under ubiquitous surveillance. Narratively, the shows rely on their female protagonists to act and, in doing so, resist their object status. Commercially, teen girl TV may in fact depend on some level of complacency from viewers willing to subject themselves to surveillance. However, it is reductive to view girls complicit in their own surveillance as “mere unwitting dupes of a capitalist conspiracy” (Lyon 155). Young female viewers constantly negotiate their own representation, or lack thereof, in the media they consume. They can take pleasure in television shows even as they approach representation critically. Teen girl television always has room to grow, to expand and diversify the girlhoods they represent, and teen girl television will also always be a commercial endeavor. The relationships between audience and media text, between visibility and control, between
spectatorship and surveillance will remain in tension, and teen girl television viewers possess, though not without challenge, the agency to explore and negotiate that tension.
Works Cited


Gossip Girl. The CW. Developed by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage. Warner Bros


Television.