



CHAPTER 11

Flipping the Script on Consent

Re-centering Young Women’s
Sexual Agency in Teen Comedies

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Feminist Re-Presentations in the
MeToo Era: Setting the Scene

On October 19, 2017, *Elle* magazine published the “Women in Hollywood 2017: Power List,” noting bleak statistics around Hollywood’s lack of support and opportunities for women as directors, studio heads, and sole protagonists within major films (Rushfield). The article appeared just three weeks after the *New York Times* outlined Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein’s decades-long history of sexual predation (Kantor and Twohey), and four days after #MeToo went viral. As a counterpoint, the article highlighted a list of key women in the movie industry, including presidents and CEOs of major studios like Disney and 20th Century Fox,¹ offering a forward-reaching vision of a post-Weinstein Hollywood (Rushfield). This cohort of women have tried to make incremental changes in the twenty-first century by ensuring greater visibility for women’s representation in film, television, and popular culture more broadly. To an extent it is working; many new films and prestige television shows over the last five years offer strident critiques of sexism and reflect the rise of newly “emergent feminisms” in popular discourse (Keller and

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1 Ryan 1–2). The Time’s Up campaign, part of a “dramatic and unprece-
 2 dented cultural acknowledgment and conversation about sexual assault
 3 and harassment in Hollywood and beyond” (Cobb and Horeck 489),
 4 exemplifies this growing relationship between explicit feminist politics
 5 and the entertainment industry. And yet, as the startling lack of Oscar
 6 nominations for women filmmakers and artists in 2020 revealed, little
 7 has actually changed in terms of institutional recognition for women in
 8 Hollywood and women directors in particular.

9 What are we to make of these forward-reaching feminist goals and
 10 the lack of institutional support for them? While there are many ways
 11 into this conversation, one is to consider the feminist messaging within
 12 contemporary films that aptly reflect the discourse of the times. Here
 13 we may find some reason for hope. Since around 2014, women-directed,
 14 -written, and -produced films and television have notably shifted away
 15 from the postfeminist narratives of the early 2000s, which advanced
 16 neoliberal, individualist notions of women’s empowerment (Brundson
 17 2000; McRobbie 2004; Gill 2005; Negra 2008). Postfeminism is defined
 18 as a reductive belief system that delegitimizes feminist activism. Instead,
 19 it encourages women’s self-surveillance, competitive individualism, and
 20 the myth of “empowerment” through a consumerist ethos (Gill 2007
 21 149). Postfeminism evokes feminism’s “cultural power” in order to “empty
 22 it of its radical critique” (Gill 74). This framework is being challenged
 23 by popular film and television at present. For instance, Jessica Jones in
 24 the Netflix series of the same name (Rosenberg 2015–2019) is not a
 25 postfeminist heroine but rather a feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017). I have
 26 argued elsewhere that in fighting sexism and racism Jones is in fact a
 27 postfeminist failure insofar as she refuses individual empowerment and
 28 idealized femininity (see MacDonald 2019). Her character is one of many
 29 examples of representational change in Hollywood that deserve further
 30 consideration. Expanding upon this argument, I consider here feminist
 31 counter-narratives found in recent teenage romantic comedies written
 32 and directed by women. The films positively reflect popular and public
 33 feminist conversations in the media by refiguring the retrograde sexual
 34 politics largely associated with this rom-com genre for the last four decades.

35 While much has been written on the chick flick and its problem-
 36 atic ties to neoliberal, postfeminist ideals (Gerhard 2005, Cobb 2011),
 37 we must also examine such ideals in films directed at younger women.
 38 This is particularly important because “girls . . . as a social group . . .
 39 typically embody fears and desires of cultural transition” (Willis 242). In

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response, I explore how current iterations of feminism in the #MeToo 1
 era are being articulated in positive representations of consent within 2
 teen rom-coms. I compare three films: the Netflix original *To All the 3
 Boys I've Loved Before* (Johnson 2018), the Judd Apatow-esque raunch 4
 comedy *Blockers* (Cannon 2018), and Olivia Wilde's directorial debut 5
Booksmart (2019). These films center on both straight and queer, as 6
 well as white and biracial, women protagonists in formative sexual and 7
 romantic encounters. The narrative arcs of these films reflect a broader 8
 cultural transition through their focus on young women's sexual agency 9
 and consent. 10

To All the Boys I've Loved Before was arguably the most popular 11
 teen romance of 2018 (Fang). With thousands of posts using the #tatbillb 12
 for fan memes on Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter, the movie developed 13
 a large audience across millennial and generation Z audiences. Distrib- 14
 uted by Netflix, the film boasts a core group of women creatives at 15
 the center of production. Directed by Susan Johnson, the film is based 16
 on the equally popular 2014 young adult novel of the same name by 17
 Jenny Han and was rewritten for the screen by Sofia Alvarez. Cited by 18
 Netflix as "one of its most viewed original films ever with strong repeat 19
 viewing" (Fang), the film represents the current resurgence in rom-coms 20
 being led by streaming services (Sandberg). The second installment in 21
 the film franchise, *To All The Boys: PS I Still Love You*, was released on 22
 February 12, 2020, and the final installation in the trilogy, *To All The 23
 Boys: Always and Forever*, was released on February 12, 2021. 24

In the first film, Lara Jean Covey (Lana Condor), a somewhat 25
 reluctant protagonist, is trying to find her place in the social spaces of 26
 her high school after her older sister leaves for college. Her younger 27
 sister sees her struggling and mails five love letters Lara Jean wrote to 28
 former crushes but never intended to send. These letters include one to 29
 her sister's ex-boyfriend and one to school jock Peter Kavinsky (Noah 30
 Centineo) who just broke up with popular mean-girl (and Lara Jean's 31
 former best friend), Genevieve (Emilija Benerac). Lara Jean and Peter 32
 agree to "fake-date" each other to solve their separate romantic problems 33
 and fall in love along the way. 34

Blockers, released in the same year as *To All the Boys*, is the 35
 directorial debut of Kay Cannon, who wrote for *30 Rock* between 2008 36
 and 2010, and wrote and produced the *Pitch Perfect* franchise between 37
 2012 and 2017 and Netflix's *Girlboss* in 2017. *Blockers* was produced by 38
 Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg, the team behind *Superbad* (2007) and 39

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1 *Pineapple Express* (2008), and distributed by Universal Pictures. *Blockers*
 2 premiered at South by Southwest in March of 2018 and its theatrical
 3 release came a month after. Cannon, who situates the film as part of a
 4 larger feminist project, is notably one of only six women to have ever
 5 directed a “big budget R-rated comedy movie in film history” (Holmes).
 6 It has an 83 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes and made \$94 million
 7 (USD) globally, which is impressive given it had a production budget
 8 of just \$21 million (USD).

9 The film follows teenage best friends, Kayla (Geraldine Viswana-
 10 than), Julie (Kathryn Newton), and Sam (Gideon Adlon), as they make
 11 a pact to lose their virginity on prom night. The title is a shortened
 12 version of the slang phrase “cockblocking” and refers to the main plot
 13 obstacle wherein their over-protective parents try to stop their “sex pact.”
 14 The majority of the comedic gags center on their parents interfering into
 15 their teenage worlds to disastrous (and often abject) ends. *Blockers* is far
 16 removed from the original script from 2012, *Cherries*, which followed three
 17 dads trying to stop their daughters from being sexually active (Kilkenny
 18 2018). In the updated 2018 version there is no emphasis on purity or
 19 slut-shaming—in fact, it is quite the opposite; Kayla’s mom explicitly
 20 calls out the other parents, including her husband, for their obsession
 21 with the three young women’s virginity.

22 Like *Blockers*, the film *Booksmart* also premiered at South by South-
 23 west festival. It showed there in March 2019, with a theatrical release in
 24 May of that year. It grossed \$24 million (USD) globally and has a 97%
 25 rating on Rotten Tomatoes. While the production and creative team did
 26 not get nominated for any Oscars, Beanie Feldstein was nominated for a
 27 Golden Globe award for acting, and the film won “best female director”
 28 at the Hollywood Critics Association Awards and “best first feature” at
 29 the Independent Spirit Awards.

30 *Booksmart* follows two over-achieving best friends Amy (Kaitlyn
 31 Dever) and Molly (Beanie Feldstein), who have sacrificed their social
 32 lives to earn places at Ivy league colleges. Their worlds explode on their
 33 last day of high school when they discover all the cool kids who they
 34 wrote off as stoners and losers are also going to Ivy Leagues or six-figure
 35 jobs at Google. To reconcile their mounting regret at how they spent
 36 the last four years, they go on a one-night party adventure that includes
 37 awkward first-time sexual encounters, public fights, and one of them
 38 landing in jail.

39 These films re-imagine two longstanding narrative tropes within the
 40 coming-of-age subgenre of romantic comedies. The first trope positions
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teenage girls as sexually naïve and thus reaffirms heteronormative views of women's sexual passivity and men's active sexuality. The second trope frames date rape and nonconsensual sex as a teenage rite of passage rather than an act of sexual violence. Past eras of coming-of-age romantic comedy often used date rape as a punch line and portrayed young women as lacking sexual agency or a sense of their own desire. For example, in *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes 1984) the main protagonist Sam Baker (Molly Ringwald) reluctantly gives her panties to nerd Ted (Anthony Michael Hall) as "proof" to his friends that they were intimate even though they were not. Romantic lead Jake Ryan (Michael Earl Schoeffling) later in the film encourages Ted to take advantage of his drunk and unconscious ex-girlfriend Caroline (Haviland Morris) when he drives her home.

That a film as enduringly popular as *Sixteen Candles* places the date rape of the "popular girl" as a punch line shows how far more recent films such as *Booksmart*, *Blockers*, and *To All the Boys* deviate from earlier teen comedy scripts. Two of these films even reference *Sixteen Candles* directly as a sort of revisionist gesture. In *Blockers*, a poster of *Sixteen Candles* hangs in main character Julie's bedroom, a subtle nod to the history of the genre and how it will be reconfigured as the narrative progresses. In *To All the Boys*, Lara Jean makes Peter watch *Sixteen Candles* at her house, where they engage in a productive conversation about the film's racist portrayal of the Asian character Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe) from the perspective of Lara Jean and her little sister Kitty, as Asian American viewers. This scene switches the representational power of the original film's racism as it is actively addressed and negotiated by Lara Jean and Kitty.

To All the Boys, *Booksmart*, and *Blockers* model generative examples of young women protagonists engaged in consensual sexual relationships. These characters are comfortably in control of their sexuality and have supportive, respectful partners, solid, women-centered friendships, and open relationship with their parents. These are significant representational shifts within Hollywood that are connected to larger conversations around rape culture and youth culture in contemporary public discourse.

The Lives of Young Women On Screen Now

The three films I consider in this chapter reflect how women directors and writers are finding ways to imbue feminist intentions within the constraints of the big-budget studio system and traditionally sexist film

1 genres. *To All the Boys* reimagines the protagonist of a rom-com as a
 2 grounded and thoughtful teen who feels accountable to herself and her
 3 family first before her romantic relationship. Unlike the more standard
 4 rom-com model of *To All the Boys*, *Booksmart* and *Blockers* are more
 5 vulgar R-rated movies about sex. The two films reimagine the raunchier
 6 coming-of-age script by refusing to sexualize girls and instead highlight
 7 the protagonists' desires and experiences as valuable sides of discourse.
 8 All three films explore with humor and grace the difficulties and realities
 9 of trying to maintain healthy connections *and* boundaries with friends
 10 and family. Like in *Booksmart* and *Blockers*, *To All the Boys* depicts sis-
 11 terly solidarity and women's friendships, as well as the portrayal of high
 12 schoolers who actually like their families, creating space for relationships
 13 that aren't overly valued in traditional teen films (Shary 215).

14 In addition, fans and critics celebrate *To All the Boys* for its expanded
 15 representation of women and people of color as main characters within
 16 the genre. This is equally true of *Booksmart* and *Blockers*, although to
 17 differing degrees. All three films promote healthy models of consent
 18 and take a stand against racism, sexism, and homophobia. In *To All the*
 19 *Boys*, the representation of Asian American teenagers and multiracial
 20 families are distinct from previous, largely white, cinematic images of
 21 teenagers and family spaces in Hollywood film. The film expands who fits
 22 into our imagined (and real) social environments. Many fans and critics
 23 also appreciate how relatable Lara Jean is, applauding how her style and
 24 persona push back against whitewashed images of an idealized romantic
 25 lead. The fact that Lara Jean is a bit of an introvert who does not like
 26 parties and is a homebody is an accepted part of who she is. It is neither
 27 idealized as representing a pure and chaste exception to teenage life or
 28 something she has to overcome. While it does set out the crux of her
 29 narrative journey, the resolution to her introversion is not dramatic but
 30 rather is about her moving slightly out of her comfort zone.

31 Lara Jean complicates the existing stereotypes of Asian women
 32 onscreen; she is never depicted "as sexually available to the white hero"
 33 in order to cater to a "white, masculine gaze" (Marchetti 1993, 2–6).
 34 Nor does she need a white male hero to save her "from the evils or
 35 excesses" of her Korean culture (8). This is something her character
 36 shares in common with protagonist Kayla in *Blockers*. Kayla is a jock
 37 who has a white, hypermasculine, and overprotective stay-at-home dad
 38 Mitchell (Jon Cena) and a South Asian feminist mother, Marcie (Sarayu
 39 Blue). Kayla is self-possessed and confident, qualities she gained both
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from her mother as a feminist model as well as on the soccer field with
 her dad as her coach. While her dad is struggling with Kayla's entrée
 into dating life, her mom is vocally supportive of her daughter's sexual
 agency and explorations throughout the film—a marked contrast to her
 father's possessiveness. If there is a comment to be made on how his
 whiteness plays a factor in his possessiveness of Kayla it is subsumed by
 the more general trope of the overprotective father.

By foregrounding non-white characters in central roles, the two films
 refuse the troubling legacy of racist representation upheld by Hollywood
 for many decades. As Laura Hyun-Yi Kang suggests, we may want to
 question what *To All the Boys* and *Blockers* reveal “about racial, gendered
 difference as it is inscribed on an Asian female body and ultimately
 apprehended by white masculinity?” (Kang 74). Neither Kayla nor Lara
 Jean is depicted within the historically racist framing of Asian women
 as either predators through their excessive sexualized desirability or as
 victims that need a white male savior (Marchetti 218). To a degree, their
 narratives ensure that any current racial tensions within the United States
 are “reduced to the manageable realm of interracial, heterosexual romance
 between white male and Asian/American female” (Kang 74) insofar as
 narratively race is not a barrier to overcome. However, because race is
 not a barrier in these films, it also means the women protagonists are
 not playing into an “economy of white male desire” (Kang 74). Rather,
 the points of tension in the films center on familial conflicts and their
 own desires over those of their white male partners or fathers.

A larger historical trajectory of Asian American cultural producers
 offers the foundation for such reformulations in the two films. Gina
 Marchetti suggests that one way to critique dominant representations
 of Asian American women as love interests is for Asian American
 producers to explore interracial relationships on their own terms (217).
 This is what occurs in the source material for the movie, which was
 written by Jenny Han, who is Korean American. Han's original narrative
 productively used “these accepted images as part of [her] own critique
 of the media” (Marchetti 217). As Han notes, she had to actively resist
 a whitewashing of the script in her early encounters with Hollywood
 producers whose interest in making the film “died as soon as I made it
 clear the lead had to be Asian-American.” Han recalls that “one producer
 said to me, as long as the actress captures the spirit of the character,
 age and race don't matter. I said, well, her spirit is Asian-American.
 That was the end of that” (Han). The *To All the Boys* film franchise

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1 intentionally takes the time to integrate Lara Jean's Korean culture into
 2 the narrative in both smaller ways (Peter brings her and her sister their
 3 favorite Korean drink) and larger ones (the opening of the second film
 4 shows them celebrating Lunar New Year with family). Kayla's relationship
 5 to her South Asian culture is not explored extensively in the film save
 6 for a nod to Indian sari fashion with her prom dress. While it would be
 7 great if the film did address her biracial identity more fully in *Blockers*,
 8 it seems to be overlooked in favor of exploring her negotiations with
 9 her burgeoning sexuality.

10 While Kayla and Lara Jean's biracial identities are not the focus
 11 of their narrative journeys, they do both end up with white romantic
 12 partners. Neither Kalya's nor Lara Jean's white boyfriend performs a
 13 stereotypical white knight role in their lives in order to assimilate them
 14 into dominant white heteronormative values and society. Lara Jean's
 15 main narrative arc requires that she be more forthright with herself and
 16 others about her relationship with Peter and confront the consequences it
 17 produces. This includes her being afraid of disappointing her older sister
 18 and her need to stand up to the mean girl at school who is bullying her.
 19 With Kayla, she needs to stand up to her dad, who is creating barriers
 20 to her self-directed sexual explorations. Kayla must articulate her desire
 21 for independence while maintaining a relationship, albeit a changing
 22 one, with her overprotective father. Connor cannot do that for her. It
 23 is her narrative arc, and thus her task to complete.

24 In *Booksmart*, Amy and Molly are both white, and Amy is a lesbian.
 25 While there is a lack of racialized negotiations with these two charac-
 26 ters, Amy's sexuality is equally integrated as a part of, rather than the
 27 defining element, of her identity. Further, in *Blockers*, the three popular
 28 boys in school are all racial minorities, but this too is subsumed by the
 29 dominant, upper-middle-class culture the three movies portray. Lara Jean
 30 and Kayla's biracial identities, like those of the popular boys in *Blockers*,
 31 are not whitewashed, but they are normalized within these largely white
 32 milieus. This is addressed most clearly in *To All the Boys* where Lara Jean
 33 actively negotiates her relationship to her biracial identity and is raised
 34 by her white father who has kept Korean traditions alive in the house
 35 since her mother died when she was young. The decision in all three
 36 films to not make race or sexuality a narrative obstacle but rather a fact
 37 of life is a critical reimagination of how to portray identity differences
 38 in teen comedy. I would question, however, if each film's replication
 39 of teenage worlds tied to wealth and privilege tend to maintain other
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cultural norms. Hollywood equally needs a more nuanced approach to incorporating difference that does not sexualize, whitewash, heteronormativize, or enact idealized class privilege.

Teenage Sex After #MeToo

I want to now focus in greater detail on how sex and intimacy, while key in the narrative plots of all three films, are catalysts for more profound self-realizations, rather than penultimate goals themselves. This refutes the standard Hollywood milestone of losing one's virginity within such teen comedies, as few of the protagonists considered here succeed in this particular goal. Instead, the films offer narrative space for young women to address their own personal growth both inside and outside of romantic relationships.

In *To All the Boys*, the male romantic lead is a down-to-earth teenager rather than a bad boy. He is a welcome shift in focus from films of the early 2000s, which romanticized abusive traits as desirable. This can be seen most clearly in Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* franchise (2008–2012), and the controlling playboy millionaire Christian Grey in *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (2015–2018). Despite his popularity and traditional good looks, Peter Kavinsky is well intentioned, and models respect and care in the way he treats Lara Jean and her family. Peter does small things for Lara Jean because of his interest in her rather than grand romantic gestures that he expects her to reciprocate by being sexually available. The film has no one magical moment of falling in love but represents their relationship as a process of getting to know, share with, and trust each other. It presents the impression that friendship is the foundation of love.

This is put to the test when Laura Jean agrees to go on the senior class ski trip, which, she notes, is known as a place to lose your virginity. Instead of being with Peter, she hides out reading romance novels and putting on face masks in her hotel room with her gay friend Lucas (Trezza Mahoro), who convinces her that Peter has a crush on her. Lara Jean finally goes after Peter and finds him waiting for her in the hot tub. An awkward conversation occurs in which Peter tries to make Lara Jean see how much he likes her. They are sitting on opposite sides of the hot tub, with Lara Jean perched on the edge still weighing her choices and sorting through her feelings. There is no invitation or pressure by

1 Peter for her to enter the hot tub. When she does, it is very clearly her
2 choice; she initiates and directs the encounter. The scene is intimate
3 and respectful. It does not glamorize the encounter but also doesn't
4 avoid showing it. Afterward, they affectionately say goodnight as they
5 part in the hotel hallway, and she goes to bed happy and alone. Lara
6 Jean's first sexual encounter with Peter is framed as a positive experience
7 of her own making.

8 The incident does yield consequences, as Lara Jean's mean-girl nem-
9 esis Genevieve posts a video of her and Peter in the hot tub on social
10 media. The film carefully frames this so as not to play into slut-shaming
11 or rape culture discourse. It shows the pain this bullying causes Lara Jean
12 and how it impacts her trust in Peter and others. She is not punished
13 by the film narrative for choosing to be intimate with Peter. Instead,
14 she turns for support to her older sister, who gives a textbook example
15 of how to report such breeches of privacy and have them removed from
16 social media platforms. When Lara Jean returns to school thinking the
17 worst is over, she is publicly embarrassed once again as photocopies of
18 the video are plastered over her locker. Her best friend calls out Peter,
19 asking why he isn't doing anything to stop the slut-shaming Lara Jean
20 faces that he, as a man, does not have to negotiate. Thusly prompted,
21 Peter clarifies to all those jeering at the photo that they did not have
22 sex. While this shows Peter using his alpha male status to defend Lara
23 Jean, it is significant that Lara Jean confronts Genevieve on her own
24 without Peter's influence. Lara Jean is not being saved by her romantic
25 partner, and he is not much of a hero in that moment. In the second
26 film, Peter takes Lara Jean's cue on how intimate they will be. Lara Jean
27 expresses hesitations to have sex because Peter is not a virgin and she
28 is. The progression of intimacy is put on hold in the narrative as they
29 work out their emotional conflicts as a couple.

30 In *Blockers*, the three best friends present parallel trajectories in
31 their sexual explorations but to very different ends. Julie, the stereotyp-
32 ical blonde beauty, is the only one of the three friends in a committed
33 relationship, with the handsome and wealthy Austin. She is determined
34 to lose her virginity on prom night. She has grand visions of how the
35 night should go and is the one who inspired her two friends to join
36 the prom night sex-pact by emphasizing how meaningful the memory
37 will be if they all share it together. She wants the experience to unfold
38 perfectly and is seen carrying flowers and candles around the entire night
39 for when the opportunity arises. Julie's hotel room sex encounter is the
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most recognizable from previous teen films. She is the one who is most
invested in playing out the cinematic fantasy. Despite this overdeter-
mined vision, Austin supports her and is content to go along with her
vision. However, it is Kayla who sets up Julie's hotel room with flower
petals, donuts, and condoms, as she knows what Julie likes better than
her boyfriend Austin does. When Julie enters the room and loves it,
Austin lets her know it was Kayla's doing. The sexual encounter between
Julie and Austin is respectful and caring. Austin engages in all of Julie's
requests. She is thus able to experience the encounter in ways specific
to her desires. While this is an idealized scenario, it also models for
younger viewers the value of such articulations. This is a valuable cor-
rective to previous male coming-of-age films, which often promote rape
culture and overlook practices of affirmative consent. If, as Lisa Funnell
notes, the phrase "coming of age" is associated with women's first sexual
experiences, then it should reflect "their clear and unwavering choice"
(personal correspondence, December 19, 2019).

Sam is the more introverted of the three friends in *Blockers* and
is still closeted about her developing queer desires. She agrees to get
in on the sex-pact despite not being too interested or involved in her
prom date Chad because she feels pressured to have a shared memory
with her friends. The premise of Sam's narrative arc appears at first the
most retrograde, as her desires toward the sex-pact are ambivalent, yet it
ultimately models the safe exploration of her emergent queer sexuality as
Sam keeps encountering Angelica (her actual love interest) throughout
the night. At the start of prom, Sam asks Angelica how she knew she
was gay. Angelica replies when she first touched a classmate's penis and
said to herself "fuck no!" This conversation sets Sam up for her own
similar realization when she tries to have sex with Chad later that night.
Sam changes her mind about having penetrative sex, but while she is
expressing this to Chad he prematurely ejaculates, offering comic relief
to an otherwise uncomfortable encounter. This sets Sam up to then
come out to her dad and then her two best friends and ultimately end
the night kissing Angelica at the prom hotel after-party.

In contrast, Kayla is very direct with her desire, and her date Con-
nor models a version of teenage masculinity that is not hung up on sex
as the ultimate goal of the evening despite his interest. While getting
high with Connor outside the prom, Kayla states very clearly that they
are having sex that night. Connor is interested but keeps adding the
caveat "if the opportunity arises." His interest in her continuous consent

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1 pushes directly against stereotypes of white men holding power in their
 2 sexual relationships with Asian women (Marchetti 1993, Kang 2002).
 3 Kayla's forthright sexual desire is all the more significant because it is
 4 not as readily seen or celebrated in teen sex comedies of previous eras.²

5 When Kayla brings Connor to a hotel room to finally have sex,
 6 she decides she doesn't want to lose her virginity without getting to
 7 know him better. Connor is supportive and agrees they should date
 8 first. He suggests instead they chill and do light journaling. Kayla says
 9 she'd rather have him perform oral sex on her, and he obliges. Kayla's
 10 agency to speak her own desire is significant and something director Kay
 11 Cannon pushed hard for throughout the production (Hasty). If previous
 12 teen comedies portrayed sex as largely a hormonal teenage male arena
 13 (Shary 210–214), these three examples from *Blockers* portray women as
 14 exploring their desire in a variety of ways. For Cannon, it was important
 15 to deviate from existing teen sex comedies because “it won't feel like
 16 we're equal until we can do the same things that the guys do without
 17 judgment or shame or disapproval” (Hasty n.p.). In *Blockers*, Kayla, Julia,
 18 and Sam do exactly what guys have been able to do from *Fast Times at*
 19 *Ridgemont High* (1982) to *Superbad* (2007) and the *American Pie* franchise
 20 (1999–2012): articulate their sexual desires to their friends in crass and
 21 funny ways with the support of their peers.

22 When Kayla's dad comes in and throws Connor against a wall, it
 23 leads to a fight between Mitchell and Kayla in which she shames him
 24 for thinking she can't make her own decisions. She asks him why sex is
 25 even bad. Mitchell admits he doesn't know and says that he just wants
 26 to be the best dad, revealing the social imperative he faces as her dad
 27 to disavow and actively fight against her sexual agency. Their story arc
 28 and the conversations he has with both Kayla and his wife Marcie are
 29 the most direct in countering rape culture and how it informs men's
 30 relationships to their daughters.

31 These representational themes are further supported by the plot
 32 trajectory of *Booksmart*, which is overt throughout in its referencing of
 33 feminist figures as role models for the two main characters. In their sexual
 34 explorations, both Amy and Molly try to awkwardly flirt with their
 35 crushes at a year-end party only to see their crushes end up together.
 36 This, paired with a huge fight between them (filmed by classmates for
 37 the world to see), sets them on different paths toward the end of the
 38 party. Molly sits alone at the party and is approached by Jared, a rich
 39 and nerdy guy who she ends up kissing the next day at the start of her
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valedictorian speech. Amy, on the other hand, finds herself in a bathroom 1
 where the beautiful, aloof mean-girl Hope is smoking. They exchange 2
 some barbed insults, and Hope calls her weak. Amy responds by kissing 3
 Hope, who returns the kiss. This begins a now infamous sex scene that 4
 is both endearing and awkward. The surprise in their desire is palpable, 5
 and their consent to be intimate with each other is very clear. As Amy 6
 has been out for two years and never kissed a girl, this is a momentous 7
 event that goes awry as she confuses parts of Hope's anatomy and then 8
 pukes on her in her embarrassment. In versions of the film shown by 9
 Delta Airlines in their in-flight entertainment programming, the bathroom 10
 scene was removed, alongside a scene discussing women's masturbation, 11
 prompting Wilde to critique the airlines censorship of queer storylines. 12
 The scene shows a version of queer teen sexual experience that is not 13
 overly romanticized or presented for the pleasure of the male gaze. It is 14
 honest, uncomfortable, and hopeful while maintaining a comedic tone. 15
 Amy's first intimate experience is a recognizable teenage rite of passage 16
 regardless of sexual orientation. And yet it also avoids the usual repre- 17
 sentational traps of queer sexuality as pathological, dangerous, or under 18
 threat. As such, it offers an important model for how to represent queer 19
 teenage desire in future youth-oriented Hollywood films. 20

Perhaps most importantly, *Blockers*, *Booksmart*, and *To All the Boys* 21
 do not end their narratives with these different scenes of first-time sexual 22
 experiences—arguably because these do not make up the crux of any 23
 of the narratives. In *Blockers*, the three best friends meet up to share 24
 their experiences with each other and then dance to their song “Gonna 25
 Love myself” by Hailee Steinfeld. The teen anthem of independence 26
 and self-acceptance points to what they value as a group of friends and 27
 have all individually achieved in their separate narrative arcs. This is 28
 followed up by a final scene of the girls leaving on a road trip to drive 29
 Julie off to her university in California. Julie is not driving with her 30
 boyfriend, but rather her best friends, as well as Kayla's now-boyfriend 31
 Connor. This ending may be even more radical in its reframing of the 32
 teen comedy than the sex scenes themselves as it emphasizes how the 33
 girls' romances are secondary to their enduring friendship. 34

A similar scene is found at the end of *Booksmart* when Molly 35
 drops Amy off at the airport for her year-long trip to Botswana. The 36
 film does not end with each character interacting with their new love 37
 interests, but instead with them together, highlighting how primary their 38
 friendship is in their lives. The narrative arc is for them to come to a 39

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1 place of independence from each other while still maintaining their close
 2 connection. The takeaway from this and *Blockers* is how valuable strong
 3 friendships are for helping you navigate the transition to adulthood.
 4 While *To All the Boys* ends with Lara Jean and Peter kissing on the
 5 high school football field, it is ultimately Lara Jean's emergence from her
 6 introversion, the strengthening of her relationship with her sisters and
 7 her father, and her continued negotiation with the loss of her mother
 8 that provide the more meaningful narrative resolutions.

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Conclusion

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13 If the value of situating popular cultural texts as an "object of study" is
 14 that it becomes "a tool for thinking" about "the state of feminist politics"
 15 (Lumby 97), then *Booksmart*, *Blockers*, and *To All the Boys* offer insights
 16 into how Hollywood has started to accept more progressive representational
 17 politics within its framework. Each film's progressive politics reflect the
 18 parallel public dialogue around enthusiastic consent and equitable sexual
 19 agency prompted by the #MeToo movement. In particular, the films all
 20 move away from postfeminist tropes that favor individual success in both
 21 life and love. In contrast, the personal successes in *Blockers*, *Booksmart*,
 22 and *To All the Boys* are inextricably tied to how each protagonist exists
 23 in relation to her friends and family, suggesting that there is indeed more
 24 to life than a heterosexual happy ending.

25 The re-centering of women's agency is not unique to the teen
 26 rom-com genre. From melodrama, to action adventure, to dystopian
 27 sci-fi fantasy, women's agency is being re-centered in a variety of ways.
 28 This reflects a (re)emergence of feminism within film and television
 29 narratives, tracing a move from postfeminist themes to more politicized,
 30 or at the very least critically oriented, themes. I would argue this shift is
 31 aligned with contemporary sites of feminist rage, or what Sara Ahmed
 32 calls a feminist snap (2017), that has occurred across film and media
 33 industries, affecting both those producing and creating women-centered
 34 narratives and the audiences, who are increasingly vocal regarding fem-
 35 inist concerns. The #MeToo movement is perhaps one of the loudest
 36 and most far-reaching feminist snaps of the last several years. It is part
 37 of a timely series of political snaps, including #BlackLivesMatter and
 38 #IdleNoMore, that are aiming to foster greater social equity in our worlds.
 39 What we can hope is that cultural producers in Hollywood reckon with

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these snaps in meaningful and generative ways, offering a mirror to the movements in our film and television landscapes. The outcomes of the particular feminist snap that has informed the films considered in this chapter offer a sense of hope for our continued collective resistance to rape culture's presence in both the industry and the popular films and television it produces.

Notes

1. This list included Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilms and head of the *Star Wars* franchise; Diane Nelson, president of DC Entertainment; Debra Lee, CEO of BET Networks; Stacey Snider, CEO of 20th Century Fox Film; and Diane Gabler, president of Fox 2000, to name a few (Rushfield; *Hollywood Reporter*).

2. A precursor and exception to this is the character of Michelle Flaherty in the *American Pie* franchise, who is equally comfortable with being upfront about her sexual desires.

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