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Negotiating Space, Class and Masculinity in *How I Met Your Mother* by Kristen Shaw

Pop and corn—the interrelated themes of this issue of *Word Hoard*—are concisely explored by Sally Colwell in her article exploring the bachelor pad as it appears in the “corny” pages of *Playboy* magazine and in the spaces of thoroughly “pop” television sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*. Colwell’s article, “From Playboy Penthouse to High-Rise Playboy: The Bachelor’s Evolution,” deftly reveals the underlying insidiousness of pop/corn, insofar as these images—perhaps more easily precisely because they pass as harmless “fluff”—get under our skin, simultaneously informing and (re)producing particular cultural norms. While Colwell’s article focuses predominantly on the intersection of gender and sexuality, and how these identities are (re)produced through particular spatial representations, my response is inspired by Colwell’s brief assertion of the connection between capitalist ideology and the prosthetic technologies of the bachelor pad. Examining the episode of *How I Met Your Mother* that provides the basis for Colwell’s own article, I argue that the idealized masculinity of the straight, white, upper-class bachelor emerges and is normativized in relation to ethnic and working-class “others.” These opposing representations of masculinity are made visible through equally disparate spatial imaginaries: the streamlined luxury of the bourgeois bachelor pad stands in stark contrast to the abject spaces where “improper” masculinities emerge, threatening to dissolve the barrier between public and private on which bourgeois notions of heterosexual domesticity depend.

Colwell’s article begins by outlining George Wagner’s analysis of masculine interior designs produced for *Playboy* magazine between 1956 and 1970, interior spaces that “function as a means of ‘imagining sites for the Playboy lifestyle’” (101), a lifestyle centered on the seduction of women. Colwell succinctly summarizes Wagner’s central thesis, that “Playboy’s imagined interiors [are] elaborate woman-traps: spatial offspring resulting from the cross between technology and sexual predation” (101). What is missing from Wagner’s account, Colwell argues, is an account of how these spaces depend, not only on the ability to ensnare women, but to *eject* them after the sexual act is completed. An essential component of these spaces, she argues, is their ability to facilitate the removal of women after seduction is complete. What happens between the eve of
seduction and the morning after, where the bachelor is described as solitary once again, free to enjoy his coffee and bacon without disruption? Departing from Wagner, Colwell here brings us to her central two-part argument, arguing, first, that “the bachelor’s status as such depends less on his ability to snare women than on his ability to successfully return them to the wild” (102), and, secondly, that “the entire Playboy house of cards is ultimately dependant not on the bachelor’s desire for the woman who will bolt, but on the bolting woman’s desire to flee” (103).

In the section that follows, Colwell describes ways that female desire actually does infringe on this fantasy of the technologized bachelor pad, asking, “What happens [. . . ] when the bachelor’s only condition of desire for his fantasy space is not met—when the woman he thought was prey turns out to have predatorial plans of her own?” (104). Colwell works out a potential answer to this question through a fascinating analysis of an episode of the sitcom How I Met Your Mother, in which Barney Stinson’s bachelor pad is invaded by his friend Lily Aldrin. As Colwell remarks, Barney’s bachelor pad is a “stream-lined woman-ejection device” (104), a “prosthetic” outfitted with a series of technological gadgets that facilitate the ejection process and secure his private domestic space as the “bachelor country” he declares it to be. While Barney is at first resistant to Lily’s presence, Colwell brilliantly argues that Lily herself is enlisted as a species of technology, becoming a prosthetic by playing the part of Barney’s wife when his other devices fail at ejecting his sexual conquests (104). This apparently ideal situation is ruined, however, when Barney allows Lily to begin making small changes: a throw pillow here, a colourful rug there, and fresh fruit in the fridge, to name a few. These changes result in Barney committing a grave sin for a bachelor normally on the prowl: staying in on a Friday night to watch Letterman. As Colwell notes, Barney “begins to undo his own bachelorhood” (106), and it is only by ejecting Lily that “the basic conditions of the bachelor’s home are [. . . ] reset” (107). In order to reiterate his bachelor identity, Lily—who is tellingly described as giving Barney “a disease”—must be removed.

The final section of Colwell’s article centers on the argument that Playboy’s ideal bachelor must not only remain single, “he must also remain obviously masculine and straight” (107). The spectre of the queer bachelor must be excised at all costs, which is made possible through the performance of a properly masculine (i.e. heterosexual) sort of consumerism. Colwell expands this argument by examining the second storyline of the episode, in which Marshall’s relationship with another recently-single male friend is coded as potentially queer, a “bromance” that is both mocked by Ted and Robin and represented as a dangerous form of homosocial male bonding. This threat is largely a result of the kinds of “effeminate” consumerism they partake in together: going for brunch, attending an Alanis Morissette concert, and partaking in fancy steak dinners. Like Barney, who must reaffirm his bachelor identity by
expunging the feminine influence from his carefully curated domestic space, Marshall must also “break up” with his male friend and avoid the kinds of consumerist behaviours that suggest queerness lurking beneath a normative heterosexual surface.

Throughout her article, Colwell deftly navigates a number of important and fascinating topics, examining the interrelation of gender, sexuality, and space. However, an interesting aspect of this episode which is not addressed by Colwell is the extent to which the representation of an “ideal” spatialization of the (technologized) bachelor lifestyle epitomized in Barney’s apartment is made possible through the contrast between Barney’s pad and the spaces that are represented as abject and undesirable spaces, and, by extension, sites of undesirable masculinity. Lily only ends up at Barney’s apartment—the “heart of Bachelor country”—because the only apartment that she can afford on her own has her living in horrible conditions. The newly-single Lily can only afford an actual bachelor pad, crammed full with a toilet, bathtub, and 3-in-1 kitchen appliance. The dirty and run-down apartment is populated by rats and, as Robin notes, “different cultures!” in the form of Lithuanian neighbours who cook, gamble and cut each other’s hair in the hallway. Eternally positive, Lily remarks that she is learning Lithuanian because of her neighbour, who is heard yelling (what we assume are expletives) through the wall.

Lily eventually transplants herself to Barney’s sleek pad, the sterility of which serves to represent a “proper” kind of upper-class masculinity that, even if it is not amenable to “feminine” touches associated with heterosexual domesticity, is nevertheless preferable to the kinds of abject masculinity on display in her former, temporary abode. As Colwell notes throughout her article, Barney’s apartment serves as the spatialized representation of a normative white, middle-upper class heterosexual masculinity, but what I would add is that this representation is bolstered by the previous representation of a literally leaky space that is associated simultaneously with vermin (Ted notes that her “roommate is a raccoon”) and foreign bodies out of place and out of sync by virtue of their ethnic otherness and lower class position.

The apartment’s “leakiness” is rendered literal when Lily tries to pull down her makeshift Murphy bed, accidentally destroying the wall that separates her apartment from that of her Lithuanian neighbour. The neighbour stares at her incredulously, eating a bowl of cereal off his pronounced stomach. This event is the last straw, compelling Lily to seek shelter with Barney despite his reservations. This scene—and the contrast between the leaky apartment and Barney’s self-contained bachelor pad—reveals the extent to which the proper bachelor pad depends on a particular partitioning of public and private space. Barney’s bachelor pad is a thoroughly private space, unavailable even to his friends, as, to quote Ted’s voice-over at the beginning of the episode, “none of us had set foot in his apartment” before this incident with Lily. The self-contained insularity of Barney’s apartment stands in stark contrast to Lily’s apartment building, where the lines between

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public and private are frequently trespassed—the Lithuanians cook, gamble, and cut each other’s hair in the hallway—activities typically relegated to private spaces, associated with both the maintenance of the body and with illicit social activities.

Whereas these ethnic and lower-class “others” are associated with an unrecoverable leakiness and danger—which is, by extension, linked to a particular kind of improper and undesirable masculinity—the climax of the episode’s narrative shows that Barney’s pad and his masculinity are also penetrable, but only in an acceptable way. Lily’s ability to “convert” Barney suggests that despite the technologized prosthetics he employs to keep his bachelor pad free of “feminine” accoutrements, with enough prodding, all bachelors can easily slip into the imperfect perfections of white, heterosexual bourgeois coupledom, symbolized by the throw pillows, the fresh fruit and coffee, the Friday nights watching Letterman on a 300-inch TV in a giant king size bed. While the spatialized representation of non-white, working class masculinities further normativizes Barney’s particular brand of masculinity, his aggressive singledom is made all the less threatening by the climax of the episode which suggests that even the most staunch bachelors (and bachelor pads) can be converted and made amenable to what Judith Halberstam calls “straight time” (and space), ways of life that align with normative white bourgeois heterosexist ideology. Alternatively, the kind of abject masculinity on display in Lily’s apartment is represented as fundamentally dangerous—this is a form of masculinity incompatible with bourgeois values and capitalist ideology.

Furthermore, an essential characteristic of the bachelor pad—as is visible in both the Playboy-commissioned interior designs and in How I Met Your Mother—is, as Colwell aptly notes, not only the ability to engage in a “properly masculine” sort of consumerism, but also to have the luxury of private space in the first place, particularly in a city like New York (where the show is set). This is a privilege that, as HIMYM perhaps unwittingly foregrounds, is specific to a particular class of predominantly white men, and is a privilege that someone like Lily—who is a kindergarten teacher and aspiring artist—cannot afford on her own. This episode shows her during a period of transition, the only period of the series where she has broken up with her long-time partner, Marshall, and can therefore no longer afford to live in a more comfortable building. As a light-hearted sitcom, Lily’s struggles to find decent housing are, of course, transformed into comedic hurdles. However, I think it is also telling that the majority of the episode focuses on Barney and the now-single Marshall struggling to maintain their respective versions of masculinity, predominantly through negotiating particular spaces, rather than on Lily’s struggle to find her own, non-precarious space.

The implication, instead, is that women are naturally “at-home” in domestic spaces, whereas men must constantly engage in a series of strategic negotiations to re-stake private
space as their own. This relates to Wagner’s argument, cited and examined by Colwell, that the “‘domestic fantasies of Playboy are meant to compensate’ for a number of fears surrounding dominant cultural constructions of domestic space—constructions situating a man’s home as ‘appropriated’ by women and children, taken over as ‘the domain of wife and family’” (Wagner in Colwell 102). In this sense, Lily is, to reiterate Barney, the female “disease” that takes over the domestic sphere, reinforcing what Wagner calls “spatial and architectural emasculation” (Wagner in Colwell 102). This perspective of the private sphere as the woman’s domain has, obviously, enabled the (re)production of harmful gender stereotypes, but it also suggests that while women are always and naturally at home in the private sphere, impulsively adding throw pillows, colourful rugs, and cantaloupes like Lily does, men must always stake out their claim to domestic space, albeit, through a careful negotiation (as Colwell notes) of gendered and spatial codes influenced by socio-economic status. Unlike the Cosmo girls mentioned by Colwell, who have “predatoral plans of their own” (104) and disrupt the fantasy of the ideal bachelor as a result, Lily’s “desire” is not sexual, nor really desire at all. Rather, the episode represents Lily’s home-making as a naturalized feminine inclination towards (desexualized) heterosexual domesticity.

This reminds me in particular of the phenomenon of “man caves.” As an enthusiastic and shameless lover of home renovation reality shows, I am constantly surprised at the popularity of these spaces, which typically take the form of a basement where (predominantly married) men are allowed a space of their own to watch sports, drink beer, and temporarily escape from family life. Naturally, man-caves are a class-specific privilege, but they also reinforce the notion that the rest of the home is the domain of women. In this sense, man-caves act as a contemporary mutation of Playboy’s bachelor pad, defined as they are by the absence of women and children who, to reiterate Wagner’s point, are perceived as having “appropriated” the domestic realm from men. Jokes about being “whipped” (i.e. controlled and therefore emasculated) by their wives are abundant in renovation shows, and the man-cave is represented as the consolation prize enabling domesticated men to retain some of their dignity. Like the fantastic bachelor pads of Playboy and How I Met Your Mother, the phenomenon of man-caves is yet another example of how space is gendered and serves to reiterate and reinforce particular gender, class, and racialized identities.

In Female Masculinity, Judith Halberstam argues that “masculinity […] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white middle-class body” (2). This argument justifies Halberstam’s analysis of alternative masculinities, but it also suggests that it is non-white, non-heterosexual, non-middle-class depictions of masculinity that frequently serve as models of deviance against which normative masculinities are established as ideal and “natural.” As I argue above, it is the ethnic and class difference of Lily’s immigrant neighbours that bolster the representation of Barney and Marshall as safely

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masculine. Their respective “slip-ups”—Barney allowing Lily to infiltrate his pad, Marshall engaging in a suspiciously queer relationship—are represented as hurdles that they must face but will ultimately overcome by the end of the episode, reinforcing both as stalwartly masculine in the “right” ways. It is precisely these happy endings that make “fluff” taste so good—but which also, more frequently, leave a bad taste in our mouths. Analyses like Colwell’s are vital precisely because they investigate these hidden undercurrents that both reflect and reproduce normative ideologies and the spatial orders that reinforce them.

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