A Table for One
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A few years ago, Princeton alumna Susan Patton (2013), sparked intense debate when, in an open letter to *The Daily Princetonian* (Princeton's university student journal), she suggested that female students make the best use of their time at the university by finding a future husband. The only good men out there, she explained, were to be found exclusively in their undergraduate classes. In a follow-up interview with the *Daily Mail*, Patton added that college-age women “have to start putting in place plans for their personal happiness, because they will never again have this kind of concentration of extraordinary men to choose from” (Whitelocks 2014). One sentence that warranted particular attention was her assertion that nowadays, career women “are wasting their youth on caring about their jobs” (ibid.). Elsewhere, Patton has been quoted as saying that “a woman looking for a husband in her 30s gives off total desperation, … No matter that the median age for a woman's first marriage in the U.S. is 26.5 years old—once you hit 30, apparently, it's all over” (Bahadur 2013).

Patton's letter generated much media attention. While some commentators criticized her for a sexist and elitist outlook, others saluted her for her courage in telling the truth to single women. Following on from the controversy, Patton (2014)—who has since come to be known as the “Princeton Mom”—published a book, *Marry Smart: Advice for Finding THE ONE*. The message of Patton's book, in common with her letter, is that a woman's most important life goal is to get married and have kids. Elsewhere she summarized her ideology thus: “So you’re 35, who are you going to be looking at to marry? I’m going to say most women who are 35 are going to be looking for a man around the same age, or maybe a year or two older. So let's take the man of 36. He's quite happy to actually be with a woman 10 years younger” (Wallace 2014).

In Israel, Patton’s message was mentioned in an article about a short film of a 35-year-old single Jewish woman (Domkeh 2014). Claims like Patton's are ubiquitous in mainstream Israeli discourse about midlife single women. They convey deep-seated assumptions about the need to teach single women the “facts of life” and “how the world really works.” One striking feature of this discourse is that these numerous instructional and regulative codes are anchored by temporal economical images,
metaphors, and principles. Thus, single women are warned not to waste the “best years of their lives,” to manage their time wisely, and to invest in the right kind of men/commodity. Moreover, this discourse is imbued with “objective” calculations about man-shortage, consumer demands, expiry dates, and the rules of supply and demand.

Patton’s letter is a useful opening point for this chapter because it raises some of the important questions that motivate my analysis: how does the commodified language of time shape our perceptions of female singlehood? What sort of exchanges take place between single men and women, and what are their conditions? How far does the abstraction of time into a quantifiable measure control single women’s lives? And what are the discursive mechanisms through which single women become “damaged goods”? In this chapter, I argue that the naturalized, objective temporal rules of supply and demand are significant discursive resources in everyday discourses, and through these the oppression of women occurs and age-gender based hierarchies are produced and maintained.

Within this context, I stress the need for alternative ways of thinking about singlehood, in a manner that disconnects singlehood from the normalized concepts of market logic, exchange value, and the notion that a single woman can be “sold” and “traded.” Undoubtedly, there is a need to incorporate feminist thinking into this discussion which aims to debunk the way this commodification of time regulates women’s consciousness.

Single women in the temporal marketplace

The single consumer marketplace is replete with a rich vocabulary and descriptive metaphors. These evaluations permeate numerous online articles, which depict the marketplace in terms of a demographical crisis. Here are some typical headlines taken from websites around the world:

“Man Drought Sees Shortage of Eligible Men as Women Struggle in Dating Game.” (Michael 2014)

“Man Drought Leaves Many Lacking Romance.” (Heather and Easton 2014)

“Hong Kong’s Women Are Suffering a Man Drought.” (Cox 2013)

“Amid a Growing Gender Imbalance, the Territory’s Females Are Undergoing Drastic Measures— from Love Coaches to Liposuction—to Lure a Suitable Partner.” (ibid.)

Or this quote from another article, its sensationalist tone backed up with numerical evidence:

Many single women looking for love could be out of luck, as a man drought turns severe. Census 2013 figures show the number of men to go around is at an all-time low—and it’s especially grim for those of a prime marrying age. For every 100 women looking to snag a New Zealand chap aged between 25 and 49, on average about nine will miss out. And on the Kapiti Coast the chances are even lower, with only 82 men for every 100 women. If you’re looking for a little older or younger gentleman the chances are better—51 per cent of the total population is female. (Heather and Easton 2014)
As the extracts illustrate, a cavalcade of demographers, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and lay experts of all sorts present themselves to analyze the data and estimate men’s and women’s chances of getting married. Often—as in Patton’s letter—the experts evaluate the market value of single women, while warning them to hurry up because their market value is gradually declining. The study of singlehood—as in so many other social realms—reveals the extent to which the tyranny of the market (Bellah et al. 1985; Bourdieu 2003) and the commodification of social experiences infiltrate our lives. Indeed, a significant body of research proves these assertions, demonstrating how people draw upon the vision of the commodity markets to create, maintain, and renegotiate social ties with other people. Following this line of inquiry, scholars have shown, for example, that the commodification of intimacy and romantic love is congruent with the logic of rationalized market exchange (Hochschild 2003; Illouz 1997, 2007), and that procreation is becoming an increasingly commercialized process, in which eggs, sperms and embryos are treated as consumer goods.

Bauman’s (2000, 2003, 2005, 2007) work provides another perspective from which to examine the ways in which personal relationships can be seen to correspond with capitalist and consumerist logic. For Bauman (2003)—who offers a pessimistic account of intimate relations today—the cultural configuration of liquid love operates within the unrestrained capitalist consumerist framework which frames personal relationships as goods and services. In Bauman’s view, the consumerist logic forms frail-fluid, human bonds, or what he dubs semi-detached, de-facto relationships, made up of quick beginnings and quick endings. Online dating, in this sense, is tantamount to shopping for a partner—with no obligation to buy, and a generous return policy for dissatisfied customers (ibid., 45–46).

The analysis presented here seeks to explore how representations of single women’s time in Israel is articulated and regulated by this commodity-imagery. It is important to stress that the single market place—which, in Bauman’s words, operates within an unrestrained capitalist logic—is also attuned to collective temporal conventions. Putting it another way, I argue that the temporal component must be taken into consideration when one seeks to understand the power of this economic discourse in creating seemingly rational normative guidelines which are rarely disputed.

In order to understand the commodification of time, one must return to some of the classic scholarship in Time studies. This line of inquiry begins with E. P. Thompson’s (1967) widely quoted study examining the transition from natural time to clock time, and the formation of clock time discipline in industrial capitalism. This significant transition, brought about by the industrial revolution, has transformed public culture and the sense of selfhood. As the vibrant historical and sociological literature on Time has demonstrated, time had become a standardized resource: to be calculated, allocated, saved, bargained, and controlled (Adam 1995, 26, 85). Or as Thompson puts it, “Time is now currency: it is not passed, but spent” (Thompson 1967, 61).

In this regard, Benjamin Franklin’s famous aphorism, that “time is money,” poignantly captures this social and historical juncture, within which a new temporal discipline looms large. Time calculations are considered as value-neutral objective frameworks, operating according to market demands. From this perspective, one can understand
how perceptions of time as value and commodity play a central role in the calculative assessments of this consumer marketplace. Within industrial factories or outsourced call centers in India, time measurement is an instrument of power, producing undisputed temporal knowledge and temporal disciplines.

Returning to the single marketplace, I want to argue that these temporal customs are politically charged and implicated in regimes of power, which discipline single women through compliance with their fluctuating exchange value. Seen this way, ageist and sexist norms like those promoted in Patton's public letter are presented as temporal facts, merely reflecting market dynamics. In this context, this temporal economy works as a regulatory ideal which single women must comply with from an early age. This notion is exemplified in a column written by Lotti Kremba (a pseudonym), an Israeli single woman:

[Addressing single women] Ha! At your age you suddenly remember that you want a husband and children? There you have it, you've lost! You missed the train; the train of the biological clock and social order, [you ignored] mortified parents, friends, and neighbors. But above all, you missed the train of men! Men—regardless of their age or looks—will always choose a fertile young woman with no wrinkles … That’s how it is. Nothing can help you now; you are off the market! A market in which there is no equality between the sexes. (Kremba 2009)

Lotti declares, cynically, that nothing can help single women above a certain age as they are “off the market.” This is a market that privileges single men and younger women, she proposes. The temporal language of the market conveys a chauvinist logic which cannot be challenged or refuted. “There you have it, you’ve lost!” she states. It’s a competitive market, in which one gains and loses in relation to one’s value in the current exchange market. This is why single women should have known better, and should have looked for a husband when their youth still endowed them with a higher market value. Moreover, Lotti's tone conveys the message that it is the single woman's responsibility to stay alert and to practice constant self-scrutiny over her position in the market. Otherwise, she is doomed to become a “waste product.”

As the above account clarifies, “missing the train” is an act which defies both biological and socially determined schedules. As an irrational actor, the single woman fails to acknowledge what is well known by her immediate surroundings. These messages have a firm tone: “But above all,” “Nothing can help you,” “That’s how it is,” “You are off the market.” Moreover, as the writer states, the market does not adhere to feminist codes: there is no equality between the sexes, and there is nothing that the single woman can do about this. In this context, the single woman has no female agency and there is no possibility of resisting these oppressive gendered relations. Patton's Princeton letter deploys a similar rhetoric as quoted previously: “I’m going to say most women who are 35 are going to be looking for a man around the same age, or maybe a year or two older. So let’s take the man of 36. He’s quite happy to actually be with a woman 10 years younger” (Wallace 2014).

The power relations between men and women are configured here as neutral regulations of the temporal marketplace, one in which women's age is the currency by which
their value is set. According to this logic, as single women age, their marketplace inferiority becomes an absolute fact, and thus they have limited options in finding a man their age “or maybe a year or two older.”

The same ideas are expressed in Rachel Greenwald’s (2004) best seller self-help book, Finding a Husband After Thirty-Five: What I Learned at Harvard Business School, translated into Hebrew and published in Israel. Greenwald’s popular book propagates these messages by prescribing a business plan for single women over 35. In an interview with Dana Spector—a columnist with Israel’s most popular weekly Yedioth Ahronot she urges single women to adopt a “realist” stance concerning their exchange value in the single marketplace:

I’m not talking about admirable women who are happy being on their own … I’m talking about those who do want marriage and children. Women who want a husband and have reached this age, must begin to relate objectively to the market conditions which surround them. They have to stop dreaming that one day he will come along and must wake up and do something to find him. I call it a wake-up call, a necessary wake-up call. Men aged 30 and 40 plus approach me. A mass of them. They always tell me, “You must know a lot of women, can you introduce me to some? I really want to love someone.” That’s when I dissolve “Ohhhh, he is so cute,” until they add in a nonchalant tone, “and by the way, I do not want to date anyone over the age of 30.” It’s cruel, it’s terrible, but that’s reality. I could say to him: “You’re a pig and I refuse to help you,” still I decided to do something else. (Spector 2004)

According to Greenwald, the single marketplace conditions are crystal clear: single men do not want to date women over thirty. This is why she views her book as a wakeup call to women who fail to realize how the laws of the market operate. The socially constructed inferiority of “over aged” women is not challenged, but rather reinforced by these claims.

Drawing on this line of analysis, we can see how this standardization of time is configured in an economy of ageist and sexist temporality. A woman’s age signifies her exchange value and social worth. From a certain stage in her life course, she becomes easily disposable. Within these conditions, single women have to compete with each other over a sacred and a vital resource—the attention and time of single men. Single women who have been single for too long are accused of refusing to adapt to what are articulated as universal, biologically determined market-based rules. Hence, they fail to acknowledge their limited chances of survival in the market in the long run, and instead waste their time. According to this scenario, as in the workings of the consumer economy, single women are bound to be replaced by younger and “fresh products.”

In her review of Greenwald’s book, Dana Spector compliments Greenwald, describing her book as sincere and effective. Dana opines that anyone who implements Greenwald’s tactics seriously will increase her chances of getting married:

Single women who read Greenwald’s book undergo a harsh reality check, which urges them to wake up and realize that their worst fears have become a reality: Yes, a single woman at this age is considered to be damaged goods, with a limited chance of getting married. In fact, this single woman has reached the September 11 of her singlehood; this
deadly Armageddon requires a re-organization. It sounds terrible, but Greenwald’s frankness makes her book extremely effective for her target audience. Anyone who actually implements these focused military tactics may certainly well increase her chances of getting married. (Spector 2004)

Spector’s tone recalls the praise garnered by Patton’s letter, and could be summarized thus: “Finally, a courageous woman offers an effective solution to ‘aging’ single women.” Only by adopting the strategy of the business plan can single women liberate themselves from the illusion that they still have time left. As in all the excerpts considered thus far, the temporal logic of the market is represented as a timeless truth, one which erases other social experiences. What’s more, while these claims may appear harsh, they are—in Spector’s view, at least—a necessary wakeup call.

Let’s return to some of the messages underlined in Patton’s letter. As she clarifies, when single women attend college, their market value soars; accordingly, they have more options to choose from and to be chosen. Following this logic, this is why they should put their youth to maximum value rather than waste their “best years.” Singlehood in one’s thirties can be nothing but gloomy, since men can—and will—date women ten years younger than them. Both Spektor and Patton, like so many other commentators express this kind of patriarchal concern for all the single women who fail to acknowledge the dynamics of the market place.

While some of these themes have been discussed in the preceding chapters, the focus of this chapter is to explore how these presumptions are commodified and absorbed into the language of temporal market exchange relations. As the textual analysis demonstrates, the statements and images through which single women are represented are imbued with age grading and age-based timetables, through which women are constantly objectified and evaluated. This is a pervasive instrument of social control, which confers normative standards and prescribes rhythms and mechanisms for inclusion and exclusion. The naturalized authority of time, coupled with the rhetoric of supply and demand infuse these schedules with potent discursive force and warrant the successful maintenance of a patriarchal, ageist temporal order. In other words, the temporal market rhetoric is presented as connected to the individualized decisions of the male consumer, and decontextualizes these decisions from its patriarchal tone.

This outlook is instilled with strong overtones of panic and blame. For instance, this tone is vividly illustrated when single women are accused of being “too selective,” as well as in the popular demographic discourses discussed earlier. Marking single women as being too selective appears to be a global phenomenon, whereby the notion of selectiveness has come to be identified with the cultural figure of the urban, educated, and economically independent single woman (Lahad 2013). The accusation of selectiveness, with the attendant command to compromise, also carries with it the sensibilities associated with putting a mirror in front of single women and liberating them from their illusions. This tone, which casts doubt on their abilities to perceive reality, is also indicative of the infantilization process that single women are often subjected to. Injunctions such as “Grow up and learn how to compromise,” refer to what
is perceived as their inability to face the “facts of life,” to recognize their fluctuating exchange status in the single market.

The truth-bearing quality of age and time, as discussed in previous chapters, endows these statements with the authority and aura of expertise. This discourse is arrayed in everyday parlance as well as through the plethora of dating experts all urging single women to hurry up and understand that they are running out of time. Otherwise, as they are repeatedly warned, they will turn into “aging spinsters” or “old maids,” the figures that represent women excluded from the singlehood market, and thus exist out of society.

Single women as damaged goods

Sometimes I feel like a horse at an auction. I allow myself to be examined by a stranger with a suspicious nickname. This man evaluates my weight and height, he compares my breasts in relation to others, examines my teeth. At the end of this examination, I receive a compliant, hum, not too eager, God forbid. In order to escape from the dating sites, you have to put yourself up for sale, as though you are the most attractive product: upload an excellent picture, provide remarkable information, and think about the consumer. (Levin 2006)

In the quote above, May Levin, a single woman, describes the process of self-commodification she underwent, during which she evaluated herself according to the objectifying gaze of potential men. Accordingly, her different body parts bear different values, through which she can be attractively displayed, marketed, and sold. Hence, in this marketplace one has to recognize one’s fluctuating exchange value and do all one can to maximize this, in order to attract the attention of the male gaze. In this process, as feminist scholars have long emphasized (Bartky 1990), she becomes a self-policing subject, dependent upon the male gaze and his judgment.

Endorsing the temporal language of the market becomes a disciplinary apparatus, one which produces the docile subjects of the Foucauldian analysis. Its authority is accepted as legitimate, and becomes a potent form of self-surveillance. Our narrator above is aware of her position in this competitive market, and the subject positions ascribed to her in this particular discourse. In this account, she draws on the metaphor of the auction as representing the ways in which she is objectified: each of her body parts is measured and subjected to a market estimate.

The presence of the anonymous male consumer is also apparent in the next piece of advice, offered by Esta Brodsky-Kauffman, a dating coach who writes regularly for nrg, a popular Israeli online portal:

You can bend the truth a little: It’s okay to lie regarding your age by a year or two, to add some height and lose some weight. The objective is to present an attractive package in the eyes of the potential date. (Mendelman 2013)

As Esta explains, one’s exchange value is dependent upon one’s ability to present an “attractive package.” Drawing from marketing tactics, the dating coach suggests that
there is nothing wrong with bending the truth a little, accordingly making slight adjustments to one’s age. “You have to think about the consumer,” the expert emphasizes, “and present yourself as attractive merchandise” (ibid.). Following capitalist consumerist logic, the image is what counts; or as the expert puts it, the ability to present attractive merchandise or packaging. No surprise that many dating websites worldwide follow and endorse this logic by making space on their webpages for commercials touting hair removal, plastic surgery, diets, and professional photographers, who can maximize the candidate’s capabilities in attracting the attention of male consumers and upholding market standards.

The acceptance of these scenarios yields another temporal metaphor, the belief in “the single woman’s short shelf-life,” as Louise (a pseudonym), a single woman writing for Ynet, declares:

Let’s face it, the shelf-life of singlehood is shorter than that of a tub of yogurt in the warm summer months; a single woman who allows herself to relax for too long on the couch will be lonelier than a voter for the Meretz party at Bar Ilan University. (Louise 2007)

In a different column mentioned also in Chapter 4, Merav Resnik, another Ynet columnist, conveys a similar message:

Recently, I read an article about the different remedies that are supposed to cure the single disease for people above the age of thirty-five. While reading the talkbacks, I couldn’t help but notice that one of them exclaimed: “Anyone that is single above the age of thirty is damaged goods.” I smiled to myself; how lucky I am to be only thirty-two. My damage is considered to be light; I am safe for the time being. But the thought hasn’t really disappeared. (Resnik 2007c)

The perception of the single woman’s short shelf-life can be found in numerous jokes and popular sayings. One such joke was published in a 1986 Newsweek article (Salholz 1986) suggesting that a single, college-educated forty-year-old woman was more likely to die in a terrorist attack than to get married. In the 1980s, Japanese women were called “left over Christmas cake”: just as no one wants to buy Christmas cakes after December 25, Japanese men are not interested in women over 25 (Dales 2014; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Nakano 2011). Although these sayings go back thirty years they are still present in contemporary discourse about singlehood in Israel and elsewhere.

For example, in a research study on single women in China, anthropologist Arianne Gaetano (2009) quotes a different joke circulating on the Internet: “A 20-year old woman is like a basketball, everyone scrambling for it; A 30-year old woman is like a ping pong ball, everyone hitting it back and forth; a 40-year old woman is like a soccer ball, everyone wanting to kick it; A 50-year old woman is like golf balls, the further away it is hit, the better” (ibid., 5–6).

The above accounts exemplify the ways in which the temporal language of market exchange has infiltrated personal relations, and the extent to which single women position themselves as marketable commodities—and in turn view single men as very selective consumers. It also conveys the threat of becoming unusable, the rejected
objects of consumption. From a certain age, they cross the point from which there is no return. These views are echoed in the next web column, written by Hadas Friedman who refers here to her “damaged goods” label:

Congratulations to me! I recently reached the age at which, according to some of the talkbacks, I can be tagged as damaged goods, or as an old single woman obsessed with marriage and children. This is the age at which I’m supposed to internalize the verdict upon me and understand that I’m being punished. If not now, I will be punished in the future for my selective, arrogant, and reckless behavior. This is what happens to a woman who has not married by this advanced age—she should understand that she herself has determined her own fate, and from now on she will remain alone. She should be aware that from now on, no man will ever want her. Why should he? He has the option of choosing younger and more beautiful women, and of course less selective ones. (Friedman 2009)

Hadas realizes that her status, as “damaged goods” or being called an old single woman obsessed with marriage and children, has deterministic consequences. She is now afflicted by the ultimate punishment: no man will ever want her. In other words, she is not marketable. The criteria are dependent upon principles of a temporal market which comes to view as a potent shared system of thought. No alternatives are possible, and resisting this temporal consumer logic is improbable. The threat of being consigned to waste is seen by Bauman as integral to the capitalist mode of consumption:

Objects of consumption have a limited expectation of useful life, and once the limit has been passed they are unfit for consumption; since “being good for consumption” is the sole feature that defines their function, they are then unfit altogether—useless. Once unfit, they ought to be removed from the site of consuming life (consigned to biodegradation, incinerated, transferred into the care of waste-disposal companies) to clear it for other, still unused objects of consumption. (Bauman 2005, 9)

As indicated before, books like Greenwald’s (2004) bestseller Finding a Husband After Thirty-Five: Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School accept these underlying socio-temporal presumptions as a given. Indeed, the aforementioned title could be paraphrased as How to Find a Husband before Being Forcibly Ejected from the Marriage Market. The age of thirty-five, in this case, signifies a state of emergency in which the single woman’s condition has become a “9-1-1 situation,” as Greenwald puts it (ibid., 3).

As Bauman states: “Life in the liquid modern world is a sinister version of the musical chairs game, played for real. The true stake in the race is (temporary) rescue from being excluded into the ranks of the destroyed and avoiding being consigned to waste” (Bauman 2005, 3). The fact that feminine singlehood extends through a longer time period than before does not imply that its boundaries can be extended endlessly; they are demarcated by rigid gendered age norms. Metaphors and jokes about the single woman’s short shelf-life can be seen, in Bauman’s words, as a “sinister version of the musical chairs game.”

Continuing the discussion begun in previous chapters, it could be claimed that in the earlier stages of their singlehood, women have control of their time: consequently,
they are “suitable for consumption,” can be an active purchase to-be, while with the later ones they cannot be “kept in the store anymore.” This is one of the reasons why women are socialized from an earlier age to do all in their power to avoid being consigned to waste in Bauman’s terms. Their shelf-life is bounded by age limits, and therefore one should be aware of her expiration date or—as Bauman argues—when subjects are no longer fit for consumption.

However, instead of complying with this logic, I question the discursive parameters and the temporal measurements of this shelf-life. These measurements are ingrained with sexist and ageist beliefs. On this view, this temporal market language endows patriarchy with discursive force, and I argue that this should prompt us to think about how we can disconnect our thinking about women’s expected life trajectory from these popular metaphors and seemingly undisputed laws of consumer capitalist circulation. These discursive templates are also incorporated in the related assumption that single women should be wary of wasting time, because their time is running out.

**Wasting time/accumulating time**

The injunction not to waste time is another temporal construct which reflects the vigorous temporal regulations to which single women are subjected. In this context, the prohibition not to waste time becomes a disciplinary norm, according to which single women are socialized into becoming their own watchful guardians and successful *time managers*. In his celebrated analysis of the Protestant work ethic, Max Weber observed that wasting time is considered to be “the first and, in principle, the deadliest sin” (Weber 1985, 157). This observation is related to the perception that time is both a valuable and an expiring resource. This principle is widespread in capitalist consumer society and, as we shall see, is present in many accounts discussing singlehood time.

As the following examples will attempt to demonstrate, the temporal imperative not to waste time places single women in a constant state of alertness. Meeting the right guy can happen at any moment. Ella Pe’er a single woman explains:

*I live in Tel Aviv and according to all social parameters I am a successful woman. I have a senior position, I earn a five-digit salary … usually I am surrounded by a lot of people and many desire my company. It is almost as if I’m surrounded by so many people so that I won’t feel the loneliness anymore and I won’t remember that I am alone in the world … it always seems that any second this might happen to me, yet reality proves differently.*  

(Pe’er 2007)

In a different context, Rona Stern, another single woman, describes the pressure she is subjected to at work: “At work I am the only one who is not married; thus, every single guy entering the office must be scrutinized immediately: perhaps there is a chance that he will be the guy for me” (Stern 2007). In a similar vein, Esta, the dating coach, instructs single women: “Act like every interaction is your dream date; you have to be at your best most of the time to meet people out there” (Brodsky-Kauffman 2006a). In a different online advice column, she takes the case of Naomi as an example of wasting the best years of her life with the wrong man:
Naomi is a good looking thirty-two-year-old woman. After being in a relationship for many years with an emotionally unavailable man (an atrocious waste of time; indeed, she wasted the most beautiful years of her life), she decided to take action and to end the relationship. She began her session with me at the point in which she constantly found herself; at the beginning of a relationship which would not yield a thing … she’s no longer twenty-two and doing what she has done so far has not really worked for her. (Brodsky-Kaufman 2008b)

In Naomi’s case, as described above, she did not invest her time wisely; accordingly, her stock went down. Arguably, this bad investment did not lead to any productive results, such as finding a husband and having children. The prohibition of wasting time becomes a duty of the self. It is the single woman’s responsibility to do all that is in her power to prevent herself from crossing the point of no return or in Bauman’s (2005) terms leading wasted lives.

This temporal awareness configured into a constant state of alertness can also be found in the global speed dating trend also popular in Israel. One of the key assumptions underpinning speed dating is the scarcity of time. As one Israeli speed-dating agency, named Speed-Date, promises in an advertisement, their venture is intended for people who do not want “to waste time on pointless, drawn-out blind dates” (Speed-Date 2014). Consider, for example, the following questions in a different Israeli speed dating website named Look4Love:

Do you want to go out on more dates?
Are you tired of wasting time on long, unnecessary dates?
Are you interested in meeting more people in less time? (Look4Love 2015)

These queries illustrate some of the shared cultural understandings and social pressures in today’s dating scene. A temporal reading of speed dating is interesting; it assures potential clients that it will acquaint them with the love of their life in just a few minutes. Speed dating, drawing on Bauman’s (2003) analysis, can also be perceived as a new consumer practice in which potential partners become merchandise. In these market conditions, one must be quick and efficient. Consider questions such as: “Is this a serious relationship?” “Where is it heading?” “Does it have a future?” All these questions manifest an anxiety produced by the injunction of the desire to not waste time, but instead to invest in the “right” kind of relationship. Another best-selling self-help book, which in time also became a global box office hit screened also in Israel, was He’s Just Not That into You: The No-Excuses Truth to Understanding Guys (Behrendt and Tuccillo 2009). The book’s underlying message is that one should not waste time on “dead-end relationships.”

In Israeli relationship terminology, there is a well-known phrase, called the Yachasenu Le’an conversation (the “Where is this relationship heading?” conversation). This is considered a crucial conversation that one is expected to conduct with a potential life partner, in order to determine the intentions of the partners involved. The underlying implication is the need to know if one should invest time in the relationship. The common understanding is that this kind of conversation is usually imbued with the prophetic power to determine if the couple should break up or stay together. Moreover,
in Israeli culture this kind of conversation is readily associated with images of “needy” and “hysterical” single women, searching for the cues, confirmation, and reassurances for a future commitment on behalf of a future husband. Thus, the Yachasenu Le’an conversation reflects some of the prevailing cultural ideologies which hover over relationships that do not accord with linear productive temporal frameworks. In other words, relationships which do not accumulate to substantial value—getting married and having kids.

Seen this way, romantic relationships which are “going somewhere” are automatically configured as more meaningful and productive, and implicitly dismiss a vast range of alternative social relationships. According to this logic, short-term relationships, “flings,” one-sided love affairs, and “platonic” relationships are categorized and graded in relation to “real” and “meaningful” ones: that is, long-term, committed romantic relationships.

What follows from the above is that the *temporal accumulative* dimension plays a crucial role in imagining familial relations. From this perspective, long-term relationships represent a positive accumulation of time. In fact, successful long-term relationships signify time invested wisely and productively. For example, in a different context, the *New York Times* reported a few years ago that the current marriage “crisis” has led to the declaration of a new public holiday in Russia (Rhodin 2008). In a press announcement, the State declared that couples married for more than twenty-five years would be awarded medals and declared ideal families in special ceremonies across Russia.

The way in which conjugal time is socially constructed as a positive accumulation of time also emerges in the next example, telling the story of an Israeli couple: “Ruby and Natalie, so it seems, have not wasted their time and they have accomplished the goals they have laid out for themselves” (Reinstein 2009). This tone of appreciation is expressed by a Ynet writer in a special section of its website entitled “Couple of the Week,” in which an Israeli couple share their story with the portal’s readers: “We both subscribed to JDate in order to look for a serious partner and create a family … after three weeks of dating we felt that this was it … after a month-and-a-half Ruby proposed” (ibid.). The column ends with the celebratory statement: “Today, a year from their first date, they are on their way to starting their family” (ibid.). This linear model of couplehood organizes time as a sequential process of steps and stages. Like many similar narratives, the happy couple are praised for not wasting time and acting in accordance with societal timetables. Further, by focusing on their goal-oriented pathways they have successfully utilized appropriate time-measurement techniques and norms. A similar story is the story of Galit and Tal, also appearing in the “Couple of the Week” section of Ynet. Both partners are in their thirties; after one week of knowing each other they decided to live together and two weeks later decided to get married (Farkol 2007).

In the preceding chapters, I emphasized the temporal imperative of successful timing. According to the pervasive cultural scripts in earlier stages of singlehood, many women are encouraged to experiment and to engage in different relationships which would not necessarily lead to marriage and children. This highly recommended
experimentation is considered a necessary step toward enriching one's personality, and is even regarded as an important basis for one's future and for building a "serious relationship." On the other hand, moving in together after a week once you are in your thirties is perceived as a wise and recommended decision. One's age is figured as a primary coordinate of meaning and evaluation, as well as a crucial focal point for setting priorities, planning life goals, and estimating successes and failures.

One more related example can be found in another one of Esta's columns, when the dating advisor addresses a twenty-seven-year-old woman who has never been in a romantic relationship:

You are rightly concerned. Statistically, someone who has never been in a relationship and has passed the age of twenty-five has a serious problem. Your chances of being in one in the near future are increasingly diminishing. According to a wealth of research, people who have never experienced a mutual relationship lack the basic qualifications needed for maintaining a conjugal relationship ... They lose the little things which make someone capable of being in a relationship ... With such a resume much luck will be required. (Brodsky-Kauffman 2007b)

As evidenced in this column, late singlehood is ascribed with negative and pathological social connotations. The longer you are single, the harder it is to get out of singlehood, to become a non-single. Singlehood becomes part of your identity, constituting one as a loner, diminishing one's market value, forming bad habits and, as Esta claims, causing one to "lose the little things which make someone capable of being in a relationship." Thus, being single for too long leaves one with emotional and behavioral deficiencies requiring different forms of "rehabilitation" as a precondition for re-entry into the marriage market.

Elsewhere, Esta declares: "There is a fact that dating sites want to keep hidden—anyone who does not succeed finding a partner within 3 months, will remain there for years" (Mendelman 2013). In another column, "Trapped in the Net," the dating expert quotes what she dubs as the terrible statistic that most dating websites would be reluctant to uncover: the longer a person frequents a dating website, the more their chances of meeting someone diminishes:

Do you know, there are some very alarming statistics which online dating sites will do everything in their power not to reveal: the longer a person spends time on dating sites, the less chances one has to meet someone. Yes, yes, this is a real statistics. And why is it so true? Not because of a bad spell, but due to the behaviors people adopt on these dating sites. Don’t get me wrong: I’m all for dating sites. They certainly create opportunities to meet people who in other circumstances you cannot meet but the use of them can turn out to be dangerous if it is not done right. (Brodsky-Kauffman 2009)

So, according to Brodsky-Kauffman, the longer someone is single the less chance they have to unsingle themselves. The above analysis exemplifies how heteronormative modalities of time acquire coherence and normativity. As Kerry Daly suggests, through the moral economy of time one has to be a good manager of one's time and successfully meet deadlines in which certain amounts of activity have to be condensed into a specified period of time (Daly 1996, 86). The single woman should use her time prudently
otherwise she loses her ability to act, both in the present and future. She becomes trapped in the net and the pathologies of long-term singlehood. This is reminiscent of a new pathology inscribed to singlehood: chronic singlehood.

A few years ago, during a class about the medicalization of feminine singlehood, a student drew my attention to a new term adopted by some Israeli journalists and experts: *chronic singlehood*. In an article published on the *nrgr* portal, a journalist describes the following method which would supposedly “rescue singles from their pathology”:

Dr. Ora Golan offers another method, which has nothing to do with statistics. She is a Doctor of Chiropody by profession, and offers to release every eternal single man and woman from years of loneliness. This is done through a series of sessions of 20 minutes... Golan reports up to 80 percent success with her method. (Dagan 2010)

It is beyond the scope of the discussion of this chapter to present an extensive critique of the medicalized and therapeutic tones of the term, yet I do think its temporal dimensions merit our attention here. The term “chronic” signifies both the negative accumulation of time as well as a loss of control and autonomy. In this context, I emphasize once again the connections between time and agency. Terms such as “chronic singlehood” or “the single woman’s short shelf-life” come to designate a loss of agency and a vastly diminished capacity to act and determine one’s life trajectory. In this sense, women are controlled by their illness and or diminishing exchange value in the single market place.

These medicalized and therapeutic rhetorics become part of a set of disciplinary techniques modeled on the competitive marketplace. As the textual analysis here demonstrates, the circulation of models, metaphors, and phrases which draw from this language is abundant, and interacts with economic and temporal deterministic assumptions about the possible life trajectories of single women.

This deterministic tone also explains why one rarely encounter texts that run counter to this temporal economic logic. An example which offers an alternative to this form of thinking can be found in the next column:

I often hear how people only want a serious relationship or a relationship that will lead to a wedding... it sometimes seems as if we live in the realm of what will happen in the future only, and consequently we limit ourselves with lists and requirements that we have invented... We check, select, and examine and we miss out not only on the future but what could also be the future. Perhaps we should learn and perceive life as a holiday; a journey made up of summer flings. As not just about what we could get out of it; not just about the race, but what we feel here and now. What will happen? Will we fall in love? Will our hearts break? Damn! It would at least remind us that our hearts exist. (Friedman 2007)

Hadas, the writer of the last column, lucidly critiques the current culture climate in which personal relationships are now constituted. The primacy of long-term relationships, it seems, rules out any possible alternatives. To put this another way, she points out the mere fact that social life is made up of a plurality of social interactions, yet
these discursive tenets cast off relationships which fail to conform to linear and productive paradigms, setting rigid limits on what is considered as meaningful and valuable. According to this mindset, short-term relationships and long-term relationships which have not necessarily resulted in successful marriages are regarded as an utter waste of time. Common behavioral standards which attempt to distinguish between wasting time and investing time fail to consider the affection, magic, interest, and meaning often found in relationships which do not necessarily result in marriage and children.

To conclude, this chapter has addressed the ways in which the commodified language of time shapes the popular perceptions of female singlehood. My analysis here has also attempted to shed light on some of key questions which preoccupy sociology, cultural studies, and feminist theory. Among these is the objectification and commodification of women. Age branding in this case plays a significant role in determining women’s exchange value, and women’s sense of agency and social worth. The unquestioned adherence to these beliefs provokes women’s anxieties throughout their life course: “Can I still participate in this marketplace?” “What is my current worth?” “When will I be disqualified and excluded from this commerce or become ‘damaged goods’?” The analysis presented in this chapter should prompt us to create alternative discourses to the commodification of single women’s schedules. Within this context, I stress the need for alternative ways of thinking about singlehood, disconnecting singlehood from normalized concepts of market logic, exchange value, and single women’s capacity to be “sold” and “exchanged.”

The texts analyzed in this chapter voice the current devastating effects of patriarchy. In this manner we can see how patriarchy overlaps with other systems of oppression, namely singlism and ageism. Thus, rethinking time norms and schedules should be located in a broader framework of gender forms of oppression and vice versa. That is, feminist resistance should pay attention to the ways in which temporality is exercised to discipline and normalize the female body, punishing who ever cannot comply with these fixed rules. Thinking beyond the conjugal imaginary poses such an alternative which will be further discussed in the last chapter of this book.