The title of this essay is taken from two essential popular texts of the 1960s: the CBS Reports documentary “The Homosexuals” (1967), and Helen Gurley Brown’s best-selling self-help book Sex and the Single Girl (1962), which became a lifestyle bible for millions of white, middle-class, white-collar working women. These two texts are crucial Zeitgeist artifacts, offering more-complex-than-you-might-expect overviews of the changing psychic and social landscape for homosexuals and “career girls” in the United States in the 1960s. Already famous for its creators’ and writers’ omnivorous use of all things 1960s, Mad Men simultaneously borrows from and critiques the representation of the homosexual and the single career woman in these iconic texts, while also juxtaposing these figures in evocative and provocative ways.

“The Homosexuals” is framed by interviews with men who represent “the happy homosexual” and “the closeted married man.” The first is a fully visible, good-looking, young blond identified as Lars Larson, who tells reporter Mike Wallace that while he initially felt that homosexuality was “furtive” and “ugly,” an encounter with a serviceman in New Orleans “was just a
grand, grand experience. It was the first moment in my life where I was open, where I didn’t have to hide. . . . I had all the freedom in the world to be Lars Larson.” Earlier in the interview, Larson says that he had the choice to “be a nice little robot and go through the motions of life for some sixty, seventy, eighty years. . . . But it wouldn’t be right, not for me. And I couldn’t sit back and take that.” At the end of the documentary, however, we are shown someone who has decided to “sit back and take that,” in the person of a homosexual man, shown in silhouette, who has a wife and two children, and who suggests that he married a woman because “the gay crowd is so narcissistic that they can’t establish a love relationship with another male.”

Considering what the documentary has to say about mainstream U.S. attitudes about homosexuals in the 1960s, the life choice of this shadowed homosexual husband and father is understandable—if not his comments on gay narcissism. Directly after the opening interview with Larson, Wallace explains that Larson is a member of “the most despised minority in America,” and that a CBS poll found that “Americans consider homosexuality more harmful to society than adultery, abortion, or prostitution. . . . Two out of three Americans look upon homosexuals with ‘disgust, discomfort, or fear.’ One in ten says ‘hatred.’ A vast majority believes that homosexuality is an illness; only ten percent say it is a crime.” Yet, paradoxically, the CBS poll found that “the majority of Americans favor legal punishment” even for private homosexual acts between consenting adults.

This is the cultural history against which Mad Men’s Sal Romano and Kurt—or, the closeted, married homosexual and the happy homosexual of “The Homosexuals”—are situated. Sal and Kurt come to represent the alpha and the omega of 1960s homosexuality for the series’ first four seasons, just as the opening and closing interviewees might have for viewers watching “The Homosexuals” in the 60s. Importantly, however, Mad Men reverses the trajectory of “The Homosexuals” from the cautiously out (Larson) to the closeted (final married interviewee) by introducing Kurt into the series after Sal. Like Larson, Kurt is a young, blond, “out” homosexual. And while Lars does not have an accent like Kurt’s, his name conjures a European openness toward sexuality—think La dolce vita (1960), Swedish films such as Through a Glass Darkly (1962) and Loving Couples (1964), and films of the French New Wave.

In “The Jet Set” (2.11), Kurt invites Peggy Olson to a Bob Dylan concert while several coworkers look on. When Harry Crane remarks, “Peggy and Kurt in the Village, oh my!” he little realizes that conjuring Greenwich Village and The Wizard of Oz in a single sentence will result in Kurt’s casu-
ally announcing that he is “a homosexual” to make it clear that Peggy is not his “date.” Ken Cosgrove nervously assumes—perhaps hopes—that Kurt, being foreign, does not understand what he is saying. While Kurt’s friend Smitty tries to stop him from saying more, Kurt insists that he “make[s] love with” men. Once Kurt leaves, Smitty explains by telling everyone that Kurt is “from Europe, it’s different there.” Ken, still a bit rattled, offers a line that could have come from that CBS poll: “I knew queers existed, I just don’t want to work with them.” Smitty snaps, “What, he’s the first homo you’ve met in advertising?” This is all it takes for Ken and the rest of the young executives left behind to practice a little McCarthy-era guilt by association. “You think Smitty’s in love?” Ken asks. “Which bathroom does he use?” Harry jokes, resorting to the gender inversion model of homosexuality still prevalent in the 1960s that understood feminine men and masculine women as queer.

Tellingly, off to the side or offscreen for most of Kurt’s coming out scene is Mad Men’s other recurring homosexual character, the closeted Sal, who, unsurprisingly, looks upset but has nothing to say, even about his choice of donuts from the variety on offer in the break room. The series thus far seems to construct its closeted homosexual character largely through the deployment of some of the tropes that 1960s mainstream America associated with homosexuals: Sal is connected to foreignness (he is Italian American), sartorial stylishness that is generally a touch or two more “colorful” than a straightforward Brooks Brothers look, and closeness to his mother (in one scene the office telephone operators talk about how devoted Sal is to his mother). In the first episode (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” 1.1) Sal uses his being Italian as an excuse for not having a girlfriend—which, of course, might be understood as indicating a hyperheterosexual libido, but, with our knowledge of Sal, can also be understood as indicating his homosexuality through the sign of foreignness. To complicate the representation of sexuality in another way, the series also makes Don Draper and Roger Sterling stylishly “metrosexual” avant la lettre. By contrast, the young, out Kurt evidently does not have to try as hard as Sal, Don, or Roger, and favors a more casual style of dress. Finally, then, the series suggests that both middle-aged heterosexual and middle-aged closeted homosexual men are slaves to appearance in ways that the up-and-coming (gay and straight) youth culture of the 1960s, which Kurt seems to anticipate, will not be.

Cleverly, if potentially problematically, the series also associates Sal with Bruno Antony (Robert Walker), the psychopathic queer killer in Alfred Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train (1951), a film that some critics have condemned as homophobic and others have praised as a critique of phallic
masculinity. Like Bruno, Sal has a snappy wardrobe and is very close to his mother. Like Bruno, Sal has a crush on another man who is straight—or ostensibly so in the Hitchcock film. And like Bruno, Sal admires his crush’s talent: in *Mad Men* for writing fiction; in the Hitchcock film for playing tennis. Sal and his crush, Ken Cosgrove, bond over literature and Ken’s ability to explain a Rothko painting. The show suggests that, with his artistic skills and interests—which we later find out extend to opera—Ken may be a latent queer guy, and that Sal has some reason to hope. To the degree that we feel for Sal’s circumstances, we are asked to hopefully take on the 1960s cultural cliché of an interest in art and literature as the sign of a queer man, only to have this hope dashed during an at-home dinner to which Sal invites Ken (“The Gold Violin,” 2.7).

During dinner, the now married Sal tells his wife, Kitty, about Ken’s short story, “The Gold Violin.” In a moment of painful irony, Sal tells Kitty that the gold violin “was perfect in every way, except it couldn’t make music.” Now while it is clear that Sal would like to “make beautiful music” with Ken, the melodramatic construction of Sal’s narrative segments in *Mad Men* are invested in keeping him a secondary, silent, and tormented figure of pathos, by and large. In terms of melodrama, irony, pathos, and victimhood, it is no accident that the object of Sal’s affections is the person who, four episodes after the dinner party, displays the most homophobic response to Kurt’s coming out, and who fails to notice a silent, chastened, anxious Sal standing nearby. There is further melodramatic irony in the fact that young, thin, blond Ken is the straight double of young, thin, blond, but openly homosexual Kurt.

The coda to the dinner-party scene takes us back to *Strangers on a Train*. After dinner, Ken leaves his lighter behind. Just as crazy queer Bruno takes the lighter Guy (Farley Granger) leaves behind after their meal together, so Sal keeps Ken’s lighter as a fetishistic token marking a potentially obsessive desire—after all, Bruno tries to use the lighter to frame Guy for murder when Guy won’t do his bidding. Viewers of the Hitchcock film may find that the final shot of Sal in the bedroom, in the eerie glow of a television set, lighting his cigarette with Ken’s lighter, while, in the background, his clueless wife does needlepoint sitting in bed, makes them wonder whether Sal could be thinking dark thoughts, and if he might be capable of dark deeds in order to express thwarted homosexual desires. After all, Bruno seems like a charming, affable guy at first too.

Another fascinating aspect of Sal’s character development is his relationship with his “straight-but-not-narrow” boss Don. *Mad Men’s* first episode, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” establishes a subtle connection between
the two men through Don’s involvement with Midge, a free-spirited, independent female artist who lives in countercultural Greenwich Village—the queer space in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s. After establishing Don’s sexual liaison with the artist, the episode has art director Sal enter Don’s office to find him exercising with a chest-building isometric device. “Look at you, Gidget, trying to fit into that bikini!” Sal campily quips to Don. Because Don takes in this outrageous quip with such equanimity, one might wonder whether he is not deploying some very dry version of camp humor as a retort to the Gidget remark when he looks over Sal’s Lucky Strike ad, which features a handsome, muscular man in a swimsuit, and says that the image would probably be “better off with some sex appeal”—so could Sal put a woman in a bathing suit next to the man? Sal is more than happy to comply as it provides him with the opportunity to act the part of “one of the boys” with Don. But whether or not we understand Don as being aware of making a joke, the narrative is constructed to have his comment about a “girl” in a swimsuit campily play off of Sal’s opening remark in order to position Don-as-Gidget next to the muscular man on the beach. This is but one example of how *Mad Men* develops Sal’s relationship with Don in ways that, layering the present over the 1960s, slyly challenge and complicate gender and sexuality binaries.

Why would Sal feel comfortable enough to direct an over-the-top camp comment at his boss, who not only lets it pass, but perhaps, consciously or subconsciously, takes up the banter? Considered within a broad psychosocial context, it makes sense that someone like Don who is desperate to hide his own outsider identity (the illegitimate son of a prostitute, raised as “poor, white trash,” an army deserter and identity thief) would connect at some unspoken level with the closeted Italian American Sal and might feel a little less guarded around him. On its most manifest narrative level, *Mad Men* has Don and Sal making suggestive comments about women to each other, but the series also appears to be intent on building up a suggestive queerness under and around their relationship—a queerness that is implicitly supported for certain viewers by things we find out about Don, such as his Greenwich Village artist mistress, his love of European art films, and his move into a Greenwich Village apartment of his own at the end of season 3.

The next and—considering the permanent departure of Sal from the cast by the end of season 3—perhaps the final time the series allows for this kind of playful free and easy interaction between the two men occurs during their joint business trip to Baltimore (“Out of Town,” 3.1). The queer suggestiveness begins on the plane when Don points out a magazine ad to Sal. Set
in the French Quarter of New Orleans, the illustration has a business man carrying an outsized bottle of Fleischmann’s whiskey while a smiling, well-dressed young woman looks on (fig. 14.1). “Can you believe this?” Don asks Sal; “What’s this world coming to?” “That is a big bottle,” Sal replies. “That’s not a bottle, that’s his date,” Don remarks. Perhaps inspired by the French Quarter ad setting, as well as the pre–take off drinks in which they are indulging, Sal and Don improvise a dialogue. As the ad fills the frame, Sal speaks for the woman: “My, oh my, what a big bottle you have!” Don continues as the man (also in voiceover): “I’m sorry honey, but I’m taken. I just pawned my typewriter so we could be together for the weekend.”

What is being suggested here is complex, but finally points to queer possibilities for and in Don whom, as we know, is struggling to remain faithful to his pregnant wife, Betty, after an affair in season 2 nearly ended their marriage. Don is willing to play along with Sal’s campy, cross-sex opening, but in turning down Sal-as-the-woman’s come-on, Don would appear to be saying “no” to queerness by reasserting his straight masculinity. When Shelly, a flight attendant, mistakes him for William Hofstadt—Don’s brother-in-law who has left his name tag on the suitcase—Don goes along with it and pulls Sal into what turns out to be an ongoing game of fluid identities in this episode. Don introduces Sal as “my associate, Mr. Fleischmann”—the brand of whiskey in the magazine ad. In a classic illustration of the functioning of the unconscious, Don “just happens” to name Sal after the “date” (the big bottle of Fleischmann’s whiskey) for which Don’s ad double has rejected the
woman (or Sal-as-the-woman). Here Don Draper/Dick Whitman (or his unconscious mind)/his ad double/William Hofstadt fends off a date with a woman (or a man-playing-a-woman) for another man (Sal/the big bottle/Mr. Fleischmann). He almost does this again with Shelly when she proposes they all meet for dinner with a friend of hers, but she is insistent while Don is strangely passive.

Adding to the queer suggestiveness in the scene on the plane is Don’s final line for the man in the ad—“I just pawned my typewriter so we could be together for the weekend”—which is a reference to the novel *The Lost Weekend* (1944) by Charles Jackson, and the film based on it (1945), whose alcoholic protagonist shares a first name with Don, and whose “problem” in the original novel is repressed homosexuality. On some level, this episode entertains the possibility that this “out-of-town” business trip might end with Don ditching the woman he usually finds to sleep with for the “big bottle” of Fleischmann’s sitting next to him on the plane.

If so, the manifest narrative challenges, if not fully represses, this latent queer possibility by introducing Shelly, who insists that Don and Sal go to dinner with her and her coworker. Don does not seem particularly interested in this available, attractive woman—perhaps because she is coming on so strong. At dinner, he seems far less intent on seducing Shelly (indeed, she will later have to put the moves on him as the woman in the ad does) than in having Sal go along with his story that the two of them are accountants, possibly working for the government on the Jimmy Hoffa case. Interestingly, the dinner sequence is initially constructed largely from two-shots of Don and Sal in business suits alternating with two-shots of the flight attendants still in their uniforms, reinforcing same-sex pairing (figs. 14.2–14.3). It is only with the unexpected appearance, in a medium long shot, of a pilot (also still in uniform but wearing a lobster bib) sitting across from Sal that the shots become more varied, including classic “sexual difference” shot–reverse shot close-ups of Don and Shelly (fig. 14.4).

But if, in one way, the pilot’s appearance disrupts certain queer undercurrents at the table, it also activates others. After all, we know that while Don may eventually be coupled with one of the flight attendants, Sal will not be. A man in uniform across the table has been abruptly introduced into the mise-en-scène as a possible match for Sal. Could this be another time, as with Shelly’s emphatic appearance, when the text suddenly introduces an additional figure to diffuse the possibility of a Don-Sal pairing? As it turns out, this episode will provide Sal with a man, just not the pilot (or Don, for that matter). However, it is interesting to discover that while the
Figures 14.2–14.4. A series of shots of same-sex pairs is interrupted by a medium long shot (“Out of Town,” 3.1).
writers originally planned for Sal and the pilot to have a one-nighter to parallel Don and Shelly’s, they finally decided to pair him with another man in a uniform: the bellboy who comes to check on Sal’s air conditioner. Although he is not given a name, his looks, and the name of the actor who plays him, Orestes Arcuni, suggest the bellboy is Latino. This bellboy initiates sex with Sal, established by a shot from Sal’s point of view as he takes out his money clip. While Sal is ostensibly going through his bills to find a tip for the bellboy, the appearance of the bellboy’s shoes in this shot also suggests a sex-for-pay arrangement (fig. 14.5). The move by the series’ writers from a tall, fair, WASP pilot to a short, dark, bellboy-cum-hustler for Sal’s first homosexual experience deploys certain white, middle- and upper-class cultural tropes that eroticize race, ethnicity, and the working class. While Don is upstairs with a tall, blonde, WASPy flight attendant, Sal is downstairs with a Latino bellboy/hustler.

Both Don’s and Sal’s liaisons end in coitus interruptus, which frustrates audiences who have been waiting for a very long time to see Sal act on his sexual desires. But the fire alarm that melodramatically conspires to thwart Don’s liaison with Shelly and Sal’s with the bellboy also functions to bring Don face-to-face with Sal’s homosexuality—and, perhaps, with his own latent queer desires. Granting its problematic dominant cultural erotic politics, the scene between Sal and the bellboy is constructed to encourage viewer empathy for Sal, and, even more, to encourage viewers to be as excited as Sal is by the bellboy’s actions — there is even a (risky for basic cable)
shot of the bellboy’s hand going down Sal’s boxers. Once that fire alarm goes off, however, the sequence quickly shifts to record Don’s progress out of his room and down the fire escape. As he stops by Sal’s window to watch him put on his clothes, we are momentarily placed in the classic male erotic voyeur position, except here it is a man watching another man. Don raps on the window, which triggers a shot of an anxious Sal, followed by his view of Don on the fire escape. “Come on!” Don yells at Sal. A shot over Don’s shoulder reveals the bellboy in his T-shirt entering the room and coming over to Sal (fig. 14.6). In an episode that repeatedly foregrounds Don’s gaze, a final medium close-up shows Don staring into the window at Sal and the bellboy, looking less appalled than dumbfounded and pained, at which point a female leg enters the frame to remind Don of his own “illicit” liaison (fig. 14.7).

Once on the street in front of the hotel, we return to Don’s point of view as Sal and the bellboy emerge from the crowd. Sal looks at Don and briefly casts his eyes downward as the bellboy leaves the frame. In Sal’s point-of-view reverse shot of Don, the flight attendant has also left the frame. For a moment Don and Sal are (re)constructed as a couple, and we are given a shot of Don’s blurred profile as he looks over at Sal, who is looking up (and who is in the center-frame “power” position). When the flight attendant (and heterosexuality) pops back into the frame, Sal’s image is thrown out of focus, but we notice Don is now following Sal’s upward gaze with the same grave and enigmatic look that he had earlier at the window. Of course, one way to read what has happened here is that Don is unpleasantly surprised...
at the sight of Sal with the bellboy because he wonders what Sal’s homosexuality might mean in terms of their maintaining a comfortable working relationship. But considered within the queerness rippling through this episode—beginning with the double-entendre play with the ad (or perhaps even earlier in the episode with Don’s imagining his illegitimate birth)—this sequence also suggests that the flight attendant may have been a narrative diversion from the expression of Don’s (and the series’) more inchoate, unconscious queer desires. In this context, Don’s enigmatic looks just might contain some measure of a confused and troubling awareness of his interest in things queer (even if we understand this interest as being limited to play-acting and looking). On the street in front of the hotel, Don follows Sal’s gaze back up to the scene of homosexual or queer possibility where he stood transfixed at the sight of Sal with the bellboy.

This possibility is suggested by events later in the episode. On the plane back to New York, instead of the stern lecture Sal expects, Don pitches a London Fog ad that features a woman wearing nothing but a London Fog raincoat flashing a man on the subway. Clearly meant to be a friendly warning to Sal, Don suggests “Limit your exposure” as the ad’s tagline. If the tagline is cautioning Sal about his sexual expression, however, the sight of Sal with the bellboy has inspired Don to create a new, more boldly (hetero) sexual, campaign for London Fog. Back in the office, Sal shows his sketch for the ad to Paul Kinsey and Harry Crane. Wondering who to cast as the man in the ad, Kinsey asks Sal, “What does he look like?” “I don’t know . . .
a little excited, a little shocked,” Sal suggests, perhaps thinking of Don’s face as he looked in from the fire escape and his own face when he caught sight of Don. “No,” Kinsey retorts, “What’s he look like?” Snapping out of his reverie, Sal is also probably thinking about Don on that fire escape when he says, “Oh, oh—handsome.” Tellingly, if somewhat stereotypically, Sal is cast as the flashing woman and Don as the man on the subway who is both “excited” and “shocked” at what he is seeing. But in doing this, the episode also provocatively, and homosexually, recasts the scene in which Don insists that Shelly undress first while he looks at her.

With this ad campaign, Sal is once again the “picture” to Don’s “words” (something the owner of London Fog says makes them a great team), and Don (protectively? possessively?) wants Sal to “limit his exposure” to one man—to Don as the man on the subway. It is fitting that Don comes up with this tagline/advice since he has been trying to limit his own exposure during the series by taking on an elaborate “imitation of life” as Don Draper to hide his identity as Dick Whitman. Ironically, Don’s next plum assignment for Sal actually encourages Sal to “come out” a bit more (“The Arrangements,” 3.4). Don asks Sal to take over as the director of a Patio (read: Pepsi) diet cola commercial based on the opening of the musical film Bye Bye Birdie (1963)—in spite of Peggy’s assertion that the Ann-Margret/Bye Bye Birdie concept won’t appeal to young women. Perhaps she realizes that this concept is calculated to appeal only to men, whether they are straight (the sexy Ann-Margret look-alike) or homosexual (the musical and camp elements). In his enthusiasm to show his wife what the TV ad will look like, Sal forgets Don’s advice and, far from limiting his “exposure,” plays the Ann-Margret part for all it’s worth as he performs for his increasingly confused and uncomfortable wife. While the clients admit the commercial was a “meticulous” recreation of the number in the film, they don’t like it: “There’s something not right about it. I can’t put my finger on it . . . but it’s just not right.” After the clients leave, Kinsey agrees with them: “It looks right, it sounds right, it smells right, but it’s not right.” While Sal’s wife, the straight-laced clients, and the junior executive Kinsey do not appreciate the commercial, a more queerly positioned Don certainly does, and tells Sal, “You’re a commercial director,” which is “the only good thing to come of all this.”

But Don’s protectiveness toward his new protégé—another sign of the implicit queer charge between them—is short-lived. Their final major scene together happens some time after Sal has fended off the advances of a Lucky Strike executive in the editing room where they are working on a commercial (“Wee Small Hours,” 3.9). When the executive asks that Sal be fired as the
director, Sal tries to explain to Don that the client was drunk and cornered him, but that he resisted. Sarcastically and incredulously, Don asks Sal, “But nothing happened, because nothing could happen, because you’re married?” Perhaps recalling that confusing and painful moment on the hotel fire escape, Don spits out, “Who do you think you’re talking to?” “I guess I was just supposed to do whatever he wanted? What if it was some girl?” Sal asks Don. “That would depend upon what kind of girl it was and what I knew about her,” Don says. A stern look crosses his face as he mutters, “You people . . .” shortly before firing Sal. In a poignant moment, we see Sal packing up his office, placing on top of the pile that Lucky Strike ad he and Don worked on during the series’ first episode. In a striking move, this episode ends not with a clear-cut image of Sal as a melodramatic victim, but with a shot of him in a public phone booth calling his wife, telling her not to wait up for him. As he makes the call, we see that he is in a public park cruising area replete with leathermen. But the scene fades out before we see what happens next. So we are left with a more homosexually proactive Sal, but within a mise-en-scène and narrative context that might be connected with promiscuity and self-destructiveness for certain viewers.

One of Don’s final lines to Sal also suggests how, when push comes to shove, homosexual men and single women can be lumped together under the sign of a despised sexuality that should, however, be at the disposal of patriarchal capitalism and the powerful men within it. Revealing that he might consider asking one of the women who work at the agency to sleep with a client, Don quickly moves from calling these sexual women “it” to conflating sexually active single women with homosexual men (which has a long tradition in Western culture): “That would depend upon what kind of girl it was, and what I knew about her. You people.” This is placing homosexual men in the women’s room in another form. Don might have been willing and able to stand by his man (or to stand by one of the women in the office) in the face of a client like Patio, but, as he tells Sal, Sterling Cooper can’t afford to lose the Lucky Strike account. In firing Sal, Don—and possibly the series as a whole—has finally made (or has been culturally “forced” to make) the choice, painful as it may be, to put aside queer possibilities, queer playfulness, and queer desire in the service of patriarchal capitalism.

By the end of season 3, Don has become more attached to his other protégé, Peggy Olson, who shares with Sal a need to keep her sexual desires a secret, as well as a complicated mentor relationship with fellow secret-keeper Don. Torn between being a good Catholic girl and a modern career woman, Peggy seeks out and enjoys sex, but not without some residual
Catholic guilt. Initially, Joan is set up as the show’s *Sex and the Single Girl* model for Peggy, dispensing advice like “Don’t overdo the perfume,” “Know where the booze is for the boss,” “Men don’t really want a secretary, most of the time they want something between a mother and a waitress—and the other times, well . . .” In the first episode she also advises Peggy, “Go home, take a paper bag and cut some eye holes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed, and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are. And be honest.” While what she says to Peggy is all very much in line with what Helen Gurley Brown advocates for young career women, Joan, unlike Brown, does not encourage her girls to aspire much beyond the secretarial pool and marriage, telling Peggy that if she makes the right moves she’ll be in the city like the rest of them, or, even better, “married and in the country.” On the other hand, *Sex and the Single Girl* states quite emphatically at the end of its first chapter that it “is not a study of how to get married but how to stay single—in superlative style” (11). The tips about meeting and forming relationships with men in Brown’s book are largely concerned with satisfying a single girl’s libido and advancing her career.

Indeed, Brown’s story could be the model for Peggy’s narrative arc in *Mad Men*. Brown admits that she was not pretty but developed a style that got her noticed, while also presenting herself as eager to take on extra work and new challenges. At one point Brown was a secretary to an advertising agency head, who “was responsible for [her] getting a chance to write advertising copy” (16). But while Don offers the ambitious Peggy the chance to write ad copy, her professional relationship with Sal helps to establish her as a successful advertising “man.” During the first three seasons, Sal and Peggy—the homosexual and the single career girl—become a very successful “go-to” pair for those ad campaigns featuring feminine products: lipstick, bras, and vibrating weight-loss devices. As a team, Peggy and Sal are able to move out of this gender ghetto only when they are forced to present a campaign for Samsonite after the executive in charge, Freddy Rumsen, becomes incapacitated at the last minute (“Six Month Leave,” 2.9). With a “show must go on” attitude, understudies Peggy and Sal take over and do an excellent job—or so we are told, since we do not see their presentation. In not showing us this presentation, the narrative deemphasizes Sal’s contribution to Peggy’s rise, while also throwing more weight onto scenes before and after the presentation that emphasize Freddy’s importance to Peggy as a professional mentor—a role that Don also plays. All this recognizes what Helen Gurley Brown knew: ambitious single girls need to cultivate (straight) male men-
tors if they want to climb up the career ladder. But Mad Men takes things a step further, and darker, by suggesting that career girls might also gain professionally from the decline and fall of their male mentors. Although Peggy feels conflicted about this situation, she does finally take Freddy’s office.

Once Mad Men has used closeted Sal to assist the talented and intelligent Peggy in establishing herself professionally, the series begins to associate her with a homosexual who can help her on the personal front, and fulfill Sex and the Single Girl’s exhortation that all single career girls develop an eye-catching, feminine style that is at once sexy and ladylike. Enter the chic, modern, and, let us not forget, European Kurt. While Sal is stylish in his own way, it is too much of the suit, ascot, and vest school to be of much help to Peggy — and his being closeted would prevent him from offering any sartorial advice to his female coworker in any case. Helen Gurley Brown betrays her conventional attitudes by labeling homosexual men “girls,” even if they look like “men,” but she does find that they make wonderful friends and confidants for a single woman (28). And, she adds, “they have the most exquisite taste,” a tired trope Mad Men seems only too happy to reinforce with a more contemporary, but equally tired, trope: the gay makeover (31). Arriving at Peggy’s apartment before the Dylan concert, Kurt is almost immediately placed in the role of confidant and adviser when Peggy laments, “I don’t know why I pick the wrong boys. . . . What’s wrong with me?” “You’re wrong style,” Kurt replies in his charmingly broken English, as he touches Peggy’s bangs (“The Jet Set”). Replacing Joan as Peggy’s Sex and the Single Girl mentor, Kurt goes on to say that her look “is not modern office working woman.” He immediately offers to “fix” her, thus fulfilling his narrative duty as a good homosexual, which is, first and foremost, to help heterosexual people in distress — here played out as a kind of Queer Eye for the Straight Woman. At this point in the series, we know nothing about (let alone see anything of) Kurt’s private life. Thus far, we have seen as much of Sal’s private life as we have, I suspect, because much of Sal’s personal life as a closeted, married man is rendered in melodramatic terms that cast Sal as pathetic victim.

The show’s happy, out homosexual, Kurt, begins his makeover by placing Peggy on a chair, telling her he’s “very good,” and proceeding to chop off her girlish ponytail (fig. 14.8). The next day, Peggy has been transformed into a Sex and the Single Girl–style career woman, complete with flip hairdo. “You look different,” Pete remarks on seeing her. “It’s my hair,” Peggy replies. Then Ken pops up to tell Pete, “Kurt’s a homo,” little realizing that the look they now admire on Peggy and on other women in the office is often the result of collaborations between “homos” and single career women. But if the charac-
ters are unaware, the series itself seems fully aware of the irony that it takes a homosexual man to conjure up the single-girl style that turns on heterosexual men.

But what happens when the single career girl is herself homosexual? “The Homosexuals” cuts out women except for brief footage of them participating in a protest outside Independence Hall, thus suggesting that the only homosociality to be concerned about is male—perhaps because male homosociality seems to pose a greater threat to straight men, or because straight men don’t really consider women as sexual beings of any sort. Helen Gurley Brown’s treatment of lesbians and lesbianism is even briefer than what she accords homosexual men, but it is, on the whole, more empathetic. Interestingly enough, “Suppose You Like Girls” is one of the subheadings in a Sex and the Single Girl chapter titled “The Affair.” In this section Brown admits that she can “contribute no helpful advice” to women who love women, because she knows nothing about lesbian “pleasures” (234). But she seems sympathetic to a 1960s lesbian’s lot in life, saying, “I’m sure your problems are many. . . . At any rate, it’s your business and I think it’s a shame you have to be so surreptitious about your choice of a way of life” (234). What I find most fascinating about this liberal outburst is that, rhetorically, it addresses lesbians directly, and assumes that they might buy a book titled Sex and the
**Single Girl** in the hopes of . . . what? Finding lesbian sex tips? Finding a way to pass as heterosexual career girls?

*Mad Men* has a little femme passing and a little mannish lesbian coding in the first season, and a soft butch “career girl” in the fourth season. In this, it joins most U.S. television programming, including “The Homosexuals,” in not being particularly interested in lesbians on the job or in the bedroom. *Mad Men*’s first potential lesbian appears in the pilot in the form of a tailored, middle-aged woman named Greta Guttman—possibly to evoke Sapphic associations with Greta Garbo or more general homosexual associations with the character of Kasper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet) in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Before we see Greta, Don tells Sal that the head of the research department is coming in to deliver their findings about marketing cigarettes. “Great,” Sal remarks snidely, “now I get to hear from our man in research.” Instead of a man, the mannish Greta enters. Sal’s joke is on Greta, whose severe style, Germanic accent, and Freudian doctrines are not likely to win over the audience. If there is one thing men—both straight and queer—can bond over, apparently, it is being lesbophobic. Pitching her report into the trash can, Don tells Greta, “I find your approach perverse.” We might understand Don’s negative response here as not only triggered by his reading of Greta’s sexuality (coded by his use of the term *perverse*) but also by her being an intellectual European woman who advocates scientific/psychoanalytic explanations for human behavior and motivations, something Don and his advertising peers seem to distrust but feel they need to use in a postwar, pop Freud world.

More benign, if just a hair’s breadth away from *The Children’s Hour* (1961), is the series’ treatment of Joan’s roommate, Carol. When Carol gets fired for covering for her boss, Joan decides to have a “girls’ night out” during which they will exact their revenge on men by looking for bachelors and emptying their wallets (“Long Weekend,” 1.10). As they prepare to go out, Carol looks admiringly at Joan, who is fixing herself up in a mirror. “You never say die, do you?” Carol asks Joan, going on to tell her how happy she has been sharing an apartment and a life with her. Of course, Joan (willfully?) misunderstands Carol’s confession of love, but Carol presses on, telling Joan that she saw her their first week in college, fell in love, and followed her to New York so she could be near Joan as co–career girl and roommate. Coming closer, Carol asks “Joanie” to think of her “as a boy.” Joan, struck silent for a moment, says, “You’ve had a hard day. Let’s go out and try to forget about it.” This leads to a scene in which they are in their apartment with two men. Joan quickly takes one of them into her bedroom, leaving a sad and humiliated Carol on
the sofa telling the other man that she will do “whatever [he] want[s].” While this is not a suicide as in *Children’s Hour*, it is presented as a ritual debasement filled with sexual jealously and self-loathing—and we never see Carol again, so as far as the series is concerned, she is dead.

But the spirit of Carol lives on in many of the websites devoted to the series. It seems that pairing the Erotic Earth Mother Joan with a lesbian roommate even for part of one episode has encouraged more than one self-identified straight woman in online fan forums to admit to a “girl crush” on Joan, or the actor Christina Hendricks, who plays her. “Pegster,” for example, says, “My sister and I are totally straight, but we can’t take our eyes off your fabulous body,” to which “SCfan” adds, “We are all going to have to ‘go gay’” for Joan/Hendricks. The comments on this board are typical of fan remarks about the show as they reveal how each of the major characters has provoked a range of complex—and often complexly erotic—reactions among fans.

But I began to yearn for some *Mad Men* lesbian or gay slash literature by the end of season 3, when Don sets up a new renegade ad agency that includes Peggy and Joan but that seems to have no place for Sal or Kurt ("Shut the Door. Have a Seat," 3.13). While I remained intrigued by the show’s representation of the sexual desires and careers of single straight women, by the end of the third season I was starting to get that old “seduced and abandoned” feeling about *Mad Men* and homosexuality. As far as I could tell, it looked as if we homosexuals had once again done our cultural and narrative duty serving, supporting, styling, and titillating straight Mad Men and the career girls who love them, and now we needed to move on and find a new roommate, cruise Central Park, or go back to Europe.

Then Joyce Ramsay appeared in season 4 (“The Rejected,” 4.4). Because I have been burned in the past, however, I was cautiously optimistic about Joyce developing into an important recurring secondary character whose narrative life extends beyond the ways she can serve or develop one of the main characters—in this case, Peggy. Peggy first meets Joyce, an assistant photo editor at *Life* magazine, in an elevator where she notices Joyce holding a file with the word “Rejected” stamped on it. Inside the file are photos of nude women taken by Joyce’s (male) friend. Peggy says she would be “shocked” to see them in *Life*, but finds one of them “beautiful” and reaches out to touch it as Joyce playfully snaps shut the portfolio. Soon after this, Joyce comes to Peggy’s workplace to invite her to a party. The scene begins with Peggy walking into an arresting butch-femme tableau: Joyce clad in a gray tailored jacket leaning over a desk toward a voluptuous receptionist in a bright red dress.
Peggy arrives at the party in the Village looking like a chic beatnik in her black-striped green pullover. This outfit elicits an admiring “You look swell-gant” from Joyce, who has been speaking with Sharon, a black woman who is one of her friends’ nude models. When Peggy asks for a beer, Joyce says she is already “high” and offers Peggy a hit from her joint, which Peggy accepts. But when Joyce moves in to kiss or rub against her cheek (it’s unclear which), Peggy pulls back a little with a good-humored “Hey! I have a boyfriend.” “He doesn’t own your vagina,” Joyce snaps back, to which Peggy replies, “No, but he’s renting it,” after which they both laugh.

Thus far, Joyce is set up as someone who encourages Peggy’s queer (if not specifically lesbian) expressiveness, as well as someone with the potential to become Peggy’s best friend or new romantic partner. However, Joyce’s queer bohemian world and Peggy’s queer expressiveness in it are ceded to Peggy’s heterosexual romance with Abe, Joyce’s friend. When Peggy’s office mate snidely calls Joyce Peggy’s “boyfriend,” Joyce licks a smiling Peggy’s cheek. Later at a bar, however, Abe barges in and stands between Peggy and Joyce until Joyce makes a weak excuse and leaves.

The show quickly resolves a potentially provocative romantic/sexual triangle between Peggy, Joyce, and Abe in favor of the man, with Joyce put in the heterosexualized role of the gallant would-be lover who steps aside for his/her friend. During her next visit to Peggy’s office, Joyce lets slip that her past sexual experiences with men have been bad, which unfortunately gestures toward a cliché about why women become lesbians. In spite of her own bad luck with men, Joyce suggests that she “helped Abe out” because he seems a worthwhile candidate for a relationship with Peggy (“The Beautiful Girls,” 4.9). Is Joyce being reduced into another of Mad Men’s “helper homosexuals” who are then kicked off the show for their pains? The final moments of this episode suggest as much, capturing Joyce in a shadowy long shot getting in an elevator while a medium shot places Peggy, Joan, and Faye Miller in a brightly lit one.

The same melodramatic pathos evoked for Joyce recurs in the opening scene of “Chinese Wall” (4.11). Joyce and Peggy have spent the day at Jones Beach, but all we see is the end: Joyce in the driver’s seat of her car, with Peggy on Abe’s lap to accommodate the crowd of friends. Cut to Peggy and Abe entering her bedroom and immediately falling into bed. The next morning, Peggy gets Abe back into bed as he is about to leave. “You’re incredible,” Abe tells her, to which she replies, “I’m usually not like this.” After her (hetero)sexcapades with Abe, subsequent scenes show Peggy becoming more assured and inspired in thinking up and pitching ad copy. Should we
conclude that Peggy’s (homo)eroticized friendship with Joyce—and her entry into Joyce’s queer bohemian world—allows Peggy to become a more free, open, and sensuous woman? That this, in turn, leads to an exciting (hetero)sexual relationship with Abe, while feeding her creativity so she can develop better (heterocentric) ad campaigns and more persuasively charm her (male) clients into using them?

If this was where season 4 left Joyce, I would have been prepared to write off the series at this point in terms of its uses (and abuses) of homosexuality, though still somewhat fascinated by the straight queerness of Don and Peggy. But Joyce made an appearance in the final episode (“Tomorrowland,” 4.13), which offered a small ray of hope that the show’s next season would not limit her to melodramatic “helper homosexual.” Entering in another gray tailored jacket with a glamorous woman in tow, Joyce introduces her companion to Peggy as Carolyn Jones, a model. Carolyn has just been fired from her last job and Joyce wants to know whether Peggy’s agency might have any work for her. As they sit together on a small sofa, Joyce places her arm comfortably behind Carolyn (fig. 14.9). This time it is Harry who intrudes, sitting on the arm of the sofa next to Carolyn and trying to insinuate himself by promising to see about getting a job for her. Irritated by Harry’s behavior—and perhaps recalling what happened with Abe and Peggy—Joyce stands up, saying to Carolyn, “We should be going, honey,” which makes it clear even to the most obtuse viewer (if not to Harry) that Joyce at least would like to think of herself and Carolyn as a couple.
This is where *Mad Men*’s fourth season leaves Joyce. She has moved on from her position as Peggy’s abject, character-developing “helper homosexual” to once again show signs of having a life (including a relationship) of her own apart from one of the major characters. There are many ways *Mad Men* might develop Joyce’s life and her relationship with Carolyn. Unfortunately, given the show’s track record, the most likely scenario may be splitting up our potential butch-femme couple, this time courtesy of Harry’s interest in Carolyn—in other words, by adhering to long-standing narrative conventions that have femmes go off with men, leaving butches out of the picture to fend for themselves (remember *Personal Best* [1982]?). Will Joyce be the latest victim of *Mad Men*’s love-’em-and-leave-’em relationship with homosexual men and women, or will she be allowed to live on and tell her tale of being a lesbian “career girl” in the 1960s, balancing a job at *Life*, a relationship with another woman, and exciting times with her bohemian friends? I, for one, will tune in to season 5 expecting the worst, but with my fingers crossed.

**Post-season 5 Postscript:** Since I wrote this essay, season 5 has come and gone, and with it Carolyn, Joyce, and any chance *Mad Men* had of keeping me around for a sixth season. Carolyn never shows up again, and Joyce makes one appearance early in the fourth episode, “Mystery Date,” in which she rather callously flashes around some graphic photos of the nurses murdered by Richard Speck. This sets up a narrative thread in which many characters—but not Joyce—get to have character-illuminating responses to the crime. It is bitterly ironic, at least to me, that Joyce’s only appearance during the season (and most likely her final appearance in the series) is as the bearer of images of murdered women. R.I.P., Joyce, I’ll miss you—but *Mad Men*, not so much.

**Notes**

2. For the creator Matthew Weiner describing Brown’s influence on Joan’s dialogue, see Zimmer.