

Fantasies of the Good Life

Responding to Rape Culture in 13 Reasons Why

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Abstract: Using Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, we address the ways in which rape culture, as depicted in Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* and the first two seasons of the Netflix adaptation, shapes girls' agency and attachment to possible futures. We take seriously the ways in which social and institutional structures in *13 Reasons Why* produce girls' livability as tied to everyday forms of sexist violence, which supposedly grant them access to what they think of as the good life. Bound up in these cruel attachments is a more limited set of options than may appear available: girls are called upon to endure daily violence in hopes of achieving this fantasy or to choose alternative paths, such as slow death or even suicide.

Keywords: cruel optimism, Lauren Berlant, livability, neoliberalism, sexual violence, sexism, slow death, suicide



Introduction

13 Reasons Why, both the book and the Netflix series (hereafter *13RW*) deal with youth culture, sexist violence, rape, and suicide. Academic writing on the text tends to dismiss it as needlessly glorifying suicide, a stance that disavows what youth have named as an important way to dialogue about these same topics. Vilifying *13RW* sets a larger cultural precedent regarding the kinds of stories with which adult professionals (such as teachers and school counsellors) are willing to engage (Greensmith and Sakal Froese 2018; Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019). The first two seasons of the Netflix show, *13RW*, revolve around Hannah Baker's story. She is a white cisgender girl who documents, through a series of prerecorded audio tapes, the everyday violence she endures and her eventual decision to take her own life. Before she dies, Hannah shares the tapes with those implicated in her torment, rape, and eventual suicide, encouraging them to listen to them and then pass them on. Tony Padilla has a duplicate set of tapes, which he plans to make public if her peers do not follow Hannah's instruc-



tions. Hannah's intention is not to make public the story of her suicide, but, rather, to hold accountable those who have harmed her.

Tony is a friend and ally to Hannah and is the first of her peers to see her taken into the ambulance. Like many characters in the Netflix show, Tony, played by Christian Navarro, who is of Puerto Rican descent, is cast in a manner that makes him racially ambiguous, and is represented as a character who is racialized or can be described as "not white." While the Netflix show uses the appearance of diversity (Gonzalez-Sobrino et al. 2018) to produce itself as engaging with critiques of racial difference and race, it fails to discuss the implications of race or racism in any meaningful way. The role of race in *13RW* is complex and will be discussed below in greater detail. We are especially interested in the characters of Zach Dempsey, Courtney Crimson, and Jessica Davis in this regard.

Taking cues from girlhood studies, we see this dismissal of Hannah's experiences of sexual violence as mirroring refusals to engage with the stories of trans and cisgender women and girls in the world, further perpetuating the notion that they are meant to live in a sexist world and endure rape culture with all its attending forces. Scholars who have engaged with *13RW* have argued that watching the show may correlate with increased suicide ideation (Ayers et al. 2017). Marco Scalvini (2020) notes that Season 1 of the show has been criticized for depicting Hannah's suicide graphically. The World Health Organization (2017) recommends against showcasing visual depictions of suicide, in particular the act itself. Netflix has since removed the relevant scene, and the producers of this show have added a public service announcement as well as a dedicated website that urges viewers to seek help from adult professionals.

But, significantly, Netflix has not removed any scenes depicting rape (Chloe Rice and Tyler Down, a white character who follows Hannah (and Courtney) around in Season 1 taking secret, sometimes provocative images of her, is also raped in the Netflix show as well as Hannah and Jessica), nor have they prompted discussions among men and boys (including queer and trans men and boys) about their potential role in preventing rape.¹ These editorial choices on behalf of the show's producers indicate that while the specter of suicide remains on the radar of Netflix, victims of rape and rape culture do not. This is the crux of our argument.

Building on Berlant's (2011) theorization of the good life, we engage seriously with the structures of violence in *13RW*² and link them to structures of violence in the world. The fantasy of the good life in a simplified form persists, and it is to this fantasy that the girls in *13RW* cling. Hence-

forth, we will use the phrase *good life* to refer to this fantasy, and *neoliberal good life* to refer to our (and Berlant's) critique of it. Our criticism uses a poststructural analysis (Berlant 2011; Britzman 1995; Leung 2009) to disentangle which, if any, paths to something like the neoliberal good life are available to women and girls when rape culture is so ingrained in the social apparatus. Wendy Brown (2006) suggests that neoliberalism is

depict[ed through] free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as achieved and normative, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy—not simply as occurring by dint of nature . . . [Neoliberalism] produce[s] citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care'—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions, whether as welfare recipients, medical patients, consumers of pharmaceuticals, university students, or workers in ephemeral occupations. (694)

Beginning in the 1970s, the good life ceased to be a life in which the subject has their material needs met and is thus freed to pursue self-actualization. Instead, the question of being deserving of the good life emerged (Berlant 2011). Since then, the pursuit of the good life has been undercut by neoliberal structures that insist on framing self-actualization in terms of capitalist production, value, and worth (Brown 2006). In response to this ontological stalemate, Berlant (2011) offers the useful concept of cruel optimism, which she defines as a network of attachments that are

wicked and not merely inconvenient or tragic . . . The subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world. (24)

Cruel attachments are impossible fantasies of happiness, the realization of which neoliberal subjects are required to desire. As Berlant argues, "[A]ll attachments are optimistic, [but] that does not mean they 'feel' optimistic." The object of desire on the part of the subject remains optimistic as they "surrender to the return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form" (20). For us, the cruelty of this optimism lies in the subject's invitation into the possibilities of living—that one will find solace in one's harm and that things will get better. The good life under neoliberalism is a cruel fantasy; no longer is the production of it the purview of governments or schools, but, instead, this work is downloaded onto the subject, and is held out as a promise that one

might achieve if one submits fully to one's own domination. For women and girls, rape culture is one such dominating force.

Poststructural scholars have challenged neoliberal constructions of the good life for maintaining and upholding women's and girls' subjugation. This poststructural analysis of *13RW* aligns with the views of girlhood studies scholars and girl activists who are critical of any promise sutured to such a demand. Critiques of rape culture are useful given that little or no attention is paid to *13RW*'s depictions of rape as part of the banal violence faced by women and girls (Letort 2019). Rape culture is a phenomenon by which male dominance is reproduced as a normal part of life (Keller et al. 2018), and through which (c)overt violence against women and girls is legitimized. Rape culture fuels the ways in which men and boys engage with their relationships and offers them a fantasy of domination through the subjugation of others (Ahmed 2016; Keller et al. 2018; Wunker 2016). Roxanne Gay (2018) notes in an account of her experience of being subjugated and raped that

[i]t was comforting, perhaps, to tell myself that what I went through 'wasn't that bad.' Allowing myself to believe that being gang-raped 'wasn't that bad' allowed me to break down my trauma into something more manageable, into something I could carry with me instead of allowing the magnitude of it to destroy me. (ix-x)

Under the auspices of rape culture, women's and girls' worth is predicated on enduring gendered and sexual violence, which is to be accepted in order for them to gain access to what they think of as the good life. The good life, thus, is a fantasy, one which is to be understood through and shaped by rape culture, and indeed, by men's and boys' domination.

Given the persistence of gendered and sexual violence in the lives of women and girls, we use *13RW* as a text that engages with rape culture, representations of girls' daily existence, and a critical dialogue surrounding girls' livability as they contemplate (and engage in) self-harm and suicide. Roxanne Harde (2020) argues that young adult (YA) texts that deal with the rape of girls "place [them] where the public and judicial and educational institutions can no longer ignore [them]" (184), noting that stories about rape need to address denial as well as consent. With Harde's criticism in mind, we understand Hannah's story to be about more than her suicide; her narrative, in naming and holding accountable structures of violence, is met with resistance by those who are named, and by those who would dismiss her story because it depicts her suicide. This holding to account differs very little between the book, published in 2007, and the Netflix show, which first aired in 2017. Treating *13RW*, and its critique of rape culture as if it

threatens young adults, and girls in particular, amounts to a tacit protection of rape culture, one that mirrors the actions of those who disavow Hannah's tapes in the text. Hannah's suicide is not presented uncritically, or as the logical consequence of her actions. Instead, her decision to take her own life is based on her lived experience of rape culture and of buying into the fantasy of the good life.

Girls, Girlhood, and the Power of Sexist Oppression

Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby (2017) note that sexism embedded in Canadian public schools often requires girls to choose between being smart or popular. These scholars observe that girls articulate that they feel discriminated against, although they do not use this language. Instead, girls frame their experiences through understandings of inequality. Girls often point out that their dress is criticized by school administrators, but what the boys wear goes unnoted. Schools ritualize rape culture through neoliberal modalities of success: girls articulate that they must be popular (and preferably pretty) or smart and they understand that only smart girls' educational experiences will give them access to the good life by fostering individual growth, development, and esteem. Pomerantz and Raby (2017) address the ways in which girls question the structures that make these demands of them and discuss their suspicions of these very attachments and systems that mirror Hannah's in *13RW*.

Octavia Calder-Dawe and Nicola Gavey (2017) highlight the fact that when girls address sexism in their lives, they often cite individuals, and are silenced or harassed when they try to speak about sexism as a systemic force. For girls, "aspirations to living well through personal authenticity seem, today, to be part of a structuring cultural common sense" (783). Of concern here is the degree to which the neoliberal good life shapes the ways in which the calls made by feminist girls to name, unlearn, and challenge sexism, under the auspices of girls' advocacy, can be imagined, especially if living well means dealing with and enduring everyday sexism while imagining that sexism is over (Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019). Hannah's tapes push back against what might be thought of as cultural common sense, and her story of persistent, compounded sexist violence shows how schooling can be stifling and discriminatory. The sexism Hannah experiences, through the circulation of images of her body, as well as the ongoing torment by her peers, makes the school an especially unwelcoming place.

The mantra of girl power, which is used to focus on girls' individuality and strength, functions as a call to turn away from oppressive structures, and towards the individual self. Kelly Oliver (2016) points to a set of failings that come into being as a result of this individualism. Oliver names two seemingly contradictory trends that are on the rise: the valorization of party rape, especially among high school and college-aged youth via the circulation of images and videos of said assaults, and simultaneously, an increase in strong, capable (often armed) girl heroes in fiction. The rape of Hannah and Jessica both qualify as what Oliver calls "party rape." Even though it is not the circulation of images that makes Jessica aware of her own rape, as Oliver notes is true of some victims of party rape (2016: 89), it is Hannah's tape that reveals this.

Oliver (2016) suggests that there is something insidious made possible when the strength of girl heroes is met with violence—sexual and otherwise—in which the camera revels so that "their resistance to patriarchal stereotypes becomes justification for their abuse [and] their strength in fighting back against their assailants becomes filmic justification for visually reveling in the violence done to them" (21). Girl power becomes a cruel attachment: the cost is being beaten or violated on camera, often in dystopian contexts, and does not lead to a changed world in which women and girls are able to achieve any increased power without also enduring violence. These competing discourses of (girl) power and inequality produce girls' agency within a neoliberal framework, discouraging them from acting in collective formations, and yet encouraging consumption of narratives of girlhood as a means of survival in a world that valorizes rape culture. This is the neoliberal good life in action.

Girls who are taught to thrive in a world that normalizes sexism and rape culture need to consume stories of girl power that feature popular girls, hero girls, and strong girls. While these narratives offer rich fantasy spaces of the good life, other narratives, such as those included in what Nelson (2017: 50) calls the "dead girl" YA genre contributes to the sexist oppression of girls who come to "matter only when they are dead." Nelson's criticism points to a concern about girls' agency, noting that dead girls' stories, including Hannah's, seem to be "more interesting, more compelling, perhaps even more valid, if the teller has killed herself" (44). Nelson's work sets the foundation for our readings of rape culture in *13RW* insofar as Hannah's peers seem to finally see, as it were, her suffering in the series of prerecorded audio tapes. We suggest that the death of girls and their livability are bound up within and made possible through rape culture. While

Hannah is dead, her story challenges the ways in which rape culture thrives in schools, making girls' lives barely livable, especially when girls cling so tightly to the fantasy of a good life.

Engaging with Girls' Trauma

Reading *13RW* as a form of cruel optimism approaches girls' experiences with gendered and sexual violence as being bound up in the tension between livability and their shared experiences of trauma (Failler 2008; Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019). For Berlant (2006, 2011), girls are invited to imagine life as stitched to daily, enduring sexist violence. Of the stories in *13RW* that remain important to this mobilization of cruel optimism, Bryce's story is notable since it directly precedes Mr. Porter's tape. Bryce is a vile misogynist character; he rapes Chloe, Hannah, and Jessica, the last mentioned under the grotesque circumstances of her boyfriend, Justin Foley, allowing him access to an incapacitated Jessica.

Bryce's story is impactful given that much of the public outcry surrounding gendered and sexist violence in *13RW* works to vilify him (Letort 2019), rather than contemporary rape culture, which makes his actions possible, even permissible, in the first place. Individualizing the sexist and misogynist violence of Bryce reproduces male aggression, violence, and cultures of rape that declare that women and girls are objects for the consumption of men and boys. Other boys, including Clay, through whose narrative perspective readers and viewers receive Hannah's story, do not warn Hannah of the full extent of Bryce's capacity for violence but, instead, they name him a creep. This is part of the problem of how cultures of rape are framed because rapists know that their status as men and boys under patriarchy will propel them into their notion of a presumed neoliberal good life, while enabling other men and boys to ignore the ways in which they participate, even in apathy and inaction, in producing rape culture. This focus on Bryce, and the resulting legal action in which Jessica engages in Season 2, which we discuss later, produces a divestment with rape culture, placing blame on Hannah. After all, in Bryce's tape, Hannah articulates that she does not "say no or push his hand away. All I did was turn my head, clench my teeth, and fight back the tears. And he saw that. He even told me to relax" (Asher 2007: 265).

In rape culture, the flourishing of girls is very much tied to refusals, or to the idea that they must either "press charges [or] confront [their ag-

gressor]” (Asher 2007: 278), as Mr. Porter suggests. A linear understanding of girls’ trauma is disrupted by the story of the thirteenth tape. The manifestation of Hannah’s belief that life can get better occurs when, after being raped, she goes to see Mr. Porter. She knows that Bryce Walker is untouchable, as a popular boy and athlete who comes from wealth, and also as someone whose violent actions against girls at the school are known but remain unpunished. Yet, Hannah remains open to the possibility that Mr. Porter will give her something—anything that might make her pain go away. Mr. Porter is the only adult at her school who is asked to listen to the tapes, and his is the only tape that is recorded during the event; the other tapes all narrate past events that Hannah has linked together as the network of factors that made her life unlivable. This is an undeniable return to the scene (the school), and the fact of the recording in real time underscores Hannah’s cruel attachment to the belief that Mr. Porter may be able to ease her pain or transform it from a deadly pressure to a wound that will heal (Failler 2008).

Before Hannah’s experience with Mr. Porter, she endures many violent acts. Like the girls interviewed by Pomerantz and Raby (2017), Hannah, too, is invested in what she thinks of as the good life since she does not respond with inaction or complicity. Rather, Hannah composes the tapes as a way of documenting her own response to pain and asks her listeners to take that pain seriously at the expense of all the men and boys who benefit. Hannah, and other girls in *13RW*, have a cruel attachment to the school system and the adult professionals who run it. Throughout *13RW* the girls are bound together by the hopeless sexist culture and the violence directed at their bodies. Tyler objectifies Hannah in images that circulate around the school and Marcus Cole exploits Hannah’s vulnerability. Hannah has an attachment to possibility, but neither can a neoliberal good life, nor even a survivable future be framed through Mr. Porter’s invitation to “press charges [or] confront [her aggressor]” (Asher 2007: 278). Hannah is seeking existence outside of rape culture—she maintains a cruel attachment to a future that may not be possible.

13RW asks viewers and readers to make sense of girls’ pain even when large-scale events shift attention from the exceptional to the everyday. The dissolution of Hannah’s relationship with Zach underscores the importance of the everyday in girls’ cruel attachments to futures they still imagine can contain the fantasy of the good life. Before Bryce rapes Hannah, her trust in others is jeopardized as she searches for hope in a school culture that continues to inflict violence upon her. In *Peer Communications* class, we learn that

students can provide one another with affirming or positive notes to offset the difficulties of their daily lives. On Zach's tape, Hannah articulates, "You never left anything mean in my bag . . . But what you did do, was worse" (Asher 2007: 158).

The story of Zach and Hannah is about persistent neglect turned torment. After Zach approaches Hannah following her encounter with misogynist Marcus, he assumes that his kindness will be enough to convince her to go on a date. In the book, Zach never asks Hannah out. In the Netflix show, we are provided with more motive on Zach's part: the day after the event with Marcus, in front of all his friends in the school cafeteria, Zach reaches out to Hannah, saying, "You think every guy likes you because you have this great ass. I like you for so much more than that." Zach says to Hannah, "If you just give me a chance" and reaches out to touch her. Disgusted and already traumatized, Hannah yells, "Leave me alone." Bolstered by a school environment wherein men and boys do anything they want, Zach responds, "Shit that happens to you, I think some of it you bring on yourself" (Season 1, Episode 7).

As Hannah notes, "My world was collapsing . . . I needed any hope those notes might have offered. And you [Zach]? You took that hope away. You decided I didn't deserve to have it" (Asher 2007: 165). When Hannah confronts Zach in the hallway, asking, "Why me?" he ignores her and runs away (Season 1, Episode 7). The notes provided by Hannah's peers offer her little scraps of hope amidst a collapsing world; Zach's tape shows the persistence of rape culture in relation to how men and boys use their power to control even such small elements of girls' lives. These actions are some of the many microaggressions that have a cumulative effect on Hannah and other girls' attachments to living. The notes Hannah receives are anything but cruel; she invests in stories that may sway her to believe that the sexist treatment meted out to her may come to an end, that her life may have value, or even that she still has allies in a school that seems so turned against her.

In Season 2, the relationship between Zach and Hannah unfolds through the lens of a summer fling, one which invites viewers to participate in Zach's and other characters' gaslighting of Hannah in the original tapes in Season 1. The summer before Hannah's suicide, she and Zach develop a romantic relationship, which occurs through their shared experience of surrendering their virginity to each other. Later, we learn that Zach ends the romantic relationship with Hannah because he believes his mother will disapprove of her. The depiction of Zach and Hannah's relationship in

Season 2, insofar as she attempts to trust Zach, perpetuates the normalization of rape culture in girls' lives since they both desire the neoliberal good life, and so Hannah is not suspicious of men's and boys' mistreatment of her as being systemic. This knowledge of Hannah and Zach's summer relationship changes viable readings of their later interactions in Season 1. Not only does Zach's theft of Hannah's notes read as more punitive and as framing his actions as a type of flirtation based on the notion that boys will be boys, but his suggestion that he likes Hannah for "so much more than that" becomes an invitation for Hannah to imagine that they could either resume the romance or she could feel mocked by him. His assertion that she brings things on herself becomes more biting and definitively psychologically manipulative.

Alongside boys in *13RW*, girls, too, participate in upholding the status quo, bringing attention to the normalization of rape culture in all the characters' lives. For girls, the neoliberal good life holds out a promise of a certain amount of acceptance and safety in exchange for propping up rape culture. This promise is made evident when Hannah and Courtney are at the school dance and the jocks gesture to them, not as lovers, but as sexual objects. Courtney does not name the sexist violence, nor does she hold the boys accountable. Instead, she deflects sexist and negative attention towards Hannah in the form of denial, which further sediments Hannah's reputation as a slut, while providing Courtney with access to what becomes a version of a good life akin to the one offered to men and boys via the subjugation of girls and others. Courtney is thus able to retain her popular status, positive reputation, and she can appear to be good and straight by remaining always on the right side of the discourse. In desiring this sort of good life, which is ultimately Courtney's cruel attachment to living, she is required to throw other girls under the bus so that her actions are in line with the requirements of the status quo (Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019), and so she does not disrupt any aspects of rape culture at the school. Thus, Courtney shows herself to have a cruelly optimistic attachment to neoliberal scripts of productivity and success: as long as she plays along and ignores both the maltreatment she suffers and that of the other girls, she is rewarded (Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019).

By engaging in deflections of all sorts, including her noting in *Peer Communications* class that anyone who questions life might be looking for attention, Courtney uses her cultural capital to invite her peers into a disavowal of slutty or queer girls thus ensuring that the instability of her own power is never questioned since, if this should happen, she will be read like

Hannah—as queer—and she will lose access to everything that she (together with her fathers) has built for herself. Although her actions are motivated by an individualistic impulse, it can be seen clearly that they prop up rape culture. Courtney’s investment in the status quo does not erase her pain but contributes to it; she is living but dead on the inside (Sakal Froese and Greensmith 2019). Courtney longs to come out and free herself from the constraints placed upon her by added pressures to gain popularity and status, and for a future in which, as neoliberal subjects are promised, her hard work pays off.

In the Netflix show, both Zach and Courtney are played by East Asian actors. As Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Cameron Greensmith (2019) note elsewhere, reading Courtney as an East Asian character provides a nuanced interpretation of her in/action. We highlight the need to engage Courtney’s and Zach’s investments in rape culture through their race and/or ethnicity to contextualize their decisions as having complex motivations. Despite many girls being oriented toward cruelly optimistic attachments to living nearly unbearable lives, other girls try to live through their expected trauma in a manner that is outside of or in contrast to cisheterosexist domination.

Living in a Cruel World: Rape Culture and Girls’ Survivability

Being cruelly optimistic is not a failure of women and girls but is a failure of a society that invests in rape culture. Jessica has no reason to believe that Justin and Bryce would be violent towards her, let alone rape her. In listening to her own tape, Jessica is forced to confront her rape, and to engage with this newfound understanding of herself and her peers. Aligned with Gay’s (2018) discussion of rape culture, Jessica must choose to discredit Hannah who cannot be taken seriously because doing so would make Jessica’s rape real. To cope with her rape, and fulfill the promise of subservience, Jessica opts to engage in polysubstance use, which Berlant (2007) calls a slow death because, given the

condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; embodying, alongside embodiment. (759)

With a slow death orientation, Jessica chooses her own form of sentience without intentionality rather than live with the reality that her body has been trafficked between boys like an object.

While the girls' stories in *13RW* offer critiques and evidence of complicity in rape culture, Jessica's experiences provide the opportunity to think about rape culture through her Blackness. Jessica, in Season 2, is tasked with holding Bryce accountable when Hannah cannot. The Netflix show invites viewers to read Jessica as another racialized cast member, and yet, embedded in such a reading is an erasure of the ways in which Black women and girls are hypersexualized and overpoliced (Griffin 2012; Love 2012.) According to a seventh-grade Black girl participant in Nia Nunn's 2018 study, "It's always the girl's fault. We fight each other . . . jealous over stupid stuff like whose gotta bigger booty . . . we turn into entertainment for boys" (14). Producing Black girls as entertaining objects for men's and boys' consumption naturalizes the insidious and racist nature of rape culture. Blackness must be taken seriously, but the writers of Season 2 prop up Jessica's decision to seek justice through the North American legal system at the expense of downplaying the ways in which Black women and girls are routinely subjugated and encounter rape. Reading Jessica's engagement with the justice system as a fault of sexist laws alone, given that Bryce is acquitted of all charges, repudiates the ways in which Black women and girls are so often failed by a system that is not only sexist, but also anti-Black.

13RW invites readers and viewers to empathize with girls as they are harassed, assaulted, and mistreated. Jessica is encouraged to seek any form of retribution through the North American legal system, which highlights another cruel investment in a postfeminist future where, supposedly, structures work with and for women and girls instead of in opposition to them. While Jessica is surviving, she is not thriving. The same can be said of Skye Miller, a less frequently observed character who is represented as white and a total outsider to the school system. Having dropped out in favor of a low-opportunity service job at a coffee shop, she is rarely depicted in or near the school. In Season 1, Skye makes the decision that to survive in the short-term, she must give up on her own future because she does not see herself as deserving of the neoliberal good life. During *Peer Communications* class, an anonymous student, who is later revealed to have been Hannah, declares that they may be suicidal. "What if the only way not to feel bad is to stop feeling anything at all, forever?" (Season 1, Episode 7). In response to being targeted as the person who may have written the note, Skye says, "Whoever wrote it was in pain." Like Jessica, Skye is enduring a "slow death" as she engages in self-harm as a survival strategy. In Season 2, Skye is institutionalized, which she interprets as a "second chance" through which she can "hit the reset button" (Season 2, Episode 8). Season 2 treats

the problem of rape culture as a problem of individual capacity as if the issue is not the violence that girls face, but is, rather, the way in which it pathologizes them as unable—rather than unwilling—to endure it.

Death and living in *13RW* seems to be of the most interest to its critics. However, livability, insofar as it is produced through cruel optimism, is glued to the ways in which women and girls are asked to endure cultures of rape. While much of the focal point surrounds Hannah's in/action, girls' livability must be imagined beyond survival in a world that valorizes rape culture; girls cannot be made to live with ongoing sexist violence and also criticized when they die from it. This cruel optimism is deeply tied to *13RW*'s plot and narrative structure and presents persistent rape culture as inherently necessary to gaining access to the (neoliberal) good life—a bleak and postfeminist future—if there is a future to be had at all. Hannah's story, and, more importantly, the tapes that hold her peers accountable, suggest that no one can build a life outside of rape culture, nor can they desire a good life without its being a cruel one. Girls' livability is made to be cruel, and survivors of rape, such as Jessica and Chloe, are consequently discredited for knowing their own story, and for seeking retribution, thus creating an impossible situation wherein justice cannot prevail for victims of rape culture. Like Jessica and Skye, women and girls must struggle to merely survive, which, in the current configuration of the world, is to exist under men's and boys' domination. In such a world, it seems that girls are left with few choices. Livability for girls is produced through cruel investments in rape culture that naturalize gendered and sexual violence as part of everyday life.



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Filmography

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Notes

1. We do not discuss the rape of Tyler, nor the subject of compulsory toxic white masculinity since both topics are deserving of their own article.
2. We focus on Seasons 1 and 2 of the Netflix show because they proceed through the question of legal liability in a way that provides a fruitful link to girlhood studies' critique of contemporary rape culture—and remain focused on Hannah Baker's story and decision to end her life.