

***All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* by Rebecca Traister**  
**Reading Guide for GVSU's 2017-2018 Community Reading Project**  
**By Maureen Wolverton and Jennifer Jameslyn**

“As young women become educated in the industries of the world, thereby learning the sweetness of independent bread, it will be more and more impossible for them to accept the...marriage limitation [...]”  
-- Susan B. Anthony, 1877

“I truly believe that women should be financially independent from their men... Money gives men the power to run the show. It gives men the power to define value. They define what's sexy. And men define what's feminine. It's ridiculous.”  
-- Beyoncé, 2013

***Before Reading***

- 1) Consider your views on marriage before opening this book. Reflect on your upbringing and how these experiences shaped your views. Do/did your parents expect you to get married one day? Do/did you expect to?
- 2) What is the best age to get married? Why? What factors influence the age of marriage today? In the past? How does marriage impact friendships, career goals and well-being?
- 3) Why might someone choose to remain single? Is there a social stigma around this today? Why or why not? How does choosing to be single impact friendships, career goals and well being?
- 4) Are single women perceived differently than single men? How do stereotypes about single people intersect with assumptions or stereotypes connected to race, class, and sexual orientation?
- 5) How do you think the decision to marry or stay single differs depending on your gender? Sexual orientation? How do you think that singles fare over time? Do you think that they are satisfied with their decision? Why or why not?

***Streaming Film Links (Descriptions are at the end of this document. Links can be copied and pasted into Blackboard!)***

- [American Masters: The Women's List.](#)
- [PBS Makers: Women Who Make America Season 1.](#)
- [PBS Makers: Women Who Make America Season 2.](#)
- [Miss Representation](#)
- [PBS American Masters: Althea Gibson](#)
- [PBS American Masters: Billie Jean King](#)
- [Rebel-Loreta Velazquez: Secret Soldier of the American Civil War](#)
- [PBS American Experience: Triangle Fire](#)
- [Anita: Speaking Truth to Power.](#)
- [Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice.](#)
- [Wonder Women: The Untold Story of American Superheroines.](#)
- [BBC: In Search of the Brontes.](#)

***A Note on Interviews and Attribution/Introduction***

- 1) Who did Traister mainly interview for this book? How will this impact the way that you read *All the Single Ladies*?
- 2) The Introduction opens by recounting stories of when Traister's heroines married. Why does she feel as though some of her favorite characters' stories come to a close with this plot point? Reflect on your own favorite book and film characters.
- 3) The Introduction draws upon a Susan B. Anthony speech, stating that we are in the middle of an *epoch of single women*. What does she mean by this? How and why might being remaining single be a tool in women's struggle for equality (p. 11)?

## **Before Reading Resources**

GVSU's Community Reading Project (CRP): <http://www.gvsu.edu/read/2017-2018-crp-exploration-page-83.htm>

Rebecca Traister's Website: <http://www.rebeccatraister.com/>

Rebecca Traister's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rtraister>

CBS This Morning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG2B02G1wRs>

## **Chapter One: Watch Out for That Woman (1-36)**

**Key Words:** 1990's, Anita Hill, Murphy Brown, "the great crossover," Welfare Queen, Second Wave of Feminism, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem.

- 1) How did Anita Hill shift the "lexicon" and the American Consciousness? Why was her marital status part of the discussion?
- 2) How did Anita Hill's testimony impact views on the justice system, particularly that an all white, male Senate Committee confirmed Justice Thomas despite Hill's testimony? How did this case reflect the reality for women in the 1990's?
- 3) Two women served in the US Senate when Hill testified in 1991. How many women serve in the Senate now? Where are they from?
- 4) What is "the great crossover"? How did popular culture in the 1990's mirror the reality of "the great crossover"?
- 5) Why did politicians like Quayle and Santorum negatively link single motherhood to social change? What does Traister argue is the root of their critique?
- 6) What factors slowed women's entry into marriage in the 1990's? What is the Second Wave of feminism? What issues mattered most to this generation of feminists? In what ways does the Second Wave feel different from or similar to feminism as you understand it now?
- 7) What critiques does Traister offer with regard to Friedan's vision of feminism? How does Gloria Steinem differ?
- 8) How did the women's movement open opportunities for single women specifically? How did it impact marriage?
- 9) Were you surprised to read that the Supreme Court did not legalize access to birth control for married women until 1965 and single women until 1972? Did you know that women were not legally guaranteed access to credit cards, bank loans, and mortgages until 1974? Think about your own family history: how might these events have shaped the lives of women in your family?
- 10) What forms did the backlash against the women's movement take?
- 11) What are marriage rates like today? How does this impact politics? Why do you think that 40% of unmarried women potential voters are not registered to vote? What factors does Traister identify on p. 33?
- 12) Why do conservative politicians see marriage as a solution to poverty and violence? How does Traister critique this notion?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Single Women Have Often Made History: Unmarried in America (37-69)**

**Key Words:** Spinster, US Colonial times, coverture, Cult of Domesticity, Industrial Revolution, Cult of Single Blessedness, Civil War, the Progressive Era, WWII, GI Bill.

- 1) How were unmarried women classified in early colonial United States? What limitations were placed on their freedoms?
- 2) "Marriage, in the varied ways in which it has been legally constructed over centuries, has been extremely useful in containing women and limiting their power" (p 39). Who has historically benefitted from limiting women's power? Why did so many of the remarkable women Traister lists on p. 38 and 39 avoid marriage?
- 3) Discuss the origins of the word "spinster." What is a *thornback*? What is *coverture* and how did it shape early American attitudes toward marriage?
- 4) What historical factors shaped the male to female ratio during colonial times? What intellectual movements impacted views on women during this same time period?
- 5) Compare/contrast the intersections of slave and marital law.
- 6) How did the industrial revolution impact the roles of women? Which professions opened up for women during this time period? Why?
- 7) Why were single women key abolitionists? How did women's rights overlap with the *banning of booze* (49)? What other issues might abolitionists care about?

- 8) "The rate of American spinsterhood hit its first peak at 11 percent for American women born between 1865 and 1875" (51). How did these women gain economic freedom during this time period?
- 9) How did educational opportunities for women expand by the end of the nineteenth century? What types of resistance unfolded to challenge women's independence and intellectual capacities?
- 10) "In 1870, professional women accounted for less than seven percent of the nonagricultural female workforce; that percentage would more than double by 1920" (55). What impact does this have on the workforce? On the labor movement?
- 11) "By 1920, nearly 40% of black women worked for wages, compared to about 18% of white women" (p 56). How did sexism and racism intersect to shape the opportunities available to black women?
- 12) What is a Settlement House? Who was Jane Addams? What political gains were made as a result of this generation of women?
  - a. Did you know Grand Rapids had a Settlement House? Learn more about it:
  - b. <http://www.historygrandrapids.org/audio/4450/viva-flaherty>
  - c. <http://www.ggrwhc.org/seven-women-bissell>
- 13) What historical factors chipped away at "centuries of repression" leading activists to fight for better access to contraception? What concerns did President Roosevelt voice about the use of contraception? How are these concerns echoed fifty years later by Daniel Patrick Moynihan?
- 14) Discuss the cultural blowbacks to women's increasing position of power of society. How did the Miss America pageant begin? What did the field of psychology say about unmarried women?
- 15) How did the GI Bill impact women following WWII? Why did white women begin to marry early? What policies impacted the lives of black women?
- 16) "This is the epoch of the single women, made possible by the single women who preceded it" (69). How did this brief historical perspective shape the way that you view the women's rights movement? Of feminism? What surprised you the most?
- 17) Which parts of this book leave you with more questions? What are these questions?

### **Chapter Three**

#### ***The Sex of the Cities: Urban Life and Female Independence (70-95)***

- 1) "The correlation between cities and comparatively high numbers of single female residents is long-standing and worldwide" (72). Why? What evidence does Traister provide the reader with to see this as a "long-standing and worldwide" truth?
- 2) What are the drawbacks of urban living for single women?
- 3) Traister argues on p. 83 that "Cities allow us to extract some of the transactional services that were assumed to be an integral, gendered aspect of traditional marriage and enjoy them as actual transactional service, for which we pay." Does framing marriage as including gendered transactional services challenge your conception of marriage? How might separating transactional expectations from other elements of marriage change the meaning or value of marriage?
- 4) How does the infrastructure of the city help single women? Do you agree with the statement that, "being single is a handicap in the more rural places" (84)? Why or why not?
- 5) Have you encountered, witnessed or perpetrated the "prejudice and alarm" about people who remain unmarried? Is marriage or early marriage the norm where you live?
- 6) How did housing for single men differ from similar complexes for single women in the 1900's? How does architecture and design impact women?
- 7) What is problematic about the media messages about single women living in the city? How does media coverage of crime emphasize women's vulnerability in cities? What messages does this kind of coverage convey about single women?
- 8) How does *Sex in the City* represent single women living in an urban setting? Compare this with Rebecca Traister's experience of living in New York.

### **Chapter Four**

#### ***Dangerous as Lucifer Matches: The Friendships of Women (96-122)***

- 1) How would you define family? What are "chosen families"?

- 2) “Given the way we’re taught adulthood is supposed to unfold, the idea of figuring friends into life’s trickiest logistical equations sounds silly. You can’t—and aren’t supposed to—build your lives around friendships, but rather around families, marriages, jobs, *maybe* aging parents...” (103). Reflect on your own deepest friendships while reading this statement. Which of these factors do you imagine are most important to build lives around? Why?
- 3) Traister argues at the top of p. 108 that if sexual intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and monogamy are the defining elements of “real partnerships” many heterosexual marriages don’t qualify. What do you think are the defining elements of “real partnership”?
- 4) Why were women discouraged from forming close social unions with other women in the 1920’s? What is as “dangerous as Lucifer matches” (112)?
- 5) How does marriage impact intimate friendships that existed prior to the union? Give examples from your own life in comparison with the stories that Traister offers.
- 6) Unpack the feelings of Elliott when she states, “I feel completely out of sync with my peers” (114). Have you ever experienced a similar disconnect with close friends?
- 7) Discuss Sara’s return. How and why has their friendship changed? Have you encountered a similar experience?
- 8) Can you both be “happily married” to friends and married to your partner/spouse? Why or why not? How do friendships change post-marriage? What factors or pressures might contribute to those changes?
- 9) How did popular culture “present stories about what twentieth-century female life, unhooked from marriage, might look like” (118)? What did the backlash look like?
- 10) What contemporary films/books/blogs/etc. give voice to single womanhood and friendship today? Why does Traister argue that *Sex and the City* transformed media representations of single women?

## **Chapter Five**

### ***My Solitude, My Self: Single Women on Their Own (123-152)***

- 1) Traister unpacks stereotypes around the status of “single” in the first part of Chapter Five. Do these stereotypes resonate with you? What do you make of her claim that married life can be more lonely than partnered living?
- 2) How do you feel about alone time? Is it a “surprisingly sweet relief” or something else to you? How do you imagine that alone time changes depending on your relationships?
- 3) “As the number of unmarried people steadily rises, threatening the normative supremacy of nuclear family and early bonded hetero patterns, independent life may swiftly get cast as an exercise in selfishness” (129). Analyze this statement, taking apart each claim to consider it carefully.
- 4) “Women are very socialized to choose other people” (134). Can you think of ways that you experienced this personally? What do you think of Amina Sow’s advice to “Always choose yourself first”? What does this look like?
- 5) “There remains an anxiety that a lack of marital affiliation might somehow be tied to a lack of *existence* [...]” (137). What is the “freakishness” that Traister explains? What assumptions might underlie our inability to put unmarried women into a “box” if they are not unhappy?
- 6) How is loneliness defined in this chapter? How does Traister introduce the idea of exhaustion as being connected to loneliness? What is *opting out*?
- 7) What does Maria Mitchell’s poem convey about single women? Why did a dress evoke an existential crisis for Ann? What are the connections between health and marriage? Why does Frances say, “We’re all alone, no matter” (146)?
- 8) What is Traister’s vision for end of life care with regard to people living outside of a nuclear family agreement?

## **Chapter Six (153-181)**

### ***For Richer: Work, Money, and Independence***

- 1) How does Rebecca Traister’s own grandmother exemplify the tensions between professional aspiration and duties in the home? How much do you suppose that will work define your identity in the future? How do you think that your choice to marry or not will impact this?
- 2) How do our grandmothers’ and mothers’ choices about work and home impact the next generation? Reflect on the stories in the book (Tina Fey, Patricia Williams, Alison Turkos and Carmen Wong Ulrich) along with your own personal experiences.

- 3) “The freedom of having your own money, has to be freedom to not marry the guy, to be free to leave the guy, and to support yourself as a single person, possibly with kids” (162). Analyze the way that this statement reflects the importance of equal wages for equal work.
- 4) How does college impact your views on marriage time lines? Do you view relationships in college as “too demanding and potentially too distracting” (166) from your goals? Why or why not?
- 5) How much do you intend to be “married to the job”? Reflect on how hearing the answers of women differ from men on this. Do you expect your profession to bring you the type of joy outlined in this chapter?
- 6) What is the pattern between marrying early for men versus women? How does this choice impact earnings for both sexes? What about having children?
- 7) “the average wedding costs nearly \$30,000” (178). Have you ever heard of a single-girl shower? How much money have you spent on the events/showers mentioned in this part of the book?

### ***Chapter Seven (182-210)***

#### ***For Poorer: Single Women and Sexism, Racism, and Poverty***

- 1) Name three statistics in this chapter that help to paint a picture of the wage gap between women and men. What age do we see this gap widen? Why?
- 2) Many conservative thinkers espouse marriage as a solution for poverty. What does Traister argue are better solutions? What impedes the implementation of these?
- 3) What is “marital privilege” and how does it work?
- 4) Traister identifies two misleading messages commonly used to link single motherhood and poverty (192). What are these messages? Why does Traister argue they don’t adequately address the interplay between these issues? How does this connect to her argument on p. 195 that policies addressing poverty are more likely to make marriage accessible?
- 5) “Until poor women have more access to jobs that lead to financial independence [...] the poor will continue to have children far sooner than most Americans think they should, while still deferring marriage” (200). Discuss the reasons that Traister gives for this. How does this impact your understanding of young women having children outside of marriage? Why might early motherhood be a strategy for exerting control over an uncertain future?
- 6) What factors contribute to the “shortage of eligible male mates” (202)?
- 7) Why does Monica Potts argue that “Women do the emotional work for their families, while men reap the most benefits from marriage” (204).
- 8) Why do many poor couples choose not to marry? What factors shape a single mother’s decision to marry or not?
- 9) Analyze the quote by Ta-Nehisi Coates, “human beings are pretty logical and generally savvy about identifying their interests. Despite what we’ve heard, women tend to be human beings and if they are less likely to marry today, it is probably that they have decided that marriage doesn’t advance their interests as much as it once did” (210).

### ***Chapter Eight (211-236)***

#### ***Sex and the Single Girls: Virginity to Promiscuity and Beyond***

- 1) What messages have you heard about chastity and promiscuity from your friends, family, faith community, teachers, and popular culture? Think about the value systems you have developed about sexual intimacy. How were these formed? How have they changed since starting college? How does reading about Kristina square with your own beliefs? What are some common stereotypes about promiscuous women? Men? What assumptions are those stereotypes rooted in?
- 2) Have “sexual pathways” increased in recent years for women? What does Traister mean when she says that, “we finally begin to break apart the gender essentialist assumptions about ‘what women want’ (215)? Why is talking about sex and women’s sexuality important for challenging these assumptions?
- 3) How did the invention of the birth-control pill impact views on women’s sexuality, according to Paula J. Caplan? Are the competing pressures she describes still pressures women face in navigating their sex lives?
- 4) Why were some Second Wave feminists like Shulamith Firestone against marriage? How does Tinder fit into their argument? How do you view dating apps? Are they liberating or objectifying for women? Can they be both?
- 5) How does the decision to abstain from sex before marriage impact women in relationships? Men?

- 6) Why does Frances Kissling state that unmarried, sexual women are, “about the scariest woman a patriarchal system can find” (224)? Discuss the differences between female desire as opposed to female sex appeal. How are women’s bodies scrutinized and policed compared to men’s bodies?
- 7) “The slow realization that women’s sexuality, when truly unleashed from hetero and marital expectation, might begin to look more like traditionally male sexuality is the stuff of social, economic, and sexual revolution” (225)? Analyze this statement and consider the implications of such a revolution.
- 8) Examine the claims made on both sides of the argument about “hook up” culture in this chapter and compare them with your own experiences and observations.

## ***Chapter Nine (237-266)***

### ***Horse and Carriage: Marrying—And Not Marrying—In the Time of Singlehood***

- 1) How do marriage trends in the United States compare to Japan? Italy? Germany? Why are there such stark differences? Why are Scandinavian countries so different?
- 2) What are the arguments for postponing marriage? What are the downsides?
- 3) Compare the statistics on married fathers participating in household chores (246) with your own experiences. Have you noticed generational differences? What do millennials think about work-life balance trends?
- 4) How does Traister argue that gay marriage will be “key to our ability to re-imagine straight marriage” (249)?
- 5) What lessons about marriage and divorce are you learning from Ada, Molly and Heidi?
- 6) How are the assumptions and stereotypes about single black women different from the single women of other races and ethnicities? What specific issues do Hill, Stewart, Giles, Stanley, and Andrews identify as black single women (pp. 256-260).
- 7) Do you know anyone who married for the financial benefits? Because they were settling? What’s love got to do with it?
- 8) Why does Traister argue that she wound up happily married because she lived at a time when she could be happily single (263)? What are the ways in which living independently as a single person might lead to happier marriages?

## ***Chapter Ten (267-295)***

### ***Then Comes What? And When? Independence and Parenthood***

- 1) Discuss the many ways that “contemporary women are redefining whether, when, and how they become mothers” (268). What role does technology play in this? Discuss the pros and cons of the different technologies discussed in this chapter.
- 2) What challenges exist for older parents? How do many parents meet these challenges?
- 3) Why are some women choosing to remain child-free? “Society stigmatizes women who don’t have kids” (283). How so?
- 4) How does the story of Patricia Williams (284) highlight issues of some single mothers? What assumptions surrounded her son’s adoption? How do those assumptions demonstrate intersections between race, class, and gender?
- 5) What are the concerns about a declining birth rate in the United States? Are these valid? Why or why not?
- 6) Should a two-parent, partnered home be the aspirant goal for a society? Why or why not? Discuss the role that social policies play in supporting parents, children and families in your response, and be sure to consider the arguments made by Harris-Perry (287), Stewart (288), Brown (289) and Roiphe (290).

## ***Conclusion/Appendix/Where are They Now?***

- 1) Traister states, “We have to rebuild not just our internalized assumptions about individual freedoms and life paths; we also must revise our social and economic structures to account for, acknowledge, and support women in the same way in which we have supported men for centuries” (298). How have policies supported men for centuries? What structures would support women?
- 2) “Single women are taking up space in a world that was not built for them” (299). How can we greet the epoch of single women with open eyes and a curious mind?
- 3) How can we rebuild the world for the “diverse women who live in it now, more freely, than ever before” (300)? Use the Appendix to discuss the policies and attitudes that Traister states need readjusting.



- 4) Catch up with the women that Traister interviewed for the book. Are there any surprises here? Discuss the role that their stories played in how you engaged this book.
- 5) How did this book impact your views on marriage? Remaining single? Motherhood? Divorce? What factors were/are most important to you as you made/make the decision to marry or not?

**Streaming Film Links from the CRP website (These can be linked in BB for students to view independently or streamed in class.):**

- [American Masters: The Women's List](#). Meet 15 women who define contemporary American culture in Timothy Greenfield-Sanders new List film featuring Madeleine Albright, Margaret Cho, Edie Falco, Betsey Johnson, Alicia Keys, Nancy Pelosi, Rosie Perez, Wendy Williams and more PBS Television, aired 9/25/15.
- [PBS Makers: Women Who Make America Season 1](#). The first season of Makers tells the remarkable story of the most sweeping social revolution in American history, as women have asserted their rights to a full and fair share of political power, economic opportunity, and personal autonomy PBS Television.
- [PBS Makers: Women Who Make America Season 2](#). Through intimate interviews with trailblazing women known and unknown, viewers are given a rare glimpse-- sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and always candid--of what it was like to be pioneers in their fields, (includes Women in Comedy, Women in Hollywood, Women in Space, Women in War, Women in Business, Women in Politics). PBS Television.
- [Miss Representation](#). Written and directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the film exposes how mainstream media contribute to the under-representation of women in positions of power and influence in America. The film challenges the media's limited and often disparaging portrayals of women and girls, which make it difficult for women to achieve leadership positions and for the average woman to feel powerful herself.
- [PBS American Masters: Althea Gibson](#). This is the story of Althea Gibson (1927-2003), a truant from the rough streets of Harlem, who emerged as the unlikely queen of the highly segregated tennis world in the 1950s. She was the first African American to play and win at Wimbledon and the U.S. Nationals (precursor of the U.S. Open) -- a decade before Arthur Ashe. PBS Television.
- [PBS American Masters: Billie Jean King](#). Billie Jean King is the single most important female athlete of the 20th century, winner of 39 Grand Slam titles and a major force in changing and democratizing the cultural landscape. PBS Television.
- [Rebel-Loreta Velazquez: Secret Soldier of the American Civil War](#). In 1861, at the outbreak of the American Civil War, a teenager from New Orleans headed to the front lines. Under the alias Harry T. Buford, he fought at First Bull Run, was wounded at Shiloh, and served as a Confederate spy. But Buford harbored a secret-he was really Loreta Velazquez, a Cuban immigrant from New Orleans. By 1863, Velazquez was spying for the Union. She scandalized America when she revealed her story in her 1876 memoir, *The Woman in Battle*. PBS Television.
- [PBS American Experience: Triangle Fire](#). It was the deadliest workplace accident in New York City's history. A dropped match on the 8th floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory sparked a fire that killed over a hundred innocent people trapped inside. The private industry of the American factory would never be the same. PBS Television.
- [Anita: Speaking Truth to Power](#). An entire country watched as a poised, beautiful African-American woman sat before a Senate committee of 14 white men and with a clear, unwavering voice recounted the repeated acts of sexual harassment she had endured while working with U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. Anita Hill's graphic testimony was a turning point for gender equality in the U.S. and ignited a political firestorm about sexual harassment and power in the workplace that resonates still today.
- [Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice](#). Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice documents the dramatic life and turbulent times of the pioneering African American journalist, activist, suffragist and anti-lynching crusader of the post-Reconstruction period.
- [Wonder Women: The Untold Story of American Superheroines](#). Kapow! Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines offers a nuanced critique of gender and heroism in

popular culture as well as a powerful dose of Vitamin F(eminism) for the undernourished. From the birth of the 1940s comic book heroine, Wonder Woman, to the blockbusters of today, Wonder Women! looks at how popular representations of powerful women often reflect society's anxieties about strong and healthy women.

- [BBC: In Search of the Brontes.](#) The story of three sisters, their precocious creativity, the scandalous reputations they sought to subvert and the mythical legacy they deliberately left behind. It is a story of alcoholism and illness, of thwarted passion and unrequited love, and of a 19th-century quest for fame.