

'You're not progressive enough for this': Pre-woke nostalgia and queer disruption in HBO revival *And Just Like That...*

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a trend for televisual remakes and revivals. Such shows must update themselves for contemporary audiences whilst maintaining nostalgic appeal. *And Just Like That...*, HBO's *Sex and the City* revival, does so by diversifying and engaging with 'woke TV', but also with reactionary discourses. The series reveals the tensions of contemporary returns to the past, where nostalgia might extend beyond a *narrative* world to a *social* world. Thus, this article identifies 'pre-woke nostalgia': a regressive draw to imagined 'pre-woke' times. This is both epitomised and complicated in newly queer Miranda and controversial new character, Che Diaz.

Keywords

television, transmedia, nostalgia, queer, woke, LGBTQ+, heteropessimism, reactionary feminism

In December 2020 reports circulated of a revival of HBO's hit dramedy *Sex and the City* (*SATC*), confirmed in January 2021 with the announcement of *And Just Like That* (*AJLT*). *SATC*, 'a wildly popular US television series' (Nash and Grant, 2015: 977) ran for six seasons between 1998 and 2004. The series, adapted from The New York Observer column by Candace Bushnell, was set in New York and featured central protagonist and narrator Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) and friends Miranda

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Hobbs (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte York (Kristin Davis) and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall). The show, which centred on the foursome's friendship, fashion and dating, quickly became a hit. As Jane Gerhard describes: 'in its combination of frank sex talk and best girlfriends, *SATC* became one of the most watched and discussed television series in recent memory' (2005: 43). As Deborah Jermyn suggests, watching the series often constituted a 'shared televisual experience' (2009: 202) – the sociability of viewership central to the series' appeal. *SATC* had a significant cultural impact, mediating contemporaneous discourses of gender and identity. As Kim Akass and Janet McCabe summarise: 'the series... contributed to... cultural discourses related to fashion trends, discussions on sex, sexuality and relationships as well as debates on modern femininity, feminism and the single woman' (2004: 2). Whilst in many ways ground-breaking, *SATC* was also limited: centring a white, middle-upper class, heterosexual, cisgender perspective. The end of the series was followed by two feature films (2008 and 2010), with talk of a third film reportedly cancelled due to Kim Cattrall no longer wanting to appear in the franchise. It appeared the story of the four 'gals from Manhattan' (Akass and McCabe 2004: xxv) was over, until the announcement that it was to be revisited in the form of a television revival.

In December 2021 *AJLT* premiered on HBO Max, re-introducing us to the iconic *SATC* characters 17 years after the final episode of the original series. Nicole Evelina writes that *SATC* asked: 'How do women of the mid- to late 1990s fit into a changing society?' (2022: xvii–xix). In *AJLT*, we are asked the same of the early 2020s. As reruns and revivals bring older content into new contexts, they open up questions around societal change and contemporary resonances. *AJLT* emerged into a complex socio-cultural landscape and is shaped by a convergence of two contemporary trends: pop culture nostalgia – the series is one of a number of reboots, reruns and revivals (*Will and Grace*, 2017–2020; *The L Word: Generation Q*, 2019–2023; *One Day at a Time*, 2017–2020 amongst others) – and diversified or 'woke' media. Notably, in a marked shift from the original series, *AJLT* actively engages, albeit often clumsily, with race and racism and expands its queer representation. Shaped also by nostalgia, however, *AJLT* mobilises, I argue, a contradictory take on woke TV that simultaneously reveals nostalgia, not only for the narrative world of the original series, but also for its *social world*. These complexities are particularly evident in the first season of the comedy drama; with the writers still developing the revival's tone and address, space is opened up for multiple perspectives. Thus, through analysis of the first season of *AJLT*, this paper identifies a broader sensibility of 'pre-woke nostalgia': a regressive draw, or retreat, to imagined 'pre-woke' times. This sensibility is not always consistent, however. The messy multiplicities of *AJLT*'s address, alongside its previous incarnation as *SATC* and the extension of both into press and social media, speak to broader shifts towards 'reactionary feminism' and right-wing backlash and the contradictory impulses of the contemporary period (Banet-Weiser and Kay, 2026). Epitomising this multiplicity, *AJLT*'s Miranda both evokes and, critically, *complicates* pre-woke nostalgia in her giddy leap into romance with contentious new character Che Diaz (Sara Ramirez) – the series' (reductive) embodiment of woke culture.

And Just Like That and the nostalgia trend

Whilst the evocation of nostalgia in media is not new, the past decade has seen it emerge as a notable trend and marketing strategy (Niemeyer, 2014). This was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, where nostalgia mobilised, as one Forbes article described, ‘as our Coronavirus security blanket’ (Klein, 2020).¹ Perhaps nowhere has media nostalgia found a more visible home than on television. As Lisa Hill writes: ‘Television’s social immediacy, focus on characters, and relationship with domesticity all directly contribute to the degree of nostalgia and cultural consequence TV shows accrue’ (2018: 12). On the one hand, these connections have been complicated by contemporary shifts such as the rise of streaming services, changes to industry structures, televisual flow and consumption patterns. These shifts producing, as Caitlin Shaw argues, ‘ever more fractured audiences and ways of viewing and... programming increasingly produced for international distribution’ (2021: 288). At the same time, we have seen a rise in British and North American television media of ‘textually retrospective programming’ (Shaw 2021: 288), from reruns, reboots and revivals to entertainment television imbued with nostalgic appeal.

As Katharina Niemeyer notes, ‘nostalgia is not only a fashion or a trend’, but rather ‘expresses or hints at something more profound’ (Niemeyer, 2014: 2). Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as ‘longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed’ (2001: 49), whilst Grainge describes nostalgia as ‘a form of idealized remembrance’ (2000: 28). Nostalgia then might be to look or be drawn backwards, but to a version of the past that is lost, never was, or was not as good as the nostalgic gaze imagines it to be. Nostalgia is thus also tied to the present, where the catalyst for the looking back lies. The context of its emergence is thus significant: what, in the present moment, moves such collective looking backwards? Long utilised for political effect (Niemeyer, 2014) nostalgic discourses might emerge during periods of social change or instability, such as we have seen in recent decades. As Holly Willson Holladay, drawing on Tunnock writes, ‘nostalgic representations of the past have come to signify a culture in transition or crisis, as new values take hold and challenge previous assumptions about social life’ (2016: 37). Nostalgia can function as a regressive force, as the idealised gaze looks back to ‘better’ days. Such idealization can, at best, obscure the unequal realities of ‘times gone by’, particularly for marginalised groups, and, at worst, actively work to reproduce them. At the same time, nostalgia can function, as Amy Holdsworth describes, as ‘a mode of critique’ (2011: 103). Multiple in its effects, Niemeyer suggests we ‘grant nostalgia its plural meanings by using the notion of *nostalgias*; especially when it comes to the question of media, where different nostalgias interact’ (emphasis added, 2014: 6).

Like other revivals *AJLT* trades on nostalgia, offering a return to much loved characters. *AJLT* initially establishes continuity: Carrie, still a writer but now also a podcast regular, is still married to ‘Big’, or John (Chris Noth). Charlotte remains married to Harry, their two children now teenagers. The former art dealer is busy with her children’s private school and on the board of the Metropolitan Museum. Miranda, still married to Steve and raising their teenage son Brady, has quit her job as a corporate lawyer to pursue an MA in human rights. The new series is littered with ‘easter eggs’ – references to the original series – particularly in the use of fashion and costume design, for

which the dramedy was so well-known. In S1 E4 Carrie appears in a long white tulle skirt that references the iconic tutu of the original series' opening credits. The pleasurable comfort of revival nostalgia is, however, disrupted by the absence of Cattrall as Samantha, explained in the narrative by a rift with Carrie and a move to London (and in the press by the much publicised 'feud' between Cattrall and Parker). As press media and fan debate attest, this is a significant absence. It was through Samantha that the series mobilised its most boundary-pushing sex-positivity and key aspects of its comedy. Furthermore, the character embodied a camp sensibility central to the tone and appeal of the series. Much press surrounding the reboot asked: 'Can the new *SATC* reboot ever hope to work without Samantha Jones?' (Dray, 2021).

The first episode features the shock death of Big. Ending the central on-again-off-again romance of *SATC*, this narrative twist acts as catalyst for the first season, with Carrie repositioned as a newly widowed New Yorker. This was further complicated when actor Chris Noth was accused of sexual assault by multiple women, including on the *SATC* set – directly situating the series in the context of contemporary discourse. Parker, Nixon, and Davis expressed their support for the women in a joint statement (Long, 2021). These intra and extra textual ruptures complicate nostalgic attachments to *SATC*, tainting the object of nostalgia. At the same time, they might simultaneously heighten it, as audiences are drawn back to an earlier period of attachment, before such tensions had to be contended with. Within the narrative world, the losses of both Samantha and Big are felt by the central characters: Carrie spends much of the first season grieving, and Samantha's absent presence is returned to throughout (in dialogue, text messages and a poignant flower delivery at Big's funeral), culminating in a highly publicised cameo in the season two finale (S2, E11).

A new (woke) world

AJLT also emerges into a transformed televisual and representational landscape, which has seen notable shifts in platforms, consumption and content. Indeed, as *SATC* – produced for premium cable channel HBO – epitomises the television culture of the 1990s, *AJLT* speaks to contemporary television production as an original programme for subscription streaming service HBO Max. In this changing media context, as Jacqueline Gibbs, Billy Holzberg, and Aura Lehtonen describe, 'representations have at least somewhat diversified, with streaming platforms in particular tending to include higher proportions of queer, trans and racialized characters' (2025: 12). *AJLT* emerges as part of these broader shifts, and makes an explicit attempt to 'update' itself for this new representational era. This is particularly necessary as the original series was notably lacking in diversity. As Evelina notes, 'there are only really four examples of characters of colour in 94 episodes and only two of those lasted more than a single episode' (2022: 113). The occasional representations of people of colour tended to fall into racialised tropes – 'cast in unimaginative, stereotypical roles' (Brasfield, 2006: 133) – and there are examples of racist and homophobic dialogue throughout (Evelina, 2022). The central characters are securely middle-upper class, and their relationships almost exclusively heterosexual (other than Samantha's brief queer romance). Thus, whilst the show offered notable and arguably ground-breaking representations of (some) women's (hetero)sexuality and

mobilised a feminist discourse, its perspective was limited. As Brasfield writes: ‘Sex and the City, as a medium for social analysis, reflects almost exclusively the perspectives and values of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who define themselves primarily as oppressed victims of patriarchy’ (2006: 132). Thus, as Melanie Curry writes in *Elle* magazine: ‘The SATC reboot desperately needed diverse characters and inclusive storylines’ (2022).

The intervening years have seen high-profile, and highly mediated, social movements and cultural shifts across multiple contexts. Three key shifts influence the *SATC* revival: #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and ‘new queer visibility’ (McNicholas Smith, 2020). In 2017, film and media industries were brought into the spotlight when, following the revelation of numerous accounts of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, the #MeToo movement² against sexual violence gained momentum (paving the way for the afore-mentioned allegations against Chris Noth to be made public). In 2018, a skit on late night sketch show Saturday Night Live referenced *SATC* alongside Hulu series *The Handmaids Tale* (an adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s feminist novel) when it portrayed a spoof trailer for ‘Handmaids in the City’. Host Amy Schumer quipped: ‘Let’s face it ladies, in 2018, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is basically our *Sex and the City*’ (S43, E20). As Anna Marie Bautista writes, ‘the blending of the two series signifies the cultural significance of their representations of female empowerment in their respective eras, nearly 20 years apart’ (2023: 1) - the parody emphasising the significant cultural shifts seen in the intervening years.

In 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman after he shot and killed seventeen-year-old African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter began to be utilised on social media. Following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 and Sandra Bland in 2015 the movement came to further prominence, becoming a national network (Khan-Cullors, 2016). In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin initiated a global response. As Ellen Jones notes, the impact of the movement ‘has been reflected in the film and television industry’ (2024: 9). With conversations on racial injustice brought to the fore, this period saw ‘social media movements such as 2015s #OscarsSoWhite, hundreds of vaguely defined media diversity schemes, public statements from celebrities, and both independent production companies and big studios avowing their anti-racist intentions’ (Jones, 2024: 9). The 2010s also saw ‘a notable increase in the visibility of LGBTQ + characters and media content’ (McNicholas Smith, 2020): from the ‘It Gets Better’ ethos of teen hit *Glee* (Walters, 2014), to soap opera weddings (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017) and ‘modern families’.³ In 2014 *Time* magazine declared a ‘transgender tipping point’ on a cover featuring actress and activist Laverne Cox (Steinmetz, 2014). Notably, Cox was appearing as Sophia Burset in ensemble comedy-drama, *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019). The emergence of Netflix and the rise of streaming services marked further shifts in screen media and visibility: as has been well documented, an ‘emphasis on diversity’ was, and remains, a central (albeit complex) feature of Netflix’s strategy (Jenner, 2018: 145).

These and other examples have made anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQ + political discourse newly visible across mainstream media (although this is, of course, not the first time such critiques have been made or mediated). Critics have described media shifts

such as a ‘new cultural life of feminism’ (Agostinho, 2016), ‘conspicuous feminism’ (Bautista, 2023) ‘diversification’ (Gibbs et al., 2025) and the rise of ‘woke TV’ (Osur, 2022). The term ‘woke’ originates from AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and can be traced back to the 1920s and 30s, tending to refer to the need for Black Americans to remain ‘awake’ to racially motivated violence and inequalities (Romano, 2020). Whilst definitions of the term have expanded, Summit Osur cites this history and defines ‘woke TV’ as television that ‘portrays and challenges the realities of structural inequality’ (Osur, 2022: 70). As such ideas move into broader public discourse, however, they are also open to appropriation and de-contextualisation. Thus, Osur argues, woke is ‘a term that has been coopted and often neutered by hashtag progressives’ (Osur, 2022: 70; see also Sobande, 2019; Kanai and Gill, 2020). What’s more, ‘woke’ has been taken up as a derogatory term in popular right-wing discourse, utilised to shut down political critique and to bemoan even more liberal shifts towards media ‘diversity’. The anti-woke sentiment speaks to the rise of right-wing populism in multiple national contexts and contemporary backlash against the more progressive social and legislative shifts of the intervening years. As Rosalind Gill wrote of the US and Europe in 2017: ‘these are dangerous and frightening times’ (2017: 608). Almost 10 years after Cox featured on the Time cover, she reflected: ‘In 2023, we are at the height of the backlash against trans visibility’ (in Mendez II).

It is into this political and cultural arena that the narrative world of *AJLT* and its central characters re-emerge. Reflecting on this, showrunner and executive producer Michael Patrick King notes:

It’s the same characters, but it’s a new world. So when we decided we’re going to shift the frame of everything—who else is in the world who we didn’t see before? What’s in the world right now that wasn’t in the world, on these characters’ tongues, when they were 35? And what that is, is race, sex, privilege (in Roundtree, 2021).

It is notable that King speaks of ‘a new world’, neatly absenting ‘race, sex and privilege’ from the world of the original series. Nonetheless, a conscious attempt has been made to expand the narrative world of the new series and engage with the politics of ‘woke TV’. This engagement largely plays out through the introduction of four new recurring characters, all people of colour, and the narratives and dialogue they act as catalyst for: glamorous realtor, Seema Patel (Sarita Choudhury); documentarian and art collector, Lisa Todd Wexley (Nicole Ari Parker); law Professor Nya Wallace (Karen Pittman); and non-binary stand-up comic, activist, and podcaster Che Diaz (Sara Ramirez). These characters symbolise important shifts in the *SATC/AJLT* universe, and function in direct response to earlier critiques. There remain, however, critical limits: from the repetition of stereotypical tropes to the ways in which the new characters often function to progress the narratives of the central (white) trio. In an article in *Elle* magazine Melanie Curry argued that all four ‘[fall] into the POC best friend trope, only serving to propel their white friends’ storylines forward’ (2022). It is notable that, by the final season (S3), only Lisa and Seema remain.

Tradwife Charlotte/Woke Charlotte

In a transmedia televisual landscape, the *SATC/AJLT* characters exist in multiple iterations across platforms: from HBO to HBO Max, to Netflix, where *SATC* began streaming in 2024, to social media, where the characters are (re)mediated in images, memes, gifs and clips. This can be seen in the reanimation of Charlotte in ‘Tradwife’ media: a nostalgic social media phenomenon which celebrates ‘traditional’ femininity and ‘a “return” to a heteronormative male breadwinner model of domesticity’ (Sykes, 2025: 833). In *SATC*, Charlotte is characterised as the most traditional of the central characters: as Evelina notes, ‘sometimes it seems like Charlotte York would have been more at home in the 1950s than in the late 1990s’ (2022: 13). This is emphasised in costume design, with her feminine, preppy, tailored attire – or ‘ladylike aesthetic’ (Tappan, 2025). As Beth Montemurro observes: ‘for Charlotte, fulfilling traditional roles is a fantasy to be realized with elegance’ (2004). Notably, recent press has returned to the character’s style, with one Marie Claire article declaring: ‘although decades-old, her elevated style is more relevant than ever’ (Tappan, 2025). Similarly, on social media, images and videos reanimate the character’s aesthetic through hashtags such as ‘#elegantfeminine’, ‘#classicgirlaesthetic’ and, notably, ‘#tradwifevibes’ – the character taken up as tradwife inspiration. Within the *SATC* narrative, season four sees Charlotte leave her job as an art dealer after marrying her first husband Trey. As Montemurro notes, ‘Charlotte’s decision to enter a life of domesticity... is perceived negatively by the other women’ (2004). However, Charlotte frames her perspective through a liberal feminist discourse of choice (Montemurro, 2004) – ‘I choose my choice!’ (S4, E7).⁴ Nash and Grant argue that *SATC* presents feminism ‘as a series of individual “choices” with no political agenda’ (2015: 978). Indeed, the series can be read as ‘post-feminist narrative par excellence’ (Nash and Grant, 2015: 977). Charlotte’s iteration of the postfeminist return to traditional gender roles (reimagined as empowered choices) (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004), might well resonate for the later tradwife movement. Notably, as Sykes argues, ‘the appeal of tradwifeism... lies in its promise of retreat from the failures of popular feminism and recovery from the damage caused by ‘hustle’ culture’ (Sykes, 2025: 833). Whilst *SATC* is an early example of the popular feminism that tradwife media is responding to, Charlotte might be taken up as example of retreat from its offerings, as represented in the rest of the central ensemble: independent and child-free Carrie, career-woman Miranda, and sex positive Samantha.

Notably, however, this reading of Charlotte is not the only one. In an alternate social media iteration of the character, she is mobilised, on the contrary, as ‘woke Charlotte’. In 2017, Instagram and podcast account ‘Every Outfit on Sex and the City’, run by Chelsea Fairless and Lauren Garroni, utilised ‘woke Charlotte’ memes to intervene in the series’ problematic representations and dialogue. Images reimagine Charlotte ‘calling out’ characters on, for example, white supremacy, cisgender privilege, and biphobia (Levine, 2017). In their analysis of reactionary feminism Sarah Banet-Weiser and Jilly Boyce Kay draw on Naomi Klein to argue that ‘we are living in a time of ‘mirror-worlds’, in which topsy-turvy new social and political formations are taking shape; reactionary movements mirror and absorb discourses from the left, leading to perplexing new political alliances. In the mirror-world, the familiar predicates of politics have been scrambled

(Banet-Weiser and Kay, 2026). As in Klein's work, Tradwife Charlotte and Woke Charlotte exist as doppelgangers – both, in turn, echoes of the original character – their co-existence representing the fractured complexities of contemporary gender politics and their mediations.

Pre-woke nostalgia

The sense of retreat evoked in *SATC*'s Charlotte is also evident in *AJLT*, where season one portrays the characters grappling with the changed social world that 'woke Charlotte' represents. This is epitomised in S1 E1's depiction of Miranda's 'return to graduate school', where the character is confronted by King's imagining of the 'new [woke] world'. The scene depicting her first class portrays the character making a series of faux pas. Firstly, going to sit in the professor's chair, she does not recognise Professor Wallace when she enters and expresses her surprise that the person in front of her is, in fact, her. When asked why she seems so surprised, she responds, 'well, your braids'. Increasingly flustered, Miranda's dialogue sees her explain that the braids are 'just so different' from the professor's photo on the website, acknowledge the braids as a Black hair style, state that it was important to her that the professor was Black, and acknowledge her own greying hair. This increasingly awkward dialogue also sees her (mis)gender a classmate as male, to which they respond: 'someone's quick with the pronouns' – the incredulous stares of the rest of the class function as judgement shots. Later, she tells Carrie: 'I was so worried about saying the wrong thing in this climate I said all the wrong things': her language evoking that of right-wing backlash against 'political correctness'.

On the one hand, Miranda's racialised and cis-normative gaze is made uncomfortably visible, depicted so as to evoke a critical response from the audience. Furthermore, she herself acknowledges that she 'said all the wrong things'. Notably, these consciously cringe-worthy scenes seem to mock the central character, made ridiculous in her lack of 'woke-ness'. As one article critiques: 'Miranda's been diminished to a bumbling, confused 50-something' (Mason, n.d.). At the same time, Miranda's explanation of her behaviour seems to be pitched to reposition her more sympathetically. In a subsequent scene, Miranda saves Professor Wallace's bag from being stolen on the subway. This act largely redeems the character, and the two women go on to develop an unlikely friendship (in season two, they even become roommates).

Charlotte is similarly challenged when her child, Rock, changes their name, rejecting gendered pronouns and labels in favour of 'just being me'. Both Charlotte and Harry initially struggle to understand. Writer Samantha Irby reflects:

I think for most progressive people, it's like, oh, I'll do it, but I'm sort of annoyed that I have to learn new things. I loved watching Charlotte and Harry slowly get on the level. We always knew it was going to be fine and that Charlotte was going to do the work, but it was valuable to a certain segment of this show's audience to see someone mirror themselves back to them (in McHenry, 2022).

This reflection begins to reveal the show's use of such narratives not only to educate and/or critique, but also *appeal* to a segment of society struggling with changing social

values. As Arthurs argues, *SATC* was always, to a certain extent, ‘addressed to affluent, white women as a segment of the market’ (Arthurs, 2003: 84). In these clunky engagements with political discourse *AJLT* seems to continue that address but interpolate more specifically a liberal positionality that identifies as progressive, and thus engages with contemporary discourses around identity and privilege (because that is what a progressive person should do, and be seen to do), but does so superficially. Further, the central characters appear to be both engaged with and weary of these shifts, opening up a nostalgic attachment to the ‘old world’ of *SATC*, imagined as a time before such challenges. Gibbs, Holzberg and Lehtonen similarly ask: ‘whether the desire to return indicates an attachment to the more straightforward and homogenous sexual class gendered and racial politics of the past’ (2025: 106). Of course, this imagined past never truly existed (although it was, perhaps, easier to act as if it did), thus, nostalgia functions as ‘way to transform the past by imagination’ (Niemeyer, 2014: 10). Thus, I argue, *AJLT* mobilises ‘pre-woke nostalgia’: a reactionary sensibility tied up with the postfeminist returns echoed in the tradwife mediations of Charlotte.

***SATC*’s queer representation**

The tensions of this sensibility and its expression in *AJLT* come to a head in the much-debated Che/Miranda storyline – marking a significant shift in the series’ LGBTQ + representation. On the one hand, *SATC* was, as Mandy Merck notes, ‘largely the creation of gay men’ (2004: 58) and is imbued with a ‘gay sensibility’ (2004: 59) that offers queer viewing pleasures. Queer codes are present in the series’ campy fabulousness, and the way in which, as Turner argues, ‘Samantha performs her gender to the point of drag excess’ (Turner, 2004).⁵ Celebrated costume designer Patricia Field is an out lesbian, and brought her long associations with queer subcultures to the series’ iconic aesthetic. The relationship between the four central protagonists mobilises intimacy and kinship beyond the heteronormative (Gerhard, 2005). In S2, E15, Carrie evokes the queer chosen family when she reflects: ‘the most important thing in life is your family... Sometimes it’s the family you’re born into and sometimes it’s the one you make for yourself’. The character of Miranda evokes queer coding in characterisation and style. Wearing her trademark red hair cut short and often dressed in tailored suits, Miranda is a successful, direct and no-nonsense lawyer; a career woman grappling with the boys’ club of corporate law. She is the most cynical member of the friendship quartet; as Brasfield notes, ‘Miranda’s cynicism toward relationships is the essence of her character’ (Brasfield, 2006: 131). She is thus, as Merck writes, ‘the likeliest nominee for a plausible lesbian romance’ (2004: 55). Nixon also reflects on this: ‘I think that Miranda had many other queer and frankly, lesbianic qualities about her... And I think for a lot of gay women... she was a stand-in for the gay women we didn’t have’ (in Aurthur, 2022). In 2004, extra-textual queer coding was established when, to much media interest, Nixon began dating her now wife, Christine Marinoni.

Within the narrative, Miranda’s queer/lesbian coding is referenced when she is set up with her lesbian co-worker, Syd (S1 E3). On kissing Syd, however, heterosexuality is quickly affirmed as she states, ‘Yup. Definitely straight’, shutting down the canonical possibility of queer identification. The character’s central romantic narrative is with bar

owner Steve Brady, whom she eventually marries and has a child with. Instead, it is Samantha who is given a queer storyline when she dates Brazilian artist, Maria Diega Reyes (Sonia Braga) (S4). The narrative, was, however, short-lived, and mobilised through Samantha's sexually adventurous persona as a 'try-sexual', who will 'try anything once' (S3, Ep4); evoking queerness as temporary experiment or phase. Maria was also represented through racialised tropes: exoticized as sexual other and, as Fegitz describes, 'caricatured as the stereotypical impetuous South American woman' (2016: 95). Meanwhile, dialogue throughout (as social media's 'woke Charlotte' points out) includes examples of biphobia and transphobia. When one episode sees Carrie kiss another woman in a game of Spin the Bottle, as Merck argues, 'Carrie's wide eyed horror at the kiss... underlines the series' abjection of female homoeroticism' (Merck, 2004: 54). The only long standing openly gay central characters are Stanford Blatch (Willie Garson) and Anthony Marentino (Mario Cantone), who both function through the familiar gay best friend trope. As Caballero critiques: 'They aren't even real characters, they're accessories that Charlotte and Carrie use whenever they need a pep-talk, or a friend to hang out outside their inner circle' (2021). Ultimately, heterosexuality is centred with all four leads finding narrative closure in romance.

'Woke moment!': Che Diaz

All this makes the introduction in *AJLT* of Carrie's boss and podcast host, Che Diaz particularly significant. Che, 'a queer, non-binary Mexican Irish diva', is an activist and the host of *X Y and Me* - 'the podcast that talks about gender roles, sexual roles and cinnamon rolls' (S1, E1). Che is portrayed by Mexican American actor Sara Ramírez, who is herself non-binary, and brings something 'deeply personal' (Dickson, 2023) to the character in their lived experience and commitment to representation of a 'more expanded definition of queerness' (Ramírez in *HBO Max*, 2021). Certainly, the introduction of a non-binary queer person of colour into the *SATC/AJLT* universe is important. As, Che states in a meta-commentary: 'we know that visibility isn't justice. But visibility can be the key that unlocks it all' (S1, E8). Visibility is complex, however, and the character emerges through a convergence of queer visibility and the cis-het gaze. On the one hand, *AJLT* frames Che as desirable. Their costuming is characterised by a gender-neutral aesthetic, combining streetwear and tailoring, their hair styled in a queer coded pompadour with undercut sides. The character is performed with a confident swagger, which is portrayed as having a powerful effect on queer fans and Upper East Side moms alike. As Charlotte gushes: 'Che is so cool and charismatic' (S1 E6). There is, however, an exaggerated-ness to this desiring that works to fetishise the character, who becomes an object of transgressive (but temporary) titillation. Che also evokes a reductive hypersexuality, as epitomised in their 'comedy concert'⁶ monologue: 'I've dated a lot in my life. I've dated men, women... pretty much everyone in here. Cheer if I've fucked you. Cheer if you've fucked me. Cheer if you want me to fuck you' (S1, E3).

Che is portrayed as somewhat of a caricature of an activist. Irby describes them as 'the kind of person who turns a coffee order into a lesson in colonialism ... Che is like that turned up to a 12' (in Sanders, 2023). Their dialogue is littered with clichéd terminology: when recording the podcast, Che presses literal 'woke moment' and 'trigger warning'

buttons, reducing contemporary socio-political discourse to humorous soundbite. Irby describes Che's comedy as 'a light roast of modern stand-up, a little Hannah Gadsby mixed with annoying front-facing video comics — all the ways that comedy is happening now' (in [McHenry, 2022](#)). Gadsby is perhaps best known for their 2018 Netflix special, *Nanette*, described as 'a fiery and furious takedown of the heterosexual patriarchy' ([Neutze, 2019](#)). Thus, Che both represents the new woke world – a modernising presence that brings queer visibility and political discourse into the *AJLT* universe – and undermines it in the 'light roasting' that characterises their depiction. It is notable too that Che is often portrayed in an unsympathetic light, even describing themselves as a narcissist. If Che epitomises the new 'woke' era that the series is contradictorily grappling with, it is significant that their characterisation invites disidentification. The character was roundly critiqued in the media press as unlikeable and clichéd, with one article proclaiming Che 'The Worst Character on TV' ([Fallon, 2022](#)). Critically, in this and the slippages into mockery of Che, the series' reactionary (or pre-woke) affiliations are reiterated.

Queer Miranda is canon/or, a heteropessimist refusal

Che's unpopularity with audiences was not only due to their characterisation, but also to their narrative arc and romance with Miranda. When we return to the characters in *AJLT*, Miranda and Steve initially remain (unhappily) married. In one scene Miranda asks Charlotte: 'are Steve and I even a couple anymore?'. Noting that there's been 'no sex for years' she reflects, 'I don't think either one of us even thinks about it. The only thing that we're passionate about is our dessert ritual' (S1, E3). Later, Miranda describes an attempt to initiate sex with Steve as like: 'two dead people trying to get it on, like zombie sex' (S1, E7). This dialogue evokes the regressive sensibility of 'heteropessimism', described by Asa Seresin as:

performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience... That these disaffiliations are "performative" does not mean that they are insincere but rather that they are rarely accompanied by the actual abandonment of heterosexuality ([Seresin, 2019](#)).

As Billy Holzberg and Aura Lehtonen have argued, contemporary media texts are making the tensions of hetero-patriarchal romance visible, but doing so alongside a resigned acknowledgement that ultimately closes down both critique and the search for alternatives: 'while we can point at the gendered confines of heteronormativity, ultimately there is little we can do to change them' ([Holzberg and Lehtonen, 2022](#): 1911). Holzberg and Lehtonen argue that such gestures 'might be understood as the latest form of a postfeminist sensibility'; a further iteration of feminist discourse which co-exists with the simultaneous recentering of hetero-patriarchal norms. This marks, they argue, a shift from 'an earlier, more optimistic, paradigm of postfeminism' to 'a more pessimistic attachment that critiques yet likewise remains enamoured with the affective pull of heteronormativity' ([2022](#): 1911). Miranda's disheartened dissatisfaction suggests *AJLT*'s Miranda and Steve might join the media archive of heteropessimism. The narrative, however, takes a different turn when Miranda begins an affair with Che.

In S1, E5, Carrie is at home recovering from hip surgery when Che pays their co-worker a visit. Carrie is sleeping but Miranda invites Che into Carrie's apartment, where things quickly escalate. In what would come to be one of the most notable scenes of the series, we cut between Carrie in bed and Che and Miranda in the kitchen. As Carrie wakes up, she calls to Miranda: 'I have to pee'. We are positioned from her point-of-view as she catches sight of Che and Miranda in a mirror. Seeing what is happening, she tries to get herself out of bed but is unable to. In a (literally) messy convergence of queerness, bodies, pleasure and disgust, the scene juxtaposes Miranda loudly orgasming with Carrie desperately urinating in an empty Snapple bottle. When Carrie spills the bottle's contents onto her bed, we are interpellated through her perspective of shame and disgust towards the unexpected bodily fluids on bedsheets, and in turn the bodily acts taking place in her kitchen. An angry confrontation subsequently plays out between Carrie and Miranda, and the latter finally reveals: 'I'm unhappy... Ok. I'm trapped. I hate my marriage. I hate it. I hate my life. I hate it'. In an impassioned outburst she tells Carrie she '[doesn't] want to be this person anymore', she wants 'to be something more... this isn't enough'.

Miranda expresses a heteropessimistic disaffiliation with her heteronormative 'good life', but denies the resigned foreclosure of heteropessimism and its complaint cycle – complaint, catharsis, recuperation – and instead acts on the complaint, insisting on 'something more'. 'Something more' comes in the queer alternative of Che, who allows Miranda, and perhaps the audience, to imagine otherwise. In direct opposition to the weary affect of heteropessimism, canonically queer Miranda is unashamedly pleasure seeking, even if that pleasure discomforts in its viscosity. Excitable and giddy, she exclaims to Carrie in S1 E8: 'I'm in a rom-com!'.⁷ The Che and Miranda narrative is not, however, simply a rom-com with a twist, but arguably speaks to more expansive possibilities of intimacy and desire. Che tells Miranda: 'I can't give you anything traditional. That is not who I am', and states: 'This isn't going to work if you lock us into those fucking limiting relationship tropes' (S1, E9). Miranda, however, is 'done with traditional' – traditional has not brought her the flourishing it promised. When Miranda finally asks Steve for a divorce, she reiterates her desire for more: 'more everything, more connection, more energy, more sex, more me' (S1, E8).

A reactionary response

Miranda's symbolic alignment with Che complicates the series' pre-woke nostalgia, as the character shifts to align, if often still awkwardly, *with* the 'new (woke) world' of the series' distanced imagining. When, in S1 E6, Miranda tells Charlotte that she has had sex with Che, the dialogue voices the series' contradictory address. Charlotte, channelling her tradwife iteration, is shocked, and has, as Miranda describes, 'a huge reaction'. Carrie too informs Miranda she's 'not fine [with it]', she doesn't 'even know what it is yet'. Whilst Charlotte names her concern as Miranda's 'affair', Carrie retreats into awkward quips, close-up shots of her face expressing her discomfort. When Charlotte exclaims – 'why do you keep trying to make this nothing, it's something' – Carrie reiterates her position, stating, 'no... Big dying is something, this is... I don't know what this is'. Here, Carrie refuses to acknowledge or even comprehend a situation beyond her heteronormative expectations, subsuming it within the dominant narrative of her heterosexual widowhood.

Charlotte too struggles in her attempts to categorise this narrative turn, expressing her shock that Miranda is ‘having non-binary sex’ and exasperatedly exclaiming: ‘are you gay now?’. Ultimately, she angrily declares: ‘you are not progressive enough for this’, and: ‘you’re having a midlife crisis, you should have just dyed your hair’. Charlotte’s objectifying sense-making and Carrie’s discomfort reveal the unintelligibility of Miranda’s queer subjectivity. Reflecting on this scene King notes that Charlotte ‘has strong opinions that a lot of the audience are going to agree with’ (2022). As King suggests, the scene mobilises the series’ reactionary address, as Charlotte’s outburst is assumed to offer an identificatory response.

Justice for Steve

As King suspected, Charlotte’s ‘strong opinions’ were shared by audiences. Responses revealed a range of reactions, including some acclaim for the storyline but, more commonly, disdain. Reflecting on the infamous kitchen scene, one article noted: ‘viewers were thrilled and horrified by the scene in equal measure’ (Spencer-Elliott, 2022). Others described it as ‘deeply cringeworthy’ (Mazzeo, 2021) and ‘uncomfortable’ (Russell, n.d.). ‘Hey, it’s Che Diaz’, was quickly mobilised as a humorous meme (McLaren, 2022). In an interview Nixon questioned whether the largely negative response was shaped by the scene’s departure from the conventions of ‘girl-on-girl action that people across the board think is really sexy’ (in Aurthur, 2022). Notably, both characters are portrayed by queer people, making it more difficult to recuperate these moments through a hetero-normative male gaze: as Nixon suggests of non-binary actor Sara Ramirez, ‘a person like Sara is really threatening and frightening to people’ (in Aurthur, 2022). The repeated remediation of this character as object of dislike and humour, appears an attempt to defuse this threat. Meanwhile the hashtags #TeamSteve and #JusticeforSteve quickly emerged on X (previously Twitter) and in press articles expressing dissatisfaction with the character’s narrative treatment. Certainly, Che is a complex, stereotypically imagined and not always likeable character, and the storyline is often clumsily handled – to much valid critique (see e.g., Gibbs et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the visceral reactions towards Che, and the support for Steve, seem to exceed narrative and characterisation. Nixon reflects on the normativity of the response, stating: ‘I don’t know what to make of it... I mean, I think you’ve got a lot of marriage-police people out there’ (in Aurthur, 2022). Michael Patrick King goes further, arguing:

The real issue is — and I say this with love — 90% of long-term relationships are watching television, sharing dessert and talking about kids. So that’s trouble when Miranda points a finger at that relationship, which a lot of people are very happy with, and says, “This isn’t enough” (in Aurthur, 2022).

A queer alternative

Whilst Gibbs et al. (2025) read a loss of queerness in what they describe as Miranda’s ‘rather typical coming-out and romance narratives’ (2025: 119), I argue instead for queer possibility. Miranda and Steve signify a convergence of norms of whiteness, upper-

middle class affluence and ageing. Their relationship depicts a taken for granted decline in passion in long term relationships, its continuation the sensible, safe, and predictable choice. In the depiction of their struggles, Miranda and Steve symbolise the normative trajectory of heteropessimism, in which difficulties can be expressed but only in order to 'live through the constraints and disappointments of heterosexual life... [foreclosing] any alternatives that might move us beyond its confines' (Holzberg and Lehtonen, 2022: 1913). Miranda's narrative, however, constitutes a rejection of this trajectory, betraying its inevitability. Miranda and Che, in contrast to Miranda and Steve, are middle aged *and also* unapologetically desiring. Che is queer and, notably, Latinx, a further affront to a white, heteronormative gaze. Che also complicates the homonormative, or post-queer (McNicholas Smith, 2020), sensibility of contemporary LGBTQ + visibility. In post-queer media culture, the representation of LGBTQ + bodies, lives and relationships is characterised by its proximity to hetero-patriarchal ideals. Che challenges this in their unapologetic queerness *and* their unlikability: the character does not appeal to the limited tolerance mindset (Walters, 2014), rather inhabiting a largely untolerated positionality. Critically, when Miranda leaves Steve and pursues a relationship with Che, rejecting a highly competitive internship to go with them to L.A., her choices are gleefully rash, their outcome uncertain. Whilst the following season sees this relationship come to an end, and Che ultimately written out, *in this moment* Miranda does not seek security in homo-normative futurity. Rather the character chooses a queerer temporality, departing both from the nostalgic impulses of the series and the post-queer imperative, instead claiming queer joy in the immediacy. Although many viewers and critics have understandably found this inconsistent with Miranda's characteristic cynicism, this might also heighten its significance. As Heather Hogan reflects: 'Miranda has been waiting her whole life to realise she's queer, and she's been miserable for so long' (2022). In this context, Che exceeds the limits of their characterisation, symbolising more expansive possibilities of being and desiring – even if, as queer visibility so often plays out, only for this moment. In the contemporary transmedia context, where images, scenes and dialogue might be taken up in multiple ways beyond the original text, however, moments can hold powerful possibilities.

Next on *And Just Like That...* Miranda moves (normatively) on

The second season of *AJLT* sees Che and Miranda move to L.A. where Che is recording their sitcom. As the characters move into each other's everyday lives (or rather, Miranda moves into Che's), things slowly begin to unravel. By the end of the season, Che and Miranda have broken up, and Che's sitcom has failed. In a meta scene in S2 E5, Che listens to the feedback from a test screening of the pilot. When a 'genderqueer person from Brooklyn' describes the show as a 'phony, sanitized, performative, cheesy-ass, dad-joke, bullshit version of what the nonbinary experience is', they echo criticisms towards *AJLT*'s writing of Che. Whilst, as Shaad D'Souza writes for *The Guardian* newspaper, in moments like this the season allowed the character a little more depth – 'Che is no longer a walking, talking infographic' (2023) – Che's downfall seems to punish Che for their unapologetic queer persona, once figured as so desirable. By season three, they have been written out of the show entirely. As Drew Burnett Gregory writes for *Autostraddle*: 'the

show used Che to teach their audience about queerness, to seem hip due to a misguided idea that transness is new. They didn't take the time — or have the ability — to make Che a real person who could stand on their own' (2023). Che's evocation of 'woke' 'newness' is ultimately rejected in favour of a more settled return to the elite 'escapism' of the original series. As one review reflects, the series 'has found its feet' as 'the leads are no longer trying to be anything other than themselves: absurdly rich New Yorkers in their 50s' (Nicholson, 2025). Season three sees Miranda dating Joy, a BBC journalist and feminine presenting, cis-lesbian. Whilst still a meaningful representation of middle-aged queer romance, in style and characterisation Joy is certainly a more normative 'good gay' figure – the confronting disruption of Che foreclosed in favour of a more contained and less political figuration of contemporary queerness. Meanwhile, whilst season two does expand the narratives of Lisa, Seema, and Nya, they still largely function for the central trio, and, by season three, Nya is also written out.⁸ As D'Souza echoes, by season two *AJLT* appears to have settled into 'a fun, frothy farce about women in their 50s navigating their lives with even more clumsiness than they did when they were in their 30s' (2023). In doing so, the series might become more narratively and tonally coherent, but the messier ruptures of the series might also be closed down.

Conclusion

Like *SATC* before it, *AJLT* captures distinctive tensions of its era. Whilst *SATC* grappled with postfeminist figurations of 1990s femininity, race, class, and consumerism, *AJLT* emerges through the seemingly contradictory impulses of nostalgia and woke TV. Where 'retrospective' programming draws us back to the past, woke TV addresses contemporary concerns and calls us towards a more progressive future. Where these sensibilities converge, they might function, as Holdsworth argues, as critique, working 'to reaffirm a belief in the progress of the present' (Holdsworth, 2011: 103). They might also, however, co-exist in less coherent ways. In one sense the revival of the *SATC* universe works to confront the characters (and the audience) with a changed social world, mobilising struggles with 'woke-ness' as teachable moments. At the same time, neat and sympathetic resolves mean critique tends to remain superficial; the characters (and the audience) 'let off the hook'. The revival goes further however, simultaneously mobilising 'pre-woke nostalgia', articulating a series of affective disconnects from the supposed 'wokeness' of the present and interpolating an un-progressive longing for the imagined 'old world' of the past.

The backwards draw of pre-woke nostalgia is, I have argued, disrupted by the queer possibility of Che and Miranda. The Miranda and Che affair is sometimes awkward and uncomfortable, but also bold and insistent. The couple prioritise queer joy over straight comfort and refuse the painful compromises of heteropessimism. The affair exudes an unapologetic 'now-ness' that resists the regressive impulse of pre-woke nostalgia and articulates a countermove towards the pleasures of the present and a joyfully uncertain future. As tradwife Charlotte and Woke Charlotte remind us, this is an era of multiplicity and opposition, where media might be taken up in both regressive and progressive ways. *AJLT* can be read as either, or simultaneously, reactionary or disruptive. Certainly, it

reveals something (or multiple things) of the tensions of contemporary nostalgia, and its mediation of socio-political change.

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Notes

1. Notably, the reuse of existing media content also worked to mitigate issues with a pause in the production of original content in the context of nationwide lockdowns.
2. ‘MeToo’ was initially used in 2006 on MySpace by activist Turana Burke, and was remobilised on Twitter in 2017 by actress and activist Alyssa Milano (Gill and Rahman-Jones, 2020). This period saw numerous revelations of sexual assault across media and other industries, and high-profile demonstrations and calls for change.
3. Such as in: *Modern Family* (2009–2020); *The Fosters* (2013–2018); *The New Normal* (2012–2013).
4. In Season two of *AJLT*, Charlotte’s return to work storyline highlights gender inequality and the invisibility of domestic labour (Stone, 2023).
5. As Turner also notes, ‘the camp concept of fabulousness must be understood as a raced and classed construct, borrowed from the “flamboyance” of black queer culture and relying on the economic power of high-end consumerism’ (2004) – a dynamic reiterated here.
6. The clunky terminology of ‘comedy concert’, as Miranda describes Che’s show, epitomises the ambiguity of the writing, which seems to simultaneously claim its own contemporary ‘wokeness’ and yet remain awkwardly out of touch with contemporary dialogue, or, alternatively, deliberately write the characters as such.
7. As audiences have noted, this line recalls Miranda criticising Carrie for ‘living in a fantasy’ when she decides to move to Paris with then boyfriend, Aleksandr Petrovsky, in *SATC*.
8. This was reportedly due to scheduling conflicts, but the impact remains.

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