Interpreting Erica
A Study of Fan Engagement

Susan Edey

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By: Susan Edey

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Elizabeth Miller Chair

Dr. Krista Lynes Examiner

Dr. Sandra Gabriele Examiner

Dr. Martin Allor Supervisor

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____
Dean of Faculty

Date _____

Abstract

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This thesis mobilizes theories of audiences and everyday life, feminist media critique and narrative identity to consider the medium of television and the fan experience. Using a targeted group of research participants, accessed through snowball sampling, the author undertook small-group conversations and one-on-one interviews to better understand how these particular fans engaged with the CBC television series *Being Erica*. Taking the view that audiences are both active and culturally situated and recognizing that our taste in media both informs and is informed by our sense of self, this research asserts that fan engagement with middlebrow televisual texts merits serious academic attention. Based on a consideration of *Being Erica*'s position within a post-feminist genre, the author contends that the series' generic storylines allowed these viewers to relate to what they perceived to be an authentic representation of a young woman in today's world and to remember and reflect on their own life experiences. Furthermore, the use of therapy as a primary narrative trope and the mobilization of self-help discourse gave these fans the opportunity to (re)learn some key lessons on how to be a 'good' person and live a 'good' life. The result was a personal, emotional and enjoyable journey for these fans, but one that served to promote a normative view of happiness and emphasized the importance of individual accountability and self-management above all else.

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Introduction

The Project

Writing in 2008, MSNBC television columnist, Jeff Hidek, observed, "TV shows love therapy. Cable channels, broadcast, networks, dramas, comedies – all of them have embraced the trend this year." Hidek singles out *The Sopranos* as the instigator of this trend, although arguably the presence of therapeutic discourse on television has been around for a lot longer than that. In her book, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*, published over a decade and a half earlier than Hidek's online column, White describes therapy as serving as "a master narrative strategy of contemporary mass culture" (1992, 11). The presence of therapeutic discourse in nonfiction television such as talk shows and reality-based programming has received significant academic attention (Dubrofsky 2009; Peck 1995; White 1992) but what is of greater interest to me here is the integration of therapy into fictional storylines to which Hidek refers.

The inclusion of therapeutic discourse and the use of confession to develop characters and advance the plot in fictional texts are not limited to the field of television. In her consideration of feminist bestsellers from the 1970s alongside the wildly popular 'chick lit' of the new millennia, Whelehan observes that "the confessional form has been perennially popular among women writers and that it is especially suited to the desire to expose the underside of women's lives and to explore the realities of what had been too often dismissed as trivial and unremarkable" (2005, 215).

In early 2009, mobilizing many of the narrative conventions that are characteristic of chick lit and jumping onto the therapy bandwagon that was sweeping through television at the time, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired the pilot episode of the television series *Being Erica*, about which this thesis is written. In the opening voiceover of the pilot episode, the show's protagonist describes herself as follows:

> You know that friend you have? The girl who seems to have it all figured out? She's got the great job, the great guy, the great life. Well, I'm not that girl. My name is Erica Strange and I'm 32. I still work a dead end job and I'm still sleeping with my cat. I know people wonder why the cute girl with the great education and the great friends can't get it together. There's a simple answer: bad decisions. I could teach a course on messing up your life; really, I am that good at getting everything wrong. The worst part is, it wasn't always like this. I used to be a rising star but these days, I just feel like a flame out. Okay, okay, so I know it's my fault my life is where it's at, but I figure I gotta catch a break some time, right? ("Dr. Tom" 2009)

As this first episode continues, Erica loses her dead end job, gets stood up by her latest Internet date and winds up in the hospital after an allergic reaction. Just when it seems as though Erica is hitting 'rock bottom', the mysterious and enchanting Dr. Tom appears. A non-traditional therapist, who relies on time travel as his primary tool, Dr. Tom guarantees that he can help Erica turn things around provided she is willing to commit to his process, no questions asked. Feeling like she does not have much to lose, Erica agrees and thus begins her (our) journey. Week after week, viewers watch as Dr. Tom sends Erica back in time to face her life's regrets. Inevitably, nothing changes except for Erica's perspective – and perhaps those of her viewers.

As a viewer and fan of the show myself, I can attest to the experience of often being left with significant food for thought after watching an episode of *Being Erica*.

Apart from my emotional engagement with the characters and the narratives presented each week, what makes the show stand out in my mind, is the self-reflexive nature of its plots. Friends of mine, who were also fans, sometimes expressed feeling as if the show was mirroring their lives almost exactly and often commented on the lessons that they took away from Erica's therapy. A similar connection to the series was echoed in online communities. For example, following the airing of an episode in October 2011, which focused on Dr. Tom's tendency to use work to hide from his personal problems, fans posted on the "Being Erica on CBC" Facebook community about their approval and appreciation of the storyline. Nadine Demoe wrote, "I was really effected by it, actually. I recognized something of myself in Dr. Tom's behavior and recognized how harmful keeping myself safe from potential rejection has been, not only to myself but to the people in my life. Very thought provoking. Who writes these episodes? They're brilliant![i]" Likewise, Barbara Bradley commented "Love this show, I'm addicted! It's amazing how therapy has reached out of the show and into my own life. Thank you."

It is this relationship between viewers and the program that I seek to explore in this thesis. By presenting a female protagonist, struggling with her identity and a long list of regrets, who is given the opportunity to confront these past mistakes through time travel, the show allows its viewers to engage with Erica's therapeutic journey in ways that relate to practices of the self. But the question remains: what do viewers actually take away from the program, if anything? There are many ways I could have approached this question, but for the purposes of this degree, I have chosen to study a small number of fans and their relationship to this series.

Evidently, a causal relationship between *Being Erica* and its viewers' thoughts and behaviours is both unlikely and impossible to substantiate. Still, drawing from the significant body of academic research into television audiences, I maintain that there is considerable value in studying the relationship between this program and its fans for several reasons: Firstly, "television continues to be the most accessible mode of communication in the world and is therefore an incredibly important medium to understand and study" (Gorton 2009, 1). Just because the process of studying television and its audiences is complicated, does not mean that the effort is unwarranted. Secondly, "TV is a major communicative device for disseminating those representation which are constitutive of (and constituted by) cultural identity" (Barker 2002, 31). In other words, media texts, because they are so deeply integrated into our culture, have a lot to tell us about the society we live in and its current preoccupations. Finally, while audiences are certainly not powerlessly brainwashed by the media they consume, they do negotiate meaning with texts that are still filled with limitations. This leads to important questions such as "how do people actively make sense of structured texts and events; and how do texts guide and restrict interpretations?" (Livingstone 1998, 26).

In the pages and chapters that follow, I explore both academic writing and lived experiences to better understand how fans of *Being Erica* interpret the show. More specifically, I focus on answering the following research questions: what draws fans to the show, how do they engage with and experience the show and its storylines, and how do their interpretations go on to be reflexively incorporated into their sense of self?

The Theory

To tackle these research questions I drew upon three principal bodies of work: research into audiences and everyday life, feminist media critique and narrative-based identity theory. The core theoretical underpinnings of my research into each of these domains will be outlined below and built upon in the chapters that ensue.

Audiences and Everyday Life

In the introduction to *Rethinking the Media Audience*, Alasuutari (1999) marks the starting point of audience reception research as Hall's seminal text "Encoding/Decoding," originally published in 1973, and identifies three generations within this academic project. The first generation, which he simply names "reception research", was very focused on the specific moment of decoding. Using a semiotic approach, research of this type often drew upon Hall's notion of different viewing positions, ranging from dominant to oppositional. As the value of looking at more than the moment of decoding became increasingly apparent, ethnography emerged as the preferred methodology because it provided a deeper perspective into the role of media in everyday life. This led to the second generation of reception research, which Alasuutari calls "audience ethnography." Textual content became secondary to the new emphasis on identity politics and interpretive communities. At the time of Alasuutari's writing in 1999, the third generation of reception studies was still taking shape. He described it, not as a firm break from its predecessor, but rather as a change in focus. This time, the focus was widened further to look more broadly at media in culture, or perhaps more accurately at ‘media culture’. The

author suggests, "It may entail questions about meaning and use of particular programmes to particular groups of people, but it also includes questions about the frames within which we conceive of the media and their contents as reality and as representations - or distortions - of reality" (7). The research presented in this thesis falls within this third generation of research.

My theoretical understanding of the audience and their relationship with media is largely drawn from the writings of Livingstone (1999) and Bird (2003) who both work within the third generation of audience reception studies. By combining their existing theoretical perspectives, drawn from social psychology and anthropology respectively, with those circulating in media studies, each author presents an enriching discussion of audience members as both active and culturally situated. Livingstone emphasizes that "the creation of meaning through the interaction of texts and readers is a struggle, a site of negotiation between two semi-powerful sources" (26). In my discussion of *Being Erica,* I will address both the possibilities and the constraints encountered by audience members. Livingstone identifies two theoretical perspectives that co-habitate within communication research: The cognitive strand, which focuses on how television affects behaviour through cognition, and the constructionist approach, which focuses on how people construct their social reality. My research fits within the latter, which Gergen describes more precisely as being "principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (quoted in Livingstone 1999, 30).

Even more than Livingstone, Bird reinforces the idea that media is completely intertwined with daily living, stating that, "We really cannot isolate the role of the media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in different ways" (2003, 3). She defines the audience as “everywhere and nowhere” (3) and describes the experience of media as "non-predictable and non-uniform" (2). The emphasis in her book is on different methodological strategies that “shed light on how people interact with media to create meaning in their everyday lives” (8). While acknowledging that audiences can be both passive and active, Bird states, "The images and messages wash over us, but most leave little trace, unless they resonate, even for a moment, with something in our personal or cultural experience" (2). It is these moments of resonance - moments in which a viewer feels a connection to a character, a situation, or even just a feeling - that proved most illuminating in my research.

Feminist Media Critique

It is important to remember that *Being Erica* is a not just a televisual text, but a televisual text principally concerned with the experiences of its female protagonist, primarily targeted at a female audience and circulating within a post-feminist media environment. My understanding of post-feminism and popular culture is informed by the writings of McRobbie (2009), particularly her discussion of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*. She argues that “post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (12). In McRobbie’s view, the result is

a “dismantling” of feminism that serves to “re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice” (22).

Writing in a similar vein, Berlant’s *The Female Complaint* (2008) and her concept of the 'intimate public' also proved to be central to my research. In defining an intimate public, Berlant offers the following description:

> A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history, its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied, experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging - partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live. (viii)

The fans of *Being Erica* that I interviewed can be conceived of as an intimate public. They were connected to each other through their relationship to the show and the fact that they all felt that, in some way or another, they could relate to its storylines. Berlant argues that mass-culture produces intimate publics by presenting stories that are both personal and general, that trigger processes of both recognition and reflection, and that provide opportunities for consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion (viii). In her view, it is worth looking at intimate publics and the way they operate because their aesthetics and pedagogy contribute to "shaping the fantasies, identifications, and attachments to particular identities and life narratives" (xii).

Narrative Identity

Identities and life narratives make up my third theoretical focus. Historically, identity has been theorized in various ways ranging from fixed and pure to fractured and irrelevant, but for the purposes of this project, I will draw my

definition of identity from the writings of Hall (1996). Hall refers to a "postmodern subject," which is made up of multiple identities that can oppose one another and that shift in emphasis from moment to moment (quoted in Barker 2002, 16). In this understanding of identity, there is no stable centre or true sense of self around which other identities revolve, but rather a series of articulations between the subject and the various discursive formations in which she is situated.

Recognizing the centrality of language to the expression of who we are, Hall states, “Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture” (quoted in Thornham and Purvis 2005, 28). Holstein and Gubrium (2000) dig deeper into this narrative dimension of identity in their book *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*. In their view, “while this [postmodern] subject is clearly social, its production is both artfully agentic and culturally circumscribed” (12). They emphasise that, while, in many ways, our identity is nothing more than the stories we choose to tell about ourselves, we are limited in our telling of these stories by the narrative resources available to us and by the context in which we share them. “Narrators artfully pick and choose from what is experientially available to articulate their lives and experiences. Yet, as they actively craft and inventively construct their narratives, they also draw from what is culturally available, storying their lives in recognizable ways” (103). The stories put forth through television serve as one source of the cultural narratives that contribute to identity construction (Thornham and Purvis 2005, ix), making a television program, or cultural narrative, that centres on the constructed nature and malleability of its

protagonist's identity, a rich text for research. Furthermore, the interviews I conducted opened up a particular kind of space for the discussion of identity, adding further complexity and depth to this project.

The Method

Commenting on the long-standing academic interest in media targeted at women, Kuhn (2008) identifies that while much of this research is rooted in feminist theory, work on film melodrama has tended to focus on issues of text and spectatorship, while research into television soap operas has more often been oriented towards context and social audiences. She attributes this contrast in approaches to different academic histories, with the former stemming from literary theory and film studies, and the latter growing out of sociological approaches to media studies. Acknowledging the importance of both approaches, Kuhn suggests, "Looking at spectators and at audiences demands different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, distinct discourses which construct distinct subjectivities and social relations" (23).

Kuhn asserts that "psychoanalysis seems to offer little scope for theorising subjectivity in its cultural and historical specificity" (21) and contends that research focused solely on spectatorship "disregard[s] the broader social implications of filmgoing or televiewing" (23). She further advocates that the concept of spectator be both recognized as distinct from and considered in tandem with the concept of social audience. "In attempting to deal with the text-context split and to address the relationship between spectators and social audiences … theories of representation may have to come to terms with discursive formations of the social, cultural and

textual" (27). My consideration of *Being Erica* would have been strongest had I been able to focus on both the spectator and the social audience. However, given the limited scope of this project, and recognizing the social nature of my research questions, I have focused my attention primarily on the latter.

Finding my Participants

To begin my exploration of the social audience and the context of their engagement with *Being Erica*, I identified my research participants using a snowball sampling technique. This meant that I first contacted friends and acquaintances of mine who I knew watched the show and then asked them to refer any of their friends who were also fans of the show. According to Noy, "Snowball sampling is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research" and is often viewed as "plain and rather commonsensical" (2008, 330). Contrary to this easy acceptance, Noy argues that because sampling techniques necessarily influence the type of knowledge created, snowball sampling needs to be employed reflexively, "*on its own right and merit*, and not as a default option" (331, emphasis in original).

My rationale for using snowball sampling was two fold: First, Faugier and Sargeant point out that snowball sampling is particular useful when "the behaviour or 'trait' under study [is] social and participants [share] with others the characteristic under examination" (cited in Browne 2005, 48). I see the act of being a fan of a particular show as a preference that is often shared amongst peers. In my personal experience, my enjoyment of *Being Erica* was greatly enhanced when I either watched an episode with a friend or discussed it post-viewing. Recognizing this inherently social dimension of television viewing makes my decision to focus on

participants within related friendship groups not only practical but also appropriate for the subject at hand. Snowball sampling "is *essentially social* because it both uses and activates existing social networks" (Noy 2008, 332, emphasis in original).

Second, by using research participants who I already have a relationship or connection to, I was able to engage in more meaningful and intimate discussions. Reflecting on her experience researching non-heterosexual women using snowball sampling techniques, Browne points out that "ongoing relationships and knowledge of participants' lives both enable and constrained participants' investment in research conversations" (2005, 56) and further notes that these existing relationships "also form what is said and how it is said" (57). While there was undoubtedly a bias introduced by my decision to focus on participants who travel within a social network in which I am already embedded, I believe that the benefits of access and intimacy rationalized this choice[ii].

The only requirement for participating in my research was that the individual self-identified as a fan of *Being Erica* and that he/she was comfortable and willing to be interviewed. Seiter warns of the risks that come with "the differences in class and cultural capital which typify the relationship between the academic and the subject of audience studies" (1990, 61). By studying a show that I am a fan of myself and by starting my snowball sample with people within my friendship circle, I believe I was able to at least partially mitigate against this potential pitfall. The majority of my research participants were female and in their late twenties or early thirties. While there was still diversity within this sample,

being of a similar age and in a similar life phase as my participants decreased the number of barriers in the interview process.

Talking to my Participants

The majority of my interviews took the form of small-group interviews, which I referred to as 'group viewing conversations'. In total, I organized five group viewing conversations with two to three participants each. In planning these conversations, I relied heavily on my primary contacts (i.e. the individuals who were the closest to me in my social network) who often hosted the conversation in their home and invited other participants to attend. The conversations generally unfolded as follows: When we all arrived at the host's home we would spend the first while catching up with one another. Sometimes this consisted of a conversation over a meal or snacks and other times it was just a few moments of casual chitchat. Next, the first item of business was asking participants to read and sign the consent forms. At this point, I would explain that these events were informal and that I did not have pre-set questions to ask. I clarified that I was simply interested in hearing what they thought about the show and that these thoughts would guide my future research. Originally, I had intended to follow up with some participants for further one-on-one conversations, but I found that the group conversations were already quite rich and provided me with more than enough material for this project.

Once these introductory steps were complete, we would begin by watching an episode of *Being Erica*. More than anything, the purpose of watching an episode was to set the tone and to conjure up people's memories of the show. I allowed participants to pick any episode that they wanted to watch, but, in all but one case,

they ended up just picking an episode at random. Once the episode was over, I would kick things off by saying something like, "What did you think?" or "Did you like that one?" etc. and then the conversations would go on from there. As much as possible, I tried to let the conversations flow like normal communication amongst friends, but I would ask probing or transitional questions as required.

Thomas points out that “the simulation [of talk] can never be equivalent to spontaneous social interactions – the presence of a researcher and a tape-recorder must always play a determining role” (1992, 9). Still, Bird (2003) argues that methods of inquiry that conform with communication styles already familiar to research participants have the potential to result in fruitful interactions. Reflecting on her examination of tabloid audiences using letters and phone calls, Bird found that the research experience was "received as comfortable, unthreatening, and pleasurable" (14). Similarly, because my pre-existing relationships with a significant proportion of my participants were already heavily rooted in conversation about life, love and the self, I was able to capitalize off of this familiarity and our existing communication patterns to create an open and casual dialogue.

These conversations were recorded and lasted between thirty and ninety minutes each. After the conversations, I gave participants the option of contacting me to talk more about the project or the show post-interview, but none of the group participants took me up on this option. I see this as indicative of the fact that, while this project consumed a great deal of my time and attention over many months, for most of my participants their engagement with it was fleeting. However, as Browne astutely observes "personal networks in research means that one is never 'out of the

field' because the 'field' is an important aspect of one's own life" (2005, 56). In my case, my continued submersion within this social field and the conversations I had with my friends on a diverse range of topics as I wrote this thesis undoubtedly exerted continued influence on my research.

Coincidentally, these five group-viewing conversations were framed on either end by two one-on-one interviews. I did not single out either my first or last research participant for individual interviews; they simply resulted from circumstance: The first one-on-one participant had invited a friend to join us but she was unable to do so, whereas my final one-on-one participant had declined my initial invitation to participate in one of the group conversations because of strained friendship dynamics. These one-on-one interviews were both very similar and very different than my group viewing conversations. They were similar in that both were informal and led by the participants' comments rather than a predetermined list of questions. However, neither one-on-one interview included an episode screening. Luckily, the two individual participants turned out to be the seemingly most passionate fans of my sample and did not struggle to talk about the series at length, even without the prompting of an episode. In addition, because the one-on-one format removed the need to share airtime or worry about social dynamics, I found that both of these participants were able to go into much greater detail about themselves, their beliefs and their experience of the show.

My understanding of the usefulness of the qualitative interview, both small group and individual, as a method is based largely on the writings of Lewis. In his book *The Ideological Octopus*, Lewis writes, "One of the main advantages of the

qualitative interview is the freedom it allows the respondent to set the agenda, and the scope it allows the interviewer to probe into potentially interesting areas" (1991, 83). Of the interview formats Lewis outlines, I see my combination of small group and individual interviews as ideal because the strengths of each offset the weaknesses of the other. While the individual interviews had the clear benefit of being more personal and allowing me to glean the maximum information about each participant's unique lived experiences, they were limited because they artificially removed participants from their everyday social context. As mentioned above, television, even when watched alone, is still often a social experience that is discussed with friends. Lewis suggests, "We do not make up ideological positions, understandings and beliefs on our own - they are cultural products that bind societies and social groups" (88). This further rationalizes my use of group viewing conversations, which facilitated a more normal and social environment and instigated the research process in a less sterile way.

Despite the benefits of the small-group style interview, there were also drawbacks. Using groups made up of participants that were already familiar with each other in some way limited concerns about social discomfort and self-censorship. However, Browne points out that, even when "there was a lot of laughter... and participants appeared comfortable" in her friend-based focus groups, it was also "important to them not to upset their relationships/friendships during the group element of the research process" (2005, 55). In several of my group conversations it was clear that one participant spoke more than the others and was perhaps an opinion leader within the group. In addition, there seemed to be a

greater comfort when discussing collectively held opinions as opposed to divergent ones, meaning that there were likely some thoughts and ideas that went unshared.

The Researcher

At the same time as it is important that I outline the implications of my methodological choices, it is equally pertinent for me to consider my own position as a fan/friend/researcher. Arguments against researching an object of one's own fandom are often based on the unfounded assumptions that it is possible and desirable for a researcher to be a neutral and objective observer and that fans are incapable of thinking critically about the object of their fandom. As Hertz points out, researchers are never simply neutral observers, but "active participants in the research process" (1997, viii). Does the fact that I am a fan of *Being Erica* influence this project? Yes. But, does this fact undermine the validity or usefulness of this research? No. In fact, following the arguments put forward by Thomas in her book *Fans, Feminisms and 'Quality Media*, I would suggest that my position of as a fan of the media text in question allowed me to "open up" (1992, 12) this research in important and interesting ways.

In order to study the social and psychic dimensions of audiences, Thomas based her research off of two media texts that she herself enjoyed. She justified her choice of studying objects of her own fandom as an effort to not find herself in the position of 'othering'. She states, "Rather than studying, for instance, youth culture from which I am separated by age, or the female fans of romantic fiction which I rarely read, I have chosen to study audiences and fan cultures which I myself am

part of" (11), and recognizes that this choice raises a series of questions about her role as a researcher:

> What happens when the researcher is also part of the audience being researched, and when the power differential, and the dynamic between researcher and researched, are transformed by this shared belonging? How are the research context and the data generated changed by the researcher's dual, or split, role – partly objective observer, partly member of the group, sharing anecdotes and experiences? (11-12)

While Thomas never answers these questions directly in her book, she addresses them by including a great deal of reflexivity throughout her analysis. This is a strategy that I have sought to emulate in my work. To use Thomas' words, "following a well-established tradition of feminist research, I will throughout attempt to highlight my own stake in the research and the social specificity of the apparently neutral 'I'" (2).

I will start by giving a very brief demographic description of myself, with further details included throughout this thesis as necessary. I am a Caucasian, heterosexual, female in my late twenties. I come from a middle-class background and have decidedly middlebrow taste. I have a Bachelor of Commerce and, before returning to school to pursue my Master's in Media Studies, I worked as a Grant Policy Advisor for the Alberta Government for two years.

As much as I begrudge its existence and pervasiveness at times, I cannot deny that television has been a constant and significant figure in my life. Since a very young age, I have been a television fan, not a causal viewer. If I decide I like a show, I watch it religiously. I care too much about the characters and their stories and I struggle not to take it personally if someone does not share my enthusiasm. Be it *Today's Special*, *Full House*, *Survivor*, *Grey's Anatomy* or *Being Erica*, I am loyal to TV

shows in much the same way as I am to friends and family. This means that long after a show's quality and popularity has dissipated, the familiarity keeps me coming back. Despite the pleasure I garner from television and the commitment its programs garner from me, I have always felt uneasy about my relationship with the medium. What does it say about me? Or better yet, what do I say about myself because of it? Am I different because of the programs I consume? Is the world around me different?

These questions fuel my curiosity about television audiences and definitely served as a backdrop for my interest in this project. To the greatest extent possible, I have relied on the ideas and opinions put forward by my research participants to build my analysis, but my understanding and interpretation of these comments are necessarily influenced by my own identity and experiences. “The respondent’s voice is almost always filtered through the author’s account. Authors decide whose stories (and quotes) to display and whose to ignore” (Hertz 1997, xii). In saying this, I am acknowledging the power inherent in my position as researcher and stating my awareness that my “own positions and interests are imposed at all stages of the research process” (Hertz 1997, viii).

The Thesis

In Chapter One: Enjoying Erica, I draw on research about audiences and everyday life and seek to answer my first research question: what draws fans to the show? After providing an overview of the series, I introduce the fans that participated in my research. These interview profiles serve to highlight some of the social specificities that each participant or group of participants brought with them

to the show and to the research process. I then go on to discuss some of the broad factors that I identified through my interviews as being significant to attracting and retaining these fans.

Next, in Chapter Two: Relating to Erica, I turn to my second research question: how do fans engage with and experience the show and its storylines? Recognizing *Being Erica*'s position within a post-feminist and romance-centric genre, I outline how the fans I interviewed engaged with the show based on the perceived relatability of its characters and storylines. Mobilizing debates around post-feminism and drawing on Berlant's concept of the intimate public (2008), I argue that the generic plot arcs presented in *Being Erica* allowed fans to remember and reflect on their own life experiences while watching the show.

Finally, in Chapter Three: (re)Learning from Erica, I explore my third research question: how do fans' interpretations go on to be reflexively incorporated into their sense of self? To do so, I consider *Being Erica*'s use of the narrative trope of regrets/lessons and its mobilization of self-help discourse. Looking at the varied ways that these fans engaged with these elements of the show, I conclude that, more than anything, *Being Erica* served to reinforce the lessons on how to live a 'good' life that fans had already learned. In this way, the show bolstered the status quo not only by confirming a normative vision of happiness, but also by putting emphasis on changing one's self, not one's surroundings.

Each of these chapters focuses on one of my three research questions and draws primarily on one of my three main theoretical concepts. Relevant literature, details about the show, and dialogue from my interviews will be discussed in all

three, making each chapter somewhat self-contained. At the same time, each chapter is designed to build on it predecessors and theories and ideas from prior chapters will be pulled in throughout. It would be impossible to talk about fan engagement and *Being Erica*'s female-centric nature in Chapter Two, without considering ideas from audience and fan studies and the more general background information presented in Chapter One. Similarly, my discussion of issues of identity and self-help in Chapter Three would be incomplete without the continued inclusion of critical feminist theories. Furthermore, in the conclusion, I will pull together ideas from all three chapters and include my reflections on this research experience as a whole.

Chapter One: Enjoying Erica

Introduction

At first glance, it would be easy to write off *Being Erica* as a cheesy, low-budget Canadian production that plays off of emotional and generic storylines and soap opera-like conventions to suck women in. In fact, even with my own love and respect for the show, I frequently find myself describing the series in less than ideal terms. Often times, when people find out about my research, they say they will check out an episode of the show. In these moments, finding myself overcome by a flush of embarrassment, I quickly warn them that they may not like it, that it is kind of corny and, if the interested party happens to be male, cautioning them that the show is really meant more for women. This hesitancy and recognition of the gendered nature of the series was noted by some participants as well, such as Anne[iii], who mentioned that her boyfriend made fun of her for watching the show and Joyce, who commented that Netflix allowed her to watch romantic comedies and *Being Erica* on her own "because [my husband] wouldn't watch those things with me [*Laughter*]."

In the introduction to her book, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion*, Gorton highlights how we have been culturally programmed to see television as a guilty pleasure because it is "lazy and unproductive" (2009, 3) and later points out that when "texts are associated with the sentimental there is an assumption that they are passive" (94). Drawing on ideas put forward by Bird and Knight, she successfully dispels both of these myths arguing, "We need to question the assumptions that have been and continue to be made about sentimental texts

and their audiences' responses and recognise, as recent research has done, that these emotional texts are far from over-simplified and are therefore too important to be overlooked" (94). Bird puts it more plainly when she states, "Dismissal of middlebrow shows as clichéd, sentimental schlock, often without watching them, is indeed elitist, depending heavily on easy social and gender-based stereotyping" (2003, 143).

These two authors also attack the view that fans are incapable of critical thought because of their emotional involvement with a text, arguing instead that fans regularly make aesthetic and value-based decisions about which media to consume. Gorton writes, "we, as television viewers, continually make aesthetic judgements about the shows we watch, without necessarily having criteria through which we can judge why we like some things and not others" (2009, 74) and contends that "viewers can be both emotionally close to a text and critical of it" (42). Similarly, Bird states, "Television viewing is not one, uniform type of activity. Many of us "veg out" a great deal of the time, but we may pay special attention to particular programs and may engage in more thoughtful value judgements about them" (2003, 140).

In writing this thesis, I am taking middlebrow, sentimental shows and fans' engagement with them seriously. My intention in undertaking this research is to better understand processes of televisual engagement as they relate to members of the viewing public and their sense of self, but before I get into all of that – before I dissect the inner workings of these fans' lived experiences of *Being Erica* – it seems necessary to start with some of the more basic details. The goal of this first chapter

is to set the stage for the discussion that follows. This stage will include a discussion of fandom more generally, a description of the *Being Erica* series, an introduction of my research participants and an overview of the qualities of the show that the fans I spoke with identified as significant to their enjoyment. The summation of all of these pieces will go a long ways towards answering my first research question, what draws fans to the show, while also providing a much needed contextual background to enable a deeper level of analysis in the remaining two chapters.

What is a Fan?

In his book, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Sandvoss points out that, historically, fan studies in academia, usually ethnographic in nature, have tended to focus on a certain type of fan, in very particular subcultural contexts (2005, 5). He argues that this earlier research was not only overly optimistic in its depiction of fans as engaged in acts of resistance, but it also excludes a number of fans whose behaviours and experiences do not take the form of such intense subcultural commitments. Based on his own varied series of case studies, Sandvoss found that most of his interviewees identified their fandom simply based on the frequency of their consumption of a particular media product. As such, Sandvoss defines fandom as "*the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text*" (8, emphasis in original). This definition is a near-perfect fit for the fans I interviewed. They were not the type of fans who wrote fan fiction or who set up online communities to try and stop the show's cancellation (although *Being Erica* did attract these types of fans as well). They were, however, individuals who

watched every episode of the program and who often felt emotionally moved by the storylines. More importantly, these individuals self-identified as fans of the series.

Having established the definition of fandom that I am working with, it is still worth asking: why bother studying fans in the first place? In the words of noted television scholar, Nelson, "Estimations of quality always come from somewhere: they are grounded in people's lived experience and people inhabit different places. Thus, there is always a significant proportion of ascription in people's aesthetic judgements, informed by their ethical and socio-political positions" (quoted in Gorton 2009, 74). In other words, the fact that a particular group of people like a particular show for particular reasons is worthy of academic attention because it can tell us about the fans and the culture they inhabit.

Drawing on the Bourdieu's theories of habitus and taste formation, Sandvoss puts forward a similar argument, contending that, "our consumption choices articulate our complex class position" and also play a role in "forming a sense of who we are and believe ourselves to be" (2005, 24). In developing this point, the author recognizes the theoretical view that texts are open for interpretation and that meaning is produced by readers, claiming that "the object of distinction in fandom is no longer the text, but the meaning that is constituted in the interaction between text and reader" (42). With this acknowledgment he suggests that the important questions when studying fans are not "the macro questions of power, hegemony and subversion" but rather "questions about self and identity" (42). It is these questions of self and identity that form the basis for my interest in fans of *Being Erica* and that fuel the analysis that follows.

Setting the Stage/Describing the Fandom

Following Sandvoss' work (2005), I recognize that the object of fandom that fans enjoy is not so much the text itself but the interpretations they produce from it. That being said, in order to best understand these interpretations and how they are articulated by the fans I spoke with, it is necessary to have at least a basic understanding of what the show is about and who the fans that enjoy it are.

The Series

As I alluded to in the introduction, *Being Erica* is a television series that centers on the therapeutic journey of its title character, Erica Strange. First aired on January 5, 2009, *Being Erica* went on to span four seasons, with eleven to thirteen episodes each, before wrapping up with its series finale on December 12, 2011. The series was created by Jana Sinyor and was produced by the Toronto-based company, Temple Street Productions (MacDonald 2011). In Canada, episodes of the show aired over the CBC on a weekly basis during each season and were available on the CBC's website the following day. More recently, all four seasons of *Being Erica* have been added to the Netflix Canada collection.[iv]

Over the course of the show's four seasons, viewers watched as Erica emerged from her low point as an unemployed, single, thirty-two year old woman. As the series progressed, Erica slowly got her life back on track; experiencing her fair share of mishaps along the way. Erica's present day storyline, which involved her falling in and out of love, finding and losing jobs, and dealing with numerous family and friendship issues, was punctuated by flashes from the past as Erica traveled back in time to revisit her long list of regrets.

By the time the series wrapped up, Erica had come a long way from when we first met her: She became the co-owner of her own publishing company, 50/50 Press, and was involved in a committed relationship with a fellow time-travel patient, Adam, who was shown to be both sensitive enough to support her and strong enough to challenge her as needed. Not only succeeding in work and love, Erica had also made incredible strides therapy-wise. Having successfully completed both the one-on-one and group phases of her therapy, Erica spent the fourth and final season as a Doctor-In-Training, learning to be a therapist by helping her friends and family. In the final scene of the series, after saying goodbye to Dr. Tom, who had learned his own lesson and decided to leave his practice to focus on his personal life, Erica met her first patient. Fittingly, this first patient was Dr. Tom's much troubled and estranged daughter, Sara, and, as such, the story came full circle.

But how did Erica get from "point A to point B" (Sharon) as one of my participants put it? Her progress was largely attributed to the lessons she learned through her therapy sessions with Dr. Tom. These lesson-giving therapy sessions took an episode each and typically followed a fairly standardized structure: After a series of introductory clips to situate the episode within the larger story arc and remind the audience about the most pertinent preceding plot developments, an episode typically began with a voiceover. While seeing Erica on the screen engaged in some kind of routine activity, we heard the protagonist's voice. What she said did not reflect her inner thoughts but rather the opening comments of a narrator, which served to set the tone and establish the theme or issue for the episode. The voiceover then gave way to the actual action on screen and so began the story.

For the first ten or more minutes, tension would grow in Erica's present-day life until a breaking point occurred. At this moment, conveniently, Erica was often poised to walk through a door and when she did, she found herself in Dr. Tom's office. Once there, Erica typically vented to Dr. Tom about what was happening and he would respond with a cryptically relevant quote by a famous philosopher or cultural icon. Next, Dr. Tom would pick a related regret from Erica's list and ask her to describe it to him, specifying what she would do differently. The camera then zoomed into Erica's eye and back out, transporting her back to the scenario she had described with the chance to fix what she deemed to have been her mistake.

As expected, nothing ever went quite according to plan for Erica on her time travel journeys and at some point during this secondary plotline, Dr. Tom would show up in an setting-appropriate disguise to offer another 'helpful' quote. Eventually, Erica would 'get it right' or 'learn her lesson' and be whisked back to her normal life, usually tripping or stumbling out of the doorway she had originally entered. The present day storyline would continue and typically involved one more meeting between Erica and Dr. Tom where he helped to ensure that she understood the relevance of her regret-based lesson to her current situation. Then, once a resolution was achieved, a closing voiceover would come on in which Erica expressed the moral of the story, often answering the questions she had pondered at the episode's start. Lastly, a final scene would take place, which served as the hook for the next episode.

This episodic structure, which was maintained throughout the series, despite the minor changes that came with the introduction of group therapy in Season

Three and the progression to Doctor-In-Training in Season Four, appeared to be a key factor in the fans' enjoyment of the show. Changes to this format were not viewed positively, with most of the fans I spoke to indicating their preference for Seasons One and Two and reporting a particular distaste for the more 'experimental' episodes, as exemplified by the following quote.

> I think like, I don't know, like the most interesting thing is her personal growth and her like relationships with people and her career and that sort of thing. Any time they like try to make anything more meta, or whatever, like about time travel or whatever, it's just mainly within the last season, or like the island episode, those like whole weird little gimmicky things just felt dumb and forced. I actually, when I stopped watching it in the second season it was like, oh sorry at the end of the second season, I wasn't full buying group. And that's just like, I don't give a shit about this, this is dumb. And then I warmed to it. (Zoe)

The Fans

Before I use any more quotes from my interviews to explain the pleasure fans derived from the show, it is important that I introduce my research participants. Bird writes, "Most people play many roles in their lives, and "being an audience" is probably not that important a one" (2003, 4). Recognizing that being a fan of *Being Erica* is only one of multiple subject positions that my research participants take on and acknowledging that it is impossible to "isolate the role of the media in culture" (3), I intend to use the next few pages to provide some perspective about who these participants are outside of being fans of this show[v].

Through the five group viewing conversations and two one-on-one interviews I conducted, I was able to interact with a total of fifteen participants. By coincidence of my travel plans and the geographic layout of my personal friend network, my snowball sample led me to have these discussions in four different

cities across Canada: Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal. My research participants ranged in age from twenty to thirty-five and, as might have been expected based on the nature of the show and my sampling technique, the majority were Caucasian females. It is worth noting, however, that two of my research participants were men and five of my participants could be categorized as visible minorities. In addition, at the time of my interviews, roughly a third of my participants were single, a third were in relationships, and the remaining third were married.

I state these demographic details here to give the reader an idea of the diversity, or lack there of, of my participants. However, I am not claiming that my sample is representative of the *Being Erica* audience more broadly or of society at large, nor do I believe that attributes such as age, gender, race or relationship status necessarily have anything to do with a person's enjoyment of *Being Erica*. Rather, the pleasure fans derive from the show stems from a much more complex myriad of factors such as life experiences, taste, social circle etc.

With this in mind, and recognizing that my own relationship with the research participants and the context in which the interviews took place also necessarily influenced what was said or not said about their enjoyment of the show, I will provide a brief description of each interview below. The limitations of capturing lived experiences in written text means that the descriptions I provide cannot possibly be all encompassing. Instead, I will focus on basic demographic details and any other relevant facts that might influence how these fans engaged with the show and my research. Additional details of each participant's personal

narrative will be included throughout this thesis as they were shared during the interviews and as they contribute to the arguments I present.

Individual #1, Vancouver, 12h30 December 17, 2011

My first interview was with William (34) who worked as a Youth Minister for the United Church of Canada and supplemented his income as a server for a popular restaurant chain. At the time of our interview, he indicated that he did not intend to extend his ministry contract when it came up for renewal in January and that he was considering possible career transitions. My friend Rita, who had met William through an online dating site, set up this interview for me. We met in a coffee shop near William's apartment and talked over warm beverages and snacks. Rita joined us for the first few minutes before the interview began to introduce us and help break the ice. Luckily, despite this being my first interview and my first time meeting William, he proved to be enthusiastic and talkative and the conversation flowed smoothly.

Our conversation lasted about forty-five minutes and was dominated by talk of the self and self-improvement. William is heavily involved in a personal development program called "Executive Success Programs". From what I could gather, William had attended workshops, support group type meetings, and coaching sessions. He had also recently reached the point of becoming a coach for others. Without question, William's experience of the show was heavily influenced by his submersion in self-help discourse, a fact which he himself acknowledged when he said, "I feel like I might be engaging at it at a totally different level than lot

of culture would because of because of the way that I umm have already been doing a lot of that same kind of work."

William appeared to enjoy our interview and commented that he "could keep talking forever". He appreciated the chance to share his thoughts and be listened to and said, "I recognize that even just in interacting we've actually physically changed each other because like that's, that's how we work when we like when we think differently we change our synapses and rah rah rah." As a person who is easily swayed by the positive tone of self-help discourse, I found myself feeling inspired by our interview, particularly William's comments about the importance of self-acceptance.

A few weeks after my interview with William, he contacted me via Facebook chat and the following exchange took place:

> WILLIAM: Things are good, I'm about to make a major switch in my life to living in Victoria
> ME: Oh wow. Exciting!
> WILLIAM: Yes. It is. I feel drawn to do something bold and refreshing and it's been a long time coming too
> ME: Awesome
> WILLIAM: Our chat gave me a lot to think about, and I decided to pursue my dreams full-on, headfirst
> ME: Really?
> WILLIAM: yeah... I'm going to pursue music and theatre type stuff in order to branch into the areas I've often felt drawn to but couldn't convince myself to leave the safety of my "norm". I think following "St. Erica's" way is what I mean
> ME: Good for you
> WILLIAM: Thanks.

This revelation, which initially made me very uncomfortable, is relevant because it is indicative of William's strong and unique relationship with *Being Erica*.

Group #1, Vancouver, 14h00 December 18, 2011

My first group interview was with Beth (35), a dental assistant, Lisa (31), a dental hygienist, and Jane (32), a dentist. The three worked together at the same dental office, but clearly had a social relationship that extended outside the workplace. My connection to this group was through Beth, who was a good friend of two of my friends. I had met Beth a handful of times before at different parties and social events, but was meeting Jane and Lisa for the first time at this interview.

Beth graciously agreed to host our viewing conversation in her condo in Kitslano. When I arrived mid-afternoon with a bottle of wine to share, I found Beth preparing a gourmet spread of appetizers, complete with a Caesar making station. Lisa and Jane both brought more food to share and the scene was set for a very social afternoon. After catching up about the weekend's happenings we settled into the living room to begin the more 'formal' part of the event. This group conversation, likely because it was my first and because it was the group in which I felt most like an outsider, made me quite nervous. Luckily, the other women were all very comfortable with each other and the post-viewing conversation, although the shortest of the five I conducted, still ran quite effortlessly. Of the three, Jane spoke the most and as such seemed to have the strongest connection with the show. Her comments were often quite funny and made the interview a laughter-filled event.

Two aspects of this conversation stood out to me. First, these women knew the star of the show, Erin Karpluk, personally. While *Being Erica* is filmed in Toronto, Erin lived in Vancouver during the off-season. Beth and Erin's friendship dates back to childhood, when they grew up together in Jasper, Alberta, and the

other two met Erin through Beth. As such, when they tuned in to the show it was originally to support Erin, with their fandom only developing later.

> I mean I started watching *Being Erica* 'cause Erin was in it but if it wasn't Erin I don't know if I'd be watching it. I gave it a chance and I like, I like the show and I'm a fan but I don't know if it wasn't Erin to make me start watching it if I would be watching it … Ya it was about being supportive in the beginning, but it actually turned out that I liked it. (Beth)

The other unique facet of this group was that they had not yet finished watching the series. Beth and Jane, who had been watching Season Four together, had paused their viewing to allow Lisa, who had only started watching the series more recently, to catch up. Beth was storing the episodes on her Personal Video Recorder (PVR) and the plan was that they would all finish watching the series together. This meant that these women did not have the perspective of seeing how the show wrapped up. It also meant that, because Jane and Beth were further ahead in the series than Lisa, there were moments during the conversation when they would cut themselves off so as not to spoil Lisa's future viewing experience.

Group # 2, Edmonton, 11h00 December 31, 2011

My second group interview was with Joyce (33), a dental hygienist, and Sharon (26), who had just returned from working-abroad for a university in Australia. I had met Sharon eight years earlier when I recruited her as a new member to a student club while we were both completing our undergraduate degrees at the University of Alberta. We have remained friends ever since, although our communication had decreased in frequency over the last few years thanks to the large amount of time we both spent living and travelling abroad. Joyce and Sharon

are sisters and have a close relationship. I had met Joyce at various concerts and parties over the years but do not know her well.

After meeting Sharon for breakfast, we drove out to Joyce's suburban house together for our viewing conversation. Joyce's two-year-old daughter was not impressed that she could not be part of the interview, but, fortunately, Joyce's husband was on hand to entertain her for most of the time that I was there. After a few false starts, interrupted by tears and temper tantrums, we set ourselves up at the kitchen table with glasses of water and a bag of chips to share. Still, I definitely felt guilty for inconveniencing this young family during the holidays for the purposes of my research.

Joyce talked most during our post-viewing conversation and seemed to have more fully formed thoughts about the show[vi]. She had watched the entire series more recently and indicated while signing the consent form that she wanted to make sure she did not sound unintelligent in our interview. Sharon had not kept up with the series while she was away and had instead watched the entire last season in one day after coming back home. She described that experience as follows: "For sure, this last round of *Being Erica,* I just watched it to just like not think for a long time. [*Laughter*] Invest in someone else's problems instead of mine I guess," and noted that when it finished she was "just like oh thank god that's over and now I can move on."

Perhaps it was because I knew these women better than the other people I had sat down with, or perhaps it was because it was my third interview, but this was the conversation where I started to feel like I had found my stride as a researcher.

However, listening back on it, I noticed that I asked a lot more questions during this interview than I would have liked and that Sharon and Joyce were both talking more to me than to each other, making it less of a conversation and more like a small group interview than I had planned.

Group # 3, Edmonton, 18h00, January 2, 2012

My third group interview involved Farah (27), who is a partial owner of her family's aesthetics school, and Jessica (24), who was working as a customer service representative at a large electronics store. Jessica further indicated that she was in a transition period, having recently stopped her Bachelor in Education program and planning to move to Vancouver to start a post-secondary program in event management in the near future. I met Farah in 2005 while on a study abroad exchange in France and was meeting Jessica for the first time the night of our interview, although Farah had mentioned her to me before. These two women met at a weekend personal development course called "Personal Best". Based on Farah's positive assessment of the weekend, I later attended the same introductory session. I imagine that the "Personal Best" program as a whole is quite similar to the program that William was part of, although these two women had not remained as heavily involved with their program as William had with his.

The plan was to meet at Farah's condo in downtown Edmonton. Unfortunately, Farah got confused about the date of the conversation and was not at her condo when I arrived. Jessica and I managed to find each other and waited in the heated elevator room for a while before deciding to move to a nearby café for a one-on-one interview. However, realizing her mistake, Farah sped across town and let us

into her place for a late start. Because I was flying back to Montreal later that night, we were quite rushed and there was no time for idle chitchat or snacks.

Farah and Jessica's interest in personal development clearly related to their mutual enjoyment of the show. Jessica even related the message of the episode we watched together to something she learned in the course, saying:

> Ya its interesting like we all sort of have those, ummm what are they called, like insecurities that we sort of feel like. Or not no, insecurities is the wrong word, but that whole box scenario, like in our "Personal Best" you know we talk about like our cup, you know and how like we are so concerned about filling it, but we don't necessarily think about expanding it. Where we could fit so much more if we just made it bigger. And it's so scary to have to step outside of that box

Furthermore, these women's prior experience talking about personal issues and 'life lessons' together made the interview flow very naturally. They built off each other's ideas and I rarely needed to interject with prompting questions. Although they shared the airtime quite equally, Farah still took a more dominant role, with her introducing more new topics and Jessica mainly agreeing with and elaborating on the points Farah raised. Overall, I felt very enthusiastic about the conversation that took place with these women and I am sure it could have gone on longer had I not had to cut it short to catch my flight.

Group #4, Toronto, 13h00, February 12, 2012

My fourth group interview consisted of Liz (29), who was pursuing a Master's degree in Sociology to bolster her career as a corporate training specialist, Stacey (28), a fundraiser for the University of Toronto, and Anne (28), who worked as a consultant. Liz and Stacey are two of my closest friends and I have known them for seventeen and twelve years respectively. Anne, who I had only met a handful of

times, was a friend of Stacey's from university who Liz had also become friendly with since moving to Toronto a year and a half earlier.

Given that this group consisted of two of my oldest and closest friends, I was surprised by how insecure I felt both during and after this interview. I think my insecurities stemmed from a couple of places: First, it had been some time since I had done my last interview and this distance, combined with the fact that my trip to Toronto was purely for pleasure, meant that I was not in a focused headspace. Second, the closeness of my friendships with Liz and Stacey means that I value their opinions very highly and as a result was worried about looking silly or stupid in front of them. In addition, because Liz is not only my close friend but also my former roommate with whom I started watching *Being Erica*, I had talked to her about my idea for this research since the beginning and she was instrumental in encouraging me to undertake this project. As such, I knew that she would be paying close attention to my methodological choices. Her awareness about my project going into the interview also meant that some of her comments were more critical or academic-like than they might have been in a different context.

We met in Stacey's one-bedroom apartment in the trendy neighbourhood of Leslieville and Stacey had purchased a tray of gourmet cupcakes for us to snack on. Stacey's live-in boyfriend hid in the bedroom for the duration of the interview, only emerging to socialize at the end. While most of the other groups I interviewed consisted of people who had watched at least some of *Being Erica* together, these three women had not. As a result, they did not have a shared experience of the show and were discussing their enjoyment of it together for the first time. Despite the

awkwardness I felt, the conversation proved to be quite dynamic, with the participants often cutting each other off and interjecting alternative opinions.

In particular, Stacey's engagement with the show seemed to differ from those expressed by Anne and Liz. When Stacey described the show as "inspiring" the other two seemed surprised and described their engagement in contrasting terms. This is where I felt the limitations of the group-style interview most. If time and resources had permitted, I would have liked to meet and talk with Stacey again one-on-one because my own discomfort with this discord of opinions led me to not probe as deeply into her experience of the show as I wish I would have.

Group #5, Montreal, 20h30, March 7, 2012

My fifth and final group conversation was made up of Zoe (24), a classmate of mine also working towards her Master's in Media Studies, Heather (24), who was finishing up her Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing, and Paul (20), who, having recently moved to Montreal after an extended backpacking trip in Australia, had plans to join the Naval Reserves but described himself as being in a "transition period". Zoe, Heather and Paul had known each other since childhood when they all grew up in Vancouver's downtown eastside. I met and bonded with Zoe through school and, through her, I had met Heather over drinks on a few occasions. I met Paul for the first time at the interview.

Because Zoe is in my Master's program and knew about my project early on, all three of these fans were aware that they would participate in an interview while they were still watching the series, a fact that may have influenced their engagement with both the show and my research. On a few occasions during the interview, they

directly reference their awareness that they were contributing to my thesis, such as when Heather said, “That's a good question to write your thesis about [*Laughter*].” In particular, Zoe’s knowledge of my research and understanding of the theories of media studies more generally were reflected in some of her comments.

We met at their shared apartment in St. Henri. Zoe had prepared snacks and dinner, so when I arrived we started by eating, drinking and socializing. They had talked it over before and had decided that we would watch the Pride episode, “Bear Breasts”. We continued to eat chips and drink beer as we watched and throughout the ninety-minute conversation that followed. The notable presence of alcohol and cigarette smoke (all three smoked while we talked) gave this conversation, the longest of all my group viewing conversations, an even more social feel than the others. It was very laid back and there was lots of laughter. Heather spoke the most, but all three would often cut each other off and finish one another’s sentences.

As a group, these three were by far the most avid consumers of popular culture in my sample. Their comfort talking about cultural products together was evidenced by the speed of the conversation and the ease with which they made cross-media references. A side effect of this seemed to be a higher value for pop culture and thus a better memory of the program. This was the only interview in which the participants seemed to be more familiar with the series than I was. They referenced very specific details about multiple different episodes throughout our conversation. In large part, this interview focused on what made this show a good show, with particular attention being put on the realistic representation of a therapeutic journey, the relatability of certain storylines, and the uniquely Canadian

way of dealing with touchier issues, especially sexuality. It was clear that these fans felt that *Being Erica* was a quality TV offering, but also that they had many other series they were equally, if not more, committed to.

Individual #2, Edmonton, 15h00 April 6, 2012

My final interview was with Erica B. (27) who works as a freelance writer and singer-songwriter. I was overjoyed and relieved to be able to interview Erica B. on an unexpected trip back to Edmonton because she and her relationship to the show had been part of my original inspiration for this project. I met Erica B. on the same study-abroad exchange as Farah in 2005. However, in more recent years, Farah and Erica B.'s friendship had become strained and, as such, Erica B. had indicated during my Christmas time visit that she would prefer not to participate in a group viewing conversation.

It is worth noting that Erica B. is the only participant whose first name I did not change for the purposes of confidentiality (her last name initial has been changed)[vii]. Erica B. gave me permission to use her real name because she described her engagement with the show as greatly impacted by the fact that she shared her name with the protagonist:

> But she had my name and so it was kind of, it was also interesting too, because you know you place yourself in the position of the character right. When every other character is actually saying your name, it's kind of funny. And I think that that's, maybe to me what made the show even more significant was it was so much parallel to my life but also the characters were actually speaking my name and they always say like the sound of your own name is something that, like it resonates in a certain way to you that I wouldn't- Like even if you watched a show and saw a lot of yourself in the character Erica, when they say 'Erica I love you' the guy's looking at the screen and saying 'Erica I love you' right, and I'm Erica! That's actually what people call me, right, so um it was kind of, I know, it's weird, but interesting.

My interview with Erica B., which took place in the living room of her downtown apartment, was special in many ways. We had not seen each other since I had moved to Montreal nearly two years earlier so we had lots to catch up on, including her recent trip to Australia and South-East Asia, from which she had only just returned. As a result, our lengthy interview occasionally drifted into general chitchat territory and back again. There were also moments during the interview where Erica B. reversed the tables on me and started to ask me questions about my engagement with the show. In addition, near the end of our conversation, after I was confident that I had heard all of Erica B's own thoughts about the show, I took the opportunity to share some of my in-progress 'conclusions' with her to see what she thought, which resulted in further enriching discussion.

My intention had been to start by viewing an episode with Erica B. to mirror the process of the group viewing conversations, but problems with her computer prevented us from doing so. Fortunately, Erica is a chatty person and we have a history of talking about personal issues and philosophizing about life together in very introspective and analytical ways. Even though Erica B. and I have not been in regular communication as of late, in many ways this interview seemed like just another one of those conversations. Furthermore, Erica B. self-identified as an avid consumer of self-help products and had also attended the introductory weekend session of "Personal Best". Many of the comments Erica B. made about her enjoyment of the show were reflective of her fascination with authenticity and her quest to better understand and manage herself.

A Tight-Knit Network

As has likely become apparent from the preceding descriptions, the social network that I accessed through my snowball sampling technique was fairly tight-knit. Of the fifteen people I interviewed, I would consider six of them to be friends, whom I was in regular or semi-regular communication with; four of them to be acquaintances, whom I had met before but with whom I did not have an ongoing relationship; and five of them to be friends of friends, whom I had never met before. All of these people, with the exception of William, would likely have heard of me before we met in this research setting and are also people who I am likely to encounter again in the future. This is worthy of acknowledgement because, as Browne remarks, "it can be argued that the interpersonal relations central to snowball sampling also 'form' research accounts" (2005, 53).

In her article "Friendship as Method", Tillman-Healy observes, "Friendships tend to confirm more than contest conceptions of self because we are prone to befriend those who are similar to ourselves, those more "self" than "other"" (2003, 274). As such, I was often not overly surprised by the nature of what was said during the viewing conversations and interviews. The drawback to this is clear: any observations I make only have relevance to this very particular social network and the historical and cultural moment in which they are situated. This fact was not lost on Erica B. who noted the influence that friendship might have on one's experience of the show. Commenting on the ability of many people to draw parallels between the show and their own life she said:

> I know a lot of our friends that watched felt that way. Like I love Liz but we're not that alike in a lot of ways. Or even Farah and I, personality wise are quite

> different, or the way that we view life are quite different, is quite different. And, but we're all friends still, so clearly there is like a thread that runs through all of us.

The fact that I had friendly relationships with many of my research participants affected the research process in another notable way. Reinharz reminds us that "we both *bring* the self to the field and *create* the self in the field" and argues, "Although the researcher may consider "being a researcher" one's most salient self, community members may not agree" (1997, 3). In many cases, I believe that my research participants saw me primarily as a friend, not a researcher.[viii] This had the benefit of creating a more natural feel to the interviews and conversations, but also had two drawbacks. First, there were parts of the participants' personal narratives that went unsaid during the interviews because they assumed I already knew the relevant details. I did not pick up on this problem until I was writing my analysis and realized that some quotes lost their meaning without this omitted background knowledge. Second, as my friends, participants were trying to help me out and would often end our meetings by saying something to the effect of 'did you get what you needed?' I take this as another reminder that in many ways it is not surprising that my research findings largely confirmed my own experience of the show. Not only were these members of my social network similar to me and as such likely to have had at least a somewhat similar experience of the show, to some extent they may have also been motivated to tell me what I wanted to hear.

Acknowledging the inherent bias of my sample, I stand by my methodological choice of using my own personal contacts to start the snowball for two significant reasons. First, Browne highlights how snowball sampling is especially useful when

seeking to access hidden populations (2005, 49). Of course, the fans I spoke to are not hidden in the same way as some of the populations Browne references, such as lone mothers or those living outside of heterosexual norms. I could easily have accessed *Being Erica* fans through more public means like an online fan forum. However, the heavy reliance in academic writing on drawing research participants who participate in more public displays of fandom is what led to the research bias in fan studies noted by Sandvoss (2005) and discussed above. My interest was in the more casual fan and this type of fan would have been difficult to identify had I not had access through my personal connections.

Second, my research questions were focused on personal interpretations and practices of the self, which both, particularly the latter, are deeply private undertakings. I believe that my participants' familiarity with me was essential to opening up this type of dialogue. Furthermore, it was important to me that the group viewing conversations consisted of people who felt comfortable talking with each other. While, just like in Browne's research, this meant that my primary contacts "acted as gatekeepers, introducing me to their friends and acquaintance and, consequently screened those to whom I had access" (2005, 53) it also meant that the participants "appeared comfortable discussing their 'private' lives with each other in a manner that would probably not have been possible with strangers" (54).

Why did these Fans Like this Show?

Even given their shared position within a particular social network, these participants are not a one dimensional cast of homogenous people who liked the same show for same reasons, but rather a diverse grouping of individuals who each

engaged with the series and with this project in their own ways. Having established a basic understanding of the show and the participants, the remainder of this chapter will be used to outline my understanding of what made these participants become fans of the show in the first place.

Gorton draws our attention to the phrase 'get into it' when she describes her research as particularly interested in "the ways viewers 'get into' what they watch – how they become emotionally engaged with programmes" (2009, 5). In the case of *Being Erica*, my participants identified that what 'sucked them in' or 'got them hooked' was primarily the relatability of Erica's character and storyline and the thought-provoking lessons that came out of Erica's therapy sessions:

> I, ya, I got sucked in fast … I started watching it and I thought ok this is kind of an interesting way of seeing things. And then I realized that she was like trying to solve her life or get out of her funk and I'm like man I'm sure there's tons of people and maybe I am in my thirties and I'm in that zone right now and I know people who are in that time and their probably feeling exactly the same way as she is, so ya I could just kind of relate to it even though, it doesn't matter what ethnicity, like I grew up as a Canadian, I don't know. Like it's just a Canadian show. (Joyce)

> That's one of the things that I do really like about the show like all the morals and stuff. I think they're super cheesy and lame but it's also… almost like an after school special for adults. Like you know when you watch like *The Magic School Bus* after school when you're a kid and it would be like "sharing is caring" and like you knew that but you were still like "Yeah!" [*Laughter*] I'm going to find dinosaur eggs to learn that sharing is caring, you know. Its like kind of the same thing like on a more adult level. It's like, you know all these kind of things that you already kind of realize or know or like to some extent or just like a little reminder of these like really cheesy morals and like you know facts of life, ya, you see in an after school special for adults kind of way.[ix] (Paul)

This ability to relate to Erica and to learn as she learned was central to the experience of my participants and informed the bulk of my analysis and, as such, will be discussed at length in Chapters Two and Three respectively. Before that,

however, and in an effort to not overlook the fact that, in large part, fans kept watching the show just because they *liked it*, I will first address some of the other key factors that drew these fans to this show and contributed to their enjoyment.

Friendship as Motivator

In the introduction, I explained that my methodological choices of snowball sampling and small-group interviews were appropriate because, in my view, watching television is a social experience. It appeared that, in the case of *Being Erica* at least, a lot of my participants agreed. Several of the fans reported that their original reason for tuning into the show was because a friend recommended it to them. For example, when I asked Sharon about when she started watching the show, she replied, "I don't know. Oh I think it was when you guys were like 'Oh you have to watch it.' I was like ok fine." Erica B. also described starting to watch the show because "initially just a lot of people had told me about it."

Not only a motivator to give the show a chance, friendship also played a role in the fans continued dedication to the show. After listening to Liz describe a lot of things that she did not like about the show, I asked her what had kept her watching. She explained, "Uhhhh, like I lived with you and it was what we did for fun." Many of the people I interviewed in groups watched at least some of the show together including Zoe, Heather and Paul, Farah and Jessica, and Beth and Jane. The latter justified group viewing as follows: "It's fun. It's like a bonding thing," while Farah offered the following explanation:

> And you don't feel as lame when you watch TV with someone [*Laughter*]. When you're by yourself its just pretty boring, but when you're with someone it's like cause you had fun [*Laughter*] … So we'd make plans and watch *Being Erica* and then we'd have a whole date night or something.

In this sense, it seemed like watching with a friend served to reduce some of the guilt that Gorton identified as often associated with television viewing (2009, 3).

Non-traditional Viewing

Not so long ago, one way that critics and academics used to distinguish quality television was to single out shows that could be described as 'appointment television'. Appointment television was when a person would "schedule their day around a particular programme" (Gorton 2009, 33). Technological advances such as the rise in popularity of PVRs, DVD box sets and online streaming, have led to a decline in appointment television in the traditional sense (Gorton 33). This evolution is evidenced by the viewing habits of the participants I spoke to. None of the fifteen participants consumed the series in its entirety through the CBC's on-air broadcast, and only a handful reported watching any of the episodes on TV at all. In many ways, it seemed that the flexibility of viewing options was a central part in attracting some audience members. For example:

> ANNE: I wouldn't have, if I couldn't watch it when I wanted to, I wouldn't have watched it. Like if I had to watch it on a certain night or something,
> ALL: ya
> ANNE: Like the way TV used to be, I wouldn't have watched it. I did not care that much. But whenever I had the night alone and I wasn't watching TV with my boyfriend, I'd always watch it. 'Cause like he wasn't into it at all, he thought it was annoying and he'd make fun of it.
> LIZ: mmhmm
> ANNE: But if he was out and I was like what am I going to watch, then I would watch it … that was definitely like my little routine. But it was just on my own terms when I wanted to.

Beyond just flexible timing, these new viewing platforms also allowed for more intense viewing practices with many of these fans watching multiple episodes at a time:

> I probably watched, like in one night I watched all Season One [*Laughter*]. Maybe three episodes at a time actually, I broke it up into three episodes at a time. But it was just so awesome not having commercials going through it. (Joyce)

> I started watching and then I wizzed through like three seasons and was like I'm done! [*Laughter*] Less gym time more sitting watching television. (Jane)

> I like watched the show in its entirety and I sort of like marathoned it. (Zoe)

> That's definitely kind of how I watch TV in short bursts and then I don't watch TV for awhile and then I'll watch a whole season of something, hehe, and then not watch TV for awhile. But ya, definitely, I probably watched everything, I only started watching it last year I guess and I probably watched it all like in six months. (Anne)

Gorton describes these more concentrated viewing practices as an "emergent gaze" and argues that this makes the televisual experience more comparable to the cinematic one and more "filled with an emotional engagement" (2009, 40).

The Canadian Factor

In addition to the social aspect and the flexibility of viewing, another enjoyment inducing quality that was mentioned in almost every interview was the fact that the show was Canadian. This worked in an interesting way because it was not as if fans started watching the show *because* it was Canadian. In fact, most participants admitted that they did not watch any other Canadian-made shows and that, in general, they found the shows offered through the CBC unappealing. Jane expressed this most strongly when she said:

> It's like going shopping to Holt Renfrew versus Winners. There's a lot of equal quality, it's just the presentation. Like when I go into Winners I'm like holy fuck I don't think I can handle this shit but then, on a one-on-one basis, when I see people and say I love that article of clothing, almost ninety percent of the time they're answering its from Winners. So, like, there's a lot of substance and probably a lot of good stuff at Winners, but I'm one of those people that gets tricked by presentation. Like, if it looks higher quality it's a lot more appealing. And maybe that's why I haven't watched CBC 'cause it, it

> looks like I turned on my IPhone and started recording and that's what's being aired. I don't think so.

Therefore, being Canadian was not something that made fans start watching the series, but, once they were watching, it was something that increased their viewing enjoyment in four discernable ways.

First, there was the appeal of supporting and seeing someone you knew, or 'kind of knew' on television. This was already discussed with reference to the group of fans from Vancouver that knew Erin Karpluk best, but its influence extended beyond this. Even for myself, the reason I tuned into the show for the first time was because Erin was a friend of my friends and that made me curious. Similarly, Erica B., who had stayed at the Karpluk's bed and breakfast in Jasper growing up, commented "I think there was a certain intrigue too in the fact that like all of you guys knew the character a little bit and then my family knew the character a little bit and umm or not the character but the actress, nobody really knew the character at all, haha." William also felt attracted by a familiar face, albeit that of a different actor:

> I was immediately excited when I watched the first twenty minutes and she goes back in time and the first person that she sees is her um, well besides her friend is her, uh high school prof, who is a friend of mine, the actor. And um and it was actually really interesting, I was like oh my gosh that's, that's Mark … he's actually a coach of mine so it was like weird like, how, how cool is that to have that experience and to watch it and, so excited, I wanted to keep watching. Partly because I thought he'd be in it again, which he never was.

Beyond just seeing familiar faces on the screen, the fans took pleasure in the familiarity of other aspects of the show as well. William appreciated seeing Canadian money and the inclusion of Canadian music and Sharon commented on

recognizing certain streets. This pleasure reminds me of an idea put forward by Bird:

> For most White Americans, to live in a media world is to live with a smorgasbord of images that reflect back themselves, and offer pleasurable tools for identity formation. American Indians, like many other minorities do not see themselves, except as expressed through a cultural script they do not recognize and which they reject with both humor and anger. (2009, 117)

In using this quote, I am not suggesting that Canadians are nearly as subordinated or misrepresented in media as American Indians. In fact, I believe that Caucasian Canadians probably often experience the pleasure of seeing a refracted version of themselves when watching American shows. However, it seems that this pleasure was amplified when watching a Canadian show.

The group that I interviewed in Toronto appeared to feel this the strongest as demonstrated by the following dialogue:

> STACEY: It's also like, ya, like being in Toronto, you can, I feel like I can relate to it a little bit more too because you know where those spots are and you've been there yourself and you, I like that.
> LIZ: I feel like that's almost the reason why I kept watching it because like one day I saw them filming it on like my favourite street outside of this little pub. And then I was like 'I wanna see the episode where that happens' [*Laughter*] I saw them filming a couple different places this summer so.
> ANNE: And even like where her parents live is like, it's just like very Toronto right? Like, it's just like I don't know it's, there's just a whole bunch of little things. It's just, they don't have to say it, but it's just very very Toronto, not just what that you see the Long and Branch streetcar or whatever.

At the same time as the familiarity of the Toronto setting enhanced these participants enjoyment of the show, it also undermined it in some ways. It seemed that their knowledge of 'real life' in Toronto made them more perceptive of the

moments in which the show distorted reality. “The way she lives her lifestyle is unrealistic” (Stacey).

Besides this perceived lack of realism from the Toronto fans, many of the participants attributed the show’s authentic feel to the fact that it was made in Canada. For example:

> HEATHER: I think that's one of the things that I love most about it though is that it does have that like Canadianess. Like when Julianne saw two guys like going at it. Like they'll never, that'll never make it into an American version. I think that was like part of its specialness was that it had this like very not-American feel about it like about the show and that like enhanced it in a way
> ZOE: Even though it was like, what I liked about it was that it was just like a normal show. But it had a Canadian feel to it. Like it was
> HEATHER: Like it didn't have to be *Road to Avonlea* to be Canadian [*Laughter*]
> ZOE: Exactly
> …
> HEATHER: Like *Being Erica* has this super Canadian but you don't have to have it like forced down your throat.
> ZOE: Like Degrassi
> HEATHER: Degrassi was like that too. It was like real issues in a Canadian context.

MacLennan, writing about *Degrassi Junior High*, suggests that “The air of authenticity that is the hallmarks of the Degrassi series is the product not only of its content but also its approach and production values, which lack the slick polish of America television series” (2005, 150-151)[x]. Lisa and Jane alluded to this idea when saying:

> LISA: Ya maybe that's why it’s even more relatable, that no one on the show is like a bombshell and no man is perfect.
> JANE: Its Kai's teeth that I have issues with.
> LISA: That's what I mean, they're not perfection they're like real people. Erin's character is not 5 zero and her friend Jenny is kind of weird looking. Judith is quite perfect [*Laughter*].
> JANE: Ya like the guys are, ya and all the other supporting cast members, they look real and that's kind of cool.

Whether or not the fact that *Being Erica* was Canadian was deemed to have made its quality better or worse, participants expressed pride about the show's home-grown heritage.

> SHARON: And it's nice to support a Canadian thing.
> JOYCE: Ya for sure, that's probably the number one draw first, is that it's a Canadian show and its like ya let's just see where we can go. And I, I don't know if I've seen or if I've watched any other Canadian shows that has like hooked me as much as *Being Erica*.
>
> STACEY: I also really like to support Canadian television
> ANNE: Mmhmm that's part of it
> STACEY: Like if there's kind of a quasi good show I want to show them there is some quality TV out there in Canada even though there need a lot of work with some stuff. But compared to other stuff they've put out, it's good. So it's good to support.

At the end of the day, it made fans feel good to be supporting something Canadian.

Conclusion

In his discussion of various fandoms Sandvoss argues, "The way in which fans relate to such texts and the performances that follow from this relationship vary between different fan cultures, and indeed from fan to fan" (2005, 8). Recognizing this, I have used this chapter to better introduce the fans I interviewed and the object of their fandom, *Being Erica*, ending with a description of the key factors that drew these particular people to this particular show. On the whole, participants heard good things about the show from people whose opinions they trusted, they watched with friends and could relate to each other through their enjoyment of the show, they were able to consume the show on their own schedule, at their own pace and they appreciated seeing Canadiana on screen and were happy to support a product of the CBC. However, while these factors contributed to

drawing this group of fans to *Being Erica,* they should not be seen as an indication that these fans engaged with the show in a uniform way.

A further analysis of the individual fans' descriptions of their enjoyment quickly reveals the varied nature of their commitment to the show. Some fans talked about the calibre of the writing, while others commented on the quality of Erin Karpluk's performance. Some appreciated the balance of comedic and serious moments, while others took particular pleasure in the nostalgic nineties references interwoven into the text. Some valued the thorough development of secondary characters, while others felt most compelled to know where Erica herself would end up. Some wanted a greater emphasis on the science-fiction dimension of the plotline, while others were glad that the use of time travel in the show was kept to a mostly metaphoric level. Everyone hated the overuse of product placement in the final season, but some could look past it more than others. Above all of these details and the fans varied perception of them, the real tipping-point – what made fans out of these viewers – was their ability to relate to Erica and engage with the lesson-based plotlines. The remaining two chapters will be oriented towards the specificities and intricacies of these two factors and how they can be better understood using feminist media critique and narrative identity theory.

Chapter Two: Relating to Erica

Introduction

While flying home to Edmonton for a quick Easter trip that included my final interview for this project, I elected to listen to the digital radio provided through the in-flight entertainment system while I looked over my work. At some point during the flight, a song from Rihanna's latest album (2011) started flowing through my ears. With the help of a chorus of backup singers the pop star sang:

> We all want the same thing
> We all, we all, we all, we all
> We all want the same thing
> We all, we all, we all, we all
> We all want the same thing
> Everybody wants something gotta want something
> Yeah yeah we all want love.

I stopped reading mid-sentence to consider the implications of these lyrics. How could Rihanna sing so confidently that "we *all* want love"? And, how could I, as a first time listener, be so sure that this song was going to be a hit? I could almost see the faces of thousands of girls singing in their bedrooms, of teenagers dancing in nightclubs, and of young woman finger tapping along in their cars, all consuming the lyrics with a wistful acknowledgement in their eyes: To want love is part of the feminine experience.

The song has yet to be released as an official single, so I am unable to confirm whether my predictions of popularity were true. Regardless, what captured my attention was the fact that the 'we' Rihanna is referring to is not so different than the audience targeted by the producers of *Being Erica*. Of course, there are undoubtedly significant demographic differences between the individuals snapping up copies of

Rihanna's album and those sitting down to watch the adventures of Erica Strange. Still, both media products are clearly targeted at women and those women are expected to identify with the singer/protagonist's quest to find love[xi]. The universality of this female desire for love is echoed in the opening line of Berlant's *The Female Complaint* where she writes "Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking" (2008, 1). In this chapter I will draw on Berlant's concept of the intimate public as well as other writings about feminine audiences and feminist media critique to investigate this 'we' and how it gathers around *Being Erica*.

When I asked my participants if there were other shows they felt were like *Being Erica*, they struggled to come up with direct comparisons, but, in several instances, similarities were noted with other female-led shows such as *Gilmour Girls*, *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal* and *Drop Dead Diva*[xii]. As such, it appears that *Being Erica* fits into what has been described as a post-feminist genre. I will argue in the next chapter that the series also mobilizes some of the conventions that are characteristic of self-help discourse, but rather than seeing these features as distinct or mutually exclusive I will demonstrate how they actually work to reinforce one another.

Gitleman characterizes genre as something that "changes all the time yet remains somehow the same," that "exists in infinite variety without incoherence," and that "enacts social relations it thereby reflects while reflecting social relations it thereby enacts" (2010). In this way, it is possible to understand *Being Erica* as somehow unique from the other media that fall within this genre, but at the same

time easily identifiable as falling within it. Furthermore, based on its location within a post-feminist genre, research into *Being Erica* has the potential to be extremely revealing when it comes to the social relations it both reflects and enacts. It is these relations, as experienced through *Being Erica*, that I seek to address in the pages that follow. By turning towards my second theoretical paradigm of feminist media critique, highlighting some of the key findings I came across during my review of literature in this field and presenting an analysis of relevant pieces of my interviews, I hope to answer my second research question: how do fans engage with and experience the show and its storylines?

Post-feminist Media Landscape

In her influential essay, "Women's Genres," originally published in 1984, Kuhn points out that "popular narrative forms aimed at female audiences, are currently attracting a good deal of critical and theoretical attention" (2008, 18). Nearly three decades later, it appears that, while the terrain of cultural products targeted at women has changed significantly, academic interest persists. In this section, I will first provide a historical overview of the literature circulating about these women's genres and then describe more recent evolutions in both the media and the feminist theory landscapes to further situate the discussion that follows.

A good starting place for understanding the history of feminist research into television is the introduction to the second edition of Brundson and Spigel's book *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (2008). The authors trace this academic tradition back to the 1970s and 1980s when a great deal of research was focused on romance novels, melodramas, and the soap opera. "Feminist critics returned

repeatedly to questions of everyday life, the home, and the repetitive structure of time in both the housewife's daily tasks and the television narratives aimed at her" (1). They identify two "inaugural" texts that greatly influenced the field: Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Ang's *Watching Dallas.* Because of their significance to the field, I will provide a brief overview of Radway and Ang's findings here.

First, in an article based off of her classic research into how women use and enjoy romance novels, Radway recognizes that "readers choose [the romance] category because essential features of their social life create needs and demands that are somehow addressed and fulfilled by these books" (1984, 54). For the particular "interpretive community" that she is studying, Radway suggests that the needs and demands filled by romance novels stemmed from the readers' experiences as wives and mothers, or, more specifically, as caregivers. For these women, reading romance novels gave them the opportunity to learn about the world, to take a break from the constant demands of their caregiving roles and to receive the vicarious attention of an affectionate male. While these are positive results of reading, Radway is quick to mention other simultaneous and potentially normative consequences: "Despite the fact that it enables women to resist some of [the patriarchal] constitution's most difficult demands, romance reading might ultimately conserve patriarchy because it reassures women that the sphere they occupy is right and fulfilling and that all their needs can be met within it" (69).

Ang, who first published a comprehensive analysis of her research into fans of *Dallas* in 1984, continued to build on her findings for years to come. In a more recent article, "Melodramatic Identifications: Television fiction and women's

fantasy," Ang considers how her original conclusions can be related to the "array of strong and independent female heroines" (2008, 235) that populate television screens in more contemporary times. Whether we are talking about a 'strong' woman like Christine Cagney from *Cagney and Lacey* or a 'weak' woman like Sue Ellen from *Dallas*, Ang argues that we "need to acknowledge that these characters are products of *fiction* and that fiction is not a mere set of images to be read referentially, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy" (241). Accepting that watching television is an exercise of fantasy, then the characters "do not function as role models but are more symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify" (241). Ang, is operating with a post-structuralist understanding of identity, which recognizes that being a woman, particularly a good woman, is not an essential quality. Rather, it is a task, a struggle, and a performance that must constantly be (re)negotiated (243). As such, Ang concludes that watching a fictional television program, be it a melodrama or not, is pleasurable for audience members because it offers an arena for experimenting with different subject positions without the consequences that would come if such experimentation were carried out in reality.

Since Radway and Ang published their original works, in 1984 and 1985 respectively, there has been significant evolution in the media environment, the academic field of feminist theory and the lived experience of women. In terms of the media environment, Brundson and Spigel note two significant changes. First, the ownership structures in television have altered. "As terrestrial broadcasting was supplemented and in many cases supplanted by private cable and satellite systems,

the older state-run, public, and private/network broadcast stations increasingly became just one among many choices, so that audiences now gather as 'niche' publics rather than 'national' publics per se" (2008, 2). Lotz argues more directly that the rise of specialty channels has been mirrored by a rise in television shows about and for women (1992, 3). The other big change is that, thanks to the technological contributions of recording technology and the internet, television viewing is no longer tied to broadcast schedules (Brundson and Spigel 2008, 2). This phenomenon, which, as noted in Chapter One, greatly influenced the viewing practices of the fans I interviewed, has broken the rhythmic patterns of television consumption.

If the above makes it seem like the televisual terrain has changed rapidly in recent history, I would contend that the feminist landscape has changed even more dramatically. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the aforementioned soap opera critiques were being written, second-wave feminism was at its peak. Where earlier feminists fought hard and succeeded in securing the right to vote for women, second-wave feminists made a "tactical departure from mainstream political lobbying" (Whelehan 1995, 6). The fight extended beyond getting legal rights for women and became about what it meant to be a woman in the first place. This struggle was much more radical in nature and it was recognized that "there might not be a solution to women's continued oppression short of a revolution" (4).

Second-wave feminists created significant waves culturally and their struggles resulted in notable progress. However, at some point it seems that the movement lost its steam. While the term and its meaning are still contentious, I take

the view in this paper that we now live in a post-feminist world. In her essay, "Feminism without Men: Feminist Media studies in a Post Feminist Age," Boyle (2008) outlines three different ways in which the term post-feminism is used. In one view, the 'post' is seen as a way of periodizing feminism's phases, with our current era coming after either the success or failure of the more active second-wave movement. In academic circles, the use of 'post' can be used to mark developments in thinking since second-wave feminism, taking into account theories of post-structuralism and post-colonialism. The emphasis here becomes about difference rather than similarity; recognizing that feminists no longer seek to speak about a single unifying female subjectivity. The third way that 'post' is used, and the way it is most often employed in the media, is as a rejection of or backlash against feminism. This captures the feeling that we live in a world where second-wave feminism's demands for structural change are no longer relevant or desirable. Instead, emphasis is placed only on "the aspirations and possibilities for individual women (typically, white, affluent, American women)" (Boyle 2008, 179).

While I recognize that all three of these definitions of post-feminism (and likely others) co-exist in language today, making the term slippery, the concept, and particularly this third definition, is still necessary and useful for my purposes. This is not to say that I personally reject feminism, nor do I believe that our society is no longer in need of feminist activism, because, in fact, I believe quite the opposite. Rather, it is to say that I recognize that *Being Erica* is a text circulating in a post-feminist cultural environment. Angela McRobbie expertly expresses the reality of this environment when she says:

> Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice' these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of new feminism. These new and seemingly 'modern' ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women's movement will not reemerge. (2009, 1)

Post-Feminism and the Show

Erica Strange, as the lead protagonist of a television series and as a character who is free, not only to vote, work and wear pants, but also to hold a Master's Degree, run her own company and be financially self-sustaining, clearly owes a great debt to her feminist foremothers. However, this debt is not one that is openly acknowledged in the show itself or by the viewers I talked to. Instead, these kinds of privileges are taken for granted and the show focuses on Erica's struggle to accept herself for who she is and to have the courage necessary to take risks and follow her heart. Empowerment and choice? Check and check.

Not only is the show's protagonist a woman, but the most important secondary characters besides Dr. Tom are also women. Erica's boss and eventual business partner, Julianne, her sister, Sam, and her friends Katie, Judith and Jenny all make repeated appearances in the series and play a key role in advancing the plot. The male members of the cast, again excluding Dr. Tom, are mostly relegated to the roles of boyfriends, love interests, or husbands of these women. The only men that avoid this status as female accessories are the gay couple who own the coffee shop, Goblins, which serves as the setting for a large part of the last two seasons. Still,

even the story arcs around their relationship and wedding are more ancillary and comedic than anything.

All of that to say: this is a show about women, and pretty hot and powerful women at that. While Erica starts the show with her life in a state of disarray, her friends have quite impressive resumes. Her sister is a neurosurgeon, her best friend is a lawyer, and her 'frenemy' is a well-renowned columnist for *The Globe and Mail* à la Carrie Bradshaw. All three are married. There is only Erica's childhood friend, Jenny, who seems equally directionless career and man-wise, but she mostly makes up for this weakness with her overt sexual empowerment. Moreover, by the series finale, Erica has become an established editor and entrepreneur and Jenny a real estate agent. Conversely, the men who serve as Erica's primary love interests in the series are a teacher, a barista/songwriter, and a gardener, reversing the traditional roles of 'bread-winner' even further.

The inclusion of this many strong female characters in a television show is by no means ground-breaking. In fact, *Being Erica* joins the ranks of numerous female centred comedic-dramas that have emerged since the late nineties, the most famous of which include *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal*. In this post-network and post-feminist media landscape, Erica Strange and her entourage would qualify as what Lotz calls "new new-women": "As they emerged in the late 1990s, comedic-dramas continued the tradition of the new-woman character type, updating the form to account for the post-Baby Boom, post-second wave generation of characters" (Lotz 2006, 33). According to Lotz, just like their predecessors, television shows about these new new-women are still focused on "characters' work and dating

experiences" but the emphasis now is on "issues that are more personal than explicitly political" (33).

Post-Feminism and the Audience

Using my chosen strategy of unstructured conversations, the topic of feminism was never addressed directly in any of my interviews. It is not that my participants were not talking about being women and their ability to relate to Erica and her experiences as a fellow female, it was just that the term feminism was not part of the vocabulary. This is interesting in and of itself because it indicates what might be a tenuous relationship between my participants and the ideals of feminism.

In lieu of being able to draw on these fans' opinions of feminism directly, I will rely on my own: Despite being able to easily argue in favour of the merits of feminism in academic terms, on a more personal level, my relationship with the feminists that precede me is ill-defined and ambiguous. I am happy that I have choices in terms of career, education and marital status, but I often take them for granted. Without question, there are times when I find these choices overwhelming and it would be sadly inaccurate to say that this new empowerment and freedom has enabled me to stop dedicating a significant percentage of my emotional energy to the quest of finding 'Mr. Right'.

When I was younger, I always considered myself to be a strong and independent girl. I prided myself on not being the kind of teenager who had crushes or who went boy crazy, but at the same time I was adamant that I was not a feminist. Now, as I approach the end of my twenties, I would confidently call myself a feminist, but am less able to describe myself as a strong and independent woman. In

fact, I find it hard to refer to myself as a 'woman' at all. In the place of that opinionated teenager who did not have the time, interest or energy to daydream about romance, I now find myself spending a disconcerting amount of time thinking or talking about being single, a desire for male attention, or the latest love exploits of my other single or semi-single girlfriends. At times, listening back to the pre or post interview chatter captured in my audio recordings, I was almost nauseated at the amount of airtime that was dedicated to 'boys'. What is worse, is that I am ever so aware of how unattractive it is to be a single girl, in her late twenties, who spends so much time thinking and talking about her desire for a mate, but that does not seem to make it any easier to stop.

With this in mind, when I read the following statement written by Whelehan in her book, *The Feminist Bestseller*, I felt an immediate sense of recognition and guilt: In describing the runaway success of the novel *Bridget Jones Diary* (the film adaptation of which I loved) Whelehan observes "Here was the generation who should be profiting from the activism of their feminist mothers, lamenting an excess of freedom and stumbling under the burden of choice and autonomy" (2005, 5). That is me, to a tee. Fortunately, I know that I am not alone. Romantic comedies, chick lit, and female-centered television shows are ubiquitous in our culture because they are popular. Just like the women Radway (1984) interviewed were using romance novels to fill needs and desires that stemmed from their position as housewives, the participants that I interviewed, myself included, engage with post-feminist media products like *Being Erica* to fill needs and desires that stem from our position as young women in today's world. Drawing heavily from the transcripts of

my interviews, the remainder of this chapter will consider what these needs are, how they are filled, and what this means for the fans I spoke with.

How Did Fans Engage with *Being Erica*?

Authenticity and Relatability

Above anything else, the main factor that drew the participants I interviewed to *Being Erica* was the fact that they found the characters and the storylines relatable and realistic, albeit to varying degrees. In some interviews, the connection that fans felt to the show was very strong. For example, William stated, "So I feel like, oh yeah, we're on the same path," and Jessica observed "I'm very similar to Erica, like, I'm very kind and nurturing ummm and I don't necessarily see myself as hard or commanding." Erica B. probably expressed the strongest connection with the show when she said, "I started to say, like, are the producers actually looking through my bedroom window and writing the show?"

Other fans were more cautious in reporting that they related to the show, emphasising that while the show was not a direct reflection of their lives, it still gave them pause for reflection. Anne argued:

> But I think, like, the being able to relate to it, like, it's not like you're like 'oh my god that exact thing happened to me where I slept with some guy in high school and I regret it' but the way I look at it is like, oh ya I kind of did, I might have treated some people like shit in high school, you know? Like I have that thought, but it's not necessarily exactly what's happening but it still makes me think.

Joyce echoed a similar sentiment when she said "I guess for me, there hasn't been too much that I was like 'oh my gosh, that's totally my story' ummm but like I said, it's just like little things that had happened, maybe in the past."

Fans who, like Joyce, were most clearly at different life stages than Erica (i.e. not lacking a career and a partner) were careful to point out that this did not impede their ability to relate to the show. Beth emphasized, "It's not any different whether you're single or you're in a relationship. It still, I think, connects through issues to whoever's watching it." In some instances, the lack of similarity between their own situation and Erica's was compensated for by being able to relate to secondary characters or by knowing someone else who was going through similar situations as Erica. For example, at different points during my interview with the ladies in Vancouver, Lisa made the following comments: "Even if you can't relate to her specific regret there can be other characters that you do relate to, which is kind of cool." And later, "Actually I was watching the episodes, I think I was on the episodes when she was breaking up with Ethan when my best friend and her boyfriend were breaking up and I was like Mel should watch this, like, its totally, like, she was articulating everything I knew my best friend was feeling."

Overall, despite the different levels and ways in which fans noted similarities between their worlds and Erica's world, there was a consensus that the fact that it was relatable was the reason it was fun to watch. Jane captured this sentiment perfectly when she said, "I think it's just it, if the show's relatable to your current state in life, you're just going to want to watch it." Stacey even went as far as to say that being able to relate to Erica and her struggles compensated for some of what she perceived to be *Being Erica*'s poor quality as compared to other television programs she watched:

> STACEY: But, ok the reason I like this show is cause finally there was a character that was going through kind of the shit that we were going

through. I hate my joooob and, like, when I first started watching it I was single so I was like 'oh my god she's trying to find, you know? It's all those kinds of things, like you could relate to that character and the messaging you could definitely, there was takeaways, learnings for everyone.

LIZ: It's true.

STACEY: You could relate to it a lot more and it its kind of stupid, so the fact that there was a bigger message, you know? Like, other shows that I like, I'm just thinking, like *Boardwalk Empire* I was watching yesterday. There's lots of people getting like beat up and guns [*Laughter*] and naked ladies, and I'm like, I love this show, but it's drastically different.

Part of what contributed to the participants' sense of realism was that many of them were close to the same age as Erica and, as a result, were able to identify with the past eras featured in the time travel sequences.

FARAH: I also like when they go back in time like to the nineties and she gets to change her hair all the time

ME: and the music

FARAH: And the music, ya. So I think that probably has something to do with my enjoyment of it and also generally the time lines are ones that are like ones that I can identify with because I'm not too far of her age. So then, like, like, this one wasn't a good one for that, but like sometimes when it was like the early nineties or something and I can see her like dressed exactly like times past, then you're like aww I had stuff like that or the music that comes on and you reminisce about it.

ANNE: I also liked the um, nineties references what's it called, when she goes back in time back to the nineties. [Laughter] Its stuff you can relate to right because we were teenagers back then

STACEY: Ya

ANNE: Just the clothes, I just, I like that. I think its fun. The music, whatever. It was always then when I was like ya!

While these fans enjoyed checking out the fashion and cultural references from the nineties, Erica's present day wardrobe, which was composed primarily of short dresses and high heels, was seen to detract from the show's authentic depiction of the modern female experience.

LIZ: She always runs around in heels and a dress and like

STACEY: And jewel tones [*Laughter*]

LIZ: It actually annoyed me that she always wears a dress. I don't know why, but its like they're always trying to portray her as like someone who's like, I don't know for me if like hyper-feminine is the right word but its like, oh so if you've become successful then you're expected, the idea is that you would wear dresses like that or wear heels like that.
STACEY: But then that annoying blonde girl, what's her name again?
ME: Julianne
STACEY: Julianne is um, she wears pantsuits and stuff
ME: She never wears dresses.
STACEY: Ya, she always wears pants
LIZ: She's always dressed up
STACEY: Yup
LIZ: I don't know. I just find it interesting that they choose to always put her in a dress. Mostly I wonder what they're trying to convey about that. I don't know why they'd do it but they do it. Maybe, Erin Karpluk loves dresses.
ME: Or her body type? [Laughter]
STACEY: Ya, its probably wardrobe.
LIZ: I just wonder.
ANNE: Ya I think it's probably body type, I think probably.
LIZ: mmhmm
STACEY: They want her to look gooooooood all the tiiiimmmme.
ANNE: She also wears things to work that you probably wouldn't be able to get away with wearing to work [*Laughter*]
LIZ: Like the interview with her boobs hanging out [*Laughter*] like really?
STACEY: Please hire me old man. [*Laughter*]

Heather: Ya, but she's also pretty like
Zoe: White middle class
Heather: Heteronormative, to quote Zoe. But like she's always wearing her little dresses, like I don't there's an episode where like unless she's in her pyjamas she's not in some-
Zoe: Heels
Heather: -cute little dress you know like, eeeein [*expressing scepticism*], you know?

Based on the importance of perceived realism, anything that took away from one's ability to relate to an episode, be it a wardrobe choice, an unrealistic plotline or the inclusion of an overt product placement, seemed to diminish enjoyment.

Thinking About One's Self

Beyond just these overt statements telling me that they related to the plot, the significance of the series' relatability was made more apparent by the use of personal anecdotes. Almost every participant, when telling me about their favourite episode or why they liked or disliked either the episode we watched together or the series more generally, would tell me stories from their own life without prompting. Sometimes the connections they drew were direct and obviously relevant. For example, in the episode I watched with Farah and Jessica, Erica, in her new role as Junior Editor, had been tasked with firing an author. Coincidentally, Farah had let go of an employee from her family business earlier that same day:

> Ya, that was so weird 'cause I had to fire someone today. So then, she had to fire someone so like I think then I was like oh let's see how she does it. And I felt similar to her in the episode. Like I've been thinking about this for weeks 'cause I've known I'd have to do it and then I practiced how to say stuff. And then she was really nervous and then I was really nervous…

It was clear that this direct parallel with her own life contributed significantly to Farah's enjoyment of the episode.

On the other end of the spectrum, a strong dissatisfaction was expressed about the unrelatable plotline of the episode we watched during my interview in Toronto. The story centred on Erica's regret of losing her virginity to the most popular boy in high school during an end of year camping trip. Stacey commented, "I didn't like that, I like, I didn't like that one so much and I remember the first time I saw it I didn't like it that much either, because I thought it was a little too much with like the whole sex thing." Liz agreed saying, "I just felt it was slightly unbelievable the way like she just changed, like took hold of the camera and had sex with the

other guy and you don't understand, none of it to me, like, I would never do that and it just never made sense to me."

Interestingly, each of these women added different caveats, which, in their opinions, redeemed the episode slightly. Stacey said, "But I did, I do, the last thing that Dr. Tom says is like 'you have to just take risks and open your heart' like that thing I guess resonated with me," and Liz added, "But then I could relate to the fear of going to a high school reunion and having to say, like, what you've accomplished." Even without being able to relate to the central premise of the plot, these fans were able to connect with other elements of the show. Still, their enjoyment was compromised.

In my interview with Sharon and Joyce, we watched the series premier. Mid-way through the interview the following exchange took place:

> SHARON: Ya. But this episode, it was funny when they were like, umm, everyone was like knocking on her door and trying to open her door. Yesterday my mom just barged into my room [*Laughter*] and like to return my keys and I was like on the phone crying with like my friend. And I was just like, oh my god, no privacy whatsoever and then, there's a lock though so, like, afterwards I locked it and she was like trying to get in again. She was like 'knock knock Sharon.' and I was like 'what do you want' and she's like "I just need to um borrow your keys so I can make a copy" 'Cause she lost her keys, they got stolen yesterday, they might of I don't know, and I was like 'I told you to wait 'til tomorrow just in case they find it and you don't have to waste your time doing that" anyways and then I was telling Joyce I was like "I don't know if it was you or Doug that put the lock in, but thank you [*Laughter*]
> JOYCE: I really don't remember
> SHARON: Ya, that was pretty funny.
> ME: So you could relate to the lack of privacy?
> SHARON: Oooooohhhhh ya. [*Laughter*] Yup.

In this instance, the similarities between the events on the screen, which involved Erica hiding in her childhood bedroom to avoid a brunch where she was being

peppered with questions about her lost job and failed date, and the events in Sharon's real life were not overly strong. Still, the incident with her mother was clearly significant to Sharon and, because the memory of it was at the forefront of her brain, she related it to the plot when an opportunity presented itself.

William was particularly aware that how he engaged with the show depended on what he was going through saying "I'm integrating it at the level that I'm at, so the, the level I may integrate at two years from now, I might get something totally different out of the show." What intrigues me about this comment, and the sharing of these personal anecdotes in general, is that it indicates that when the participants watch *Being Erica*, they are clearly engaging with more than what is on the screen.

In "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience" Sobchack introduces a phenomenological model of cinematic identification, which she argues "ultimately offers a more dynamic, fluid and concrete description of film viewing than does its psychoanalytic counter part" (1999, 241-242)[xiii]. Drawing from the un-translated work of Meunier, she presents a spectrum of "modes of spectatorial consciousness" that goes from home movies (or 'film souvenir') on one end, to fiction films on the other, with documentary films located in the space between these poles. The distinction here is based on how the film is experienced rather than its intended categorization during production. When engaging with a film as a home-movie, viewers are using a 'longitudinal consciousness', which means that they are often thinking about much more than what is on the screen. In this type of experience, viewers end up identifying with a whole person or event in a way that is

in large part evoked from their memory. By contrast, when engaging with a film as a work of fiction, viewers presumably have no connection with what they are watching besides the screen images themselves. This results in them being very focused on the screen, in what Sobchack calls a 'lateral consciousness'.

Sobchack suggests that viewers can switch between several modes of spectatorship during a single film and that the positions they take are tied to their existing relationships to, as well as how much prior knowledge they have about, the images being shown. She concludes that the "spectator is an active agent in constituting what counts as memory, fiction, or document" (253). Thinking of these three kinds of spectatorial consciousness as they relate to the fans of *Being Erica* I sat down with, it would seem that, just like the hypothetical film spectators Sobchack wrote about, they too fluctuated between different modes of spectatorship. [xiv] There were clearly times when they engaged with the show just as a work of fiction, but there were other instances when they operated with more of a longitudinal consciousness, looking through the screen and evoking their personal memories and reflections rather than simply processing the images on the screen.

What Made this Relationship with *Being Erica* Pleasurable?

When presenting her analysis of interviews with romance readers, Radway suggests that, “because reading and comprehension are surely not entirely conscious activities, it seems advisable to attempt to infer possible meanings to the reader and the effects of interpretive operations that she carries out but which she may not fully apprehend” (1984, 61). In this statement and the surrounding discussion, Radway is admitting that there is always an element of ‘guess-work’

involved when interpreting one's findings. Still, Radway contends that the guesses she is able to make are closer to accurate than they would have been had she only relied on her personal comprehension of the novels. In much the same way, in the pages that follow, I will be attempting to read between the lines of my interviews to provide a richer consideration of what was said. Having established that arguably the biggest factor in these fans' enjoyment of *Being Erica* was that the series and its characters were relatable, my next task is to deepen my analysis using both the literature and the transcripts to figure out how these fans experienced their relationship to the show.

Feeling for Erica/Feeling for Myself

In the previous section I argued that, at times, when watching *Being Erica*, the fans I spoke with were engaging with their own memories instead of or in addition to what was happening on the screen. These 'moments of resonance' (Bird 2003) were often described as emotional by participants, with many admitting to being moved to the verge of tears and others admitting to outright sobbing. In Chapter Six of her book, *Media Audience: Television, Meaning and Emotion*, Gorton (2009) uses an interview with television writer and producer Kay Mellor to argue that emotion is built into television intentionally. Mellor believes that emotions and empathy function not only to create drama and enable better comprehension of the plot, but also to stimulate an emotional release in the audience (cited in Gorton 42).

Notably, with *Being Erica*, it is not necessarily what is written into the plot that triggers the emotional release, but rather what it "calls up" (Anne) from the

viewers own life. For example, in contrasting the difference between his emotional reaction to *Lost* and the emotions evoked by *Being Erica*, William said the following:

> The triggers in Lost would happen more towards the end of the series, after I built up a great deal of respect and connection with all of these characters. With *Being Erica* it started happening very quickly because of how accessible it was. Well, its not just like some people are making some choices and I know their history, its like my history is my history watching the show and, and all of the experiences that she's relating to are very, like they're one's that most people can relate to. So, yeah, I have an emotional reaction very quickly.

This offers insight in to why so many fans explained being sucked into the show so immediately. They did not need to get to know the characters to feel for what they were going through, because what they were feeling stemmed from their own personal history. This is further demonstrated in the following exchange:

> ANNE: But I had a couple, I've definitely had a couple of episodes where I was watching by myself and I like, like get emotional a little bit afterwards
> STACEY: Ya me too
> ANNE: And I look at myself and go why, this is, like, not very good television, like its not great television, why are you so upset? And I'd just be, I'd be like thinking about my relationship or thinking about what I'm doing, like whatever, my job or whatever the thing is. I can't think of a specific, and I'd be like, I wouldn't say like crying, but I'd be like just emotional afterwards for sure. Like to the point to where [my boyfriend] would be like are you crying watching *Being Erica*? [*Laughter*] And I'd be like nooo... I'm just, I don't know. And I don't know what would set it off but its just like again it's just like how I could relate to. I don't know, there was definitely something. I don't know why
> ME: And in those moments, were you feeling about her? Like was it, I'm so sad that that's happening to Erica, or was it, were you thinking about yourself?
> ANNE: I think it was like things that would happen would almost like call up stuff in my life. Right so you'd be like 'why am I doing this job that makes me miserable, why did I buy a house when I don't know if I like the job, you know its like those types of big questions like what are you doing?

In her discussion of Kay Mellor's writing practices, Gorton goes on to conclude that "perhaps this is the greatest value to the presence of emotion in

popular television: it allows for a way of seeing that is different from other viewing. It allows viewers a chance to acknowledge their neediness while also feeling connected to something outside them" (95). It did seem that, despite being moved to tears and describing some episodes as "almost so real that you feel like you're uncomfortable watching it" (Lisa), these viewers enjoyed the episodes that made them emotional, often commenting that such episodes were the most memorable.

Later on in Gorton's book, she describes her personal love for Carmella Soprano and suggests, "Watching other people's fictional live unfold on screen gives a viewer a chance to reflect, to experience things vicariously, to talk to a partner (who might be watching too) and enter into conversations about your own domestic arrangements. In other words, it opens up a space which inevitably allows us to think differently about gender and identity" (124). In a similarly positive assessment of television's ability to provoke thought and discussion, Arthurs, in reference to *Sex and the City*, writes, "An ability to see ourselves in these characters works not simply to confirm our sense of self but to question the costs as well as the benefits of living in a post feminist consumer culture" (2008, 54). Both of these authors drew these conclusion based on their own experience as viewers, without consulting with other members of the broader audience. While I appreciate the hopeful sentiment they each reflect, I believe that their reactions to the shows in question are likely influenced by their position as scholars trained in feminist television critique. The fans I talked to, for the most part, did not engage in this type of questioning or discussion post viewing. Only those fans that were more engaged with self-help culture reported talking about episodes at length, and their

discussions focused on their personal takeaways and learnings. Most fans said they were more likely to just turn on another episode or move on to something else. The emotional moments were fleeting, private and reflective experiences. When they did talk about the show together, it was on more of a superficial level:

> ME: When you watch an episode now, cause you guys all work together right, so do you talk about an episode once you've watched it?
> LISA: Not necessarily episodes, more the characters. We'll not comment on the actual episode itself but more so on "oh my god I can't stand this character" or "they need to get rid of a character"
> …
> JANE: But we don't normally like articulate our feelings about the show necessarily so much as that was a good one or that was a bad one or what was up with that product placement. So, but we don't normally have a discussion about what ... or even I was never actually like I know exactly what Erica is going through when she was breaking up with so and so, its not like that either its just like a reflective note.

In this way, relating to an episode or a character was unlikely to generate critical thought and discussion. Rather, it generated pleasure, introspection and a desire to watch more.

It's Normal: She doesn't have it figured out either

While different fans related to Erica in different ways, in general, the main contributing qualities that were identified as making her relatable were her imperfections, more specifically her struggle to find a job and a boyfriend, as well as her struggle to constantly learn and grow. It seemed as though the fans I spoke to were relieved to finally see someone on television who, like themselves, did not quite have it all figured out.

> The reason that I started watching this was that I ended a relationship as well and I had a lot of time on my hands [*Laughter*] ... And it seemed like quite relatable in that you know I just turned thirty-two and am single and kind of going through like this ups and downs and stuff like that and I just kind of liked the format of the show. How it was her feeling that she had

> made mistakes in the past but it really wasn't a mistake and its kind of nice to be able to learn that. (Jane)
>
> And then, I think also the fact that like she's unestablished makes her appealing because, because then no matter what struggle you have in your life you can relate, like to some degree. Like, if she was settled and married and time travelling, like I wouldn't watch the show. I think I probably wouldn't 'cause then it doesn't seem, like she's not struggling so you don't care as much, like the fact that she's single and a bit older and like that's frowned upon in our society, which is stupid, but it is. And then she didn't have a career right off the get go and she had to struggle to figure it out and gain confidence, then you, it's like you, its like she's the underdog, like everyone roots for the underdog. (Farah)
>
> Ya, I found it comforting to like watch the show. What it comforts me about is like the fact that everyone's kind of a screw up. (Paul)
>
> Basically, the lesson that I learned the other day, I think it was from the last episode or the episode before, but change is inevitable and you just kind of have to move with it. And then I sat back afterwards to reflect, I thought 'there are a lot of problems that I get like really worked up about that involve me having to change like maybe in a minor way or in a major way' … I just need to cool off, don't sweat the small stuff, move on and then just try to be a better person from it and try to learn. (Joyce)

These comments remind me of Ang's study of *Dallas*, in which she suggests that "being a woman involves *work*, work of constant self-(re)construction" (2008, 243, emphasis in original). The fans I interviewed, just like those Ang encountered, were struggling under the burden of being 'good' women (or individuals), but there is one notable difference: Ang attributes the pleasure of engaging with the melodramatic women in *Dallas* as stemming from the fact that it allowed viewers to revel in the fantasy of letting go, of taking a break from the constant work of being a woman. I see *Being Erica* as functioning in almost the opposite way. Instead of a fantasy of letting go, *Being Erica* served as a fantasy of getting it right. Participant's enjoyed watching Erica as she, with the support of Dr. Tom and the added benefit of being able to travel back in time, learned from her regrets and gained the courage to move

forward confidently on the 'right' path. Furthermore, instead of going through these struggles alone in her head, Erica lived them overtly on screen in a way that, according to Farah, offered both comedic relief and reassurance:

> And that like, that's what I enjoy about it I think cause then she's so like timid and uncertain but then you get to, like, I think, like, probably all of us feel that way in some degree, so then you like that she feels that way outwardly 'cause you can relate to it. Like you were (Jessica: ya) struggling with do I quit school, do I not quit school; and me who was like this morning 'oh my god like I have to fire this girl' I have like post-its to like my reasonings just in case she argues, but then outwardly we don't always show it. So like, if I wasn't friends with you, I wouldn't know that that was a struggle. But she does in this thing so then its funny to me and then she overcomes it so I think there's like this thing where you go oh I can do it too or something.

This identity work that Ang noted as part of the female experience, is often associated even more strongly with the period of adolescence. In her chapter, "Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity and My So-Called Life," Murray (2007) focuses on teenaged girls, whose fan activities she observed through online billboards. These billboards were online community spaces filled with writing about fans' love of the show and stories about the similarities between the show's narrative and their own lives. These fans were serious fans who dyed their hair and wore certain clothes to look more like the show's protagonist and who even raised money and purchased advertisements in an effort to reverse the network's decision to cancel the show. Murray explained this strong connection between viewers and text as follows: "The female fans, specifically the adolescents, interwove the text with the reality of their own everyday, using the show to wrap their own desire/pain/ambivalence in, through, and around the narrative" (39). The author attributes the feelings that fans had about Angela's authenticity to the

"scarcity of other viable teen girl representations" (40) at their disposal. Similarly, the uniqueness of Erica's authenticity is noted in the following exchange:

> STACEY: I think it was just nice to have a character on TV that you could be like 'yes!' Like, I can relate to that person whole-heartedly. You know compared to other, like what other television shows you look at. Like
> ANNE: Not much
> STACEY: I can't think of anything.

In addition, according to Murray, these adolescent girls were still in the process of establishing their sense of self and transitioning from being girls to being women (43), a process that the show helped them cope with. While its clear that some of the feelings and reactions that fans of *My So-Called Life* exhibited were unique to their status as adolescents, particularly the efforts to emulate her appearance and lifestyle exactly, I believe that others, such as the ambivalence about transitioning into the role of women, extend into early adulthood if not beyond. This argument is supported by Feasey who, in her textual analysis of the teen television show *Charmed*, contends that "the themes and identificatory practices on offer in teen programming appeals to today's twenty to thirty something set because they are said to be living a life of prolonged adolescence" (2009, 438).

With events like marriage and motherhood being pushed later into life, there is a corresponding loss of traditional life scripts for young women to follow. This change is viewed alternatively as either a source of freedom or a source of insecurity (Feasey 2009, 439). Just like the teenaged fans in Murray's study (2007) may have been experiencing ambivalence over the conflicting expectations of being an adolescent girl versus a grown-up woman, the fans of *Being Erica* that I interacted with seemed to be struggling with ambivalence over the freedom and opportunity,

which was apparently at their disposal, and their inability to capitalize off of it. According to McRobbie:

> Individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life-plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. Self-help guides, personal advisors, lifestyle coaches and gurus and all sort of self-improvement TV programmes provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as a social process. (2009, 19)

I'm Not the Only One: The comfort of belonging to an intimate public

Above triggering an emotional response and offering a moment of recognition and reflection on personal experiences and struggles, *Being Erica* was enjoyable for fans because it made them feel less alone. Jessica suggested "I think its just sort of nice to see that like, not that she's a real person, but she's a concept of a real person that, there are people out there that are struggling the same as you and, you know, dealing with the same issues as you are regardless of what age you are." For Erica B. it served as a reassurance: "It was just like oh this does happen, I'm not crazy or you know. (Me: ya) even though it was a TV show." Similarly, Sharon stated, "It's also like, even though its on TV, you're like 'oh, if someone else is going through it, maybe its not that bad'. It makes you feel normal."

In these excerpts you can see that, while being careful to point out that they know that Erica is not a real person and that TV is not the same a real life, the participants took pleasure from the feeling that maybe what they were going through was a normal phase of life. It made them feel less lonely in their struggles. Interestingly, Berlant suggests that "aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally underprivileged" (2008, ix) and that intimate publics

thrive in part because of their ability to quell these feelings. It is not that everyone who makes up an intimate public, or who watches *Being Erica*, is actually the same or has lived through the same experience, but each is able to find a 'tiny point of identification' (Berlant 2008) or a 'moment of resonance' (Bird 2003) within the plot. "Participants in the intimate public feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions" (Berlant 2008, 5).

The fans that I talked to were aware that their sense that the show mirrored their life was not unique to them individually and, in fact, felt that the show's writers and producers were quite skilful and talented in their ability to address such universal themes.

> I don't know what they do, but like something is underlying universal to sort of our demographic that feels applicable when you watch it, where you're like they wrote it for me you know. Not nec- like you don't actually think so, but you're like oh that's what I'm going through. (Farah)

> I almost felt like it was my show written for me but I think a lot of people felt that way because they were probably themes that were fairly general enough that like everyone deals with having to overcome challenges or learn how to be assertive in situations, or everyone has those, you know, moments where they feel like they're floundering and trying to figure out what they want to do in life, especially at our age, especially women, especially, you know, liking to travel and wanting to do a lot of things but not really buckling down and knowing exactly what you want to do. Umm, and so a lot of those themes, and like love and trying to find a relationship and hoping that it works out and then being happy and then being distraught, and trying to balance that with your career and all the rest of these things. And being there for your friends, but not getting taken advantage of and, you know all of those things that were a lot of the themes of it I think were fairly - I don't know, translational? (Erica B.)

Berlant is critical of this universalizing quality, arguing that through the distribution of "mediated fantasies that magnetize many different kinds of women" women's

culture "manages to sublimate singularity on behalf of maintaining proximity to a vague prospect of social belonging via the generic or conventional plot that isolates an identity as the desired relay from weakness to strength, aloneness to sociability, abandonment to recognition, and solitary agency to reciprocity" (2008, 11). Her commentary is not all negative. She recognizes that there is something positive about media products that hold up persons and lifestyles that have previously been undervalued (3). However, her concern is that these representations are normative and the publics that form around these products are apolitical, leading her to ask, ""What are the political consequences of a commoditized relation among subjects who are defined not as actors in history but as persons who shop and feel?" (13).

Even when a show like *Being Erica* brings up questions about the challenges of being a woman in today's world, the answers it provides tend towards individualized solutions that conform to the status quo. As viewers watched Erica climb up from her starting place as a single, under-employed woman in her early thirties, they do not watch her learn how to consume less to save money nor do they witness her embrace the joy of community without a monogamous partner. Instead, they watch her 'pull herself up by her bootstraps' so to speak, to become more accountable, assertive and confident and, as a result, to find what she always knew she had been looking for: a man, a house, a car, and a business to call her own.

Conclusion

Recognizing *Being Erica* as situated within a post-feminist and romance-centric genre, my focus in this chapter has been to consider how the fans I interviewed engaged with and experienced the show, its storylines and its

characters, and to explore what this relationship revealed about the social reality that is reflected and enacted through the series. What I found was that fans took great pleasure in being able to see parallels between their own lives and those taking place on screen. These similarities, while not a mirror image, seemed to feel much truer to the fans as compared to the other available programs.

The generic and universal qualities of *Being Erica* made it an open text (Livingstone 1998) that fans – members of an intimate public – could populate with their own memories. The result was an emotional and thought provoking journey, but not a revolutionary one. "The cohabitation of critique, conventionality, and the commodity produces more movement within a space than toward being of wanting to be beyond it" (Berlant 2008, 12). In other words, these emotions and thoughts were experienced individually and projected inwards. The fans felt reassured that they were not alone and motivated to believe that they too could do better if, like Erica, they learned to understand and accept themselves for who they are. The lessons on how best to do so and the self-help discourse from which they emanate will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: (re)Learning from Erica

Introduction

Just like it would have been imprudent to ignore that *Being Erica* was a show both centered on and targeted at women, it would be equally unwise to overlook the centrality of identity issues in the show's plot. As a series, *Being Erica*'s narrative structure was built around therapy. Not only did the individual story arc of each episode revolve around a therapy session, the overall plot charted Erica's therapeutic journey from patient to doctor, from confused and lacking in confidence to wise and empowered.

In the previous chapter, I focused my analysis on how the fans I spoke with related to Erica as a fellow woman living in a post-feminist cultural environment. I suggested that their appreciation was based on what they perceived to be an authentic representation of the challenges facing young women today, particularly the difficulties of finding a good man and a good job. It seemed that pleasure was generated from, on the one hand, realizing that it was normal to struggle and that others were going through it too and, on the other hand, seeing someone have the opportunity and the support required to figure it out. In this chapter, I will dig deeper into this idea of 'figuring it out' and explore how fans engaged with and interpreted the lessons offered through *Being Erica*.

Considering *Being Erica*'s place within a post-feminist televisual genre allowed me to gain insight into some of the ways this genre both reflects and enacts the social realities facing women today. Next, I intend to approach these viewers' textual engagement with an eye on its relationship to the broader discourses

circulating in everyday culture[xv]. More specifically, I will discuss the experiences shared by my participants and what they can tell me about the identity issues and practices of the self at work in the show and in the lives of these fans. To do so, I will be turning to my third and final theoretical concept: narrative identity and the self. By considering the literature from this field alongside writings about self-help discourse and the extensive discussion of "life lessons" that came up in my interviews, and with the conclusions of the previous chapters in mind, I will attempt to answer my third research question: How do fans' interpretations of *Being Erica* go on to be reflexively incorporated into their sense of self?"

My third research question was the hardest one. It posed a challenge in two ways: First, it treads closest to the controversial territory of 'media-effects' research. When analyzing how fans mobilize their interpretations of *Being Erica* below, I am very careful to not imply that these fans' lives were forever changed because they consumed this particular series. Any such conclusion would be unfounded and, as a fan myself, I can attest that I do not feel noticeably different for having watched *Being Erica*. I cannot attribute any of the life decisions I have made in the past three years to a lesson I learned from the show. However, I believe that the words of my participants are still illuminating as to how the show might be subtly and reflexively incorporated into a fan's life and, as such, are deserving of critical attention.

The second challenge is that the fans I interviewed, for the most part, were not really able to verbalize what they did with the interpretations they took away from the show. This is partially because, by the time I did my interviews, the show was over and the participants' memories of it were fading quickly. Additionally, as I

highlighted in the previous chapters, the ways in which fans interact with television are often difficult to recognize and hard to separate from their interactions with our media culture as a whole. As Gorton observes, "It is near impossible to pin down the meanings audiences take from what they watch or to separate meaning taken from television and those taken from everyday life" (2009, 33). Given these two challenges, the arguments I delineate in this chapter will be speculative in nature, specific to the experiences of the fans I spoke with and a reflection not just on *Being Erica*, but on the broader cultural environment in which these fans find themselves.

Identity

In the introduction to this thesis, I put forward the view that there is no such thing as a true identity or an authentic self. Rather, drawing on Hall, I outlined a post-modern understanding of identity in which the concept is simply described as a series of articulations between the subject and the various discursive formations in which she is situated. In the words of Barker, "the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'" (2002, 14). Moreover, "identity is a constitutive description of the self in language … we do not *have* an identity, rather, we *are* a multiple weave of attitudes and beliefs" (31). Recognizing that identities are built through stories, Thornham and Purvis suggest that "as a primary generator of the most everyday source of narratives in contemporary culture" television serves to "construct, mediate and frame our social and individual identities" (2005, ix). The centrality of narrative practices to both televisual media and one's sense of self underscores the importance of studying identity issues and television fandom in concert with one another.

Having established an academic understanding of identity, it is important to also consider how identity and the self are talked about in media and popular culture more broadly. According to Barker, "it is central to the current western account of the self to see persons as unified and capable of organizing themselves" (2002, 14). Furthermore, Rimke observes that the current era is "one characterized by an unprecedented preoccupation with the self" (2000, 61). This preoccupation was echoed throughout my readings for this chapter and is supported by both the plot of *Being Erica* and my analysis of the interview transcripts.

Erica B. seemed aware of the narrative dimension of the self, saying, "It's the stories you tell yourself," and recognized that she had a choice about which stories she told. At the same time, she was very focused on the idea of an authentic self, stating that one of her favourite parts of the show was when it dealt with questions such as, "What are you? Who are you? How can you be you?" In the same vein, William noted the malleability and socially constructed nature of identity when he said:

> I think all of us come up with, uh, I think we're all, we all are born very basic but, like we, as we start to grow up, we come up with these ideas that help us understand the world when we're very young and then, uh, and those aren't necessarily based in reality. They're just based on the data that I've had and the best way that I could understand it at the time.

Yet, he too described the show as being concerned with "exploring what does it mean to be myself". These two examples are highly revealing. While some aspects of post-modern, narrative-based identity theory have clearly been taken up in wider discourse, the idea of an authentic and true self that can be understood and improved endures.

In *The New Individualism: The Emotional Cost of Globalization* Elliot and Lemert argue that "our current fascination for the making, reinvention and transformation of selves is, in some sense or another, integral to contemporary living" (2006, 53). Throughout their book, they chart social changes that have given rise to this new kind of individualism including the heightened consumerism of the globalized economy, the explosion of information and technology, the increasing privatization of problems through neo-liberal ideology and the proliferation of "confessional therapeutic culture".

According to these authors, this confessional therapeutic culture – and the self-help industry that feeds off of it – has been expanding markedly since the 1970s. Like McRobbie (2009), Elliot and Lemert attribute this at least partially to a "*disappearance of context*" and suggest that "individuals are increasingly expected to produce context for themselves. The designing of life, or a self-project, is deeply rooted as both social norm and cultural obligation" (2006, 13). McRobbie would contend that this seemingly common-sense notion of being responsible for one's own life project can be traced back to popular culture (2009, 12) and identifies Bridget Jones as a consummate example of a character that "portrays the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject" (20). In my view, Erica Strange embodies a similar set of attributes, which attests to the series' anchoring within therapeutic and self-help discourse.

My Confession

Before I continue, I have a confession to make. Somewhere in my room, hiding in a box on a shelf, I have a small collection of self-help books. Most of these books promise to teach me how to love myself so that I can open myself up to love and intimacy from others. Each was purchased in an act of desperation at a time of emotional crisis. Beyond my use of this literature, I have also gone to therapy and I have participated in a free weekend-long self-development seminar that pledged to change my life if only I committed to attending (and paying for) more seminars over the months and years to come. I signed up for counselling, attended the seminar and purchased the books all within about the last three years, at the same time as I was watching *Being Erica*, and I can see now that my pursuit of self-transformation was in large part tied to my slow and limping exit from a failing relationship. However, while my engagement with self-help in a formal sense did not reach this peak until my late twenties, I would say that I have been on a quest to 'find myself' for over a decade now. I have written in journals, drafted bucket lists, taken soul-searching trips around the world, listened to advice from anyone who was offering it and engaged in countless conversations about the meaning of life. On its most basic and narcissistic level, even this thesis can be seen as continuation of this quest.

I share this information here for two reasons. First, I want to highlight that I am not writing this chapter as a neutral bystander, but as a submersed participant. In the pages that follow, I take a fairly harsh and critical stance against self-help discourse, but in doing so, I do not seek to insult or diminish those who consume it. In the same way as I attribute the popularity of women's genres such as chick lit and

romantic comedies to their ability to fill a need, I believe that people who turn to self-help, myself included, do so out of a genuine desire to feel better, even if such a feeling rarely lasts.

Secondly, I hope that my own confession will orient the reader's attention to the central role that confession played in my research methodology. Holstein and Gubrium note that in order for self-narration to occur, a space must be made available for it (2000, 127). The interviews and conversations that I facilitated as part of this project provided such a space. Interestingly, the authors further note that the practice of interviewing, which was once confined to more formal settings, has become commonplace in today's world. "In as much as the interview has become a ubiquitous method of inquiry, so far flung that it is virtually everybody's way of acquiring personal information, the self is becoming a widespread artifact of this form of narrative incitement" (129). This might explain why participants appeared so comfortable confessing personal details about themselves to me when we met – being interviewed felt natural.

Beyond just feeling comfortable with being asked questions in an interview-style, participants were likely already at ease with the act of confession. Foucault describes confession, a key activity for the self-monitoring subject, as follows: "a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation" (quoted in Dubrofsky 2007, 272). This ritual has become so routine in our society that "secrets of private life that, formerly, you would have

given nearly anything to conceal, you now clamour to get on a television show to reveal" (Sontag quoted in Elliot and Lemert 2006, 131).

At the same time as people felt open to sharing personal stories with me about such intimate topics as losing/keeping their virginity, dysfunctional friendships and family drama, the context and purpose of my conversations with participants necessarily impacted what was said. "As texts of experience, personal stories are not complete before their telling, but are assembled in relation to interpretive needs" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000,106). As such, the senses of self that participants articulated during our meetings were influenced by our conversations' focus on *Being Erica* and by the implicit expectations of my role as a researcher. Had we met just as friends having a drink, the same stories might have taken a very different form.

Self-Help Discourse and the Show

The fact that the fans I spoke with reported learning from or enjoying the lessons in *Being Erica* is not exactly surprising. As Jane put it, "They're not that discrete about it. Like at the end, when there's the voiceover of Erin telling you what she learned from the episode, it's like 'ahh that's what I should have gotten from it.'" The show's creator, Jana Sinyor, in an interview for the blog *Staying In with Vlada*, indicates that the therapeutic messages in the show were intentionally constructed:

> We felt dorky when we were first talking about it because it sounds so pretentious. Not that we're going to help people with a television show, but that we wanted it to be meaningful. If she's going to go through therapy and she's going to learn something, what she's learning has to be worthwhile and it has to be relatable. (2010)

It was clear from the fans I spoke to that Sinyor and her team succeeded in this task.

In her analysis of *Sex and the City*, Arthurs suggests that the show's "distinctive appeal arises from its ability to "re-mediate" the familiar forms of the sitcom and the glossy women's magazine" (2008, 41). In my view, *Being Erica* operates as a successful remediation of a post-feminist comedic-drama and a self-help book. The presence of self-help discourse in *Being Erica* is fairly obvious. Erica goes to 'therapy' but not in the traditional sense. Dr. Tom is not clinically trained, but rather gets his authority as a time-travel therapist based on having overcome his own struggles in a similar way. In an article based on a textual analysis of self-help literature since its inception, Woodstock observes that within this genre of books ""life experience" provides the primary quality necessary to advise others on personal life" (2006, 327). Time travel therapy further conforms to the picture Woodstock paints of self-help in its emphasis on the individual's ability to solve her own problems (325) and by the weight placed on positive thinking. The overarching message that permeates self-help literature is that "what we think has the power to change reality, and that to change reality, we must change our thinking" (335). By sending her back in time, Dr. Tom is giving Erica the opportunity to change how she thinks about the past with the promised result being that she can change her future.

Unlike the decision to watch television, which is often attributed to a desire to pass time and enjoy ourselves as much as anything (Gorton 2009, 3), the decision to read a self-help book is something we do with purpose. We consume this type of media in moments when we have identified that something is not right in our lives, when we are seeking guidance and answers about how to make things better. While the changes we seek may not always come to fruition, the pre-tense is there. What

happens when the generic and narrative stylings of self-help are packaged in a fictional television series instead of a non-fiction book? What are the implications of consuming these messages of self-improvement second-hand, as onlookers to someone else's therapeutic journey?

In the case of *Sex and the City,* Arthurs argues that the remediation of magazine content into a televisual narrative results in a more engaging product: "The series is able to go beyond the catalogue function of magazine fashion spreads, or the list of ten tips to improve foreplay. A consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated." (2008, 48). In the same way, Being Erica is able to go beyond the self-help book's written advice, offering instead an embodied example of self-improvement.

Erica B., who identified *Being Erica* as being similar to other self-help media she consumed, made the following comment:

> I think to a certain extent, it being fiction is also kind of a benefit because you can wrap the storyline around in a way that makes the most impact on people you know … I think its easier to relate to characters and learn from their experiences because it seems like a peer and someone like you, as opposed to like a self-development book where its more a voice telling you what you should do this or try this or that. I think anything's more fun when it's a story, which is why like, I don't know, why stories are written, why the Bible was written in all those stories.

Other fans were less comfortable with the idea of taking lessons from a television show. In particular, Jane indicated more than once that she felt weird about learning from TV. For example,

> I'm like hey like I can definitely relate to this like its interesting to see how it would unfold and what she would do and what she learnt in that situation because maybe that's something I could learn from it too. But it's also embarrassing when I'm like Holy Fuck [*Laughter*] am I actually taking advice from *Being Erica*??[xvi]

Raymond Williams once wrote "To succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is recreated – not 'contemplated' not 'examined' not passively received but by response to the means, actually lived through by those to whom it is offered" (quoted in Gorton 2009, 97). He refers to this quality as art's 'lived connectedness'. In the pages that follow, I explore the lived experiences of fans and their connections with the lessons in *Being Erica* so as to further illustrate the implications of this particular instance of remediation.

How Did Fans Engage with the Lessons in *Being Erica*?

Different lessons resonated more strongly with different people. William and Jessica both mentioned appreciating the lessons about believing in yourself and not worrying about other people's judgments and approval. Zoe was most affected by the episodes where Erica was forced to acknowledge and question her use of male attention as validation. Heather remembered having the strongest reaction to the episodes that dealt with Erica's relationship with her mother. Stacey found the show inspiring because it showed her that change was possible while Joyce appreciated the show's reminder that change was inevitable and that she had better learn to adapt. Paul was most drawn to episodes that featured regrets from Erica's high school and university years where she was making decisions about her future. Liz and Anne felt most moved by the more emotionally-charged episodes that caused them to pause and question whether they were avoiding dealing with similar issues in their own lives. Sharon and Jane related most to the episodes where Erica was dealing with relationship issues. Erica B. appreciated the episodes that dealt with being authentic and taking career and relationship risks to follow your heart.

From this list alone, I hope that it is clear that these fans engaged with the messages or morals in *Being Erica*'s episodes depending on what resonated with their own lives and memories. The task of amassing all of these varied experiences in some kind of coherent way for the purposes of this chapter proved to be very challenging. Out of the 100+ pages of transcripts that stemmed from my interviews, close to a quarter could be said to tie to the topic of 'lessons'. To present these in a manageable way, I have first drawn some summary conclusions about how the narrative trope of lessons contributed to the appeal of the show and the different ways in which participants engaged with the lessons. Then, in the final section, I explore how the lessons were interpreted and what this might mean.

Lessons as a Source of Quality

In much the same way as participants commented that some of the weaker elements of *Being Erica* were compensated for by the presence of an authentic and relatable female protagonist, the lessons that permeated the storylines were also seen as enhancing the show's appeal. Stacey observed,

> Its kind of a mediocre show, but the writing is good and the stories are really good and you can, I felt the first season I could relate to it and be like ya that's such a good message for me to sort of like take with me in my life. And I know it's corny but I like fall into that, like how I saw George Lucas on Oprah [*Laughter*] and I was like learning so much from him.

For those who felt that the series waned in its final season, at least some of their decreased enjoyment was attributed to the decreased presence of meaningful lessons. For example, after watching an episode from Season One, Farah commented, "What I liked about the first season that I don't think exists anymore probably is that, like, she learns and you see it, right? Like sometimes she doesn't

anymore but you, in the first season you see it." Erica B. was similarly disappointed with more recent episodes, noting,

> For some reason, in the last season, I still enjoyed the show, and I still watched it, but I just I felt like something was missing and I didn't feel the same connect to it. And maybe that's because, I don't know, she didn't really seem like she, she wasn't searching more, she was getting involved in more drama-filled stuff I thought. Like, her life lessons of learning didn't, I mean they were still there, but it wasn't, I don't know, her, they didn't seem as profound to me as it was before … I didn't find her to be as deep anymore. Or she wasn't questioning her life as much, it was kind of just like her business and stuff started to take priority and she was going through, she was going through the flow of what she'd created rather than kind of learning about it as much still. I don't know if that makes sense.

Interestingly, others expressed quite the opposite, reporting that for them the lessons in the final season were a positive and appropriate progression from those that preceded them. William commented multiple times that he liked watching Erica in the role of Doctor-In-Training, saying "I think that the show is really on to something with that concept, that in order, that, in order to raise ourselves, we must raise each other as well as raise ourselves." Heather remarked that she felt like Erica's progression through therapy was very true to life:

> I've always thought that like the therapy aspect of *Being Erica* was like really on the nose though. And, like, the progress that she makes in therapy is like really on the nose. Like, its just like, because those are, like getting over regrets, is something like you learn to like weed out of your thought process when you're in therapy and like by the like the third or fourth season they've kind of weeded out her constantly getting over regrets and like working on like you know you kind of go like regret, current issues, how could I do things differently, to a point where you're just sort of talking about what's happening in your life and like I think that they like go through that and I like, I don't know. It really makes me think that the she, like whoever Jana Sinyor, or whatever her name is, has like clearly was like somebody who like actually went to therapy. 'Cause like the story arc of her therapy is so like true.

Non-Uniform Engagement

The topic of lessons in *Being Erica* came up in all seven of my interviews, but there was a definite diversity in participants' engagement with them. For some people, it seemed like they were at a point in their lives where they were almost looking for inspiration and lessons. In these cases, *Being Erica* was a willing provider. For others, the lessons were interpreted less directly. As one might expect, those participants with the greatest pre-existing engagement with self-help discourse (Farah, Jessica, William and Erica B.) saw the show quite literally as an opportunity for learning. When, based on a preceding comment, I asked Erica B. "So, part of what you liked about the show was watching her learn?" She responded,

> Ya. Because I felt like I learned a lot through her and sort of the way that she came to her rationalizations. Like I remember one episode, where she had to fire somebody and she was really scared about it. And then she managed to do it in this way that was so authentically her and she realized she didn't have to like scream and yell and create a big argument, she could just really say it from the heart, in a heartfelt way, and still say what she needed to say. And I think, ya, things like that for me, I mean we, we, all of us have so many instances in life where we have to do things that we don't want to or we have to have confrontations with people and can we do it in a way that's authentic so it doesn't become a big confrontation just a very like present heart felt thing. And I, I remember kind of taking, like thinking about that particular scene quite a few times just in like work place environment things that I was going through.

In my interview with William he used language that I assume came from his personal development program to describe his experience of the show. He said,

> If I'm honest and I looked into the voice inside when I'm watching the episode, I usually have what I would call an integration. Where things that weren't connecting suddenly go OOOhhhh. I've been following this rule and this rule at the same time and wondering why I'm not umm why I'm really confused and so yeah, I think, I think watching an episode I generally have an integration and things make sense.

At another point in my conversation with William, he likened watching an episode of *Being Erica* with having a therapy session: “So, um, in essence it almost feels like every episode could be like a counselling session, ya, like a therapy session.” Joyce similarly compared watching the show with going to therapy leading her to wonder about the training of the writing staff: “I don't think it matters what stage you are in life there's always something you can learn from any of these episodes, which made me think one day that maybe they have like a therapist or a psychologist on hand to help them write stuff. Do they?”

Joyce also observed that she felt “as good coming out of watching one of those episodes as if I was sitting there talking to a girlfriend too sometimes.” Anne echoed this comparison of watching *Being Erica* to talking with a friend:

> And I guess, I had a conversation with a friend yesterday who I don't see very much and I just told her a whole bunch of what was going on in my life and she gave some kind of insightful thoughts like just for someone who didn't know anything that's going on. But it, and I felt the same way after that conversation 'cause I went home, came home and was like you know this is how she said it and its like she really summarized all my predicaments up really well and this is what I need to fix and this is what I need to do and I felt like, I felt kind of similar thought process like someone just called me out on this, its like. I don't know, I definitely, *Being Erica*'s a friend? I don't know [*Laughter*].

As a friend, it seemed as though *Being Erica* served less as a source of companionship than as a benchmark against which to compare one’s own decisions, behaviours and level of self-awareness. Paul commented that he appreciated when Erica’s regrets contrasted with his own. For example, having recently returned from a trip to Australia, Paul said the following in reference to an episode where Erica regretted not going travelling in Taiwan:

> I don't know, I found that one interesting 'cause it was kind of like the opposite of what I would regret, which is like sometimes when I find the episodes interesting. She has clearly opposite things than what I go through and it kind of makes me think. Like you know, seeing like her regret of not doing it kind of makes me more comfortable in my choice of doing it or vice versa.

Similarly, for Jessica, the ability to compare her own actions to Erica's contributed greatly to her desire to keep watching the show:

> It's so real, you know, like you say you feel like you're part of it because you can relate it to your own life, you can take whatever concept she's learning and go like how can I apply that to me. And you don't even do that consciously, it just happens because you're so focused on what the lesson that she's learning. You're like, look at this one, we're both like oh I could totally relate to that already as soon as the episode started and you're hooked the whole way through 'cause you wanna know what she does to kind of relate it to what you would do and then you're like, k, I've gotta watch the next episode now.

Reminder: Don't forget what you already know

Originally my intention had been to title this chapter "Learning from Erica" but, after considering my transcripts again, I observed that none of these particular fans seemed to have learned something wholly new from the show. Rather, it simply confirmed the lessons they were already aware of and in the process of applying.

> HEATHER: I was watching the end of the third season, the beginning of the fourth season and oh my god some of those like therapist in training episodes where she's like "you are your mother" like your mother is your patient I was like Oh My God. I think in that episode it was just like, we all kind of like forget that our parents led this whole life before we were born … And like its that weird realization that like everybody has it, that your parents are like real people. It was like one of those take-home episodes. Where you're like, oh my god, my parents are human beings! I mean, not that I didn't realize that before, but you know it was one of those moments when you're like
> ZOE: It brought it home.
> HEATHER: It brought it home, ya.

Erica B. suggested that self-help products, fiction or non-fiction, were designed to remind you of the same lessons over and over:

> Essentially I think, everything, every self-help book, every *Eat Pray Love*, every show like *Being Erica*, every anything, essentially will tell you the same thing. There's no like guru, umm, book that you can read that just fixes everything like I said because we're all trying to go through this process. But I think a lot of it is the same information presented in different formats and every time you see the same thing presented in a different format it just gives you another perspective on the same thing and we need, I feel like I always need constant reassurance or constant reminders that ya pushing through fear is important, challenging yourself is important, surrounding yourself with people, you know all the things that, all those themes you forget when you're in a funk.

Likewise, Stacey found that, at times, the show's messages were the reminders she needed to re-motivate herself.

> For me, it's more like inspiring that part of the show. I was more like, yes, you can make changes, you know? You can go on and do different things and you don't need to be stuck. And I know that's an obvious statement and it, but you just have to like hear it. No matter where you hear it … it's just nice to have like those little reminders cause it's so easy to get stuck.

Interestingly, when the plot and the corresponding lessons did not conform to the viewer's expectations, it undermined the perceived sense of realism that figured so prominently in their enjoyment of the show. From my own experience, I can attest that when Erica's process of getting-over her break-up with Adam in the final season did not fit with my own understanding of such an experience, I felt frustrated, dismissed the plotline as unbelievable and was even tempted to stop watching the show all together. It was not until the storyline conformed back to my expectations that my enjoyment resumed.

Several participants commented on a particular character and storyline that they did not find believable. The character, Brent, first appeared as Erica's friend

and co-workers at River Rock Publishing early on in the series. He later became Erica and Julianne's much despised business rival, before reconciling with them, joining their new company as an employee and starting to date Julianne. Surprisingly, it was not this move from good to evil and back again that caused the viewers most concern; it was Brent's sexuality. In my interview with Joyce and Sharon they talk about Julianne and Brent's relationship as follows:

> JOYCE: And then her relationship with Brent.... He's too flamboyant. Like he cannot be a boyfriend. Like too, my gay-dar is up [*Laughter*]
> SHARON: Ya I don't see him metro guy. Like he's full on
> JOYCE: He's not a metrosexual to me, no.
> SHARON: He's homosexual to me.
> JOYCE: Ya. So I'm not convinced that way that relationship is real. Like 'cause he's just way too sensitive … he's more feminine more sensitive than I am, which doesn't make me, like I'm not jealous of that or anything, but it just doesn't seem like the right fit for Julianne.

In the conversation following my interview with Erica B., I mentioned how my friend lived next door to the actor that played Brent in Toronto, leading to the following discussion:

> ERICA B.: Is he actually gay?
> ME: No, he's like a bro, I think. I don't know, he has a dog, and he's kind of jock-y I think
> ERICA B.: 'Cause he just seems so flamboyant on the show.
> ME: Ya, but then he's not even gay on the show
> ERICA B.: I know, which was weird, because even then it was very very hard, just with his character, for me to imagine him as not being gay
> ME: Ya
> ERICA B.: You know. I think that's why that relationship seemed a little outrageous to me. Its like, he's clearly gay.
> ME: Its funny, I've had that conversation in a few of my interviews, but when I re-watched the first episode he asks Erica on a date in the first episode
> ERICA B.: Does he?
> ME: Ya, and he alludes to the fact that he has a crush on Julianne in the first episode too. So like, it feels like it came out of nowhere but it didn't, it's just like we
> ERICA B.: We weren't watching that part of it.

Conversely, the fans I interviewed in Montreal received Brent's character and the show's overall representation of gender and sexuality very positively:

> HEATHER: They do gays really well on the show though. I love all the gays on this show. I mean we just watched the Pride episode, I can't believe we didn't talk about that. We haven't talked about Brent either.
> PAUL: Oh he's hilarious
> HEATHER: He's like one of my favourite characters. I love him.
> ME: Why?
> HEATHER: Just because he's like, I don't know, like he's just one of the more like confusing characters, not just because of his sexuality … I think its like kind of, I don't, like it's not like far fetched I mean like [my boyfriend] doesn't you know like speak like 'this' but he cooks, reads men fashion blogs, would read something called the *Urban Peacock*[xvii] for sure. [*Laughter*] For sure. Like he's not, he's pretty effeminate for like a big fat burly guy.
> ZOE: I like that there were like, that the two principal gay male characters in the show were bears. I don't know
> PAUL: I liked Dave just 'cause like you know when he first comes in he's like just working at Goblins or whatever and you totally don't even like expect it, its like they almost just threw it in randomly later, you know what I mean? They're like I guess he could be like we'll just tuck this in but, ya I thought that was pretty refreshing too.
> ZOE: Ya, its also nice that a gay guy and a straight guy could be like best friends
> HEATHER: Ya, 'cause they don't do that on TV. Like if you're gay you're gay, if you're straight you're straight and you two shall never meet … I thought that was kind of part of like its Canadianess … Very like you know, in Canada like this is what our gays look like and we don't really care, you know?

It seems to me that the 'lesson' *Being Erica* was trying to convey with this complex representation of gender and sexuality through Brent's character was that masculinity, just like femininity, comes in all shapes and sizes. However, as the above exchanges exemplify, if fans were not already open to this idea, the representation seemed unrealistic and the message did not resonate.

In another storyline, Erica's sister Sam gets divorced from her husband Josh who is an emotionally abusive investment banker. Unexpectedly, Sam then meets,

falls in love and has a baby with a kind, rock-climbing janitor named Lenin. Erica B. thought this was a bit of a stretch, saying:

> I thought the storyline with her sister and Josh and then her sister like falling in love with the janitor at the hospital and she was a cardiac surgeon, I wouldn't necessarily say its completely that would have never happened in life. I think it's quite rare. Uhh, but that's not to say that would never happen.

Liz, on the other hand, really enjoyed that particular storyline:

> LIZ: There was episodes where there was stuff going on with her sister and like the asshole husband and then she meets the new guy. .... Ya, right, and those ones were interesting where she was working through that … Sam kind of works up the courage eventually to like get rid of him and after she goes to London. And I always thought, I thought that was an interesting storyline. I don't know if it was one episode, but I thought that was interesting. Then she kind of meets this guy that's like less
> STACEY: like accomplished
> LIZ: socially acceptable but he's like a way better guy and it was kind of like an interesting, I don't know, the whole process of her relationship with that the that Josh and like how he was kind of controlling and then Lenin just kind of comes in and counters it.

In her essay about identity issues in *Degrassi Junior High* MacLennan states, "Audiences are most readily persuaded by arguments that incorporate attitudes and beliefs that they have already accepted, since these arguments will sound like common sense to them" (2005, 149). For my participants, their appreciation of *Being Erica*'s lessons was greatest when it confirmed or at least paralleled closely a lesson they had already accepted based on their lived experiences. In the same way, Radway noted that, even though the historic and exotic settings of romance novels often gave a reader the sense that she was learning, the books were also "reassuring her that she already knows how to make sense of an existence which always is as she expects, even in fiction" (1984, 61). The role this plays in the maintenance of fans' status quo perceptions will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

What Lessons were (re)Learned?

So far, I have used quotes from my interviews to demonstrate that the fans I spoke with enjoyed and engaged with the messages *Being Erica* provided in different ways and that these episodic lessons primarily served as a way for fans to (re)learn what they already knew. In the pages that follow, I will discuss *Being Erica*'s teachings about how best to live with regards to one's past, present and future, and how these messages coalesce to confirm a status quo understanding of the world, which places the responsibility for reflection, management and adaptation squarely on the shoulders of the individual.

Let go of the Past: Everything happens for a reason

In the first episode of the series, Dr. Tom asks Erica to write down her regrets in a notebook. Without hesitation, Erica furiously scribbles down a multi-paged list. This list, which is made up of two to three word descriptors that identify the events that Erica believes sent her life off-track, then serves as the basis for the majority of her therapy sessions for the seasons to come. In several of my interviews, people discussed how watching the show made them think about their own regrets. Zoe noted how, even though the show was about letting go of your regrets, depending on her mood, sometimes it made her think about them more:

> There's definitely been times when I've been in a bad mood and I watch an episode and it's just like I, the show is super introspective, I was in an introspective mood before and my introspective mood just continues. And I'm like 'What? Life regrets, bladdy bladdy blah.' And like even though the purpose of the show is to almost like distance yourself from that, it's like, since she, especially in the earlier seasons, since she's in that headspace, and if you come to the show in that headspace it just like pronounces it or something.

Liz found that, while she did not instinctively resonate with Erica's focus on regrets, watching this play out on screen triggered a consideration of her own regrets:

> LIZ: Like, ok, like the concept of regrets is interesting to me because I would never like live my life thinking about like, ok, she has this list of regrets
> STACEY: Ya.
> LIZ: And then you ask yourself like well what would my list of regrets be. Like what would I have on it. And I would never think about having a regret, that wouldn't be some way that I would approach life, but I think it makes you sort of wonder like it makes you think about what decisions that you've made or ya like choices, like directions that you've gone in, whether or not you have a regret about that, or what would be an incident that you could isolate as something to explain why you are currently the way you are and I think that's what it would call up for me. Like, oh is there a reason why I'm like this or is there some kind of excuse or event that occurred that made me this way and maybe that's like sort where you start thinking about your own self or your personality or things you're not maybe happy with.
> ANNE: Mmhmm
> LIZ: Ya, regret is an interesting way of thinking about who you are I guess.

For other fans, having and dwelling on regrets seemed like a universal experience. To use Jane's words: "I feel it really is quite relatable in that sense because it is so based on regrets and feeling that you could do things differently if you had that opportunity to and that's something that we all probably think about all the time." Lisa, who was the participant who most strongly articulated that she did not feel as though she *learned* from *Being Erica*, told me that after starting to watch the show she had considered starting a blog about regret prevention:

> Like you go through life with all these things and you think well in your head you don't want to go there so I'm like, so like for thirty days say you'd do something you always wanted to do or um go back and change something or... So it was actually something I even considered and even still I think it would be really cool to go like to do things that you don't want to go through life and say ah I should have done that or I wish I'd done that.

At the same time as people acknowledged that, after watching the show, they often found themselves thinking about regrets in one way or another, someone in

every interview would point out how that was not the 'message of the show'. Rather, Erica was learning that the events that she thought defined and held her back did not have to. For the fans in Toronto, it was about letting go of certain stories:

> STACEY: Ya, that's one thing... that's the only thing, like she goes back and she doesn't really, you can undo the regret but you can't really undo it, you never-
> LIZ: You can come to terms with the situation.
> STACEY: Ya, exactly.
> LIZ: Which is more what it's about.

For the fans in Montreal, it was about realizing that the events we believe shaped us were not as significant as we might have thought:

> PAUL: Well, I think it just touches on such a broad aspect that can apply to anyone, 'cause who doesn't always wonder like what if I did this instead of that. Or like oooh and like sometimes you think like oh I made this big mistake and my life would be so much better if I had just done this, like why did I not do that. But at the same time you don't know, you could have done that and it could have turned out.
> HEATHER: And then you watch *Being Erica* and you're like maybe it would just be the same [*Laughter*].
> ZOE: Which is kind of like the message of the show.

For the fans in Vancouver, it was about stopping to view these past events as regrets, recognizing them instead as learning opportunities. Lisa said, "I think that in my life I feel like they were regrets but after watching this show it's like it isn't. It's not a regret it's a life lesson". Jessica and Erica B. both took away that they would not be who they are today if it were not for some of their 'regrettable' experiences:

> And it also just kind of made me realize like ok, well her regrets in some ways were kind of pointless because everything, not everything in our lives happens for a reason, but I tend to kind of live to a certain extent on that premise. Umm, and then ya, why do we stress and why do we have all these regrets, like just live the best that you can and know that things are kind of moving in a forward good direction and you can't you know, you can't go back, but things work the way they do sort of … It was also funny like her perception of the way that she was as opposed to how she actually was. (Erica B.)

> And you start thinking, like, there's so much about each experience that you have that affects everything in your life that I think it's so important to just take it as it is and you know and I still make sure that I'm not making, you know, stupid decisions, but I don't regret anything that I did in the past that I wouldn't necessarily change if I could because I wouldn't be here right now, you know making the changes that I am I guess. Or maybe I would it would just be in a different way, you know? (Jessica)

To better understand how the narrative trope of regrets was taken up by these viewers, it is useful to refer back to Woodstock's article "All About Me, I mean, You: The Trouble with Narrative Authority in Self-Help Literature" (2006). The author notes that "self-help readers are encouraged to mold their past, presents, and anticipated futures into the talking cure narrative presented in the text" (338). Because identity is constructed through language, it is almost as if the emphasis on regrets in *Being Erica* provides viewers with a new vocabulary to use when recounting events from their lives. Furthermore, Woodstock argues that above all else, "self-help narratives provide lessons in appropriate public self-telling" (340). Despite relying heavily on the idea of regrets, the show and the protagonist's progression encourage viewers to take a more optimistic view of these past challenges, framing them as having happened for a reason and as providing valuable knowledge for self-improvement.

The emphasis on optimism and its therapeutic effects really resonated with William who said "I think she basically learned, and she had to keep learning, I think she learned this almost every episode, that she was ok the way she was … I think that she's better because she realized that she was never sick, ummm, not really." This notion of being okay with the way you are and the aforementioned acceptance that things happen for a reason was discussed at length in Dubrofsky's article

"Therapeutics of the Self: Surveillance in the Service of the Therapeutic" (2007). Based on a textual analysis of the reality-based television series *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, the author describes the emergence of a "therapeutics of the self". She distinguishes the latter from conventional therapeutics in that it emphasises the importance of affirming the self the way it is. In other words, Dubrofsky contends that *The Bachelor* shows were examples of a new trend that prioritizes self-love above all else. "Now therapeutic subjects can be content with who they are *and* the state of the world around them. There is no impetus to change anything, but rather, people are invited to learn to become comfortable with things as they are" (268). I believe that this prioritization of self-acceptance exists in *Being Erica*, especially as it relates to letting go of the past. However, as will become clear in the section that follows, this premise is also often contradicted.

Make the Most of the Present: Learn and grow always

Being Erica may have provided viewers with reassurance that past mistakes were not worth worrying about, but the same relaxed attitude was not taken about the present or the future. Jessica's comment, shared earlier, clearly captured her experience of acknowledging that she needs to let go of stress over earlier 'stupid' decisions because things happen for a reason, while simultaneously reaffirming that she will continue to take the necessary steps to avoid making 'stupid' decisions in the future. If things happen for a reason, why does she feel the need to consciously avoid future mistakes? Participants seemed acutely aware that it was not simply a matter of leaving things up to fate, nor was it merely a question of learning the appropriate lessons from the past and then getting things right forever more.

Rather, learning, changing and growing were lifelong undertakings and a fundamental part of being a responsible and successful individual:

> HEATHER: It's like just 'cause she's in therapy doesn't mean like she stops making mistakes. You know, like it's not, it's not a miracle drug, you know it's not a miracle cure. It's not like the be all end all like now you're life is great, we'll fix up all these regrets, put a nice little Band-Aid on them and you're set to go. It's like, there's the process is contin- like it's a continual process, like she's still going through it even when she's in the show and like
> ZOE: And Dr. Tom is still going through it even though he's a doctor
> HEATHER: Dr. Tom is still going through it ya and it, like, it leaves you with the assumption that she'll be still be going through it, but just with the better tools to cope with it
>
> 'Cause you never are, like in life, you're not going to be an expert or a pro in everything 'cause that would mean that you've learned everything you needed to know and that's not possible. Like, you need to grow, and you kind of have to accept that, that change is part of that growth. (Joyce)
>
> The other thing that I kind of thought was cool was that it's not, like life is a process, it's a continual process and so its not like, it was very apparent in Season Four that she still had her own issues you know. Even though she was a doctor and she was able to help people and she knew like all these skills and all the rest of this stuff, you know she still sometimes did annoying things to drive Adam away. She still sometimes didn't trust her gut like a character like Kai who came in that was really alluring but maybe not necessarily the best for her in the end, or that it just that they wouldn't work. Umm, and I think that sometimes in my own life I've always thought like, k well if I put, like if I take this course or if I read this book, or if I do whatever, um, all of a sudden I just wave like the magic wand across my life and from then on in, and from then on in I will never screw up, you know. I will have the skill set that I need and I'll know what I have to do and I'll just move on forward in this graceful way and maybe they'll be a few hiccups but you know, I'll just be so peaceful within myself that it'll be fine right? But life is not like that, no matter how, and I mean I think they were pretty good at even showing Dr. Tom as much as an influence as he was in her life, wasn't necessarily completely free of tumultuousness in his own right, or decision in his own. And so, I think she succeeded in learning tools to be the best person that she can be but I don't think you succeed or you don't, it's like this continual process that she probably and all of us just constantly will go through. (Erica B.)

The language used in these statements reflects that these viewers are implicitly aware of their individual responsibility to manage themselves to the best of their ability *throughout* their lifetimes. Elliot and Lemert identify this as a common way of thinking in the globalized world, saying: “More and more individuals translate ... experience in society, in business and also in private life, as reducible to self-regulation, self-management and self-sufficiency" (2006, 41). Likewise, Rimke observes that in a culture infused with self-help discourse, “the self becomes an object of knowledge *and* a subject/object of governance, not simply under the gaze of an expert acting at a distance but, most importantly, under the ever-present gaze of one’s self” (2000, 68). No critique of this need to self-monitor and manage one’s own behaviour was raised during my interviews, leading me to conclude that my participants did not view it as something noteworthy, but rather as an accepted part of everyday life.

In her consideration of the reality-based programme *Wife Swap*, Gorton pays particular attention to the affective[xviii] moments in the series, noting their ability to “direct viewer’s aesthetic judgments and to privilege the notion of self-transformation” (2009, 100). The premise of the show, which I have never watched, is that two wives switch families temporarily and great drama ensues. Much like in *Being Erica*, each episode ends with a reflection on what each of the wives and their families have learned.[xix] The assumption is that at the same time as the wives improved themselves, “viewers have learned which choices are good and which ones are bad” (107). Gorton concludes that the show functions in two ways: Viewers are “drawn into an emotional engagement with participants which on many levels

reiterates our feelings of community, belonging and humanity" and are also "complicit in perpetuating an individualized society that encourages us to 'choose, change and transform' and to judge those who do it badly" (113).

Some of the fans I interviewed seemed to have internalised value judgments about good and bad behaviour based on the principles of self-management as illustrated by the following example:

> JOYCE: Like for me at the very beginning when I was watching umm I sat there and I'm like oh my god my girlfriend really needs to watch this show because she to me was Erica. Like she just couldn't get out of her funk. She couldn't like go beyond and better herself and try to better herself, like try to get herself to the next level but she's always staying there complaining about her life and 'oh woe is me'. And, but you can see with, you know, the show it kind of, ya, you just learn lessons from it and like little by little you know that change is inevitable and its just how you can
> SHARON: deal with it
> JOYCE: ya and learn from it instead of just saying, "oh the whole world is against me I just might as well not try."

William demonstrated a comparable intolerance for not taking responsibility for one's own behaviour when he said:

> I see things differently now and I can't go back, umm, whereas before it was easier just to pretend, ya I don't actually know how to fix my life, I'm just going to, I'm just going to make the world uh at fault for my actions when really, if I were to, if I were to really change, want to change, I need to actually take responsibility and ownership of my own actions and choices and say like oh I can change this. I don't have to wait for Mom to come change me, or my diaper, ya.

In this way, *Being Erica* reminded these viewers that, in order to be happy, they needed to be accountable for their actions. The only thing that was in the way of Erica's success was herself, and the only way for her to get out of her 'funk' was to do the necessary self-improvement work. Rimke describes this emphasis on individual responsibility as "the sociopolitical mandates of self-help" (2000, 67)

with the result being that “individuals are rendered entirely responsible for their failures as well as their success, their despair as well as their happiness” (63).

Open Yourself Up to the Future: Living happily ever after

As a way of wrapping up many of my interviews, I asked participants what they thought about Erica’s journey from start to finish. Sharon said, “I felt happy that she was able to change and get to where she was.” Zoe described it as “super sappy but I loved it!” In general, people seemed satisfied. They were happy that Erica ended-up happy. Farah, who realized during our interview that she still had three episodes left to watch, said:

> And I don't know exactly what happened, but I think that the only way I would feel satisfied with the end episode, is if she did have her life like a happily ever after. Like there's no way that I would take any last episode that didn't include a happily ever after. 'Cause like when you've gone through that many seasons watching someone grow, then why shouldn't they be happily ever after? It would be a pessimistic viewpoint and this show is not pessimistic. So I would be, I would think that that would be an appropriate trajectory but I think that it doesn't make for as good TV, which is why I would like the first season better than the last season, but its still necessary to feel satisfied.

In the introduction to her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010) provides an illuminating discussion of the word ‘happy’ and the cultural significance attributed to it. Happiness is often accepted as “ being what we aim for, as being what provides purpose, meaning and order to human life” (1), but the author highlights that just because a desire to be happy seems like common sense, does not mean that it is a naturally occurring or neutral phenomenon. In fact, it is hard to nail down an exact definition of what happiness *is*. According to Ahmed, happiness basically amounts to nothing more than affective associations with certain objects and ways of being.

How did the participants I interviewed know that Erica was happy at the end of Season Four? They were not able to ask her directly and, as far as I can remember, she did not proclaim her happiness on screen. Rather, viewers were expected to imply her happiness from the plot developments. She owns her own company, is doing work that she loves and is moving in with her boyfriend – how could she not be happy? The participants *knew* she would still have struggles, but they also *knew* she was better off than she had been at the beginning of the series. "Where we find happiness teaches us what we value rather than simply what is of value" (Ahmed 2010, 13).

Ahmed further notes that, in current self-help discourse, happiness has moved a long way from its original definition, which was more similar to 'lucky'. Now, happiness is often thought of as "a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated and defended privately by each person" (Sikszentmihályi quoted in Ahmed 2010, 22). The Toronto fans, who, out of the people I interviewed, were the most critical of the show, considered the implications of Erica's achievement of happiness during their post-viewing conversation. Liz questioned Stacey's assertion that she had found the show inspiring, asking how she might have felt had her life stood still while Erica's 'advanced', but Stacey pointed out that it was impossible to know. Referencing another friend who had watched the show, the following exchange took place:

> LIZ: I just remember Pam[xx] saying like she'd watched a few or something and then she kind of said oh ya, but then the Erica girl figures it out so then I just like, it was totally uninteresting to her, she couldn't identify with it.
> ME: When she was happy?
> LIZ: Ya. It was annoying to her actually; it made her feel bad about herself.

> STACEY: Really?
> LIZ: Ya, that's how, that's the conversation I had.

Other fans concurred that the show was less fun to watch as Erica's problems decreased. Zoe described it as follows:

> Because you know you've gone on this little journey and like you want, you're invested in Erica being happy in the end and that's like, in some ways it makes it more challenging to watch because you're like uuhhhh she's happy now, but umm, but at the same time, it like that's what you were wanting especially as the season, the show's wrapping up.

Even if it decreased viewing enjoyment, a happy ending was expected and appreciated.

Taking her critique of happiness further, Ahmed suggests that the fact that happiness gets associated with certain objects and not others "might be how social norms and ideals become affective" (11). In this way, by taking its viewers on an emotional journey of self-development that culminated in a 'happily ever after' conclusion, *Being Erica* reinforced a status quo conception of what successful living looks like. In the words of Thornham and Purvis, "Television dramas are able to naturalize desire, concealing the devices and codes which make the artificial, the fictional and the ideological compelling because 'natural'" (2005, xi).

Take Responsibility: Change yourself, not the world

What is this status quo 'world' that I keep saying *Being Erica* maintains? It is a world where struggles and success can be attributed to the individual. Where we are expected to concurrently undertake the conflicting tasks of loving ourselves for who we are and working to become who we want to/should be; of being accountable for our actions while letting go of our regrets because things happen for a reason. It is a world where material success and love, two factors linked strongly

to our sense of happiness, are seen to accumulate around those who are best able to manage both their thoughts and behaviour. It is a world in which we are *also* told that we will be most successful if we follow our hearts and take risks. It is a world where our number one responsibility is to be self-reflexive, self-aware and self-controlled and where our only responsibility towards others is to help them to be the same.[xxi] It as a world where an intimate public can take comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles, while also acknowledging that they alone are responsible for their individual successes and failures.

This is not a world that the creators of Being Erica invented. Jana Sinyor has described drawing her inspiration from people she knows and emphasized that her number one priority was to make the show feel like it could be real life (Vlada 2010). The participants I talked to enjoyed watching it because it made the thoughts and feelings they experience on a daily basis seem normal. They took joy in seeing their struggles refracted back at them and appreciated the added benefit of feeling like they could (re)learn life's important less along with Erica. Is there any harm in that? There is no way to answer this question definitively: Maybe there is no harm at all; maybe it helps fans cope with the reality they are submersed in; or, maybe it exacerbates it.

Perhaps William captured it best when he said "I think what this show is doing is about recognizing, well, all the shit that I am perceiving in the world a lot of that is probably my own shit. In fact, I would venture to say that 99- of it is my own shit." In this emphasis on the individual, *Being Erica* overlooks a few things that are outside of the individual's control. For example, when we first meet Erica she is

underemployed and quickly becomes unemployed. Yet, she still manages to appear unburdened by financial problems. She lives in a large, beautiful apartment, frequently goes out for food and drinks with friends and has an endless wardrobe of fashionable clothes. At the beginning of Season Three, after getting fired, Erica is able to come up with the seed money required to start-up her own business and qualifies for a business loan. By the end of Season Four, Erica has bought a condo and a car, which seems to indicate that, either her new business is wildly successful, or she has access to unlimited credit. The lack of realism of Erica's financial situation was touched on during my interview in Toronto, but otherwise appeared to go unnoticed by most participants.

Zoe described the problems dealt with on the show as "middle class white people problems" and concluded that the show was "not, like, exposing any deep underbelly of anything". While there is no inherent harm in having a show focused on "middle class white people problems", the show treaded onto dangerous territory when it equated the time travel patients' individual 'rock bottom' moments to one another. For example, in the series finale, Erica's first patient as a real 'Doctor' was revealed to be Dr. Tom's daughter, Sara. Throughout the series we found out that Sara had had run away from home at a young age, had lived on the streets and had spent time in jail for a burglary she had committed to feed her drug addiction. Her rock-bottom moment that triggered her induction into time travel therapy was a drug overdose. The idea that the same therapy that could help Erica, whose low point was being single and unemployed, could help someone who was

struggling with addiction and had a criminal record was not necessarily interpreted as problematic. Jessica commented:

> "I mean Erica was wasting her life away, living at home not really knowing what to do with her life, but she wasn't on drugs or going to commit suicide from what I remember … So like its just a different situation, but at the same time she can still relate to his daughter because she's been at the low. So I think maybe that's the point, that they recognize what low feels like and they know that you can get better."

The dismissal of structural advantages and disadvantages in favour of an emphasis on personal responsibility is a common feature of therapeutic discourse in general. In "TV Talk Shows as Therapeutic Discourse: The Ideological Labor of the Televised Talking Cure," Peck (1995) highlights how, even though talk shows have taken private problems and given them a public platform, they have done so in a way that circumscribes the possibility of public or collective solutions. Using an episode of *Sally Jesse Raphael* that dealt with parenting styles as an example, Peck describes how an African-American mother brought up the different issues facing her family as compared to those experienced by the Caucasian expert offering her advice. The show's host was quick to steer the conversation back to the topic at hand: parenting not race relations, personal behaviour not structural conditions.

Peck uses this example and others to argue that talk shows' "personalization strategies, para-sociality, and therapeutic framework organize social conflict within narratives of individual and interpersonal dysfunction" which in turn "proposes that we change ourselves without conceding that our identities and actions are determined by social conditions that will not change just because we interpret and handle them differently on an individual basis" (75). In the case of *Being Erica*, the remediation of self-help and post-feminist television conventions functions in much

the same way. To use Berlant's words, "it is a case study in what happens when a capitalist culture effectively markets conventionality as the source *and* solution to the problem of living in worlds that are economically, legally, and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival, let alone flourishing" (2008, 31, emphasis added).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered *Being Erica*'s use of regrets/lessons as a narrative trope and its mobilization of identity issues and self-help discourse. Participants experienced this facet of the show in varied ways, with some using the show as a comparison point, others appreciating its therapeutic benefits, and still others enjoying consuming self-help lessons through a new medium. Overall, these fans were glad to see Erica evolve into a stronger, more confident individual and felt happy that she ended up happy. Moreover, they seemed to welcome the show's reminders about how to let go of past regrets, how to learn and grow continuously and how to prepare one's self for a fairy-tale future.

William, whose enthusiasm for the show was unmatched by other participants, went as far as to say "its the kind of show that can move the world forward"[xxii]. While as a fan of the show myself, it would be tempting for me to agree with him, I am not so sure that I can. First of all, messages only seemed to resonate with participants if they fit in with what they already believed, which left some of the show's more progressive or challenging lessons underexplored. In addition, William's assertion is based on the belief that changing the world starts with changing yourself. But, what if we become so focused on our 'selves' that we forget

to think critically about the world altogether? In the words of Fairclough, the "ideological practices" put forward in therapeutic discourse "may be in competition with practices of political mobilization based on the contrary assumption that social ills can be remedied only through social change" (quoted in Peck 1995, 76). If we reframe all of our struggles as personal challenges only solvable by personal accountability and personal change, will our collective reality ever really improve?

Conclusion

The Project

In this thesis, I have considered the engagement of a particular group of fans with a particular televisual text. To do so, I drew on literature about audiences and everyday life, feminist media critique, and theories of narrative identity. More significantly, I relied heavily on my analysis of the transcripts from the seven interviews I conducted with fifteen fans. These interview participants, who I identified through a snowball sampling technique, were all self-identified fans who reported watching the show in a dedicated way that gave them notable viewing enjoyment. My interviews, five small group and two one-on-one, were unstructured and largely led by participant comments. The result was a rich dialogue that gave me more material than could ever have been included in a paper of this size. I read over the transcripts multiple times and identified themes as I went. As much as possible, I wanted to let the participants speak for themselves, which led to my inclusion of extended, unedited quotes throughout this paper.

Researching a television program that I myself am a fan of and interviewing other fans who in large part were part of my social network both enhanced and complexified my research process. As previously acknowledged, the presence of friendship undeniably influenced the knowledge that was accessed and generated through this research, but it also allowed me a level of comfort and intimacy in my interviews that would otherwise have been impossible. Furthermore, just like I found that participants paid closest attention to the parts of *Being Erica* that resonated most with their own experiences of life; it is worth noting that my

interpretation of what was said during the interviews was inevitably impacted by what resonated most with my own experience of the show. I made concerted efforts to circumvent this bias: re-reading transcripts for things I might have missed and including comments from participants that mirrored my own as much as I included those that felt more foreign to me. In addition, I plan to allow participants to read this project to point out any instances in which they feel misrepresented. Even so, there is no question that if another researcher had conducted the same interviews, or even if another researcher considered these same interview transcripts, their analysis would have been nuanced differently. I am implicated in what is printed on these pages and what is not at every step along the way.

Another consequence of my choice to study an object of my own fandom is that it made this research an emotional experience. For the most part, these emotions were positive. I had fun talking to other fans and often felt exhilarated by our exchanges. The theoretical readings also proved to be quite fascinating because, in better grasping other people's engagement with the show, I was better able to understand my own. I had many moments, sitting at my desk for the umpteenth hour in a row, when I felt extremely grateful that I had picked a research topic that I was so passionate about. However, it was not always happy times. It was hard to critically dissect a program I had loved so much – frustrating to realize that my enjoyment of this text might be problematic. With this realization also came guilt. I was one of *Being Erica*'s biggest cheerleaders and never once had I thought that, in encouraging its consumption, I was potentially encouraging the propagation of individualism and the further commodification of the self. I also feel guilty that I still

watch *Being Erica* to cheer myself up; that despite knowing that the feelings of reassurance it provides to me also contribute to my apathy and continued subordination, I still take great pleasure in its narrative arcs. At times, this guilt turned to anger. Is it really so bad if watching something makes me happy, and if part of what makes me happy is that I feel like I am learning to be a better person? As I write this conclusion, these are feelings that I am still trying to reconcile.

The Value

All that being said, this thesis is not just about me, nor is it just about my friends and their experiences as fans. This project is important and worthy of academic attention for three primary reasons. Most obviously, this is research into television's presence in our lives. Elliot and Lemert put great emphasis on the role of technology and media, particularly the televisual, in informing our sense of identity when they write, "More and more, and for increasing numbers of us, the mass media is from where we get our language, where we learn to construct narrative continuity of self and world" (2006, 41). This supports my assertion that it is important to study television and identity in concert with one another.

Within the field of television, *Being Erica* provided particularly rich research possibilities. For one, not a lot of research has been done on fan engagement with Canadian television shows.[xxiii] The smaller budgets and lower profiles of Canadian shows mean that they attract not only a smaller viewing audience but also a smaller amount of academic interest. Not just a Canadian television show, *Being Erica* is one of the CBC's most successful efforts in recent years; attracting significant viewing audiences, especially in its earlier seasons, and achieving widespread international

distribution. Sarah Doole, Director of Drama for BBC Worldwide, was quoted in *The Globe and Mail* as saying, "It's one of our top-selling shows around the world," noting that its distribution outpaced even the highly regarded *Doctor Who* (MacDonald 2011). This widespread popularity indicates that clearly the show's creator, Jana Sinyor, found a recipe for televisual success in her construction of the *Being Erica* narrative, particularly for the much sought after younger female audience demographic. As one of the show's executive producers, Ivan Schneeberg, puts it "Everyone talks about the accessibility and universality of the show. They see Erica's issues as their issues, her problems as their problems" (quoted in MacDonald 2011).

This brings me to the third reason I believe this research is meaningful. Beyond the continued significant presence of television in our day to day lives and *Being Erica*'s success in capturing a respectable viewing audience, what makes this show particularly interesting for research is its mobilization of relatable storylines and self-help discourse to engage fans, primarily of the female variety. The fact that this strategy proved to be an effective one for the CBC, combined with Hidek's observation (2008) of the resurgence of therapeutic narratives in all types of television shows and the continued prominence of the confessional form that Whelehan (2005) identified in popular literature targeted at women, means that we are likely to see more shows of this nature in the future. ABC and BBC have both already bought the rights to produce their own versions of *Being Erica* and other similarly inspired shows are probably already in the pipes. As such, it is more important than ever to understand what drew fans to this show, how they engaged with and experienced the show and its storylines, and how their interpretations

went on to be reflexively incorporated into their sense of self. While my answers to these research questions are only directly relevant to the particular group of fans I interviewed and the particular series in question, they still provide valuable insight into some of the processes at work in the everyday lives of television audiences more generally.

The Arguments

In Chapter One: Enjoying Erica, my focus was on describing the fandom and identifying some of the key factors that drew my research participants to *Being Erica* in the first place. Pulling from research into audiences and everyday life, particularly ideas put forward by Bird (2003) and Gorton (2009), and building off of Sandvoss' writing about fan studies (2005), I recognized that while most fans can be described as emotionally moved by the objects of their fandom and as engaging in critical value and aesthetic judgements, the reasons for *becoming* a fan and the *experience of being* a fan varies from one fandom to another as well as from one fan to the next (Sandvoss 2005, 8). With this in mind, and recognizing that conversational context necessarily impacts how fandom is discussed, I provided descriptions of the show, the research participants and the interviews, paying particular attention to the influence of friendship on my research process. I further argued that it was worthwhile studying fan experiences because taste and estimations of quality can tell us a lot about "who we are and believe ourselves to be" (Sandvoss 2005, 24). Finally, I identified three factors that were instrumental in drawing these viewers to this show: the fact that their friends watched it, the ability to watch the show at their own leisure through non-traditional viewing platforms

and the show's Canadian roots. In addition to these pulls and the other varied factors that participants identified as contributing to their enjoyment, I concluded that what really made fans out of these viewers was the fact that they could relate to Erica and felt as though they were able to learn from her therapeutic journey.

In Chapter Two: Relating to Erica, I dug deeper into this idea of being able to relate to the protagonist's journey. Drawing on feminist media critique, I highlighted *Being Erica*'s position within a post-feminist genre that has become increasingly prominent in the post-network television era. I demonstrated how, even though *Being Erica* was a show about beautiful, self-sufficient and empowered women, the relationship between the series and feminist ideals was tenuous at best. Pulling excerpts from my interview transcripts, I demonstrated that the fans I spoke with found *Being Erica* to be a uniquely authentic representation of what it was like to be a young women in today's world and that they described the show's open and generic plotlines as triggering memories of similar experiences in their own lives. Then, referencing Sobchack's phenomenology of spectatorship (1999), I argued that at moments, while watching *Being Erica*, these fans engaged a longitudinal consciousness, in which they were looking through the screen and drawing from their own experiences rather than depending solely on the images presented to them. For these fans, watching this show in this way was meaningful and pleasurable because it resulted in emotional moments of resonance; it allowed them to both recognize that it was normal to not have one's life figured out and to fantasize about what it would be like to have the resources and support necessary to get one's life on track; and it made them feel less alone in their struggles.

Considering all of this, I argued that *Being Erica* attracted an intimate public of strangers who felt connected to one another by their ability to relate to the generic narratives presented in the show (Berlant 2008). I concluded this chapter by noting that while watching *Being Erica* was an emotional and thought provoking journey for fans, it was not a revolutionary one. Rather, it was a comforting journey of self-recognition that encouraged these fans to hold out hope that, if they tried hard enough, they too could get it right.

In the third and final chapter, (re)Learning from Erica, I focused in on this idea of 'getting it right' as it was experienced and represented through *Being Erica*. Building off of narrative theories of identity and recognizing television as a primary generator of the narrative resources we use to tell our life stories (Barker 2002), I underscored the importance and relevance of studying television audiences and identity issues at the same time. I went on to discuss the current fascination with the 'self' that has been identified in Western societies and observed how this fascination was reflected in both the plot of *Being Erica* and in my analysis of the interview transcripts. Referring to Arthurs' work on *Sex and the City* (2008), I described *Being Erica* as a remediation of the comedic-drama and the self-help book; highlighting how it incorporated key markers of self-help discourse such as expertise built off of life experience, focus on personal responsibility and emphasis on the power of positive thinking. Turning next to how the fans I spoke with interpreted the lessons contained in the show, I noted that while most participants felt the inclusion of morals added to the show's quality, the ways in which they engaged with these lessons were by no means uniform. Those most involved with self-help discourse

outside of the show saw the series as an opportunity to learn and improve themselves, while others described the experience as therapeutic or similar to talking with a close friend, and still others viewed the show as a useful comparison point by which to evaluate or consider their own actions. In large part, the participants only seemed to engage with the lessons that conformed with what they already knew, making the show more of a source of helpful reminders than of new knowledge. Finally, I looked at the lessons that these fans took away from the show and observed that *Being Erica* reinforced the following ideas: one should let go of past regrets because everything happens for a reason; one should seek to learn and grow always and recognize that self-management is an important and ongoing responsibility; and, through this self-management, one should open one's self up to future possibilities in order to truly achieve what we all know we want – to live happily ever after. In this way, *Being Erica* is not only showing its viewers what happiness looks like (good job, good man, good house, good relationships with everyone, good sense of self, etc.) it is also showing us how to get there. It overlooks structural issues and disadvantages and puts the responsibility for change and success squarely on the shoulders of the individual. The message, taken right off the shelf of the ever-growing self-help industry, is clear: take responsibility and change your *self*, not the world.

The Next Steps

When the final scene of the series finale of *Being Erica* faded out, there was no question that Erica still had a lot left to learn. In the same way, in concluding this thesis I feel like I have only begun to scratch the surface of this field of inquiry.

Future research possibilities include following up with these same research participants using a different methodological approach or to discuss a different show; finding a different network of *Being Erica* fans to interview, perhaps in a different cultural context, such as Japan, where the show has been particularly well received (MacDonald 2011); or doing a similar study about fans of a different program that mobilizes therapeutic narratives and self-help tropes. Moreover, the findings of this study could be further enhanced by conducting a text-based analysis of *Being Erica* or through a thorough examination of *Being Erica* fan activity online.

Beyond additional projects, perhaps the most useful next step would be to consider what the popularity of *Being Erica* and other media products like it mean for the future of feminism. Berlant contends "feminism has been a much better resource for critique than for providing accounts of how to live amid affective uncertainty, ambivalence, and incoherence" (2008, 234) and goes on to suggest that "intervening in the pleasures of heteronormative romance and political normativity must involve dismantling their capacity to make old stories and practices look new and revolutionary while discrediting the restlessness and scepticism of the subjects who also desire them" (262). Similarly, Whelehan observes, "Given that Second Wave feminism could not solve some of the most intimate problems for women – how to conduct heterosexual relationships, how to negotiate self-identity, and how to deal with 'power' – it is not really surprising that these themes crop up again and again in the writings of young women, whether or not they are explicitly engaging with feminism" (218).

To put it differently, these types of media texts continue to be popular because they continue to fill a need. Yes, they may fill that need without actually addressing the structural issues that lead to its existence in the first place, but they generate pleasure and serve as coping mechanisms nonetheless. Considering the profitability of the industry behind these types of media narratives, and the seemingly insatiable appetite of the audiences that consume them, it is unlikely that these kinds of post-feminist media texts are going anywhere anytime soon. However, given that these texts only resonate with fans because they can relate to the storylines, maybe it is not the proliferation of these texts that we should be lamenting. Instead, perhaps the focus should be on making concrete changes to the real lived experiences of young women today so that these types of stories stop feeling relatable in the first place.

Notes

Introduction

[i] Quotes from fans of *Being Erica* will be used heavily throughout this thesis. These quotes are reflective of how fans expressed themselves either online, as in this example, or in interviews/conversations with me. When considering these quotes, particularly those stemming from the interviews, the reader should remember that online writing and verbal dialogue do not conform to the standards of written language. It was not always clear when listening back to an individual's spoken words where one sentence ended and another began. Punctuation has been included where it is deemed to increase clarity and accurately reflect what was said and how.

[ii] The influence of friendship on my research will be discussed in more depth in Chapter One.

Chapter One: Enjoying Erica

[iii] All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

[iv] *Being Erica* also has significant international distribution, a fact which is not discussed here because it falls outside of the scope of this study.

[v] This proved to be a much more difficult task than I expected. How does one choose which details, out of the myriad of details that make up a person's life, are relevant? Is pointing out someone's age, race, gender, sexuality, etc. more or less offensive than overlooking it? Do any or all of these factors noticeably influence a fan's engagement with the show? Because of the informal structure of my interviews, I did not collect consistent demographic details about my participants, which further complicated this task. Where possible and appropriate, I complimented the information shared during my interviews with my pre-existing knowledge of the participants.

[vi] Joyce's higher level of participation may have been encouraged by our seating arrangement. I was facing Joyce head on and sitting at a ninety-degree angle from Sharon. In fact, I found that in most of my interview, the person with whom I had the most direct eye contact because of seating arrangement often spoke the most. If I was to undertake interview-based research again in the future I would be more aware of and attempt to mitigate against this potential bias.

[vii] Keeping Erica B's real first name made my thesis a bit trickier to write, but the significant impact on her viewing experience made this inconvenience worthwhile. In this thesis, when I use just 'Erica' I am referring to the character, Erica Strange, and when I use 'Erica B.' I am referring to the interview participant.

[viii] With this in mind, when including excerpts of dialogue between myself and the participants, I chose to use the pronoun "me" instead of the more traditional "interviewer" so as not to convey a false sense of neutrality. As mentioned in the introduction, my personal identity and role as friend/fan/researcher in this process necessarily impacts what was said in my interviews and how.

[ix] The appeal of adolescent-type shows to young adults will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

[x] Rintoul and Hewlett point out a tendency in academia, particular writings about *Degrassi*, to equate the "Canadianness" with "Authenticity". According to the authors, this weakness leads to a "lack of attention to the way in which these terms come to be defined" (2009, 143).

Chapter Two: Relating to Erica

[xi] It is important to remember that, while this chapter is focused on women's genres and feminist theory, two of my research participants are in fact male. Ang contends that "femininity and masculinity are not positions inhabited inevitably by biological women and men", but that identity is transitory, the temporary result of dynamic identifications" (2008, 244). She uses this to explain how come melodrama does not appeal to all women and does appeal to some men.

[xii] Interestingly, William compared *Being Erica* to different shows all together, which I see as indicating that he was less drawn to the show for its portrayal of strong women and more so for its story of personal development. He likened the series to *Six Feet Under*, *Lost* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Heather also compared the show to *Six Feet Under*.

[xiii] In the introduction to this thesis, I indicated that I would be focusing on the experience of the social audience rather than that of the spectator. However, because Sobchack's discussion of spectatorship (2009) comes out of a phenomenological perspective, which is rooted in embodied experiences, I found her arguments to be both illuminating and relevant to the work at hand.

[xiv] There are obviously distinctions between film spectatorship and television spectatorship, but these have become decreasingly significant as film viewing has moved into the home and TV viewing has become independent of broadcast schedules (Gorton 2009, 40).

Chapter Three: (re)Learning from Erica

[xv] When I use the term 'genre' I am referring to the specific conventions of a particular type of text (e.g. post-feminist television shows). On the other hand, when I use the term 'discourse', I am referring to messages and ideas that circulate throughout society more broadly and which are often reinforced by multiple institutions and cultural conventions.

[xvi] Jane's apparent embarrassment in this statement is reminiscent of Gorton's argument that television is often seen as guilty pleasure because it is associated with laziness and passivity (2009, 3).

[xvii] *Urban Peacock* is the title of a book that Brent pitched when River Rock Publishing, under new management, decided to take a more a man-centric focus. The book was meant to appeal to straight men that cared about fashion and other 'fabulous' things. Brent originally tried to conform to the new boss' expectations of masculinity – changing how he dressed and learning to play golf – until Erica, as a Doctor-in-Training, encouraged him to be true to himself. Brent was subsequently fired.

[xviii] Gorton (2009) builds her arguments about affect using the theories put forth by Sara Ahmed, whose relevance to this research will be discussed below.

[xix] While *Being Erica* would be considered a fictional television program and *Wife Swap* a non-fictional program, their respective relationships with reality are not that different. Dubrofsky point out that "what occurs on reality based shows is a constructed fiction, like the action on scripted shows, with the twist that real people create the fiction of the series" (2007, 265).

[xx] Pam is another friend of ours from Toronto who I was regretfully unable to interview for this project.

[xxi] Helping others learn to help themselves is a big part of self-help discourse (Rimke 2000) and *Being Erica*'s plot. This concept has clearly been taken up by Jessica, as evidenced in this statement: "Now that I'm sort of heading in the direction I want to go in, I see others who are not there, I want to help them. K what makes, you know, go for what you want to do, go for what you love."

[xxii] Should television shows play a part in moving the world forward? William appears to think so:

> "Ya. Like, my dream job would be uh being a film maker that creates television shows that stream into people's bedrooms every night and or everyday and, and help them to connect with themselves because then um, I think that those are the secrets that can reach them whereas and books are the same way, but like um I think sometimes people need to be affected without knowing they're being affected in order to be, to, for them to see what's going on, it sort of has to be a blindside. Because a person might not choose, a person's not necessarily going to choose therapy unless they see the value of it or in their lives and because of things like this, I'm more open than I ever would have been before."

Conclusion

[xxiii] The only academic writing about audience engagement with this type of textual system in a Canadian context that I came across during my research were articles and books published about the Degrassi programs (e.g. MacLennan 2005).

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