

***Brown Girls* (2017) by Fatimah Asghar and Sam Bailey**

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1 In *Brown Girls*, the viewer observes a portrait of racialized youth. *Brown Girls*, directed by Sam Bailey and written by Fatimah Asghar, is set in contemporary Chicago. In February of 2017, the OpenTV webseries released on its own, independent URL. Viewers can access the website, and therefore the episodes, from numerous countries; however, *Brown Girls* is a comedy that confronts American issues. A number of U.S. sociopolitical events set the stage for *Brown Girls*' focus on race, queerness, and femininity: the 2016 Presidential election, the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, and an ever-increasing rate of police brutality against people of color.

2 While the viewer can recognize these broad American social influences throughout each of the untitled seven episodes, the webseries introduces the characters through archetypal images of youth. The first scene in episode one is an intimate portrait of a young woman's messy room. The shot begins without any music. A phone rings as the viewer sees shots of a desk crowded with a chalkboard, photographs, and an origami dog. Leila (Nabila Hossain) wakes up to a call. At timestamp 00.04-01:19, Leila says, "I was not sleeping, Auntie ... I didn't forget, I was just distracted ... Sex? No, Auntie, I'm not having sex!" while her naked partner, Miranda (Melissa Duprey), lounges on the bed. This moment sets the tone of playfulness, a mood that permeates every episode and finds physical form in a 'Children at Play' sign that hangs in the apartment. Additionally, these comments demonstrate how Leila and other young characters of color navigate youth and 'adult' concerns: sexuality, family, and identity. This first scene sets the tone for *Brown Girls*, an Emmy-nominated comic webseries that honors adolescence — in all of its awkward, humorous, and tense moments — without reinstating the pressure to grow up.

3 Many shows about young characters rely on a coming-of-age narrative by presenting a story about how characters grow out of childhood. While growing up is a fairly universal experience, the Bildungsroman can also condescend to youth by showing adolescence as a second tier to adulthood, something from which to *mature*. *Brown Girls* avoids the Bildungsroman trope by celebrating youth, especially Brown and Black youth, at its core. The title may remind us of HBO's *Girls* (2012), a series that features the self-indulgent concerns of white women. *Brown Girls* flips this expectation on its head. Each episode is a snapshot into the daily lives and concerns of twenty-somethings Leila and her roommate Patricia (Sonia Denis). Patricia and Leila's

relationship guides the viewer through the series; the show, *Brown Girls*, is truly about these young women. These roommates become our narrators. Most of the action in this show reflects the life of an average young adult: hookups, cooking (and burning) dinner, and talking with friends. However, the creators depict these scenes with attention and care, guiding the audience to the realization that these everyday actions, these everyday lives of young women of color, are *worthy* of being archived and portrayed on screen.

4 *Brown Girls* asserts the value of their brown girlhood rather than conforming to social norms that chart adulthood as a linear path. In fact, Asghar ends the online series with an unemployed Patricia asking her mother (Lily Mojekwu) for support. Visually, the viewer feels time repeating itself. By the final episode, episode seven, Patricia and Leila seem to be right where they started, even to the camera shots across Patricia's room that remind us of the first episode: collaged posters, pictures of Patricia as a child, and a baby-blue bong. However, the young women continue to express autonomy while they request help from the adults close to them. At the end of episode seven, at timestamp 09:39-09:54, Leila promises, "Patricia, we're going to make this work" as they clink their glasses and take a drink. The webseries ends hopefully. Despite Leila questioning her dead-end job and Patricia being fired from her position as a bartender, the two join in a celebratory 'cheer.' The moment undercuts what we, the viewer, may perceive as the women failing on their journey to adulthood.

5 Writer Fatimah Asghar and director Sam Bailey imbue these moments of brown youth with their own significance, reminding viewers that the experiences of adolescence hold their own weight and beauty. The color palette of the show reinforces this celebration of youth with primary colors. A bright disposition washes across the natural lighting in nearly all scenes and the yellow background in the credits. This color scheme does not imply that youth is always sunny. Rather, a viewer may interpret that *Brown Girls* uses these colors and daytime shoots to bring racialized youth into the light. As Robin Bernstein of *The New York Times* writes in her article "Let Black Kids Just Be Kids," many people in the U.S. perceive children of color as less innocent and older than their white peers (pars. 2-3). *Brown Girls*, by name alone, recognizes this youth and offers a space, without tragedy or condition, for these girls of color to exist as they are.

6 For many young characters of color, the mischievous moments of youth are all too often coded as criminal. However, *Brown Girls* reasserts the innocence of parties, financial instability, and casual sex. Play permeates Patricia's and Leila's consequential moments. After Leila punches

her ex-girlfriend's new partner in episode four, she staggers out of a party alongside her friends. Leila, Patricia, and their friend Victor (Rashaad Hall) take turns running in the street. They laugh and carry one another, piggy-back style, through the empty avenue. However, *Brown Girls* also confronts the heavy obstacles that young people face in their daily lives, including racism and carcerality. In episode five, a hungover Leila wakes up and Googles if she, a Muslim woman, can be arrested for punching someone. Here, *Brown Girls* masterfully contrasts two parts of Leila's reality. On one side, Leila experiences carefree adolescence, such as attending a party and playing in the street. Nonetheless, Leila also feels the gut-punch reminder that her youth will not protect her from being tried as an adult in court if she faces assault charges. As it seeks to preserve the traces of brown girlhood before Leila and Patricia grow older, *Brown Girls* charts the intersectional concerns that burden these young women.

7 This webseries effectively highlights brown women's experiences through its production value and its narrative authority. Sam Bailey is a black woman, and Fatimah Asghar identifies as a Pakistani-Kashmiri American. In June of 2017, HBO expressed interest in adopting and developing *Brown Girls*. While HBO has yet to announce when it will release new episodes of *Brown Girls* or how the series may change, I look forward to observing how the creators handle Leila and Patricia's trajectory on a new platform. I hope that HBO's *Brown Girls* continues to reflect adolescence as a time capsule that validates the events and concerns of youth, especially since viewers rarely see racially marginalized characters who have the freedom to 'be' young onscreen. If HBO expands or refocuses the series, I anticipate that Asghar and Bailey will reconsider their characterization of Victor, the gay best friend of the two protagonists. While *Brown Girls* avoids the cliché of the coming-of-age story, it does fall into a stereotypical portrayal of a queer man as the sassy 'voice of reason' for his female friends.

8 Created and directed by young women of color, *Brown Girls* offers a sense of textured authenticity with unfiltered plotlines and camera shots. The webseries accompanies other television shows and films that feature young women of color: Netflix's *Roxanne Roxanne* (2017) and *Dear White People* (2017); *Urban Hymn* (2015); and *Black Panther* (2018). In all of these films, women of color are strong not in spite of their youth, but in part *because of* their youth. The gritty realism of *Brown Girls* punctuates the relatively normal circumstances, traumas, and sportiveness of the protagonists. While white viewers can and do enjoy this webseries, *Brown Girls* presents intimate writing by and for women of color. With this audience in mind, I imagine

that sociology and gender studies instructors may use the show to present and analyze intersectional identities such as queerness, class, and race. College-aged viewers, in particular, will identify with Leila and Patricia's struggles to assert themselves around and be understood by their older siblings and caregivers.

9 *Brown Girls* reminds viewers that young womanhood is not just 'child's play,' and adolescents of color deserve a media platform to see a girlhood filled with wonder, significance, and yes, even play.

Works Cited

Asghar, Fatimah and Sam Bailey, creators. *Brown Girls*. Produced with aid from the Chicago Digital Media Fund, 2017. <http://www.browngirlswebseries.com/episodes>

Bernstein, Robin. "Let Black Kids Just Be Kids." *The New York Times*, July 26 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/black-kids-discrimination.html>