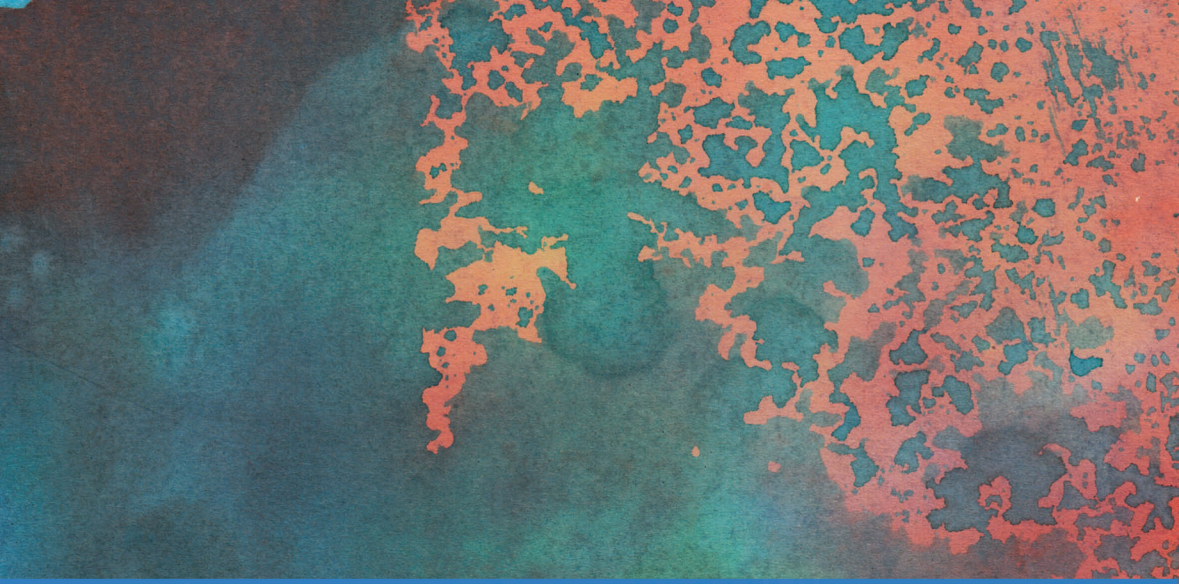
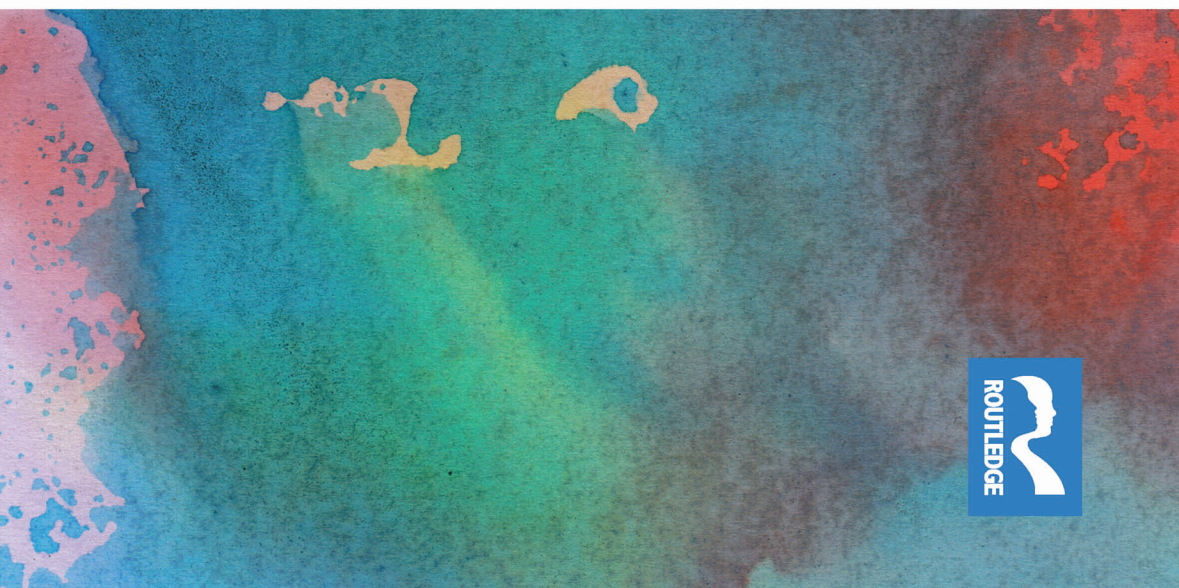


Routledge Advances in Popular Culture Studies

DOWN THE ROAD AND BACK AGAIN

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE GOLDEN GIRLS

Edited by
Jill E. Anderson and Alissa Burger



Down the Road and Back Again

This is the first book-length study of *The Golden Girls*, which ran for seven award-winning seasons from 1985 to 1992 and produced two spin-offs.

Through a cultural studies approach, this collection examines a wide range of topics, including race, sexuality, queerness, memory, familial mythmaking, aging, health, and financial precarity. Featuring contributions from an international team of scholars, this book highlights the enduring relevance and cultural impact of the show, even 30 years after its original airing.

Offering fresh insights into its cross-generational and cross-cultural appeal, *Down the Road and Back Again* is intended for scholars of pop culture and fans of the show.

Jill E. Anderson is an Associate Professor of English and Women's Studies at Tennessee State University. She is the author of *Homemaking for the Apocalypse: Domesticating Horror in Atomic Age Media and Culture* (2021) and the co-editor of *Beyond the Haunted House: Shirley Jackson and Domesticity* (2020).

Alissa Burger is an Associate Professor of English at Culver-Stockton College. She teaches courses in research, writing, and literature, specializing in gender, horror, and the Gothic. She is the author of *IT, Chapters One & Two* (Devil's Advocates Series), *The Quest for the Dark Tower: Genre and Interconnection in the Stephen King Series* (2021), *Teaching Stephen King: Horror, the Supernatural, and New Approaches to Literature* (2016), and *The Wizard of Oz as American Myth: A Critical Study of Six Versions of the Story, 1900–2007* (2012).

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Down the Road and Back Again
Critical Approaches to The Golden Girls
Edited by Jill E. Anderson and Alissa Burger

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Contents

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First on my list of appreciation are my co-editors, Alissa Burger, who stepped into the middle of the project to help me finish, and Susannah Young, who helped me get this project off the ground and over some of the initial bumps. Thanks to Monica Carol Miller for reading and responding so quickly to a draft of my essay and to various friends whose ears I so openly had throughout the process.

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—Jill E. Anderson

I would like to extend my appreciation to my co-editor Jill Anderson, for inviting me to jump in and work with her on this project.

I am also grateful for the support and inspiration of many loved ones, friends, and fellow fans with whom I watched *The Golden Girls* over the years. I cherish those laughs and conversations in front of the television set just as much as our girls enjoyed their late-night cheesecake. May we all be so lucky to have friends such as these.

—Alissa Burger

Introduction

"Witty, adult, intelligent": The Persistent Appeal of *The Golden Girls*

Jill E. Anderson

One of the revelations I experienced as I was vetting potential submissions for this collection is that everyone seems to have an anecdotal connection to *The Golden Girls*. Whether it is when and where they first viewed the series, who their favorite character is or with whom they identify most strongly, or how they saw some prescient social issue represented on a primetime television show, *The Golden Girls* seems to fit into people's lives in a way rarely seen by other programs. Everyone has a favorite catchphrase or one-liner (cynical me loves the moment in S2, E9, when Blanche flies by Dorothy and tells her to "Eat dirt and die, trash") or an episode that challenged or confirmed a point of view. My first watch-through was when it originally aired (though I was too young for the first few seasons, I caught up with re-runs with my grandma Irene). I'd occasionally spend the night with her, and she'd let me stay up past my bedtime (7:30—can you believe it?), eating a coconut cake made by her "friend," Sara Lee, watching *The Golden Girls*, playing Go Fish at the kitchen table, and waking up to toaster waffles and artificial syrup in the morning. She and I both adored Estelle Getty's Sophia—that vinegar-tongued but ever loyal matriarch resembled my grandma in attitude and steadfastness but not in cooking skills or her life after the death of a spouse. We loved Sophia's lack of filter—the gag from the pilot episode was that a stroke had effected the part of her brain meant to stop her from saying whatever came to mind. My own grandma's lack of a filter was just ingrained in her personality; they were both a level of petty to which I aspire. Grandma even marveled at how convincing Getty's makeup and costuming since she was younger than both Bea Arthur and Betty White though she played their senior. Sure, I might not have understood some of the most mature quips or storylines, but I could certainly sympathize with how everyone treated Rose when her girlish naiveté prevented her from understanding what was happening around her.

On subsequent rewatches, I have been drawn to Rue McClanahan's subtle genius—sweet and open yet guarded and easily wounded—as Blanche.[1]

1 Elsewhere, I have written about Blanche's privileged, white Southern-ness in terms of the tacky or in terms of exceeding boundaries and expectations while still maintaining Southern

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I caught the wave of Betty White fever in the early-1900s, marveling at her unlikely cameo in 1999's *Lake Placid* and laughing along with her 2010 Super Bowl Snickers (also featuring the inimitable Abe Vigoda). The United States Postal Service announced it will issue a stamp to honor Betty White, basing it on a 2010 photo when White was 88, and I will be stocking up when they're released. I watched resurfaced clips of Bea Arthur dancing with Angela Lansbury reprising "Bosom Buddies" from *Mame* at the 1987 Tony Awards, learning the Urkel Dance with Jaleel White in 1991, and declaring herself "pro-gay" in an interview with *Gay Times TV*, arguing that *The Golden Girls* appealed to gays because it featured four women whose "old age" was "an adversity" (just as the LGBTQ+ population faced a different type of adversity), as they were living their lives out loud despite society's objections. That is all to say—the Golden Girls, as both their characters and the actors who portrayed them, have earned a place in the cultural pantheon of the so-called Greatest Generation (to which my grandma belonged) through Gens Z and Alpha, appealing to the numerically older crowd as well as the young at heart. As an elder Millennial myself, I have recently come to appreciate Sophia's shrewd advice to Blanche: "No matter how bad things get, remember these sage words—you're old, you sag, you get over it" (That she follows this up with: "So what if you knew Jesus personally. Wake up and smell the coffee, you fossil!" to which Blanche replies, "My mistake, I thought since you looked like Yoda you were also wise" only increases my admiration for their jaunty repartee. I can only hope to be half as clever in my next few decades and get away with having no filter like Sophia often does).

As a cultural touchstone, *GG* represents how older women are empowered to form a chosen family in their twilight years (though Blanche would protest to any potential reference to her waning beauty), pooling their resources in a Reagan's America and sharing a love for one another even as they disagree on certain issues. James Chappel calls the show "countercultural" because of the ways it was "skeptical of the utility of established institutions," further highlighting the ways seniors could use self- and community care to enrich their lives (214). It has also been described as "a bit of a wolf in pastel print," as the sharp, sassy delivery of witty lines by the show's "seasoned pros" appeals to anyone with an appreciation for snark (qtd. in Haider). The show is endlessly quotable, and images of the four women have endured decades since the series finale. Their faces grace a line of greeting cards, ornaments, and drinkware from Hallmark, infinite t-shirts, and other wearable gear. I own a Golden Girls car sunshade that, inevitably, puts Dorothy in the driver seat making all the rest her passengers. There is a Sophia tiki mug, a Blanche prayer candle, a Rose action figure, and an officially licensed Dorothy cosplay outfit, complete with clip-on earrings. You can even buy a Chia Pet which features their four faces

decorum as a way of providing cultural shorthand. See: Anderson, Jill E. "'Eat Dirt and Die, Trash': Tacky, White Southerners in *The Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote*." *The Tacky South*, edited by Katharine A. Burnett and Monica Carol Miller, LSU Press, 2022, pp. 105–118.

in place of the presidents on Mount Rushmore or a wine tumbler that reads, "Live like Rose; Dress like Blanche; Think like Dorothy; Speak like Sophia," seemingly boiling each girl down to their most salient talent. The girls' afterlife is the stuff of marketing dreams, with ABC and Hulu's officially licensed shop having over 150 different items, including a small collection made especially for Pride. Bibliographic contributions to the show include a few books about life lessons and their wit and wisdom, several children's picture books (including a send-up of *Goodnight*, *Moon* called *Goodnight*, *Girls*), a cozy mystery, and a cookbook dedicated to cheesecakes and cocktails.

During its run, *The Golden Girls* won multiple Emmys, Golden Globes, and other awards, garnering popular and critical approval. It joined shows like *Murder*, *She Wrote*, *Diagnosis: Murder*, and *Matlock* in a so-called "silver wave" of television, featuring energetic and canny elders played by recognizable faces from generations past. The show also pioneered the female foursome half-hour comedy, a format that has become popular in the past decades with series such as *Hot in Cleveland* (which featured White as a very un-Rose-like octogenarian with ties to the mob and habits like weed smoking, promiscuity, and heavy drinking), *Desperate Housewives*, *Living Single*, *Girls*, and *Girlfriends*. This format is meant to demonstrate the diversity of women's experiences and perspectives and to interweave narratives that give audiences a way to synthesize points of view that might differ from their own. As the contributors in this collection will illustrate, the show took on many hot-button issues for the late-1980s/early-1990s (and some that remain all-too salient today), including immigration, gay rights, the AIDS epidemic (which Reagan so forcefully ignored), racism, reproductive freedom, sexual harassment, body shaming, housing insecurity, financial precarity, marital infidelity, and the ways institutional medicine repeatedly fails women. Though for the most part the ways the show took on these issues have aged well, from many people's points of view the more universal themes of loyalty to one's community and the impulse to protect our loved ones from the caprices of the world resonate with subsequent generations. Who couldn't empathize with a chosen family who come to each other's aid in their times of need, who love unconditionally (or, if conditions exist, they are erased by the end of the episode), and who are, for all intents and purposes, growing old with each other? No one is there to save them (but each other) or whisk them away to a different life: "They are living in an ideal suburban home, reclaiming that space of nuclear family bliss for a new and more creative family form" (Chappel 210). Corina Zappia for *Electric Lit* marvels at how the girls' home and family structure could be a model for:

> anybody who fears not being able to meet this unrealistic expectation of lifetime partnership or afford living on their own in their last years. Given the average life expectancy today and the rising cost of nursing homes and long-term healthcare, living alone in our last years is a luxury few of us will be able to afford; financial magazines from *Forbes* to *Kiplinger's*

> have billed Golden Girls-style houses as a more affordable, less lonely option into retirement.

And the house itself—with most of the scenes toggling between the living room and kitchen with occasion forays into Blanche's bedroom and the lanai—is iconic. I could write an entire chapter on the set design, from the iron and glass deck set on the lanai to the rattan three-seat sofa and chairs (which you can buy online for up to $25,000) to Blanche's always recognizable banana-leaf motif in her bedroom and the part those spaces played in the girls' daily lives. Though the house belongs to Blanche, it is *all* theirs, a space shared communally and equitably, serving as the hub of all their relationships.

But at the heart of the show is a certain form of melancholy with which all humans who have loved someone will have to deal one day. Rose, Blanche, and Sophia have already lost beloved spouses (and Dorothy's Stan is certainly no peach, as he shows up incessantly at their door, always wanting something ridiculous from the woman he can't quite let go), and they constantly run up against conflicts with their bio families, usually based on some sort of social or generational divide. The specter of death is always present and from the very beginning, as Sophia escapes the fire at Shady Pines to Dorothy's drawn-out bout with chronic fatigue syndrome to Rose's fear of nuclear war or Blanche's poignant reckoning with her sister after they bury Big Daddy. Rose, Blanche, and Sophia frequently indulge themselves in anecdotes of their pasts, often recalling formative moments with nostalgia. They have bodies that creak and moan and ache, they admit to lapses in their own memories while witnessing dementia developing in others, and they complain of slowing metabolisms and incontinence (at least Sophia does). Their individual and collective vulnerabilities is what speaks to people even now, and their senses of both style and self means they are distinct individuals first with their own sets of prejudices and ways of expressing themselves. They are not invisible or interchangeable. But as their children move away and friends die, as the promises of security dwindle and their bodies mature, they have to forge their own paths toward stability and happiness. And they do—triumphantly and with eternal hope, I might add. They have *fun*, coming at each day with an "adventurous spirit […] far removed from the leisurely lifestyle promised by postwar retirement culture" (Chappel 209). They always have each other's backs, despite the proverbial bumps in the road, and love each other unconditionally with verve and dedication.

The essays in this collection are not intended to be the last word on criticism and analysis of this television classic. In fact, there is so much more to examine in this long-running and much beloved sitcom. This volume represents the first full-length collection of critical approaches to the show's themes and is hopefully an opening up for more approaches to reading all aspects of the show with critical and cultural connections in mind. To that end, this collection is divided into three sections, representing the dominant themes present in contributors' pieces. "The show did its strongest work […] in providing a brief window into questions about the human limitations that we cannot

always answer but must ask ourselves anyway," Zappia explains, and as the contributors in this collection illustrate, it does that through various avenues.

Part 1: Race, Storytelling, and Queerness: Representation and Visibility in *The Golden Girls* contains essays that highlight the show's bold and often subversive approach to humor, redefining the boundaries of sitcom storytelling and offering nuanced portrayals of race, sexuality, offering a nuanced portrayal of marginalized identities that continues to resonate. In "'Tootie is my favorite': Interrogating the Responsibility for Antiracist Teaching in *The Golden Girls* and *The Golden Palace*," DeLisa D. Hawkes explores how the unconscious biases and outdated worldviews of its four lead characters, who, despite their good intentions, confront their white privilege and engage in generative reflections on cross-cultural and cross-generational solidarity as they interact with diverse communities in Miami. Michelle Bright's essay, "The biggest gift would be from [Tennessee]": Tennessee Williams's Influence on TV's Queerest Chosen Family, *The Golden Girls*, argues that *The Golden Girls* was likely inspired by Tennessee Williams's short play *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, with the show borrowing not only character names and themes from Williams's oeuvre—such as chosen family, memory, ribald humor, and queerness—but also attracting a queer fanbase due to these shared influences, contributing to Williams's posthumous cultural prominence. "Brother of Dorothy: Phillip 'Phil' Petrillo's Imagined Life in Newark, New Jersey in the 1970s and 1980s" by Kristyn Scorsone posthumously humanizes Dorothy's brother Phil, whose gender identity is treated as a punchline at times, by imagining his life in Newark, New Jersey, through archival LGBTQ+ sources which sheds light on both his transness and the city's rich queer and trans history. Alissa Burger's contribution, "Queer Engagement and Acceptance in *The Golden Girls*" examines the show's groundbreaking engagement with LGBTQ+ issues, highlighting its inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters and advocacy for causes like the AIDS crisis and hospital visitation rights, while emphasizing the show's portrayal of chosen families as a source of belonging and support for marginalized viewers. In "'Picture It': The Advocacy of Meta-Storytelling in *The Golden Girls*" by Jarrod DePrado explores how *The Golden Girls* uses storytelling to address and normalize social stigmas against homosexuality, AIDS, and teenage pregnancy, with the characters' personal narratives transforming these issues into relatable, allegorical lessons that advocate for change, self-realization, and greater open-mindedness.

Part 2: "'Isn't it amazing how I can feel so bad, and still look so good?': Sex, Health, and Bodies" addresses issues of sex, health, and aging, by using the characters' personal stories to highlight the intersection of humor and vulnerability in these discussions and advocate for a more open dialogue about medicine, bodies, sexuality, and self-worth. "Sick and Tired: Dorothy by Gaslight" by Alex Franklin looks at the depiction of medical gaslighting in the two-part episode "Sick and Tired," which portrays Dorothy's struggle for a diagnosis of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, as her journey becomes a reflection of systemic issues like the devaluation of chronic illnesses, medical inequalities, and societal

biases, while also highlighting themes of self-advocacy and resilience. Christian Krenek's "'And Then We Talk About Sex Again': Healthy, Holistic Sex in *The Golden Girls*" analyzes six episodes to explore how the defining sexual traits of Dorothy, Rose, and Sophia, shaped by their romantic and sexual relationships, ultimately offering a blueprint for a holistic and affirming sexual life for aging adults. In "'I'm done with great love. I'm back to great lovers': Sex, Age, and Insecurities with Samantha Jones and Blanche Devereaux," Jill E. Anderson scrutinizes aging, sexuality, and female autonomy through Blanche Devereaux and Samantha Jones (of *Sex and the City*), highlighting how their defiance of societal norms on aging and sexuality is both empowering and constrained by patriarchal narratives that seeks to restrain and validate their sexual freedom within conventional frameworks.

Part 3: "The Girls' Enduring Legacy: Fandoms and Intertextualities" focuses on how the impact of fandoms and intertextual connections highlights how the show's themes and characters continue to resonate and inspire engagement across generations particularly through related media. "'*The Golden Girls*, Your Friends and Mine: An Exploration of the Series' Enduring Appeal in Fandoms Across Generational Lines" by Adele Oliveira explores how the show continues to resonate with millennials and Gen Z through its progressive themes and adaptability to new media, reflected in fan engagement, merchandise, pop-ups, and digital content like memes and videos. Erin DiCesare and Shawn Miklaucic's "Lessons from Rose and Betty White: Why Generations of Viewers Are Drawn to the Golden Girl of *The Golden Girls*" looks at Betty White's enduring impact, from her portrayal of Rose Nylund in *The Golden Girls* to her legacy after her passing, highlighting how her characters challenged stereotypes about older women and reshaped narratives around aging femininity. In "*The Golden Girls* and Television Comedy Formats: Intertextuality and *Designing Women*," Leigh H. Edwards employs intertextual references, particularly through *Designing Women*, and camp to critique and subvert stereotypes of aging and gender in the "four women" sitcom format, influencing subsequent shows while both questioning and reinforcing these stereotypes. Laura Kitchings's "Character Development through Food Work in *The Golden Palace*" examines how Rose and Sophia develop stories around their heritage by sharing their food traditions, particularly successfully in *The Golden Palace*, and connecting with others by developing their identities through food. "Miami and D.C., You've Got Style: The Power of Performance and the Performance of Power in *The Golden Girls* and *227*" by Drago Momcilovic compares *The Golden Girls* and *227* by investigating their shared focus on theatrical and musical performance, arguing that these performances reflect questions of power and allow the characters to express creative agency, strengthening relationships, and diversifying representations of womanhood, friendship, and identity, especially regarding age and race.

We hope the essays in this collection bring fans—both long established and new—of Rose, Blanche, Dorothy, and Sophia's adventures some new perspectives on why their points of view continue to speak to us after so many years.

Travel down this road and back again with us. We are happy to share our love and our cheesecake.

(A note on episode and cast details in the following essays: we have, for brevity's sake, eliminated the need to name the main cast members throughout the essays, going on the assumption that most readers would be familiar with the actors' names. We have also included the episode titles along with episode and season numbers in the bodies of the essays rather than catalog them all on the reference lists as any further details about the episodes are readily available online.)

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