Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Anita Loos: *A Girl Like I* as Prequel to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

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Introduction

The same year that Derrida presented the lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,"—1966—screenwriter and novelist Anita Loos published her first autobiography *A Girl Like I*.[1] On the one hand, the book seeks to be "free from freeplay," gesturing toward the presentation of a totalizing history, a fixed origin story, a signified, her history, her biographical story—objective and factual.[2] On the other hand, the dream of a "full presence, the reassuring foundation" slips away from

[1] Jacques Derrida first presented "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. It was subsequently published in *Writing and Difference* in 1967.

[2] Biographers have challenged Loos's factual claims in terms of her age and length of her first marriage, among other points in her autobiography; nevertheless, we recall Heidi L. Pennington's encouragement to be "more attuned in our independent close readings"; thus, "we will also learn to value the nonfactual truths of a life as equally important to the cold, hard facts" (37). Likewise, Timothy Dow Adams asserts, "As fundamental as truth is to autobiography, modern readers have increasingly come to realize that telling the truth about oneself on paper is virtually impossible. Even if writers could isolate 'the truth' of their past, how could they know it would remain true as they wrote, much less in the future?" (53).

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the reader due to the lingering presence of her bestselling novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the silent film screenplay, and the musical adaptation, all molding the narrative.

In his lecture, Derrida argued that a "rupture" and a "redoubling" occurred in mid-twentieth century cultural history and thought; following Yeats, he might have added that the "centre could not hold." Derrida goes on to state that the "repetitions, the substitutions, the transformations, and the permutations are always taken from a history of meaning"; thus, "the whole history of the concept of structure…must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center." This new "absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*" (Derrida). For him, "the history of metaphysics and its concepts had been dislocated"; European culture could no longer consider itself "as the culture of reference"; similar assaults from Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger further destabilized meaning and resisted totalization (Derrida). In Derrida's estimation, we had been caught in a double-bind: "There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation." He continues, "The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay." Loos's autobiography illustrates this latter movement.

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that "the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering" (22). Likewise, in *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Paul John Eakin notes this "phenomenon": "the construction of identity that talking about ourselves and our lives performs in the world" (x). This "narrative self-fashioning" constitutes "an evolutionary, adaptive value" (Eakin xi)—in this case establishing Loos's identity as the bestselling novelist and screenwriter of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Indeed,

one could argue, the autobiography selects such events that it reads as a prequel to the novel with Loos cast sometimes as Dorothy, the wise-cracking brunette interested in a good time and a laugh—and in the musical, good looks—rather than chasing the millionaire of Lorelei Lee's ambitions—but Loos also casts herself as childlike and impoverished—qualities very much attached to Lorelei.[3] As Judith Butler argues in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, "The 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of relation—or a set of relations…The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence" (8). In other words, Loos has written no single "I" autobiography; rather, *A Girl Like I* exhibits what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed "polyphony," containing the "dialogic" voices of Anita, Lorelei, and Dorothy (6, 14).

In some ways, then, *A Girl Like I*—an iterated quote of Lorelei's—reads as a marketing, advertising, or promotional tract for sales for the novel. In other ways, we find that the design of the autobiography—the structure, sign, and play of it—has been somewhat dislocated from Loos's life and is instead dictated by her bestseller and film adaptations.[4]

[3] In "Clara, Ouida, Buelah, et al.,: Women Screenwriters in American Silent Cinema," included in the collection *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*, Giuliana Muscio states, "Even Anita Loos, who could claim legitimate literary fame and intellectual frequenting, enriches her autobiographies with detailed descriptions of the clothes she would make for herself (not just drawing them, but literally sewing them), and of such frivolous interests as hairdos and makeups [sic], for instance her famous visits at Coty, in Paris, according to the Lorelei-like character she had created for herself after the success of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" (293). In the musical—adapted by Charles Lederer—Dorothy only chases men for their looks—another kind of frivolous interest. Lorelie explains to Gus Esmond as he settles her on the cruise ship, her friend is "always falling in love with someone because he's good looking. […] If they're tall, dark, and handsome, she never gets around to vital statistics."

[4] One of the great ironies of the autobiography is its celebration of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a high point in Loos's life. In "Aunt Anita's Romances and Friendships" from *Anita Loos Reconsidered*, niece Mary Anita Loos recounts a walk along the beach

Concomitantly, the reader discovers that the events Loos chooses to recount likewise provide the *raison d'être* for the plotline, themes, and characterizations in the novel and adaptations. I argue *A Girl Like I* could never exist without *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* always already influencing Loos's autobiography. An obvious corollary assertion follows: if the novel is "experimental modernism" (Tracy 118), as critics assert, then the autobiography published four decades later may well be the next incarnation in literary movements: the Derridean postmodern text. To state it another way, Anita Loos, the premier modernist writer, showed postmodern tendencies in the last few decades of her work.

Loos as Lorelei

In the first chapter of *A Girl Like I*, Loos recounts the early successes of her grandfather as a northern California gold prospector. Quoting from an old newspaper interview with him, Loos supplies his words: "As I was making my way along a creek, I noticed some gravel on the opposite side that looked favorable for gold. I crossed the creek, scooped up a shovel full of gravel and in two minutes washed out five dollars' worth of gold dust. I immediately staked out a claim and began mining" (qtd. in Loos, *A Girl* 5). According to Loos, "By the time his hoard ran out, George Smith had amassed enough to be considered rich" (5). Here, in the opening pages, she establishes a thematic strand involving a brand or type of gold-digger, perhaps the defining characteristic for her protagonist in

in Santa Monica in which Loos admitted about her failed marriage to John Emerson, "Lots of things could have broken us up. But…it was *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* that did it…I was suddenly internationally famous…Poor middle-aged John could not bear the fact that everyone wanted to know me, be with me, quote me. He felt he must seek self-satisfaction, and he became desperately mental" (182).

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Lorelei Lee—"mistress of her own grand confidence game" (Cella 47).

As Liz Clarke notes, "female writers, producers, and directors flourished in this era and the star system was rising to dominance, further entrenching women's power within the industry" (173). Anita Loos was one such screenwriter who rose to prominence in the early years of Hollywood. As we know, studios gravitated toward adaptation in order to maximize profits by tapping into the success of the source material. Citing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Damien Sutton describes the "impossible object" movie moguls sought to create—more than the film, the entire web of "discursive practices" that the "network" of "identity" manifests (4-5). Executives were ever-mindful of the psychological systems that existed to "ensure that a film [got] made, anticipated, seen, enacted, and remembered" (Sutton 13). Capitalizing on the sociocultural phenomenon that was the novel, Paramount purchased the film rights and hired Loos to adapt it. While filmgoers understood that "[n]o film version of a novel would be able to function as a presentation of the whole story" (McGurk 38) due to time limitations as well as the restriction of the Studio Relations Committee followed by the Production Code Administration, several interesting connections among the silent film adaptation, which Loos scripted, and the 1953 musical, scripted by Charles Lederer, do exist. (According to Gary Carey, Loos's biographer, she felt Lederer "had done a grand job" and admitted his script "was an improvement on her own libretto" for the stage version [231].)

In the 1928 adaptation—the silent film is considered lost, but the screenplay for the film has been preserved, archived in the Paramount collection at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library—Loos very literally adds the Southern family history into the plotline. Lorelei's grandfather digs for gold in Arkansas—unsuccessfully, however; thus Lorelei must come into the family business as she too digs for gold, so to speak, among the wealthy Americans and

Europeans she meets on her adventures.[5] In the 1953 musical, Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell) *both* come from poverty in Arkansas. In one of the most popular song and dance numbers, they don red sequin gowns and sing: "We're just two little girls from Little Rock. We lived on the wrong side of the tracks."

While Sarah Churchwell has convincingly argued that "Lorelei is the negative to Loos's positive"—"blonde where Loos is brunette, dumb where Loos is smart, amateur where Loos is professional, prostituted where Loos is virtuous, vulgar where Loos is cultured, and ignorant where Loos is *cérébrale*" (137)—the autobiographer parallels many aspects of Lorelei to her own life as well, including the protagonist's impoverished background. Unlike her grandfather, Loos's own father provided very little in terms of the family support, working alternately as a theater manager and promoter as well as an occasional writer. Her mother "with her marriage, began the lifelong heartache of being in love with a scamp" (Loos, *A Girl* 18). When Loos won a jingle competition for wax, Pop "instantly borrowed" the five dollars (33) and "gradually Pop's disappearances from home became more frequent and of longer duration" (35). He seldom sent money, "so Mother was forced to carry on alone" (35). Loos recalls "one Christmastime when Pop was far away (nobody knew where) and there was no turkey in our larder. Mother concocted a platter of dressing out of bread, milk, and herbs and, with superhuman cheerfulness, tried to dramatize it so we wouldn't notice that the big bird was missing" (35). When Grandpa Smith died leaving Mother an heiress,

[5] Note the clever shift in characterization Loos wrote for her protagonist in the silent film adaptation: aware of the increase in censorship as well as the fact the majority of her audience would be female, the screenwriter showed the poverty of the family (motivation) as well as dismissing the gold digging as a mere inherited trait from the grandfather. These two changes increase audience empathy and support for Lorelei. For more on spectatorship, audience, and gender in the 1920s, see Mulvey (22). For more on characterization, see *How to Write a Photoplay*: Loos and Emerson state, "[b]e sure your audience is stirred to real sympathy" and "throw that sympathy to the star part" (26).

"Pop proceeded to get rid of the…inheritance as rapidly as he could. Since he was an expert, it didn't take Pop long; soon everything was lost" (40).

Like Lorelei, we learn, Loos too was an outsider without status—but one who hoped to attain it. The writer's passages regarding a southern California hotel relate this element of the autobiography's plot. Loos explains: "The Hotel Del Coronado was a famous winter resort for rich people from the East. I had read fascinating items about it in the society columns, seen pictures of it in rotogravures. Clearly visible across San Diego bay, it sparkled in the sunlight, a white structure of the 'casino' type with acres of red roof. I could hardly wait to explore a paradise that was so near" (*A Girl* 47).

The morning she and Pop chose to tour the hotel, Loos donned a Paris gown sent as a cast off by her wealthy Aunt Nina. The writer explains, "I finally settled on a black velvet model from Paquin, with a wide band of brown fur around the hem" (Loos, *A Girl* 47). She thought she was in "high fashion" only to realize that "the grounds were so pretentiously well kept the plants looked snooty," and "the lobby was filled with rich pleasure-seekers, many of them dressed for yachting, tennis, or polo" (48). As she "watched those sophisticates," her "courage rapidly oozed away" (48). She realized her dress appeared "tacky" next to the crisp white linen of the "Coronado ladies of fashion" (48). Like Lorelei, who aspires to associate with those of the upper classes, Loos "began to suffer the qualms of a trespasser" (49). Both Loos and Lorelei share a "profound hunger to be fully accepted into society," which is "at odds with their outsider's recognition of society's deeply entrenched moral hypocrisy and ethical trickery" (Barreca vii).[6] Both the silent film script and the musical retain this theme central to the plot of the novel.

[6] While Loos recounts her relationships with scamps and gamblers, she also takes great care in *A Girl Like I* to convey the fact that everyone wanted to know her after the publication of her bestselling novel. The book introduced her to princes, geniuses, Aldous Huxley, Aimee Semple McPherson, Edwin Hubble, Lord D'Abernon, Colette, George

As the scent of a perfume she could not afford drifted over to Loos—a metaphor laced throughout the narrative representing the finery of the wealthy—she began to covet the good life—a passion perhaps incited by Nina's hand-me-down couture and the diamond ring given to her by a grifter uncle. In the novel, Lorelei replicates this passion in Paris: "And when a girl walks around and reads all the signs with all the famous historical names it really makes you hold your breath. Because when Dorothy and I went on a walk, we only walked a few blocks but in only a few blocks we read all of the famous historical names, like Coty and Cartier and I knew we were seeing something educational at last and our whole trip was not a failure" (Loos 52). Like the L'Idéal of Houbigant drifting through the bar at the Hotel Del, awakening Loos's senses to the opulent, Lorelie too lusts for the trappings of the monied class. When Gus Esmond (Timothy Noonan) gives her an engagement ring in the musical, he asks her, "Is it the right size?" She responds, "It can never be too big." Once they get to Paris, Dorothy and Lorelei ride around in a taxi, overwhelmed by the sights of the cosmopolitan city. The score reprises the "Two Little Girls from Little Rock" number from earlier in the film, reminding the viewer of their rural, destitute roots. The girls then go on a shopping spree—shown to the viewer through a montage of designer storefronts: Schiaparelli, Dior, Lucien Lelong, and Guerlain Purfumeur.

In the novel, Lorelei feels ashamed of Dorothy when she says or does the wrong thing; Loos likewise feels "ashamed of Pop," his artless "derby hat," his "spineless stogie" as they walk around the Hotel Del (*A Girl* 49). "Right then and there," she asserts, "was born a desire to get

Santayana, Edith Hamilton, Ralph Barton, and so on (274-275). The novel also became an annuity and assured Loos the trappings of wealth she had so long desired. "I unpacked the chic Vuitton luggage I had acquired in Paris" (267)—she tells us—and "filtered" a lot of the money "into the dress salons of Mainbocher and Balenciaga" (273). "In the entertainment world," she boasts, "my heroine was portrayed by its two most eminent blondes: Marilyn Monroe of the movies, and Carol Channing of the stage" (272-273).

away from the raffish milieu of our home" (49). The novel, screenplay, and musical all involve a trip to Europe where Lorelei hopes to improve her position in society. Moreover, Dorothy continues to embarrass Lorelei who does not share her values. In the musical, for example, Lorelei asks, "Where's Dorothy?"—as Esmond settles her in her cabin on the ship. He replies, "I don't know. Someone whistled at her and she disappeared. I hope she's not gonna be a bad influence on you." Lorelie finds herself in the position of defending her friend. "Oh no, lover," she reassures him, "Dorothy's not bad." When they arrive at the hotel in Paris, the manager asks if he can help. Dorothy replies, "You certainly may. Show me a place to take my shoes off. My feet are killing me." To which, Lorelei scolds, "Dorothy, please, a lady never admits her feet hurt."

In another example of the story's influence on the autobiography, Loos, like Lorelei, navigated among villainous aristocracy. For Loos, he was Sir Herbert Tree. For Lorelei, Sir Francis Beekman. The writer relates an anecdote about Sir Tree's time at D.W. Griffith's studio—scenario supervisor Frank "Daddy" Woods discovered they could just call him Herb—Herb, like Beekman in the novel, had "an unceasing interest in the ladies" (Loos, *A Girl* 110). In Britain, "he had fathered a number of distinguished illegitimate children, but in Hollywood Sir Herbert began to favor the undistinguished young ladies who were available as extras" (110). Loos explains that a "crisis developed when Pasadena's most eminent hostess was inspired to give a dinner" in his "honor" (110). Herb was not interested, but Daddy intervened: "for Pasadena had held the movies in such contempt that the occasion might serve to bolster relations between the two cities" (110). Fearing he might be bored by the Pasadena socialites, Herb requested a date. Daddy searched the extra girls, but finally chose a local waitress, "a girl whose sex appeal was so moderate as not to bring turmoil to Pasadena" (111). The girl was taken to wardrobe where they "put a damper on her taste" and "got her properly rigged for the occasion" (111). The waitress was well behaved, "[b]ut not Sir

Herbert" (111). When it was time to leave at the end of the evening, he asked the hostess where his companion might be. She answered, "I believe she's 'round behind" (qtd. in Loos, *A Girl* 111). "Ah yes," he replied, "But *aren't we all*?" (111). Then, to punctuate his remark, "he gave his hostess a slap on the behind that finished Hollywood's chances to break into Pasadena society for many another year" (111).

In the novel, Lorelei calls Sir Francis "Piggie," a name that in itself suggests critique. He laughs at his own jokes, which are not funny; he drops names of his wealthy and powerful compatriots such as King Edward; and he has the reputation of a miser (Loos, *Gentlemen* 40-41). Lorelei even resorts to sending herself orchids to train him to give her gifts (44-45), but she soon tires of the self-absorption of this failed raconteur: "But I really wish Piggie would not tell so many storys. I mean I do not mind a gentlemen when he tells a great many storys if they are new, but a gentleman who tells a great many storys and they are all the same storys is quite enervating. I mean London is really so uneducational that all I seem to be learning is some of Piggies storys and I even want to forget them. So I am really jolly fed up with London" (47). Lorelei's phrase "I even want to forget them" suggests off-color or at least boorish remarks that offend and annoy her—much like Sir Herbert Tree's rakish and unwelcome joke as well as lewd gesture to his Pasadena hostess.

In the musical, the lawyer for Lady Beekman (Norma Varden) comes to the Paris hotel where Dorothy and Lorelei are staying and demands the tiara be returned. Lorelei argues that it was not stolen and suggests they ask Lord Beekman (Charles Coburn) who had given it to her as a gift. The lawyer responds, "We've already done so, Miss Lee." He continues, Lord Beekman "denied knowing anything about it and departed for the interior of Africa." Lorelei is shocked to learn that he would betray her in this manner and says, "Piggie wouldn't do that," knowing full well that he had indeed.

Throughout her autobiography, Loos refers to her figure as "childlike" (48). "I was grown up now," she wrote, "having attained a stature of four feet eleven and weighing ninety two pounds (measurements which are still the same today)" (48). Moreover, of all the pictures she could have chosen to include of herself in the first photo section of the book, she chose a sketch by Ralph Barton—who had done the caricatures in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.* The image features Loos with large eyes, short hair, wearing a huge childish bow on her dress, in an oversized chair that has the effect of making her look like a baby in a highchair—her feet dangling nowhere near the floor. In the second photo section of the book, Loos stands with a wolfhound; the back of the white dog reaches to her waistline likewise emphasizing her adolescent stature as well as demeanor. When Loos narrated her first encounter with D.W. Griffith, she underscored the fact that both he and his assistant Dougherty overlooked her as a mere child and introduced themselves to her mother who had chaperoned her on her first visit to the Biograph Studio in Hollywood (78). Daddy Woods decided it would be safer for Loos to live on the lot since she was a "runaway bride"—having abandoned her husband after their wedding—he might try to "whisk" her away or even "shoot" her (89). All of these scenarios put Loos in the position of a child who must be looked after, protected, and cared for.

When she met the director John Emerson—whom she would later marry—she reported the same reaction as mentioned earlier with Griffith and Dougherty. Emerson had found some of Loos's material in the Biograph files that he thought would be good for Douglas Fairbanks. When he met with the author, "his reaction…was typical of others'; he was amazed that any creature who looked fourteen, at the most, could have so profoundly ironic a slant on life" (99). The ironic slant was pure Dorothy—which I will discuss later—but the images of adolescence, juvenilia, youthful oblivion throughout the autobiography are all Lorelei—in all her incarnations.

Chapter 2 of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is titled "Fate Keeps on Happening."[7] Like her protagonist, Loos too presents an aura of fateful events or luck determining the course of her life. When still a child—as mentioned earlier—she won a jingle contest for F.P.C. Wax, which set her on her course as a writer (33); then she won a contest in *The Morning Telegraph* relating a "humorous anecdote about life in New York"—although she had not even been there (46). Loos stated: "No doubt it was beginner's luck, but I usually succeeded with a first effort. It might be followed by failure, but I was able to say I did it once and can do it again, perhaps. After winning the contest, I continued to send short paragraphs to *The Morning Telegraph*, which accepted the majority of them and paid me two and a half cents a word. So that at thirteen years of age I became a journalist on a New York Daily" (46).[8] Adding to her beginner's luck anecdotes, Loos tells her readers that Biograph accepted her first attempt at a scenario, *The New York Hat*, and paid her twenty-five dollars for it. D.W. Griffith directed it, and none other than little Mary Pickford starred (56).

So too does fate keep happening to Lorelei in the novel. While on the boat to Europe, she runs into the District Attorney Mr. Bartlett who prosecuted her after she found out her benefactor Mr. Jennings had other girlfriends. Lorelie says, "I had quite a bad case of histerics and my mind was really a blank and when I came out of it, it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings" (Loos, *Gentlemen* 25). The "childlike reasoning," Maureen Turim argues, has the "same force" as Mark Twain's characters who ridicule the "surrounding society" (101).

[7] As evidence of the importance of this phrase for Loos—"fate keeps on happening"—Ray Pierre Corsini edited a collection of Anita Loos's new and previously published work—both fiction and nonfiction—called *Fate Keeps on Happening: Adventures of Lorelei Lee and Other Writings*, which was released posthumously in 1984 – Loos died in 1981.

After being acquitted of the crime by the gentlemen of the jury, Judge Hibbard bought her "a ticket to Hollywood" (25) and changed her name to Lorelei "who became famous for sitting in a rock in Germany" (26). Working in the "cinema," she "met Mr. Eisman" who, she explains, "took me out of the cinema so he could educate me" (26). This turn in her life led her to the boat and a new friendship with her old nemesis from Arkansas, Mr. Bartlett. So eager to prosecute her after "Mr. Jennings became shot," they now forge a friendship on the boat to Europe.

Then on the train to the "Central of Europe"—where Eisman wants her to go to keep their rendezvous low profile—Lorelei meets the man she will eventually marry, Mr. Henry Spoffard—from one of the wealthiest and oldest families in America. Thus we find that "fate keeps on happening" to both Loos and Lorelei throughout both texts. We also find that the "reassuring foundation" of Loos's origin story has slipped away from the reader who finds Derrida's "substitutions" and "freeplay" at work in the autobiography—"the absence of a transcendental signified," the presence of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* instead. As Smith and Watson explain it, "The multifacetedness inherent in autobiographical writing produces a polyphonic site of indeterminacy rather than a single, stable truth" (16). They further remark that the "authority of the autobiographical, then, neither confirms nor invalidates notions of objective truth" (16). In their view, autobiography "tracks" multiple "previously uncharted truths of particular lives" (16).

To return one last time to the concept of Loos as Lorelie, the autobiographer worked on several occasions to differentiate herself from her heroine as well, which ironically works to support my argument here. If Loos had not blended her past with Lorelei's, she would not need to differentiate the two lest she be considered a dumb gold-digger. For example, Loos pauses to discuss her reading lists at the local library, highlighting Baruch Spinoza who wrote, "Intellectual love is the only eternal happiness" (qtd. in Loos, *A Girl* 61). The author discovered that

she was a cérébrale: “any interest in sex stemmed directly from the brain” (61). After her father got a job publishing a paper for the Hotel Del Coronado, the family moved into Tent City on the compound. Surrounded by the Pacific “sun-kissed shore,” “burnished gold of dried palm leaves,” and “chintz curtains of jungle green,” Loos wrote, “A girl who couldn’t hook a millionaire in such an environment would have to be a gargoyle” (65). There, Loos tried several times to marry just such a wealthy man only to discover she did not have the temperament for it—although one “halfwit” did inspire Henry Spoffard, the man Lorelei marries in the end of the novel (74). The wealthy class had failed to impress Loos, however, after she discovered, to her “disgust, that they were merely human” (85). In addition, the love letters she got paled in comparison to studio letters with checks enclosed for her scenarios. Unlike Lorelei, Loos would work to support her family and many of the men in her life.

Loos as Dorothy

As Smith and Watson remind us, “The stuff of autobiographical storytelling…is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experience and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences” (40). They also encourage us to “read for these tensions and contradictions in the gaps, inconsistencies, and boundaries breached within autobiographical narratives” (40). For them, “autobiographical acts take place at cultural sites where discourses intersect, conflict, and compete with one another, as narrators are pulled and tugged into complex and contradictory self-positionings through a performative dialogism” (164). Similarly, Nancy K. Miller in But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives observes, “The power in life writing in its various forms depends upon a tension between life and text that is never fully resolved” (xiv).

This tension is underscored as Loos differentiates herself as the model for Lorelei by aligning herself more with Dorothy at times. The most blatant moment of this alignment occurs when Loos outright proclaims, "when at long last the truth dawned I gave in to being the model for the unrewarded brunette of my major opus: a girl who would always pass up a diamond for a laugh" (*A Girl* 68). The "Dorothy style" of irreverence and sardonic views litter the autobiography, perhaps most notably in the section describing Griffith. Loos writes, "Despite his genius…he had a naïveté about sex in particular which sometimes took an incredible turn" (122). For example, he would not allow his star actresses—Dorothy and Lillian Gish—to kiss any man on the mouth on camera, yet advised actresses never to wear underwear as it "was a detriment to a girl's sex appeal" (123). Griffith committed other acts that replicate a Dorothy-type response from Loos throughout her autobiography. In one instance, he rigged extra girls in white robes and wings then lifted them on wires into the air "to produce the effect of flying angels." Utilizing her classic ironic twist, Loos explains, "In no time at all most of the angels got seasick, and the scene ended in embarrassing nausea" (123).

This flippancy of Loos defines nearly all of Dorothy's remarks in the novel. When Lady Francis Beekman comes to get her tiara back from Lorelei, Dorothy quips that the Lady looks like Bill Hart or "more like Bill Hart's horse" (Loos, *Gentlemen* 57). After Lady Beekman threatens to drag Lorelie into court and ruin her reputation, Dorothy throws a dart at aristocratic dignity and charges, "You have to be the Queen of England to get away with a hat like that" (58). Lorelei reflects on her friend's behavior, "I mean I always encouradge Dorothy to talk quite a lot when we are talking to unrefined people like Lady Francis Beekman, because Dorothy speaks their own languadge to unrefined people better than a girl like I" (59). As the argument escalates, Dorothy shouts, "Lady, if you go into a court and if the judge gets a good look at you, he will think that Sir Francis Beekman was out of his mind 35 years ago" (59). As the Lady

leaves, Dorothy yells down the hall to her, “Take a tuck in that skirt Isabel, its 1925” (59). Note also that Dorothy protects her friend here as well. Feminist critics Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca argue the 1953 musical—their comments apply equally to the novel—“can be read as a feminist text” (112); they are “deeply moved by” Dorothy and Lorelei’s “connection with each other” (119); and they view the story as a “celebration of women’s strength” (119). In fact, Lorelei counts on her friend to be the heavy as she “embraces etiquette” and “good manners,” using “its rules to climb the social ladder” (Coslovi 109).

In the silent film script, Dorothy defends Lorelei by telling Lady Beekman, “You could no more ruin my girl friend’s reputation than you could sink the Jewish fleet.” In the musical, Lady Beekman tells Lorelei, “You’ll find that I mean business.” Dorothy quips, “Yeah, then why are you wearing that hat?” As they leave the hotel, the private detective Ernie Malone (Elliott Reid) tells Dorothy where he is staying in case she needs any help. With one hand on her hip and one hand on the doorknob, she retorts, “You hold your breath till I call”—and pulls the door shut between them.

As we know, Loos had an equally sharp tongue—the same tongue I am arguing that inspired her dialogue for Dorothy. When the author first met Griffith, he took her and her mother to lunch at the corner drugstore where she “proceeded to sound off with some intellectual name-dropping” (Loos, *A Girl* 81). She “had recently discovered Voltaire, and Griffith wanted to know something about him” (81). The writer explained, “Voltaire’s cynicism, as expounded by A. Loos, didn’t necessarily convince Griffith, and he remarked with a benign smile that the human race might possibly be nicer than that arch pessimist conceded” (81). Loos then felt comfortable denigrating Griffith’s own intellectual favorite: Walt Whitman. She “impudently argued that Whitman was hysterical” (81). She went on to assert, “Hysteria has no place in great writing…Shakespeare is never hysterical, neither is Goethe. Walt Whitman is as uncontrolled as

Ella Wheeler Wilcox!" (81). Loos reported that "Griffith laughed and was probably as much amused by my impertinence as I was intent on trying to set him straight" (81). In fact, Loos distinguished herself from her sister Gladys by stating, "No two could have been more different than we were. Gladys was a heedless tomboy, always in the middle of things, whereas I remained on the sidelines, making *impudent* comments" (34, emphasis mine). This impertinence and impudence imbues much of Dorothy's persona as well.

According to Susan Hegeman, "Dorothy functions primarily as a counterpoint to Lorelei's comic reversals of convention: she is a critic, a truth teller, and the voice of liberated, unhypocritical moral authority" (529). For this scholar, the brunette, like Loos herself, "embodies the authorial presence even to the extent that Dorothy gives up a date with the rich and amorous Eddie Goldmaker…to have lunch with none other than Mencken"—whom Loos herself entertained (529). Scenes like this one earned the novel the label of the "great American satire" (Blom 47).

Indeed, Loos explains in her second autobiography *Kiss Hollywood Good-by* that "to fight off chagrin" due to her "husband's neglect," she "drifted into a set of intellectuals" with high IQ, led by Mencken himself (12). Ever the highbrow, she was inspired to write the story about a "flirtation" he was having with a " stupid little blonde" thus she "wrote a skit poking fun at his romance" (12). Dorothy and Loos share this "mental snobbery" (*A Girl* 134). Upon the author's first receipt of ardent fan letters as well as her first trip to New York with Griffith to promote *Intolerance*, her mother feared for her honor. But Loos's self-confessed elitism always kept her from going "astray" (134). She dreamed only of "Byron, Pushkin, and Heinrich Heine," lovers "whose sardonic attitude would complicate the whole affair; one who would whisper bittersweet things to me like those which Heine used to pour into the ears of his Mathilde in Montparnasse" (134). In New York, Loos insisted on staying at the Algonquin so that she could mingle with the literary elect of the city, but

eventually tired of their pretensions.[8] She carried an elitist's condescension even toward the elite.

While Dorothy may not have had such aristocratic taste, she is characterized with the same intellectual superiority complex in the novel, telling Lorelei the blonde's "brains reminded her of a radio because you listen to it for days and days and you get discouradged" (Loos, *Gentlemen* 65). Dorothy also reflects Loos's disrespect for the wealthy dimwits mentioned earlier. When Henry Spoffard assures the brunette that Miss Chapman "came from a very very fine old family herself and she really had a fine brain" (80), Dorothy replies, "If she really has got such a fine brain I bet her fine old family once had an ice man who could not be trusted" (80). What Lorelei perceives as unrefined in Dorothy is actually her mental acuity and sharp tongue—characteristics aligned with Loos.

Both Loos and Dorothy aid others with trickery as well. For example, the author helps Mae Marsh seduce poet Vachel Lindsay by ghostwriting letters for the actress: "Thus I developed into a small Cyrano de Bergerac, sending the poet some much more emotional thoughts on life and love than I ventured in my own purely intellectual correspondence with him. Mae copied my innermost thoughts in her own handwriting, and Vachel's replies became increasingly ardent. In no time at all he was falling madly in love with Mae" (*A Girl* 135). When the three met in New York, Vachel shifted his passion to Loos, eventually even proposing after they had spent

[8] The literary elect had mixed reactions to Loos's fiction. Faye Hammill explains, "In combination, the responses of Loos's eminent contemporaries demonstrate that the reception and literary status of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* during the interwar years was, to say the least, ambiguous. The contrast between the admiration of Huxley, Joyce, Wharton, Santayana and Empson, and the contempt of Lewis and Leavis indicates this clearly enough, while the equivocal remarks of Faulkner and Mencken contain this ambiguity within themselves, as does Loos's own tendency to celebrate her own intellect whilst deprecating her literary achievements. All these responses are determined not only by the personal taste of the writers involved but also by a complicated set of factors relating to literary value, mass culture, contemporary morality and the status of women writers" (44).

weeks tramping through Central Park and Greenwich Village. Loos never told him about the chicanery with the letters, and she hedged as well as changed the subject when he spoke of marriage (141).

Dorothy enacts frauds with equal panache. When Lady Beekman hires the private detectives Louie and Robber to retrieve her diamond tiara from Lorelei in the novel, Dorothy and her friend buy a paste copy. Dorothy then arranges to sell the fake to Louie then later to Robber (Loos, *Gentlemen* 70-71). Eventually, they all arrange to give a paste copy to the Lady, so Lorelei can keep the genuine article.

Similarly, in the 1925 silent film screenplay adaptation, Dorothy instigates a ruse in order to get Sir Francis Beekman out of their hotel room as others are arriving.[9] Knowing his abstemious nature, in a title card, Dorothy calls out, "Lorelei, they're sending up some packages C.O.D." Her stratagem works; Beekman "looks at his watch" and stammers in a title card, "I – I'm sorry, but I have an important engagement. I must be going right along." Dorothy, like Loos, outsmarts those around her. Also, like Loos, "Dorothy is a master of language, one who uses it subversively as ironic commentary" (Hefner 115).

In the musical, Dorothy dresses up as Lorelei and turns herself in to the French court to stand trial for the theft of the tiara. She dons a platinum wig, softens her voice, and imitates the syntax of her friend—all the while eyeing the clock to give Lorelei a chance to get the money for the tiara from Esmond, her on-again, off-again fiancé. "You see judge, sometimes life is very hard for a girl like I, especially if she happens to be pretty like I, and have blonde hair," she explains. To distract the lawyer who suspects

[9] Both Hefner and Laura Frost also point out that Loos's novel was influenced by her work as a screenwriter. In other words, Loos created "distinct forms of vernacular pleasure" by using a script's tools in her fiction and vice versa (Frost 292). Likewise, John T. Matthews explains that both Loos as screenwriter and Lorelei as diary writer "embod[y] the emancipatory potential of fresh forms of writing" (211). By doing such work, "women of the post-war generation" found "new spaces for imaginative activities" (220).

her identity and to stall for more time, Dorothy throws off her fur coat to reveal a scant, shimmering costume and launches into Lorelei's signature song and dance routine "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." While back on the stand, she tells Malone—while still acting as Lorelei—that Dorothy loves him, thus seducing him into withdrawing his testimony. Malone also resigns as the private investigator for Mr. Esmond Sr. (Taylor Holmes). Her subterfuge results in Lorelei's freedom as well as the triumph of true love in the marriage finale.

Conclusion

Both Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard critique universal, grand, meta, or "master narratives," deconstructing the concept of "'Truth' with a capital *T*" (Lyotard 37; Smith and Watson 204). In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Jean Baudrillard argues, "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" (1). Much like Derrida, he goes on to assert that postmodernism constitutes the process "of substituting the sign of the real for the real" (2). In his third order of simulacra—that of the postmodern period—the representation not only precedes but actually *determines* what is real. The connection between reality and representation has been lost; only the simulacrum exists. More to the subject of this article, Loos's autobiography follows her successful story—substituting the sign of the story for the real (her actual, lived life).

Moreover, ideas related to autobiography as a "unified" account, representing a "coherent self" are merely "myths of identity" anyway (Smith and Watson 61). No "unified, stable, immutable self" even exists (61). As mentioned earlier, Bakhtin's observations regarding heteroglossia in Dostoevsky's novels apply here as well: Loos's book "is constructed

not as the whole of a single consciousness…but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses" (18).[10]

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson defines the postmodern work of art as one embodying less parody, more pastiche (16-17). *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*—in all its incarnations—even the film musical penned by Lederer, but so influenced by Loos's previous works—affected the content of *A Girl Like I*, which blooms into a postmodern text even going so far as the "cannibalization of" her "styles of the past" as well as the "play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson 18).

For Loos, her past only exists and remains relevant if it bears a relationship to the writing, publication, and success of her bestselling novel and its various adaptations; her autobiographical scene selection pares down to pastiche, highlighting that very accomplishment. Thus we can also draw the conclusion that while criticism has long assigned Loos to the modernist camp, her first autobiography reveals that she trended toward postmodernism in her later writing.[11]

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[10] See also Smith and Watson on Bakhtin, 204.
[11] Monica Latham notes that "current postmodern cultural and literary practice […] manipulates the real as well as plays with different layers of truth and pluralism of realities" (355-356).

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