SPINSTERS, OLD MAIDS, AND CAT LADIES: A CASE STUDY IN CONTAINMENT STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

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Using Michel Foucault's notion of "containment strategies," this dissertation argues that representations of the crazy cat lady, the reprehensible animal hoarder, the proud spinster, and the unproductive old maid negatively frame independent, single women as models of failed White womanhood. These characters must be contained because they intrinsically transgress social norms, query gender roles, and challenge the limitations of mediated womanhood. In order to explore the role of representation, this dissertation provides a suggestive history of the ways spinsters and old maids evolved into their current iteration, the cat lady. The research begins by tracing cultural representations of cats and women from 2000 BCE through the early modern period. After this retrospective, the research focuses on two particular points of cultural anxiety connected to changing gender roles: the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. During the former, the media characterized spinsters and old maids as selfish, proud, unnatural, unproductive, and childish in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets. Rather than focusing exclusively on the negative coverage, this dissertation deeply analyzes three transgressive novels, *Agnes Grey*, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and *Lolly Willowes: Or the Loving Huntsman*, to contextualize the ways positive representations of spinsters and old maids could threaten patriarchal society. At the turn of the 21st century, "spinster" and "old maid" became outmoded terms, but the cat lady emerges as a postmodern version of the same cautionary tale. Fictional television characters like Eleanor Abernathy from *The Simpsons* and Angela Martin from *The Office* are deconstructed, revealing the ways the

framing and editing contribute to narratives of failed femininity. Participants from reality TV shows like *Hoarders* and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and the documentary film *Cat Ladies* are analyzed to demonstrate the ways "factual" representations further pathologize the cat lady by associating her with hoarding and mental illness. This dissertation illustrates how a marginalized, peripheral character like the cat lady serves as a tool for social maintenance, reinforcing heteronormative gender roles and containing alternative versions of womanhood.

For Bubba

first word, first love, first heartache

For Zazoo

forever deigning domestication

For Molly

who loved me most

For Murphy

who loved everyone equally

And for Moshi

my feline doppelganger, my hello kitty, my serrated edge

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INTRODUCTION.

APPARITIONS FROM THE PERIPHERY:

AN INTRODUCTION TO CAT LADIES

Given a happy or desirable marriage as the goal of every woman's life, if she fails in attaining it, she is looked upon, especially in the eyes of every other woman who is married, as having failed in the prime object of existence. She is made the butt of playful ridicule on all sides, and, in fact, is supposed to be kind of a female Ishmael, with every one's hand raised against her, and her hand raised against every one. Tradition associates her with cats and parrots, on which she is supposed to lavish all that is left of affection in her withered heart, while she loathes babies, those curled darlings in conjugal love, and doles out but sparingly the milk of human kindness that every breast is supposed to hold for ties of blood and kindred.

- HART AYRAULT, DESCRIBING SPINSTERS, POTTER'S AMERICAN MONTHLY, 1881

They know…The cats. They know that I've broken up with Jason and that I'm alone and they've decided it's time for me to become a crazy cat lady…There's a cat on my doorstep…It's just sitting there, staring at me, like he knew this moment was coming. It's still there. Why is it still there?…It's not fair. We just broke up. It just happened. I'm still young. It's still possible that I'm going to have a successful

relationship. You don't know. My eggs are still viable…Everyone knows. They can see it in my face. 'She's single again. She couldn't make it work again. She picked the wrong guy again.'…Oh, my God!...There are two of them. They're not even easing me into this, those bastards. I give up. I guess I need to start collecting newspapers and magazines; find a blue bathrobe; lose my front teeth…Yarn balls. I need to find some yarn balls.

- LORELAI GILMORE, THE MORNING AFTER A BREAK UP, GILMORE GIRLS, 2004

Robert DeNiro is in cat lady drag playing a character called Margie. He wears a gray straggly wig, pink sweatshirt with an iron-on cat, and a floral, ankle-length skirt. The cat lady sits on a couch holding two cats in a room with seven roaming cats. She mentions she has 80 cat children. Margie tells the cats to gather around for a Christmas story and says: *Once upon a time there was a woman named Margie and she had dreams. Then one day she was kicked by a horse and now she has cats. The end.*

- SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE, 2004

Mrs. Sarafiny herself looked worried. She was wearing the same dress she'd worn the day before and paper hospital slippers. Her hair was more flyaway than usual, and on her head was the shower cap Anna and Bethie had noticed earlier. Like the kitchen, it was lined in aluminum foil. "We brought you some food, Mrs. Sarafiny," *Anna said, holding out the paper bag of groceries. Mrs. Sarafiny was*

holding Caroline [the cat], patting her gently. Her eyes filled with tears. "It's been a long time since I've had people food." *She straightened up a bit as she said,* "Of course, I haven't starved or anything. You'd be surprised how tasty cat food is when it's warmed up a bit."

- EXCERPT FROM ANNA AND THE CAT LADY, A MIDDLE-GRADE CHILDREN'S BOOK, 1992

In an effort to destroy McKinley High's Glee Club, cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester exploits drama in soloist Rachel's love life. Sue assembles a group of "mustache-sporting teenage girls with glandular conditions" she calls the "McKinley High Old Maids Club." The motley group of girls assembled is collectively homely, awkward, and dull looking. They all wear cardigans. Sue's plan is to push Rachel into a relationship with the rival lead soloist by scaring her with the threat of permanent singleness: no homecoming dance, no Valentines, no sock-hop. One of the teenage old maids warns Rachel that if she breaks up with her boyfriend she will spend Friday nights at home watching *Ghost Whisperer*, making out with her cat.

- GLEE, 2010

Beyonce's best-selling perfume, "Heat," is doing much better than Susan Boyle's fragrance, "14 Cats."

- JOEL MCHALE, THE SOUP, 2011

Toy company Lego features a "minifigure" cat lady named Mrs. Scratchen-Post. She has long gray hair, oversized red glasses and wrinkles around her eyes, and a worried grimace. She wears a pink sweatshirt with a cat's head printed across the chest and a green fanny pack around her waist. In addition, her torso and legs are covered in short, dark dashes; she is covered in cat hair. The toy also comes with an orange cat as her companion. The Lego wiki states, "*Emmet's neighbor Mrs. Scratchen-Post takes her cats with her wherever she goes. She has so many that she can hardly keep track of them all, though that doesn't stop her from covering all of her belongings with kitty-themed pictures and decorations. Even though Emmet knows each and every one of her cats by name, from Jasmine to Bad Leroy to Fluffy, Fluffy Jr. and Fluffy Sr., Mrs. Scratchen-Post barely pays attention to him. After all, he doesn't even have a tail or whiskers!*

- MRS. SCRATCHEN-POST, THE CAT LADY FEATURED IN THE LEGO MOVIE, 2014

Max, we can't. We can't become cat ladies. And it always starts out innocently, rescuing a stray. But then you have to get another one so they can entertain each other while you're at work. And then somewhere along the line four more sneak in and you think "We're good. We're cool. We're the cute girls with six cats." *And then, one day, there you are on* Animal Cops *screaming* "Don't take my babies! These 27 angels is all I got." *That's how it goes, Max; once you get one you get 27.*

- CAROLINE CHANNING, EXPLAINS WHY THEY SHOULDN'T TAKE IN A STRAY CAT, 2 BROKE GIRLS, 2013

Meet the cat lady. You probably already have, numerous times. The cat lady in popular culture has become a shorthand signifier for non-normative femininity. Usually a minor character, she lingers in the periphery of Euro-American cultural texts. In books, magazines, television, film, videogames, and more, the cat lady accents larger plots from the margins. She emerged at the turn of the 21st century, the postmodern iteration of spinster and old maid tropes. Although updated to accommodate new understandings of womanhood and postfeminist femininity, the cat lady addresses the same gender concerns as her predecessors.

In case you're still not sure who the cat lady is, let me be more descriptive. This character is middle- to upper-class and almost always White. She is usually college-educated. Her age fluctuates and might be anywhere from late-20s into old age. She is single and has no children. She has three or more cats. Although one or two cats might suggest a female character could become a cat lady, the number three seems imperative for full-blown cat ladies. This formula is not set in stone and the ratio of cats varies on the character and her purpose in the larger narrative. The cat lady tends to be dressed in one of two ways: with Victorian modesty or unkempt disarray. Cat ladies in the former category are typically costumed in shirts buttoned up to the neck, long skirts, and cardigan sweaters. Hair is tightly pulled back, minimal make up, and an overall staunch demeanor reminiscent of prim spinster stereotypes. Cat ladies in the latter category are often depicted in night gowns, bathrobes, and cardigan sweaters. Their hair is down and disheveled or in a scraggly bun. These cat ladies often have sallow skin or missing teeth. On top of how she looks, the narratives imply there is something off about a cat lady. She cannot seem to function "normally" in social situations, and the character is meant to be understood as unpleasant, undesirable, and/or mentally unstable. These three outcomes need not

be separate – they all add up to a woman incapable of participating in social or cultural expectations of femininity.

Spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies have been pervasive in popular culture for three centuries, but their place in the periphery makes them hard to find and under-theorized. These characters offset normative main characters; their purpose is to reinforce dominant gender narratives during moments of cultural anxiety. Historical context dictates the manner in which they are depicted, but the message has been resoundingly the same: women must adhere to heteronormative gender expectations. Be desirable, flirt, catch a husband, marry, have children, and you will have succeeded as a woman. Whether by choice or situation, spinster, old maid, and cat lady characters neglect their feminine duties and become cultural models for failed White womanhood. Instead of demonstrating "correct," normative practices, they show audiences what-not-to-do. Texts frame their failure in two ways: the components of their representation and the inclusion of feline companions. In other words, cats are a major point in the character's visual construction, a cue that something might be off, but the character's narrative and the text's formal elements further distinguish a cat lady as such.

If stripped down to her basic components, though, spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies are simply single women surviving on their own. This idea of a successful single woman could be a powerful alternative to the wife and mother, feminine companion, endlessly dependable, mainstay of hearth and home, ideal woman promoted in the media. When popular culture presents alternatives to domesticity and traditional femininity, those alternatives become viable options merely because they are conjured in the plot (Basinger). Even if the narrative rejects the alternative, it opens popular imagination to it. In the case of the cat lady, while the character

may be contextualized as failed femininity, her existence in the story at all presents an alternative that jeopardizes a gender system that constantly needs reinforcement.

This is why spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies must be contained. Everything about their lives defiantly declares, "I don't need or want a man…for financial security, for family, or for companionship." Any woman willfully opting out of the system threatens patriarchy at the most fundamental levels of participation. I argue that the potential possessed by spinster, old maid, and cat lady characters must be discredited in order to make their lives seem inexorable rather than products of their choices. Depending on the medium, characters are unwritten through narrative, framing, editing, music, sound effects, costuming and other formal elements. Couching the characters in terms of disability, undesirability, and ridiculousness further insists that these characters are powerless, unthreatening, and most of all outsiders. The containment strategy discourages any attempt to identify with spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies.

Cat lady characters or references fall into three categories: reoccurring minor characters, fringe narrative references, and punch lines in jokes. Recurring characters are specific to television programs and serial novels because of the ongoing plots featuring ensemble casts or characters. Recurring cat ladies are minor characters whose outlandish personalities establish them as outsiders. They do not fit in and the cats are shorthand for their inability to socialize well with people. Since reoccurring characters show up repeatedly in narratives, their personalities are allowed to be complex and push the trope beyond spinster without children. For example, Angela Martin on *The Office* was a consistent cat lady character for nine seasons of the sitcom (2005-2013). Considering that she was an important part of the ensemble cast and a driving force in some episodes, Angela's character had to be more complex than a curmudgeonly single woman who loves cats. Angela had multiple office romances, was married twice, and had

a child. Despite her adherence to gender norms, she remained classified a cat lady based on her inability to relate or interact with her coworkers, her prudish attitudes, and her cat obsession.

Unlike reoccurring characters, a fringe narrative reference is typically a cul-de-sac character that only occurs once and in passing. This kind of cat lady occurs across media and is a physical character, not just an allusion. The fringe narrative reference is enriched by the layers of information the cats have come to suggest; audiences recognize the cat as a signifier of much more. For instance, the *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* episode "Bombshell" (2007) featured spinster sisters Clara and Bessie Holland. Detectives Logan and Wheeler question Clara and Bessie in their home because they are murder suspects. The scene begins with a long shot of their rundown parlor that looks like dilapidation of former glory. Stacks of newspapers are piled on the couches and around the room, garbage covers the coffee table, and ten cats roam the room mewing amidst expensive-looking fixtures and art. Clara and Bessie sit close together on a ratty pink couch. Clara has her blonde hair tightly pulled back, wears wire-rimmed glasses, and a rose-colored cardigan. Bessie, the older of the two, wears a cheap dark wig, pale pink cardigan, and strokes a black cat that's perched on her lap. In the course of questioning it becomes clear that the Holland sisters pride themselves on caring for their father after their mother's death – duties that had ended decades before. Clara blissfully reminisces about laying out her father's clothes, cooking for him, and drawing his mustard baths. Bessie interjects, "We're Papa's little girls." Later, Bessie says, "Sometimes I think Papa married that woman because he was disappointed in me. Once I forgot to strain the pulp from his orange juice. I'll regret that morning for the rest of my life." The male officer, Detective Logan, is of particular interest to the cats. He's covered in cat fur, one licks his neck, and another kneads his crotch. Clara points to the lap cat and says, "He likes you." Bessie adds, "It's because of his musk," and raises her

eyebrows suggestively. The Holland sisters seem out of touch in a number of ways: they're oddly jealous of their late father's second wife, Lorelai; their prim manners; their neurotic romanticizing of a long-gone past; and the squalor shown in their home. The filming adds to these impressions. Reaction shots of Detectives Wheeler and Logan's disbelieving raised eyebrows, bemused smiles, and annoyance with the cats provide audiences with further information about the (in)validity of these characters. This is the only scene with the Holland sisters in the episode and it lasts a little over two minutes, but it packs a wallop in layered meaning. That's not unusual for fringe narrative references. They rely on the most basic stereotypes and are generally less complex than recurring cat lady characters. Additionally, this category appears across genres and is often used to create humor, pity, or horror.

Finally, punch lines are seemingly the simplest kind of representation because the cat lady does not even need to be present. A punch line relies completely on the audience's shared understanding of whom and what the cat lady represents in terms of failed femininity. This category predominantly occurs as an offhand comment, an allusion in a larger story, a joke in the opening monologue of a late night talk show, or on a clip comedy program. In the 1942 film *Now, Voyager*, heroine Charlotte Vale (played by Bette Davis) breaks off a promising engagement with a doctor. Shocked, her mother demands to know what Charlotte plans to do with the rest of her life. Charlotte slyly replies, "Get a cat and a parrot and live alone in solemn blessedness." Another example of a cat lady punch line comes from the show *Tosh.0*, which uses YouTube videos as the jumping off point for comedian Daniel Tosh's commentary. In 2011 Tosh showed a YouTube video of a graying, older White woman who'd recorded herself dancing on a desk discussing her personal philosophies about life and nature. Tosh responds to the video by focusing on the woman's unattractiveness, her likely mental illness, and concludes "What's

the over-under on the number of cats she owns?" Punch lines indicate how deeply familiar the cat lady is thought to be – just the idea of her is enough to get a laugh or instigate pity. Lorelai's composite dialogue from *Gilmore Girls* at the beginning of this chapter is certainly funny, but it veers into deeper emotional territory the more she rants. The show never framed Lorelai as a cat lady, but the possibility of it happening *to* her against her will is meant to be funny, scary, and sad. That monologue captures the deep-seated fears of lifelong singleness as well as the loneliness and mental instability being alone implies. Cat ladies are always the butt of the joke with punch lines. The fact that a cat lady need not physically be present for the joke to work demonstrates the trope's pervasiveness.

Methodology

I am interested in how the cat lady trope has successfully survived in popular culture for three centuries. This project analyzes the cultural discourse surrounding the cat lady trope and questions what cultural function this character serves in Western popular culture. When are spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies most salient? What anxieties do they protect and what hegemonic norms do the characters attempt to preserve when invoked? What characterizes the historical moments when they're brought forth? What does the cat lady character say about single women? Now, more than a decade into the 21st century, what does spinsterhood mean? While the cat lady is directed at women, does it have repercussions for men as well? Is the cat lady ever positioned to invoke responses other than humor or pity? How does the trope shift when the emotive or affective context is altered?

To answer these questions, I analyze ancient Egyptian texts from 2000 BCE, European texts from the Middle Ages, and Euro-American texts from the mid-1800s through 2000s CE.

The most in-depth analyses are on Euro-American texts from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. In examining spinster, old maid, and cat lady representations, this study has two central goals. The first is to uproot this trope, unearth it from the periphery in order to connect the historical moments in which it appears to the accompanying cultural shifts. Using folklore, art, mythology, and popular culture alongside official histories, I create a genealogical long view of women and cats. It is historical in a cultural sense. Women, cats, and women and cats occupy a unique space in the popular imagination. Cats are thought to be a number of things. Loving, aloof, impulsive, strategic, unpredictable, wild, and domesticated are just a few. Perceptions of women are similarly contradictory. Both have been regarded ambivalently throughout history, so delving into this specific trope requires reading against the grain and between the lines. It requires committed critical literacy.

The second goal of this project is to interrogate the relationship between hegemonic images, representation, and social control following Michele Foucault's insight on containment strategies. Containment strategies work through ideological institutions to maintain social norms. In Foucault's sense of disciplinary power, these strategies help to create and maintain a culture of individualized, ordered, and branded subjects. Popular culture representations are just one of many sites where identity categories are established, normalized, and enforced. In terms of containment strategies the media's ability to promote specific identities through representational practices helps shape popular discourse. Foucault argues that the production of discourse in all societies "is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 216). The "procedures" Foucault refers to are containment strategies. The cat lady is contained

through three branches of the same strategy: prohibition, division, and rejection as methods of exclusion. The cat lady character is an amalgamation of social taboos: she disrupts the human-animal hierarchy by socializing with animals; her sexual expression is presumed to be outside the norm; since she is unmarried, she is stuck in an adolescent phase of development; she might be suffering from mental, emotional, or physical illness. Framing her as unpleasant, undesirable, and/or unstable means the cat lady is understood as abnormal. Separating people or groups (real or fictional – it doesn't matter) from the category "normal" effectively others them, making it difficult to sympathize or even identify with them. The cat lady's transgressive potential is thus contained.

Exclusion "forms a complex web, continually subject to modification…the areas where this web is most tightly woven today, where the danger spots are most numerous are those dealing with politics and sexuality" (Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 216). Spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies consistently challenge patriarchal norms which are influential in terms of politics and sexuality. If the cat lady character represents the antithesis of successful womanhood, then the heteronormative characters her difference highlights are reinforced as correct performances of gender. In other words, deconstructing the cat lady in popular media demonstrates how this particular containment strategy works to reassert traditional gender roles. Approaching the topic through the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, and disability will show how intricate and tightly woven the containment strategy web can be. Part of this web includes the cultural outputs that transmit spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies, so I make a point to analyze examples from art, literature, folklore, television, and film.

The cat lady's influence operates on multiple levels and answering the questions posed above requires examining the character through different lenses. To better understand the

complexity of this seemingly benign trope, this feminist project draws on scholarship from Gender and Sexuality Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Media Studies, Humor Studies, Disability Studies, and Animal Studies. It must be an interdisciplinary endeavor in order to fully address the character's intricacies. To this end, textual analysis and discourse analysis are the methods this dissertation will use to deconstruct the cat lady.

Approaching popular culture texts from a position that analyzes their presentation, content, and implications, allows researchers to grasp how the text is situated in public perceptions. This kind of textual analysis means considering contexts: the material structures of production, the material structures of distribution, and the ethos surrounding the process of reading, interpreting, and connecting texts to the bigger picture (Couldry). It's more than simply form and content; it lends itself to discourse analysis because it permits a space of indeterminacy between the text and the audience. Individuals in the audience are interpreting, negotiating, and creating new understandings of the cultural texts they consume, and, in some cases, constructing and disseminating their own texts that play with meaning.

I inform the critiques in this project with feminist approaches to media and audience analysis. Millennial texts are comprised of feminist, postfeminist, antifeminist, and pseudofeminist motifs (Johnson). Audiences are not dupes, but there are extensive, savvy manipulations reinforcing the patriarchal capitalist systems in place. While the cat lady does not force real women to accept any marriage proposal cast in their direction, the character is constructed in a way that underlines how unattractive, pitiful, and sick an individual would have to be to *choose* singleness. And in writing her as unattractive, pitiful, and sick, the idea of choice crumbles. Certainly some audiences may find an alternative to domesticity in an independent, working female character, which certainly can be *part* of some cat lady characters. But the cat

lady is never *just* an independent, working White woman; the text routinely vilifies her character by framing her choices, mental health, and personal hygiene as suspect. Given the layered and self-referential nature of contemporary cultural texts as well as irony's ubiquity across genre and medium, critical consumption is the best way to navigate postfeminist texts and terrains. As feminist media scholars Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue, "Postfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts…it urgently requires us to develop new reading strategies to counteract the popularized feminism, figurations of female agency and canny neutralization of traditional feminist critiques" (22). Reading against the grain and dismantling the components of humor, horror, and pity built into spinster, old maid, and cat lady character help make the containment strategy plain. It is a method I employ with all of the texts analyzed, regardless of whether or not they are postmodern.

The second method for approaching the cat lady trope is discourse analysis. Although inherently connected to textual analysis, employing discourse analysis goes beyond the text's structure to scrutinize the representation's function in policing identities as well as the media's role in transmitting dominant values. Namely, discourse analysis demonstrates the interactions between media texts and consumers in constructing identities. Considering the cat lady's multifaceted role in defining abnormality, this dissertation seeks to address the discourses contributing to the trope's cultural cache. I look at examples from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries in art, folklore, ritual, literature, television, and film. I explore fiction and nonfiction representations. I take into account film form and genre conventions into the character's framing and consider the range of affect created through these techniques. All the while interrogating the ways gender, sexuality, class, disability, and animals are (ab)normalized in the text. I also look for ruptures where a cat lady character projects a viable alternative to audiences. When are the

representations positive (if ever)? I will attempt to view these characters and their roles in the larger stories from multiple positions in order to find opportunities arising in the margins.

Chapter Breakdown

As stated previously, this dissertation aims to interrogate the relationship between representation and social control by analyzing the spinster, old maid, and cat lady tropes as versions of the same containment strategy. By approaching the topic through intersections of gender, class, race, disability, and sexuality, my goal is to deconstruct how the cat lady trope influences perceptions of single women in Euro-American culture. Deconstructing media examples reveals the intricacies of a seemingly simple character. At the same time, analyzing how the varying discourses interlock demonstrate how containment strategies pin down identities and expectations for women in Euro-American culture.

In the chapters that make up this project, I offer a history of the relationship between women and cats through their various representations. Rather than a comprehensive, chronological history, this project tracks times of cultural anxiety, moments when spinster, old maid, and cat lady representations are most prevalent, to dictate the focus. Probing in these cites of rupture and containment, I am looking for material effects the tropes might have had on Euro-American perceptions of single women. Although focusing specifically on spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies as case studies, each chapter feeds into the bigger picture: containment strategies and social maintenance. How does this containment strategy reassert patriarchal norms and enforce heteronormative gender roles? The cat lady character may be narrow, but what she represents and how she is contained in popular discourse is wide.

Chapter One is a specialized history that traces the cultural representations of cats and women from 2000 BCE through the early modern period. This history is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. Spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies draw on affects established centuries prior to their mediated forms. These characters may have been painted as pitiful, humorous, or monstrous after the 19th century, but they share a bloodline with ancient Egyptian goddesses and sacred cats as well as witches and their familiars. Ambivalence characterizes symbolic understandings of women and cats. Both are perceived as existing somewhere between domesticated and wild, natural and supernatural, good and evil, innocent and promiscuous, and so on. Depending on the cultural moment, women and cats might be celebrated, persecuted, or an unfortunate mix of both. Take for instance the Norse goddess Freyja who rode through the sky in a chariot drawn by cats. For centuries Scandinavian women left bowls of milk outside their homes when seeking Freyja's assistance with romantic and reproductive concerns. Women would also gather at night to perform religious ceremonies honoring the goddess. But the meaning of these religious rites changed during the Middle Ages to witchcraft and devil worship. While goddess worship may have continued undetected in rural regions of Europe, people in urban areas demonstrated their renunciation of Freyja's cult with a new tradition – throwing live cats from high towers during Lent. As mentioned above, celebrated, persecuted, or an unfortunate mix of both. Artists often played with the ambivalence to add layers of meaning to their work. From the Egyptian traditions of painting cats beneath women's chairs and totemism to shape-shifting witches in folktales to "cats in the bedroom" in Baroque and Rococo art, the symbolic meanings of both women and cats added depth to cultural texts. Beginning with the domestication of the cat, I pull from the work of scholars across history, art, folklore, literature, and religion to stress continuities across space and time.

Chapter Two examines the waves of cultural tension surrounding women's changing roles between the mid-1800s through 1930. Uncertainty generated by the impacts of first-wave feminism, the Industrial Revolution, and changes to everyday life brought on by the modern age mark these as decades of crisis in America and Europe. Although men and women were impacted by the changes, women in particular were scrutinized in the media. Once again, ambivalence characterizes the representations of spinsters and old maids. Initially, women's foray into the public sphere was tolerated and sometimes applauded. Taking advantage of opportunities in education and employment; testing the boundaries of womanhood; and seeking suffrage and equality were portrayed as respectable ventures for White women. But by the turn of the 20th century representations of spinsters and old maids were resoundingly negative. Women were troublemakers, especially educated women who remained single. Proud spinsters and unproductive old maids were ripped apart in newspapers and magazines. Painted as selfish, unnatural, and childish, spinsters and old maids were linked to lesbianism and pathologized. The chapter features positive and negative representations of single, independent women, but focuses closest on three transgressive novels: Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-fashioned Girl* (1875), and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes: Or the Loving Huntsman* (1927). Written by independent, feminist women, these texts demonstrate how ambivalent representation can be seen as negotiation between empowerment and containment.

Chapter Three dives into another cultural moment characterized by anxiety: the turn of the 21st century. Thanks to second-wave feminism this time period saw great gains in women's enfranchisement, financial stability, and reproductive control in the U.S. and Europe. These changes not only impacted women's life cycles, they also threatened traditional gender roles. While the spinster and old maid tropes were thought to be dormant, the cat lady emerges as a

postmodern version of the same old cautionary tale. Building on backlash, postfeminism, and the push to self-police this chapter interrogates how the character resonates in the new millennium. Increasingly, cat lady characters are defined by the ways they became cat ladies. I determine that there are three cat lady roots: deficiency, compulsion, or choice. With deficiency the woman is unwillingly single due to some physical or emotional defect: she's rejected because she is ugly, unlikeable, unstable, or possibly all of the above. The second root, compulsion, connects the woman's singleness with her tendency to compulsively collect of cats. Her inability to comply with socially accepted norms further implies that she is unstable: her collecting is out of control and her actions violate the human-animal hierarchy. The final cat lady root, choice, is misleading because choice is always unwritten in the cat lady's construction. She's single because she didn't plan her life well or she chose to focus on a career instead of what really mattered or she's incapable of choosing due to some kind of mental or physical instability. Whatever the genre, these causes are blended together to completely strip the cat lady of any agency – nobody chooses to be a cat lady. To bring these ideas together, I analyze two recurring cat lady characters: Eleanor Abernathy from *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and Angela Martin from *The Office* (2005-2013). Unlike punch lines or fringe narrative references, Eleanor and Angela are long term characters that have been developed over years. Rather than challenging cat lady stereotypes, these characters demonstrate the ways genre, format, narrative, editing, framing, mise-en-scène, and other formal elements dismantle the cat lady's agency. Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin show how minor characters in the cultural imaginary are strategically employed containment strategies.

Chapter Four looks at the ways factual media, or media construed as reality, contribute to the containment strategy. It is in the formula of reality TV and the conventions of documentary

film that the cat lady evolves from a social stigma to a mental disorder that can be diagnosed and treated. Nonfiction media pathologizes the cat lady by associating her with hoarding. Whereas fictional cat ladies often insinuated some kind of mental instability, reality TV and documentary film conflate cat lady-ness with mental disorders. When presented through these lenses of "reality" the cat lady is "proven" to exist in real life. Hoarding puts the "crazy" in crazy cat lady. I analyze animal hoarding on *Hoarders* (2009- present) and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* (2010-present), the initial representation of Susan Boyle on *Britain's Got Talent* (2009), and the so-called cat ladies in the documentary film *Cat Ladies* (2009). Like Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin in Chapter Three, there is no room in nonfiction media for a narrative of choice. Choice is written out through the editing, framing, sound effects, music, and other formal elements. Nonfiction media puts cat ladies front and center in medicalized narratives that frame subjects as either victims of their own poor choices or suffering from some kind of mental disorder.

In her research on internet cats' cultural resonance (research that led to many warnings that she'd be written off as a cat lady instead of an academic), Cultural Studies scholar Jody Berland found, "History assures us that…nothing is more unstable than the identity of cats" (432). This is most certainly what I found, too. But the spinster, old maid, and cat lady trope has had a relatively stable existence, undisturbed for three centuries now. This containment strategy has made it so they're seemingly nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It's time to conjure it out of the periphery and reveal the sleight of hand: there is no cat lady. She is a figment of popular imagination.

CHAPTER ONE.

AMBIVALENT TAILS AND TALES:

A LOOSE HISTORY OF GODDESSES, WITCHES, AND FELINE FAMILIARS

The domestic cat's nature is marked by ambivalence. Although humans claim to have tamed it, cat owners the world over can agree their cats have a wild streak. In one moment the cat enjoys being pet, and in the next it attacks the hand with claws and teeth. They're wild animals that enjoy the comforts of civilization. Despite claims of domestication and dependence on human intervention, the cat is still resolutely independent. Ambivalence explains why the cat occupies such a unique position in Western iconography. Cats have come to symbolize opposing forces: domestic and wild, dependent and independent, good and evil, daytime friend and nighttime fiend, private sphere and public sphere, innocence and promiscuity, and so on. Their nature makes them difficult to classify, and the range of symbolism connected to cats reflects their ambivalent categorization.

Depending on the historical and cultural moment, cats might be depicted as benevolent friends or beguiling scoundrels. The same can be said of women – depending on the time period, they might be depicted as benevolent or beguiling. Woman and cat, goddess and sacred animal, witch and feline familiar: the relationship has existed for centuries and the connotations range from domestic home and hearth to supernatural powers. This chapter considers representations of cats and women in culture from 2000 BCE through the early modern period. It is meant to be suggestive of the symbolic relationship between women and cats rather than a definitive history.

I pull from the work of scholars from history, art, folklore, literature, and religion to stress continuities across space and time.

The Sacred Feline: Egyptian Representations of Cats

Understanding the cat's incorporation into human civilization sets the stage for its unique presence across cultures. Drawing on the works of cultural historians like Donald W. Engels, Jaromir Malek, Patrick F. Houlihan, and Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe, this section examines the cat in ancient Egypt: its material existence in the home, its relationship to goddesses, and its magical symbolism. These authors use archeological evidence (i.e. where bones are buried, if they are arranged, if there is any human connection, etc.) and artifacts depicting cats to approximate the cultural beliefs surrounding cats.

Historians argue Egypt was the place cats were first domesticated between 2000-1000 BCE. In *Classical Cats: The Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat* historian Donald W. Engels argues that domesticating cats saved civilization. Egypt was shifting to an agrarian lifestyle. The Nile's annual flood created rich growing conditions and the development of granaries allowed people to prepare for times of scarcity. This important development prevented large scale famines thus lowering mortality rates as well as changed the kinds of food available year-round. Humans weren't the only ones reaping benefits from the new system – rats and other vermin raided the food stores. More than eating between four grams and four ounces of food *daily*, mice and rats further spoil five to ten times more than those amounts with their droppings and urine (Engels 16). The cat's natural instinct to hunt, kill, and eat these pests brought them to grain-storing sites, too. Egyptians began feeding cats in an effort to encourage them to stay in their homes, silos, and granaries. Engels breaks down the use-value of a cat in ancient Egypt as follows: if a

single rat can damage up to 1000 pounds of food in a year and a single cat kills about 500 rats annually, then one cat "can prevent the potential destruction of 250 tons of human food supplies per year" (17). With numbers like that, it's clear why Engels attributes civilization's progress to cats.

Cats big and small began to appear in Egyptian art during the period of domestication. According to Jaromir Malek, an Egyptologist with a specialty in Egyptian art, the cat's protection of food and home raised their status to sacred animal in religious beliefs. Sacred animals were admired for their natural instincts and skills, but the animals themselves were not worshipped. More than just dealing with mice, the domestic cat came to symbolize a wide range of skills. Their aggressive hunting linked them to war, aggression, and quiet intimidation. Hunting also meant they protected against snakes and scorpions, so they were considered guardians of the home. Cats were connected to women's fertility and sexuality: female cats control the mating process[1]; they have short gestation periods, and are attentive mothers. The cat's ascension can be seen in amulets, jewelry, knives, rods, and other weapons with cats carved into them. The likeness of a domestic cat was thought to imbue these objects with powers pulled from its sacred qualities (Malek 80; Houlihan 83; Capel and Markoe 70). For instance, an amulet with a cat safeguarded the wearer from bites and stings while a knife with a cat etched into it would hopefully give the user a steady, sure hand. On top of becoming a sacred animal, the domestic cat was also raised into the realm of Egyptian gods and goddesses.

Egyptian gods and goddesses were often portrayed as human bodies from the neck down but with animal heads. Egyptologist Patrick F. Houlihan's research focuses on the symbolic meaning of animals in *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*. Houlihan explains that animal-headed representations speak to the hieroglyphic nature of Egyptian art and suggest more about

the powers of the totem than the actual animal itself (2). Paintings featuring gods and goddesses with sacred animals as part of their bodies symbolized the divine powers they possessed and the spheres over which they ruled. In other words, a cat-headed goddess wasn't literally depicting a hybrid entity.

Cats were connected to 40 goddesses, but it was the goddess Bastet who was predominantly represented by a woman's body with the head of a domestic cat. Initially Bastet was represented by a woman's body and lion's head, but this gradually changed. When asking for Bastet's protection or care, worshipers could purchase bronze statues or statuettes of domestic cats to use as offerings at Bubastis, Bastet's temple (Houlihan 89). Bastet was revered for two major reasons: her militant aggression and her protective, life-giving nature (Capel and Markoe 140). Bastet oversaw the spheres of life, sexuality, fertility, motherhood, and pregnancy. A motif in Bastet statuary is to have her carrying a basket. Some artists went so far as to sculpt kittens into it, which some suggest the basket was intended to carry her sacred animals and represented fecundity (Engels 30). She was also a patron of pleasure, joy, music, and dance. In some bronzed sculptures Bastet is shown holding a sistrum, an Egyptian musical instrument similar to a tambourine. The sistrum was considered Bastet's instrument, but, importantly, was seen as a sign of her reverence to another fertility goddess, Hathor. Hathor protected infants and consoled the dead. In addition, she was considered the goddess of sky, sun, love, mirth, and joy. Bastet and Hathor were understood to be friends[2] and the sistrum signified appeasement and regeneration (Capel and Markoe 99). Bronzed sistrums were also cast with cat figures around the top, inside the base, and along the handle.

Bastet's ambivalent role as fierce, unpredictable fighter and caring protector of women and children evolved over time. The bellicose aspects of her personality were separated out into

a sister goddess: Sekhmet, a lion-headed deity. Sekhmet was considered a merciless adversary, the ultimate female warrior able to summon as well as withdraw pestilence and disease. She often attacked that which she was supposed to protect, which potentially symbolized the tenuous balance between dangerous force and protection (Capel and Markoe 140).

This example of splitting a single goddess into two was not unusual, nor was the merging of goddesses based on shared qualities. There is considerable overlap between Isis, Hathor, Mut, Bastet, and Sekhmet, and sometimes they are depicted in art as if they are the same, other times they are portrayed as separate entities, and occasionally they turn into another goddess. For instance, one story tells of Hathor turning into Sekhmet when she must punish a group of people. It is only until she is tricked into drinking beer tinted red and becomes drunk that she returns to the gentler goddess (Lesko). Scholars suggest that leonine-headed goddesses are part of the order known as the Eye of Ra, feminine counterparts to Ra's power (te Velde 238). Goddesses who were part of the Eye were seen as volatile personalities whose destructive, anarchic instincts were expressed by leonine forms and their peaceful nature represented by feline forms. Their purpose may have been to protect, but they were often ambivalent, unleashing terrible powers against or even abandoning the things they were meant to protect (Fazzini 139). Cats big and small were associated with the goddesses Hathor, Mut, Nebethetepet, Pakhet, Tefnut, Mafdet, Taweret, Buto, and Wadjet (Malek; Engels; Houlihan; Turner and Coulter). The metamorphosis these goddesses undergo is dependent on the historical moment as well as geography. Depending on the time and place, deities were associated with different animals.

Visually speaking, artists combined goddesses' symbols and sacred animals to demonstrate this fluidity. Hybrid goddesses were shown through totems layered on crowns or by including the sacred animals off to the side. Sacred animals were also layered in art to reveal

moods, demonstrate friendship between goddesses, or overlapping characteristics (Malek; Houlihan). For instance, an artistic rendition of the above example would combine Hathor's traditional symbolism (i.e. the crown of cow horns holding a solar disc) with Sekhmet's lion head. Although cats may not have been a goddesses' primary sacred animal, the presence of cats big or small speaks not only to the goddesses' personal powers, but their relationships with other gods and goddesses connected to cats. Another example comes from sister goddesses Sekhmet and Bastet. Artists drew distinctions and accented their personalities; Sekhmet was sometimes accompanied with kittens, which either represented her connection to Bastet or symbolized her capacity to protect as well as defend (Capel and Markoe 135). Similarly, in bronzes where Bastet wore the lion's head smaller cat figures would often accompany her. She would either be extending an arm with a kitten or cat in her hand or they would be playing at her feet.

Goddesses were not the only members of the pantheon to be represented by cats. The gods Aker, Ra, Nefertum, Maahes and Shu also had associations with cats, but were traditionally seen as lions or an unspecific species of big cat. Almost all of them were considered sons of the cat goddesses (Houlihan; Malek). Maahes, the son of Bastet/Sekhmet and either Ra or Ptah, was represented by a lion-headed man. He symbolized war, strength, power, knives, and the desire to devour captives (Turner and Coulter). But despite representing both male and female deities, cats were predominantly associated with women. Many of the goddesses listed above had power in the domestic sphere and were responsible for motherhood, childbirth, and child-rearing. These roles are intrinsically linked to sex and sexuality. For instance, in addition to serving as a manifestation of Hathor and the qualities of entertainment, the goddess Nebethetepet was also associated with sexual energy, which Malek believes is tied to the fertility and procreative powers of the cat (93). The goddess Mut is another example. Houlihan argues that the feline

association might have provided erotic significance or symbolized female sexuality (83). Other Egyptologists like Herman te Velde suggest Mut represented female kinship instead of sexual excitation. He states: "Although Mut is not without malevolent and dissipated traits and remains a leonine goddess who is not always a peaceful cat…she is not so much the sexual attraction man finds in strange and dangerous women outside the family" (238). These divine images depicted her with an erect phallus, which many have been interpreted as a manifestation of sexuality (te Velde 239; Turner and Coulter 331).

Cats weren't only present in art depicting goddesses and gods; they were increasingly pictured in scenes of everyday life after their domestication. Egyptologist Jaromir Malek notes that the distinction between big and small cats is sometimes difficult to distinguish in Egyptian art (41). Frequently, artists would rely on the hieroglyph for cat when illustrating any of the smaller cats, but this did not always signify that the cat was domesticated. For instance, the first known domestic cat appears in 1950 BCE in Baket III's tomb. In his analysis, Malek notes that Baket III's cat is clearly domesticated because the artist provided text: the word *mit*, meaning female cat, is below the cat hieroglyph like a caption. On top of the written confirmation, the cat is positioned facing the hieroglyph of a rat, also captioned. Malek suggests the positioning highlights the value of the domestic cat in eradicating vermin (50). The captions in Baket III's tomb make it unique, but in more artistic renderings it is harder to tell domestic cats apart from the smaller wild cats like servals. Different artists took liberties with ear size, tail length, and coat patterns, so it's not always clear what kind of cat is being represented, especially if the cat is outside. So scenes known as "cat in the marshes" complicate piecing together life in ancient Egypt. Paintings in this theme were elaborate renditions of life along the Nile. They depicted several species of bird, butterfly, hippopotamus, snake, and other animals swimming below,

flying above, and hiding in the reeds. The cats were usually shown hunkered down in the reeds either climbing up their stalks to steal eggs out of ducks' nests or stretching out to swat birds from the sky. Historian Donald W. Engels and Egyptologist Malek separately point to an impressive example of "cat in the marshes" from the tomb of Nebamun at Thebes (c. 1359 BCE). In *Nebamun Hunting in the Marshes* a cat hunts in the marshes on a raft alongside the family to which it presumably belonged. Swiping two birds with its front and back claws and holding another in its mouth, the cat seems to be hunting *with* Nebamun who is wielding a throwstick while his wife and daughter look on. Malek points out that there is no evidence suggesting cats were trained to hunt with humans like dogs, so it is likely that Nebamun's tomb painting is either the product of artistic liberties or depicts a fanciful wish for companionship in the afterlife (69).

Art that showed cats within the home, on the other hand, were most likely depicting domesticated cats. Upper-class Egyptians could afford unique tomb paintings that captured aspects of their everyday life. Images and reliefs from tombs of the wealthy are evidence that cats were part of life in the home (Houlihan 83). Between 1550 and 1070 BCE the number of cats depicted in domestic scenes dramatically increased (Houlihan; Malek). Cats are shown playing, napping, and eating inside the home. It was more than a general change of venue from outside to inside; the cat's location in the paintings was very specific. Domesticated cats were most commonly positioned beneath the chairs of women. For instance, Ipuy's tomb in Deir el-Medina (c. 1250 BCE) features a painting of Ipuy and his wife, Duammeres, seated side-by-side (*Ipuy's Tomb*). They are both looking to the right side of the painting toward a man who is adding a gift to an already abundant pile of offerings. Duammeres is painted with arms extended and both hands hold Ipuy's shoulders. Beneath her chair is a cat done in the hieroglyphic style with tiny spots, a ringed tail, and turquoise eyes. Attention was paid to its claws and they are

prominent in all four paws despite the cat being seated. It is positioned as the only figure looking out of the frame and toward the presumed viewer. There is also a kitten, but it sits on Ipuy's lap and scratches at the sleeve of his garment. The kitten is a miniaturized hieroglyph, but it is too focused on playing to look out of the frame like its mother.

Similarly dated, the tomb of Neferrenpet Kenro features another domestic scene. Neferrenpet's wife, Mutemwia, puts her arms around his shoulders as they look at a table bedecked with game pieces and a board off to the left (*Neferrenpet's Tomb*). A cat wearing a turquoise and gold collar or necklace and gnawing at a bone crouches beneath Mutemwia's chair. Again, it is the only figure that looks out of the frame, but unlike the cat in Ipuy's tomb, this animal is not painted in the hieroglyph style. This cat is in action; it's seated, but leans forward balancing on one front paw and using the other to help with the bone. There are also unique details like hash marks on its body and white socks on all four paws. It is not a generic cat or a symbol.

The tomb paintings of Ipuy and Neferrenpet are just two examples of a motif that occurred repeatedly. As Engels, Houlihan, and Malek stress, the symbolism of the cat's placement under women's chairs is not clear. Engels suggests this might symbolically link the women with Hathor and underline the cat's association with fertility and regeneration. Houlihan postulates that this means the women were likely the predominant cat owners (83). Malek permits these interpretations but also warns there were specific rules of representation and spatial placement artists of the time would have followed (51). In terms of representation, dogs and monkeys had traditionally been paired with men for thousands of years prior to the cat's domestication. These became motifs in their own right and were standardized in tomb paintings. Dogs and monkeys would be painted beneath tables, gallivanting on the border of illustrations, or

under men's chairs. Since the representational links had already been established in art, positioning cats with women may have been a by-product of preexisting forms. Still, dogs were rarely depicted inside the home and the canine relationship was not presented nearly as frequently as "cat under the chair." Malek's second theory pertains to spatial presentation in Egyptian art, especially between 2647-2124 BCE (50). Blank space was considered gauche and the cat simply may have been the artist's way of filling the emptiness under legged furniture. Although their symbolic meaning may be unclear, cats inside the home show familiarity achieved through domestication. The particulars between women and cats are not explained, but the artistic representations suggest some kind of relationship connecting the two.

In general, Egyptologists like Malek and Houlihan caution against hypothesizing animals' roles in Egyptian society based on the art and artifacts found in tombs. Not only are the representations artistic interpretations, but the purpose of tomb art wasn't necessarily to depict life as it was. Malek asserts that these renditions, especially those in the burial chambers, portray the "wished for reality of the life beyond the grave, carefully selected, censored, proven by use, and deeply rooted in religious and artistic traditions, combined with a host of traditional and symbolic allusions and visual references" (29). Houlihan agrees and further suggests that once a companion animal was depicted on a tomb wall it was believed the pet would accompany their master into the afterlife. Like modern day media representations, tomb paintings were not necessarily indicative of everyday life in ancient Egypt; the depictions were idealistic portrayals of the anticipated hereafter that had been hoped for by the deceased and redefined by the artist. The symbolism leaves much to be interpreted.

The paintings, reliefs, and statues discussed above came from tombs commissioned by the very wealthiest in ancient Egyptian society. Art from tombs only speaks to one realm of

Egyptian life and the religious perspectives, material goods, and other contents were not necessarily available to all classes (Malek 74). Ancient Egyptian religion was extremely complicated and dependent upon not only upon geography, but specific moments in time as well; gods and goddesses were not universally admired. This being said, cats were present across classes: carved onto weapons; characterized in jewelry like pendants, hair pins, and armbands; and added onto everyday material goods like furniture handles or bowls. Representations of cats on popular tools like magic knives, wands, or amulets meant to ward off evil demonstrate its wide appeal as a sacred animal because they were predominantly carried, used, or worn by women and children (Capel and Markoe 70). By 1069 BCE, almost a century after domestic cats appeared in the tombs of the rich, cats became regular fixtures on the exteriors of ordinary people's coffins (Malek 82).

Out of Egypt: Egyptian Iconographies Circulating In Europe

Given Egyptians' widespread reverence for the cat across classes, it is likely that reports about Egypt would have relayed the importance of cats. The following section examines the connections between Egypt and Europe during the Hellenic period as evidenced in religious syncretism. Syncretism is the process of blending disparate belief systems. Deities are merged, holidays combined, and myths conciliated in religious syncretism. Art, legends, traditions, rites, and folklore help illuminate syncretism and show new attitudes toward the symbolic relationship between women and cats. I pull from the works of historians like Erich S. Gruen, James Stevens Curl, Donald W. Engels, Sharon Kelly Heyob, and R. E. Witt. Their work helps to track the movements of powerful female-feline relationships into Europe where they become important

parts of rural religions. Following these transitions also sets the stage for understanding why women and cats were poised to become scapegoats during the Middle Ages.

Although separated by the Mediterranean Sea, it is likely Greeks would have been familiar with some aspects of Egypt thanks to Phoenician trade routes and histories put forth by Greeks who travelled to Egypt and wrote of their experiences (Gruen). One of these seminal works is Herodotus's expansive genealogy, *The Histories*, which studied Egyptian everyday life. Herodotus documented the popularity of the goddess Bastet during the Late Dynastic period when he witnessed the annual festival held in her honor in approximately 460 BCE. He reported at least 700,000 people journeyed to Bubastis, Bastet's sacred city, for the celebration (Engels 33). People danced in the streets, music was constant as women played sistrums, and the whole affair was accented by abundant sacrifices of cats specially bred for the occasion as well as gratuitous drinking (Engels 33). Written in the mid-fifth century BCE, *The Histories* hypothesized that Greeks had evolved from ancient Egyptians (Gruen; Engels). Herodotus saw similarities across art, mythology, architecture, and cultural beliefs that connected Greeks and Egyptians. When writing about religion, Herodotus used Hellenic names for the Egyptian gods and goddesses. Hathor became Aphrodite (Roman name Venus), Isis was frequently referred to as Demeter (Roman name Ceres), and Bastet was associated with Artemis (Roman name Diana). Historian Erich S. Gruen argues that Herodotus was trying to highlight "cultural entanglement" through these acts of syncretism (84).

Herodotus's influential work was the basis of several histories in the centuries to follow. Diodorus Siculus, whose 40-volume *Bibliotheca Historica* was published between 60-30 BCE, Strabo, who published *The Geography* somewhere between 64 BCE and 24 CE, and Plutarch, whose *Moralai* was published around 90 CE, built off of Herodotus's work. These Greek

historians travelled to Egypt because Egypt itself was viewed as the archive for all ancient wisdom. They traced the evolving relationships between cultures, geography, conquest, and subjugation between Egyptian and Hellenic traditions (Gruen). Additionally, Gruen points out that there was considerable back-and-forth as nations around the Mediterranean discussed the origins of myths, inventions, and traditions; this practice held "real significance for the self-perception of groups in antiquity. Concocted kinships declared composite identities" (Gruen 276). More than cultural imperialism, Herodotus, Diodorus, Strabo, and Plutarch sought to assert a shared culture between Egypt and the Greco-Roman world.

The ongoing syncretism continued thanks to Alexander III, 'the Great' (356-323 BCE). Alexander III ushered in an era of rapid conquest as he overtook the lands surrounding ancient Macedonia. At the height of his conquest, Alexander's empire extended through the Persian Empire, including modern day Turkey, much of the Middle East, and parts of Lower Egypt, all the way into west India. Architectural historian James Stevens Curl highlights the fact that unlike many conquerors of the time, Alexander III did not attempt to erase indigenous culture and superimpose his own culture. He actively encouraged *both* cultures and attempted to create a hybrid culture in the recently built metropolis, Alexandria (Curl). In founding Alexandria and making it a Ptolemaic capital of Egypt, Alexander further secured an Egyptianized Hellenistic civilization that took hold after his death in 323 BCE.

One of the strongest examples of syncretism between Egyptian and European culture is the spread of the goddess Isis (Gruen; Engels; Heyob). In her research on women's roles in the cult of Isis, Sharon Kelly Heyob outlines the goddess's history. Originally, Isis functioned as the Egyptian goddess who saw specifically over wives and mothers – roles she fulfilled through marriage to brother, Osiris, and as the mother of Horus. Despite being a mother, Isis is

considered a virgin. The goddess also protected the dead, and her knowledge of magic brought Osiris back to life after he was murdered. Osiris then became king of the dead and Isis oversaw the lives of the living. She was considered to be the Eye of Ra and was represented as a kite, a bird from the falcon family. She is often depicted with elaborate feathers down her arms making them look like wings. She also wears the solar disc between the horns of a cow, which is typically the headdress of Hathor. Heyob repeatedly states that Isis was one of the most important goddesses in ancient Egypt. In the years after Alexander III's death, the Greco-Egyptian cult of Isis spread beyond the borders of Egypt.

The worship of Isis in the Hellenistic world was notably different. All connections to animals were removed from her stories and imagery[3]. Plutarch brushed off the differences, and cited Isis as a link between Greco-Roman and Egyptian culture claiming that all cultures possess Isis and her associated divinities (Gruen). Historian Erich S. Gruen translates Plutarch's reasoning: "Different honors, symbols, and appellations might be applied among different people, but a single Reason and a single Providence order matters so as to direct intelligence toward the divine" (112). Isis made sense across cultures. She was established as the patroness of the female sex, goddess of all aspects of womanhood as well as the night, moon, and starry sky (Heyob; Engels). In frescos and sculptures she is shown in her sacred black robe, the color signifying the darkened night sky. Often she carries a sistrum and a situla, or a rounded basket, similar to statuary of Bastet. Heyob found a number of Isis's qualities extolled in Greek hymns known as aretalogies. Heyob states:

> In hymns she claims herself as the one called goddess by women, the one who brought man and woman together; it was she who established marriage contracts, who caused women to be loved by men, who gave women the ability to bear

> children, and who established the parent-child relationship. Finally, she gave women power equal to that of men thereby establishing herself supremely as goddess of women. (52)

Isis was *the* goddess of women! Women held central religious leadership roles and served as priestesses in Isiac temples. Rome and Athens had the highest concentration of priestesses in the 2nd century CE. More than being popular in her own right, Isis slowly became one with other goddesses through the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

From the well-known pantheon to local goddesses in rural religions who watched over women, female goddesses were assumed to be one with Isis. In the ongoing process of syncretism, Isis became known as the goddess "with many names" and potentially became the eventual archetype for the Virgin Mary[4] (Curl; Engels; Heyob; Witt). From the larger pantheon, Isis is related to Hera (Roman name Juno), Demeter (Roman name Ceres), Aphrodite (Roman name Venus), and Artemis (Roman name Diana) (Heyob). In particular, Isis was associated closest with Artemis in Greece. Qualities Isis and Artemis share included ruling the night, protecting women, child birth, and virginity. Known for her hunting skills, Artemis was frequently depicted with her bow and a quiver of arrows. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, published in 8 CE, tells a story of transformation in which Diana (Artemis) changes into a cat (Sacquin). In the older sculptures, Artemis is winged and holds a lion and a leopard in each hand. In later depictions she wears the lunar crown to symbolize her connection to the moon.

In his book, *Isis in the Ancient World*, historian R. E. Witt argues that it was actually Bastet who made the association between Artemis and Isis possible. Bastet served as an intermediary when the process of merging deities began (146). Greek hymns described Isis as "The Goddess of Bastet - bearer of the sistrum." The inscription and hymn suggest Bastet was in

essence another form of Isis. Additionally, the sistrums used in worship of Isis-Bastet found at Pompeii had carvings of she-cats with human faces along the tops as well as Isis and Nepthys etched on the front and back (Witt 34). On a temple wall in Edfu, located in Upper Egypt, an inscription read, "The soul of Isis is in Bastet" (Engels 122). Other inscriptions reveal a version of Isis known as Isis-Bubastis who was called upon for fertility and to aid in reproduction. Inscriptions in the remains of Isiac temples often revealed the names of priestesses and worshipers of Isis-Bastet who were predominantly women forming a "sisterhood of believers" (Heyob 71). Artemis's resemblance could be seen in representations with cats and legends about plagues she sent with arrows launched from her bow; both speak to the belligerent nature of the aggressive Bastet, or her sister goddess, Sekhmet and the manner in which they were depicted. Witt further argues that the syncretism between Bastet, Artemis, and Isis is one of the ironies of the history of religion because it resulted in the look and personality of pagan figures of the Virgin Mother.

Historian Sharon Kelly Heyob argues the cult of Isis spread via merchants involved with trade, Greeks who served in Egyptian military, travelers, sailors, and priests[5]. The diverse people would have interacted with Egyptians on a multitude of levels as well as across classes, and it explains why different practices and associations, including those with animals, continued to be part of worshipping the goddess Isis. It also explains why the cult of Isis spread not only to Greece, but also Italy, Germany, France, Spain, all the way up to Great Britain, as well as other areas throughout Europe (Heyob; Witt). Heyob points out that the cult of Isis reached its peak popularity between 4th century BCE and 4th century CE (36). Prior to Christianity becoming the official state religion, there was no strict dogma regarding paganism and rural religions

flourished. Different beliefs circulated, and geography as well as class dictated how and to whom people prayed or worshiped. This would change in the centuries to follow.

Suppressing the Sacred: Women and Cats in Medieval Times

Between the 5th and 16th centuries CE, Europe underwent chaotic times. Characterized by iconoclastic collisions, this time period was wrought with religious uncertainty brought about by the Papal Schism, mass Christianization, and the rise of Protestantism. Cultural historians have pointed to frequent rebellions, war, natural disasters, grain riots, plague, and famine to explain the cat's shifting position across Europe during the Middle Ages (Darnton; Amodeo; Engels; Briggs). Old ideas were violently ushered out and vilified creating an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Cultural anxieties can be seen through the accusations of witchcraft, sorcery, and heresy. Women and cats were often accused of all three. This section looks at their representations during this time period. Women and cats' ambivalent iconographies, some of which still exist today in Euro-American popular imagination, took root during the Middle Ages. The information in this section pulls extensively from the work of folklorists like Katharine M. Briggs, Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill, and Frank de Caro as well as cultural historians like Katharine M. Rogers, Richard Darnton, and Boria Sax. Both disciplines assert that popular beliefs can be found in legends, folklore, and superstition. These are cultural sites of fiction and doubt – places where older ideologies were allowed to coexist alongside new systems of hegemony. Cultural historian Richard Darnton argues that folktales should be understood as historical documents that supply "tone of discourse or a cultural style, which communicates a particular ethos and world view" (15). I also draw on the works of art historians and critics like Fabio Amodeo, Stefano Zuffi, and Caroline Bugler. Art, like folklore and

superstition, captures symbolism and cultural style from another angle. Paintings, sketches, engravings, and lithographs offer a visual language where representation can be further analyzed. All of the cultural texts analyzed in the following section are also sites where the containment strategy was beginning to take hold. They encapsulate forms of representation that helped dictate what was and was not considered normal.

The cat teetered at a cultural precipice during the Middle Ages: its ambivalent nature made it as threatening as it was useful. In terms of use-value, a rat-catching cat was still the best way to protect against vermin. Cat prices were put into law by Welsh king Hywel Dda in the 10th century CE. Dda decreed the value of a cat as follows: a kitten with eyes still closed was worth a penny, when it could catch mice it was worth two pence, and it was worth four pence when it was mature (Rogers 19). A fully grown cat was worth the same as a sheep or a goat. Despite its undeniable importance in protecting homes and food stores against vermin, cats' cultural status was on shaky ground. Its position as a sacred animal to the Isiac faith and other rural religions was quickly becoming a regrettable connection.

As mentioned above, sacred animals were not adopted into the larger European religions. This is true of all Christianity, but Protestantism in particular. The cornerstone to Protestantism lay in the relationship of an individual to God. Rather than mediated by saints, sacraments, animals, or the church, the connection should be direct. Medieval European culture shied away from conceptualizing animals as anything more than their use-value in aiding labor, their exchange-value, or a food source. Animals were non sequiturs in worship. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes argued, "…there is nothing which leads feeble minds more readily astray from the straight path of virtue than to imagine the soul of animals is of the same nature as our own" (quoted in Sax 318). Animals were thought unable to feel pain and were understood to be

soulless, which meant they couldn't be tools of the devil; without a soul to control animals were neither angelic nor demonic (Sax). This notion was paralleled by animals' importance within pagan religious rituals. When pagan beliefs were deemed unacceptable alongside sanctioned religious practices the animals associated with those beliefs suffered. Folklorist Katharine M. Briggs argues that the persecution of an entire species usually means the animal was once representative of a god or gods (9). She blames failed syncretism for the longstanding cultural discomfort with cats. Christianity was on the rise and female deities and their feline companions were no longer respected. In fact, women gathering or participating in rural religious rites or traditions were now indicative of nocturnal ceremonies, sorcery, and witchcraft (Zuffi; Engels; Amodeo). The protection once offered by the Isiac faith and the worship of Diana/Artemis disappeared when the goddesses fell out of favor.

The combination of medieval conflicts produced a tumultuous environment where it became necessary to locate scapegoats to preserve some sense of social order. According to journalist and photography critic Fabio Amodeo the blame usually landed on "transmitters of popular wisdom, rustic so-called wise women and men, fortune-tellers, herbalists and vagabonds" (42). These individuals were representative of old knowledge structures that challenged new ideologies. In other words, the existence of religions other than Christianity spoke to alternative ways of viewing the world. Rural religions inherently challenged the notion of stability or permanence any ideology needs in order to function. Ideology must seem permanent and longstanding, so the existence of pagan religions, multitudes of gods and goddesses, female-driven worship, and older forms of ritualized worship – all alternative belief systems – challenged Christianity. This friction between alternative and mainstream, which could be seen as an early form of backlash, will appear repeatedly in this research. The push-

pull between normal and abnormal is one of the most important functions of the containment strategy being analyzed here. Negative representations of spinsters at the turn of the 20th century and single, career women at the turn of the 21st are part of this backlash. But back in the early Middle Ages alternatives had to be dealt with, so those who fell outside the norm were marginalized.

The process of marginalizing began with heresy. To be accused of heresy, or having opinions and or committing actions contrary to the prevailing religious body, was a triable offense "considered more heinous than any other" (Westwood and Kingshill). Cats were often the source of rumors circulating around potential heretics. In 12th century France, theologian Alain de Lille equated Catharism, an offshoot Christian movement, with the whole cat species. According to de Lille's publications even the name itself, "Cathars," stemmed from cats and, he postulated, followers worshipped a large black cat and kissed its bottom during their religious services (Walker-Meikle 68). The same bottom-kissing rituals were rumored of the Publicani in England and the Waldensians in Italy and France. Kissing the hindquarters of an animal was also mentioned in eyewitness accounts of witches' worship (Levack 73, 102, 129). Heresy affected more than official religious sects, pagan beliefs were also suspect.

Sacred rituals, rites, cures, and charms from rural religions were reconstituted as heresy, and individuals as well as groups of people could be tried. Briggs further connects the dots and argues that most of the identified heretics in real life became the witches, demons, and devils of local folklore (Briggs). Despite the fact that rural religions were in the process of being driven out, pagan practices continued to exist in secret. These competing ideologies overlapped extensively during the Middle Ages. Folklorists and cultural historians suggest folklore provides another angle for analyzing value-laden popular beliefs like heresy and witchcraft. It's a

complex equation, but folklore acts as an extension of ancient pagan rites and papist superstition. Rites and superstitions do not exist in a vacuum – they must be understood as an amalgamation of geography, dominant ideas of the period (which have been worked on by the ideological state institutions like judicial system, churches, and academia), and the local traditions that subsisted despite being ignored by sanctioned histories (Briggs and Tongue; Darnton). In the introduction to Briggs's *Nine Lives: The Folklore of Cats*, folklorist Richard M. Dorson delineates folklore as a blend of education and fiction "the mixing of pagan, Christian, and folk elements; the merging of supernatural creatures as fairy glides into ghost, ghost into demon, demon into ogre" (xix). In other words, geography, ideology, and social institutions intersect in unique historical moments to produce the different myths, tales, and legends that characterize a culture. Folklore allows us to trace the ways people, animals, and beliefs from the natural world were rewritten as supernatural.

Freyja, the Norse goddess of love, fertility, war, and death, provides an example of this reconstructive equation[6]. Freyja, like many of the Egyptian goddesses discussed above, occupied a powerful but ambivalent position. She was worshipped as the goddess of fertility, sexuality and love, but was also feared as the goddess of war, magic, and prophecy. In mythology Freyja and her counterpart, Odin, would split the souls of those deceased during battle to take them to their heavenly halls: Fólkvangr and Valhalla respectively. The goddess always received first pick. Freyja coupled with multiple gods and used sex as a bartering tool to get the things she wanted[7]. Freyja was frequently depicted in a feathered cloak, not unlike the winged arms of Isis, and she rode through the sky in a chariot drawn by cats. When calling upon her for guidance in love or reproductive concerns, some Scandinavian homes would leave bowls of milk outside their door at night to welcome Freyja and her feline transportation. Flowers,

plants, and constellations named for Freyja were all re-associated with the Virgin Mary during the Christianization process in the mid- to late-Middle Ages. Women gathered at night to perform religious ceremonies honoring Freyja for centuries, but during medieval times these religious rites were construed as something different. Instead of goddess worship, these women were thought to be covens of witches meeting to worship the devil. While the Inquisition was not concerned with pagan rituals or beliefs per se, pagan beliefs and rituals became representative of witchcraft. The women who would gather to worship Freyja were reconstituted as witches, and cats, especially black cats, became agents of devilish acts and witches' familiars. "Kattestoët" was a Flemish tradition that began during the Middle Ages and lasted through 1817. Live cats were thrown from towers during Lent. The tradition was meant to show people's renunciation of Freyja's cult and any pre-Christian religions (Amodeo).

Freyja's fate was not unique. Syncretism attempted to align pagan beliefs with Christian iconography. Some gods and goddesses were merged and holidays combined effectively. But folklorist Katharine M. Briggs points out that syncretism during the Middle Ages was sometimes more successful than others. For instance, Isis and the Virgin Mary were successfully syncretized. The same is true of Roman Saturnalia and Teutonic Eostre[8] which were recast as Christian Christmas and the Resurrection respectfully. But other pre-Christian deities and celebrations could not be translated, especially those connected with sadistic or unsavory traditions. Briggs argues that "grimmer" gods, goddesses, and traditions that couldn't make the transition were demonized (5). Cats were caught in the middle of this cultural war and their liminal position subjected them to a multitude of cruelties.

Cat sacrifice had been quite common in pagan rituals, but during medieval times through the early modern period cat sacrifices were brought into sanctioned religious ceremonies to

demonstrate renunciation of pagan beliefs (Amodeo; Briggs). In the late 1800s James George Frazer, a Scottish social anthropologist, researched magic and religious beliefs from across the globe in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. According to Frazer, cats had been used to represent the Corn-Spirit that oversaw the fall harvest in Germany, France, and Belgium throughout the Middle Ages. This meant different things in different areas. In southeast France, a live cat would be adorned with ribbons, flowers, and ears of corn and the farmers would dance around it to bolster the future crops (Frazer; Rogers). In preparation for planting as well as the days before the harvest, this ritual sometimes meant cats would be burned in a bonfire to encourage a fecund ground and abundance. When the last corn was cut some communities killed a cat in the farmyard or placed a cat in the last bundle to be threshed (Frazer). Both rituals were meant to appease pagan deities. Cultural historian Katharine M. Rogers describes the ritual of Taigheirm from medieval Scotland. Live cats were roasted as sacrifice for four days straight. This would compel the spirits from hell to appear in the form of black cats and grant the perpetrators second sight and other magical powers. The cat's role in rituals vacillated between good and bad luck. Rogers finds the ambivalence neither here nor there, stating: "Whether the cat represented the good of the harvest or the evil that must be expelled from the community, it was killed for the entertainment of the spectators" (48).

Further connections across deities and beliefs can be seen in art. In R. E. Witt's *Isis in the Ancient World* two images are positioned side-by-side: one is a statue of Isis, the other a statue of Demeter (75). Witt compares the statues in order to highlight similarities across sculptural representation as well as demonstrate the way Isis and Demeter were syncretized. There are noticeable shared traits from the position of their hands, their dress, and their countenance (*Isis and Demeter Statues*). Their hair and tunics differ slightly, but those

differences could be attributed to the fashion at the time each was sculpted. Interestingly, there is a major difference in the tools being carried by each goddess. The sistrum carried by Isis is replaced in the statue of Demeter who is shown holding ears of corn in its place. Although the sacrificial ceremonies described above were not attributed to Demeter specifically, the cat's sanctity in goddess worship could be connected to Demeter, corn, and the ritual killings. The Church later rerouted ritual ceremonies like this and baptized them instead as cleansing methods to drive out evil spirits from the Christian community (Rogers).

Harvests were not the only times cats were made part of religious festivals and ceremonial rites. Cultural historian Robert Darnton's work focuses on 18th century France in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, but the traditions and folklore he researches are considerably older. One popular ritual that included cats was charivaris, or the folk tradition of cacophonously serenading newlyweds with pots and pans and off-key singing. Forced to accompany human music, cats were collected and their tales pulled or fur ripped out adding their screams to the inharmonious tune. While denoting celebration in some instances, charivaris were also used to musically mock people who transgressed norms. Darnton argues that the compositions aimed to humiliate cuckolds, husbands abused by their wives, women who remarried too quickly after their husbands passed, and older women who married younger men (83). Despite being banned from metropolitan areas in the 1600s, charivaris were still practiced in rural areas (Darnton). Charivaris were a method of actively maintaining social mores by publically shaming anyone who dared to exceed the boundaries of propriety. It was musical judgment the community could vocalize publically. Peasants in France and Germany sometimes called the addition of cats to this rough music a "cat organ" (Rogers).

Cats also served in the sanctioned festivities on saints' days and Christian holidays throughout the Middle Ages. Similar to "Kattestoët," hundreds of cats and other objects imbued with magical power were frequently burned during the religious ceremonies of Lent in Belgium and St. John the Baptist's day in France (Amodeo; Walker-Meikle; Darnton). Sacrificing cats ensured good fortune for the entire year, so sacks of cats were incinerated, individual cats were burned at the stake, and cats were set on fire and either chased through town or were tied to a flaming May pole (Darnton). In 1558 cats were burned alive in honor of Queen Elizabeth I who was soon to establish the English Protestant Church; an effigy of the Pope was made of straw and metal, then stuffed with cats and burned at the stake (Amodeo). The implications of the traditions and the symbolism of the cat may have varied from region to region, but cat sacrifices occurred in Scotland, England, France, Germany, Belgium, Norway, and Scandinavia (Briggs; Darnton; Walker-Meikle). Darnton suggests three major ingredients from this tradition salient across cultures: bonfires, cats, and the aura of witch-hunting (85).

Freyja, charivaris, and cat sacrifices all help illustrate how older belief systems were reconstituted in order to fit with the new sanctioned ideologies. If the ideas didn't jive with the new religious order they received new nomenclature: heresy. This was the case for many rural religions and pagan beliefs; they became synonymous with devil worship. If not *the* Devil specifically, heretics were individuals presumed to be aligned with whatever the major religion understood as evil. Rural religion's goddesses were judged to have transgressed too far from patriarchal propriety and couldn't be syncretized with Christianity, so they were recast as profane. These deities' fates extended to their believers (and their sacred animals) who found themselves deemed heretics. Alternatives could not be tolerated and issues of heresy bled into the discourse of demons, witchcraft, and the devil.

Feline Mystique and Female Familiars: Witches and Cats in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

Those accused of witchcraft walked a fine line of perception between power and fear. Although men and women were accused, the well-known image of a witch is a woman with her cat companion. Legal documents and official reports only tell half the story; they reflect the beliefs of the educated ruling class. Historian Brian P. Levack argues that this bias renders all legal documents of witchcraft unreliable. Information about familiars, nocturnal rites, spells, and witch-like behavior was transmitted through popular stories – these capture the beliefs circulating amongst the uneducated lower classes. Rituals, witchcraft, and folklore not only informed one another, but also shaped popular beliefs. Folktales and legends circulated "knowledge" about witches that was then used to officially accuse and prove individuals were participating in witchcraft. I again pull from the work of folklorists like Katharine M. Briggs, Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill, and Frank de Caro as well as cultural historians like Brian P. Levack, Katharine M. Rogers, Boria Sax, Kathleen Walker-Meikle, and Orna Alyagon Darr.

A witch, according to historian Brian P. Levack, in the late Middle Ages was more specific than a person who uses supernatural powers to affect the health of crops, animals, and humans. Throughout the British Isles and mainland Europe, to become a witch meant to enter a Demonic Pact. Supposedly individuals swore their devotion to the Devil and renounced the one true God – the ultimate act of heresy. Levack states:

> Witches were believed to be members of a new and dangerous sect of heretics who used magic to destroy human and animal life and who threatened the entire moral order. Defined in this way, witchcraft became the most serious crime

> imaginable, combining assorted felonies, such as murder and the destruction of property, with the spiritual crimes of heresy and fornication. (2)

This popular understanding of witchcraft set the stage for the urgent, frenzied campaigns to identify, prosecute, and execute witches during the early modern period (Levack). Legal documents, depositions, and court proceedings from witch trials must be taken with a grain of salt. Confessions often came after torture. Even witnesses in a witch trial could be subjected to torture. Levack warns, "Only when the witch denied the charges at the beginning of the trial…can we have confidence that the voices we hear are those of the accused" (1). Official reports don't reflect popular belief; the opinions captured there are those of the ruling or educated elite, those benefitting from the patriarchal system in place.

The trial of Dame Alice Kyteler exemplifies how witchcraft was conceptualized in the Middle Ages. Dame Alice and her accomplices were tried in an ecclesiastical court in Kilkenny, Ireland in 1324 (Levack 40). Her case is told like a story – the narrator is Richard Ledrede, her prosecutor. Ledrede provides a list of Dame Alice's crimes: denying faith in Christ and the church; making animal sacrifices to demons; asking the demons for advice; "usurping authority" and using the church for nocturnal meetings; concocting magical powders and lotions in a skull that included "vile ingredients such as nails cut from dead bodies, hairs from the buttocks, and frequently clothes from boys who had died before being baptized"; murder; seducing married men; and having sex with a demon who appeared as a cat, shaggy dog, or black apparition (Levack 41). Levack points out that the prosecutors integrated the "traditional charges" made against heretics as well as rural magicians, which was common practice in early witchcraft trials (39). Witchcraft conventions were still being worked out during the Middle Ages. Descriptions

of familiars, the Witches' Sabbath, and other witch-like behaviors and activities would eventually spread and become part of the general iconography of witches.

Although men and women of all ages were accused across classes, the popular representations of witches tend to be old women gnarled with age. Other descriptors include scraggly hair, hollowed eyes, toothless, and physical disabilities like a limp or trembling with palsies (Levack; Briggs; Rogers). Town crones would sometimes walk aimlessly mumbling to themselves further creating an air of other-worldliness and a body out of control. Many of the tales suggest these elderly women relied on their community for support, which strained other villagers' food, supplies, and patience (Westwood and Kingshill; Bever). In his research on early modern Europe, historian Edward Bever found 80% of the accused during witch hunts were women. The astronomical percentage is due to the social threat widows and spinsters, whose numbers had been increasing throughout the Middle Ages, created. Bever argues that patriarchal family units, a cornerstone to the Christian reformations, were threatened by single or widowed women (956). Rather than addressing the burden a single woman placed on the community or the ways their existence challenged patriarchy, the concern was religious piety.

Being a witch meant the people accused were heretics first and foremost. When the pact was made, the Devil would leave a mark on the individual usually through a tiny bite under the armpit or in the genitals (Levack; Sax). Unfortunately, the mark was not universal and might look like a mole, birthmark, skin tag, scar, or some other blemish. Despite the inconsistencies, the mark became important when determining whether an individual was practicing witchcraft. Familiars were thought to facilitate witchcraft and devil worship and they too could create the mark. Familiars were animals like cats, dogs, birds, and occasionally toads presumed to be either the Devil himself or animal versions of the suspected witch. In 1232, Pope Gregory IX

pointed specifically to the black cat when he ordered the Inquisition look into heretics who worshipped the devil in the form of a black cat. Cultural historian Boria Sax suggests the notion of animal familiars might have stemmed from the animal "mascots" connected to and sometimes the embodiment of ancient gods and goddesses. This is pertinent because the "pagan deities had been revived in the Renaissance, especially in occult beliefs, but also aroused a suspicion of idolatry and even witchcraft as that period begins to close" (Sax 322). More than leaving milk outside the door or roasting cats to ensure a healthy harvest, any alternative religion or religious practices was deemed heretical. Dame Alice was accused of killing her four husbands, but less was made of those accusations than "the heresy of keeping a devilish incubus that appeared in the shape of a black and very furry cat" (Walker-Meikle 70). The first mention of a familiar in an English witch trial occurred in 1566. Elizabeth Francis had received a talking cat named Sathan as a gift from her grandmother once Francis had renounced God. In exchange for doing her bidding, Francis had to feed Sathan with a drop of her blood and keep him content. She used Sathan to exact revenge on a lover who'd dropped her, secure a husband, and, after she grew tired of him, lame the husband and kill their child (Rogers 51). Once she had grown tired of taking care of Sathan, she gave him away to a neighbor, Mother Agnes Waterhouse, with the instructions her grandmother had given to her. Again, less was made of the accused's crime than her possession of a familiar.

Women who doted too much on their cats, or other companion animals, during the Middle Ages were suspicious. Cat behavior countered medieval notions of human primacy as masters over animals; they behave too independently. In addition, the species' mythos was boosted thanks to its ritual value, its significance in rural religions, and its liminal position between wild and domestic. All this contributed to the backlash against cats in sanctioned

religions. Cultural historian Boria Sax points out that the 16th and 17th centuries were the height of witch-hunting. This time period unfortunately coincided with pets becoming part of the middle class home in England. Companion animals would have provided a model for familiars (Sax 326). Cultural historian Katharine M. Rogers argues that class is an under-researched factor in the witch trials. Familiar animals didn't take up much space, they could be found and kept, and were cheap to care for. People accused of witchcraft were "usually too poor to own highbred pets, and it was considerably safer to accuse a poor old woman's cat of being an agent of Satan than to accuse the squire's prize greyhound" (52). On top of this, the cat's independent nature – its disregard for human rules and unexplained, "secretive" nighttime outings – demonstrated impropriety. Its behavior suggested cats were overstepping their position in the human-animal hierarchy. This made their role as familiars, or agents of the Devil, even more clear-cut in popular beliefs. To willingly consort with a cat suggested blatant disregard for ideas inherent to Christianity, and paying too much attention to a pet was considered a sure sign of witchcraft. Rogers explains that talking to a cat, cuddling it, acting as if it had the capacity to understand human speech "blurred the essential distinction between rational and nonrational animal" (51). Considering that many of the women accused of witchcraft were older, single, uneducated, and living alone in rural areas, these so-called familiars were likely the only companions these lonely women had.

The close relationship likely contributed to the idea of shape-shifting. Many witches were thought to shape-shift into animal form. This is especially evident during the Salem witch trials between 1692 and 1693[9]. Eight year-old Sarah Carrier claimed that her mother turned her into a witch when she was only six. After her mother was imprisoned for witchcraft, Carrier said she continued to come to her as a black cat (Rosenthal, B. 542). Witch cats supposedly aided in

the conversion of new witches and told people to commit terrible deeds (Rosenthal, B. 190; 128). In folklore witch cats were rumored to attack lone hunters, flood houses, and terrorize the countryside. Injuries sustained while transformed would later be visible once the shifter was back in human form. Folklorists like Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill and Katharine M. Briggs found this motif of "repercussion" in several popular legends and folktales. Repercussion provides a satisfying conclusion for these stories because it meant the witch was revealed for what she was. In the Scottish tale "The Witch of Laggan," a woodsman was taking shelter from of a storm when a cat nudged her way through the door. This man also happened to be a witch-hunter, so he was already on guard. The cat spoke and she immediately admitted to being a witch, but said she had been ostracized from her sisterhood. Taking pity, the hunter asks her to come in closer to the fire so that she may dry off. Feigning fear of his two hounds, the cat asks him to tie them up with a special rope she happened to bring. Seeing through her scheme, the witch-hunter pantomimes tying them but does not secure the rope. As she sits by the fire her cat form grows bigger and bigger. When she is larger than the hunter she springs for his throat, but the dogs attack her. As she runs off the dogs bite her all over her body. When he returns home, his wife tells him the Wife of Laggan had taken ill. The hunter goes to visit the sick woman, tears back the sheets to reveal her bite wounds, and informs everyone that she is a witch.

Folklorist Frank de Caro collected cat folktales from across the globe and found shape-shifting to be a popular trope in many areas. An Italian folktale called "The Cats of San Lorenzo" explains that the cats surrounding the cloisters in San Lorenzo are actually repentant witches living out their days. "The Witch Cat in the Mill" is an American folktale from the 1700s featuring a shape-shifting witch. The miller, Tim Farrow, is seduced by a woman who emerges from the mysterious woods across the pond opposite his mill. He gives her food and

lets her stay with him, and quickly marries her. The neighbors believe her to be quite peculiar. Rumors fly as a strange fever causes several deaths. An old woman reports that after the witch stayed overnight at her house the featherbed was only "mashed down in a little round spot in the middle as if a cat had slept there" (de Caro 106). There's a huge drop in business at the mill and strange things begin happening inside the facility. Tim starts spending nights there to get to the bottom of the mysterious happenings. After several unsuccessful vigils, Tim is shocked when there were suddenly loud knocks on the mill's door "as if it had been struck by a dozen broomsticks" and a clowder of black cats charged in with "their tails all spread out and their backs humped up in a menacing manner" (de Caro 108). Tim grabs an axe and begins swinging into the swirl of attacking cats and manages to sever one of the cat's paws. He runs home to tell his wife, but finds her lying in bed with her right hand cut off at the wrist.

In addition to shape-shifting, familiars, and supernatural powers, women suspected of witch craft often were accused of a shrewd tongue. Historian Brian P. Levack posits that improper speech – like uttering curses for their lot in life, lobbing mumbled insults at their neighbors, and knowing "too much" of the world – made women stand out. If you raised hell about an unfair world, you could be accused of being a witch. Knowledge and "knowing too much" appeared in folktales, too. For instance, two stories from folklorists Katharine M. Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue's collection, *Folktales of England*, featured this notion. In "The Four-Eyed Cat" the beautiful, but evil-hearted daughter of a gentleman is a witch. At the outset of the tale, she is accused of knowing "more than a Christian should" and although the townsmen wanted to swim[10] her they did not because of her father's social standing (56). She hates everyone from her village and wishes them all dead. She is an evil woman, which she proves by seducing a man and persuading him to leave his fiancé. She then convinces him to sneak her aboard his

fishing boat and uses magic to conjure a storm that kills everyone including herself. At the end of the tale, she turns into a four-eyed cat that hunts fishing fleets on the water. According to the teller, N. Marchang, this tale explains why fisherman won't cast nets before half-past three (cock-crow) and why they always throw a bit back into the sea for the cat (Briggs and Tongue 56). "Knowing too much" comes up again in "Tibb's Cat and the Apple-Tree Man" from the same collection. The story begins "There was a little cat down Tibb's Farm, not much more'n a kitten – a little dairy maid with a face so clean as a daisy. A pretty little dear her was, but her wanted to know too much" (Briggs 46). The kitten attempts to meet up with a glaring of black cats who gather in an eerie part of the orchard on multiple occasions, but is unsuccessful. Finally, when she sneaks out of the house on New Year's to meet the black cats the Apple-Tree Man stops her saying, "Yew go on back whoame, my dear. There's folk a-coming to pour cider for my roots, and shoot off guns to drive away the witches. This be no place for yew" (Briggs and Tongue 46). The Apple-Tree Man tells her to return home and not to wander at night until St. Tibb's Eve, of which neither the kitten nor the teller knew the calendar date.

Both the witch and the female kitten had the desire to know too much or know more than a Christian should. Although it is never flushed out, this might refer to carnal knowledge. To be wise would be the antithesis to virginal, naïve femininity. It might also be referencing knowledge of the dark arts. Considering the time period, folkways, cures, and rituals connected to paganism would have represented the kinds of knowledge now considered magical and thus heretical. To be versed in rural traditions and rites meant possessing knowledge that wasn't official. It's possible "knowing too much" applied to both.

To be thought of as a witch was a double-edged sword because it guaranteed a modicum of power for those who had none, but, if taken further it could also lead to accusations and very

real consequences. The ways these women and men were treated once accused of witchcraft demonstrates the anxieties they created. Once taken into custody, the accused underwent sleep deprivation, which was called "waking" or "watching" the witch (Levack; Darr). Those who admitted guilt after this torture were often persuaded to confess to a litany of crimes. Many ended up naming other crimes and witches as well (Levack; Darr). Oftentimes, those under suspicion denied connections with the Devil but admittedly claimed to believe in fairies and supernatural beings connected to rural religions and folk beliefs (Westwood and Kingshill). To be convicted of heresy or witchcraft meant to be put to death through stoning, swimming, hanging, or being burned alive (Levack). A witch's familiar was also burned along with her. In general, witch hunts declined during the 18th century. Great Britain made it official in 1735 when Parliament passed the Witchcraft Act, which made it illegal to accuse individuals of possessing magical powers or practicing magic. Despite the decline, there were still instances of witches being put on trial and witch executions. A Bavarian nun was beheaded in 1749 for talking to her three cats (McNeill). Apparently neighbors thought the cats were devils.

Cultural historian Boria Sax's research focuses on human-animal relations. Sax believes animals' status suffered greatly in the aftermath of witch hunts. Beyond the catalogue of cruelties, there was a lasting effect on the way animals were perceived, especially in Europe. Prior to the witch trials the cross-fertilization between Christian iconography and the gods and goddesses from antiquity reveal a grand tradition of animal helpers in world folklore. European folklore and fairytales prior to the 1500s featured numerous examples of animal helpers aiding a hero's trial like the French tale "Puss in Boots" or aiding heroines like the Italian tale "The Colony of Cats." But during the witch trials the theme is inverted: the hero is now a villain and animal helpers are actually demons or devils (Sax 325). Sax argues that the "grateful animal"

motif was destroyed in England when witches and familiars became standard iconography. He locates evidence for his theory in the Stith-Thompson Motif Index of Folk Literature; there aren't any grateful animal stories from England after the witch trials, whereas numerous stories are listed from areas that didn't have the same period or kind of persecution (325). Sax also tracks a general shift between livestock animals and companion animals in the 16th and 17th centuries. The distinction, according to Sax, is characteristic of a "post-domestic" society or a society where an animal's value increases the more it resembles humans (328). This is apparent through folk and fairy tales where animals command respect because they not only talk like human beings, but possess magical powers. Sax explains:

> [Animals in folklore] are, among other things, sages, supernatural guides, sacrificial offerings, oracles, and guardian spirits or, in other words, mediators between us and the realm of spirits. Their stories are possibly our most intimate, as well as the most archaic expression of the bonds between animals and human beings…[After the witch trials] animals lost nearly all mythic significance, leaving them little importance beyond companionship and utility. (328)

Witch trials separated animal and human-animals even further. To consider an animal sacred was primitive, an out-of-date notion in a "post-domestic" society.

Cats have remained the witch's animal in popular imagination. Their ambivalent nature is presumed to open cats up to the supernatural world. Their sacred status may have been revoked, but throughout the Middle Ages, cats were used to represent good, evil, sexuality, vanity, and a range of human emotions. They were also connected to women. The following section looks at more general representations of cats and women in the early modern period.

Allegorical Ambivalence: Connecting Females and Felines

According to French archivist Michèle Sacquin, cats were featured prominently in proverbs, fables, nonsense poetry, riddles, tales, farces, and pretty much "all literary genres testifying to passages and exchanges between popular and erudite cultures" from the 13th century CE on (65). In art and literature, cat representations were compiled from centuries of ambivalent signification ranging from venerated protector of the home to cunning demons who like to play with their victims. Much of the consternation seems to focus on the cat's motives: it feigns domestication and sweetness to get what it wants, but the cat is always somewhat wild. Art historian Stefano Zuffi posits that this attitude instigated the cat's "dual development" in iconography during the Middle Ages (46). He further states that artistic interpretations of the cat:

> [Represent] a number of stereotypically feminine characteristics: malice, attachment to the home, and nocturnal habits involving the moon. These were all incomprehensible to a society that had long been firmly male dominated and therefore unable to penetrate the subtleties of female (or feline) character. (325)

The following section explores representations of women and cats through the early modern period. Information from this section draws on the works of Sacquin as well as cultural historians like Katharine M. Rogers and Kathleen Walker-Meikle. I also draw from the work of art historians like Zuffi and Caroline Bugler.

Colloquial cats fulfilled a number of roles. Cats could show wisdom, resourcefulness, and patience, but depending on the tale these qualities can be advantageous or malicious attributes. Proverbs were often anthropomorphic and instructional using animals as stand-ins for human qualities. Maxims like "The cat doth play and after slay," "Make yourself a mouse and

the cat will eat you," and "When the cat's away, the mice doth play" show the cat's beguiling nature can be an unfortunate quality. The relationship between cat and mouse was often used to highlight binaries like strong/weak or cantankerous/perseverant facets of human personality (Rogers). Depending on the parable, the cat's nature was either admirable or deserving of reprimand. Cats were featured in other written texts like bestiaries, works on natural philosophy, and as allegorical fodder in combination with mice or dogs. Additionally, codes of law, legal decisions, conduct books, and references in sermons and literature further illustrate how deeply cats had been integrated into the home and everyday life (Walker-Meikle).

Many medieval texts hold animals to human notions of etiquette. Bartholomew de Glanville, an English friar, described domestic cats as playful, swift, and merry in extensive entries in his 13th century encyclopedia. Like many texts from the Middle Ages, the descriptions veer beyond objective qualities and move into symbolic attributes popularized in legends and useful for moral lessons distributed in sermons (Rogers 24). It was de Glanville's observations relating cats and women that became popular. He provided a proverbial connection suggesting the cat's vanity was such that if one singed its fur or snipped off its ear or tail, it would not go outside for shame over its appearance. Cultural historian Katharine M. Rogers notes that cats *are* indeed preoccupied with the condition of their coat, but de Glanville was likely referencing Aristotle's opinions about a female cat's lechery (24). This sentiment became popular in sermons chastising women and the comparison between cats and women. Rogers summarizes English friar Nicholas Bozon's message as follows: "Just as a cat can be made to stay at home by shortening her tail, cutting her ears, and singeing her fur, women can be kept there by shortening the trains on their dresses, disarranging their headdresses, and staining their clothes" (24). In

other words, women are so vain that if you muss up their appearance, they will be too embarrassed to go outside.

The idea appears in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's late 14th century tale, Alyson, the wife named in the title, quotes a former husband:

> Thou said this, that I was like a cat,
> For whoever would singe a cat's skin
> That would make the cat always stay inside,
> And if the cat's skin were sleek and gay
> She would not dwell in the house for half a day,
> But out she will go, before the dawn of day
> To show her skin, and go a-caterwauling. (228)

Throughout the prologue, Alyson, the Wife of Bath, frankly discusses sexuality, her prowess in the bedroom, and female dominance. Chaucer frames her sexuality and financial independence satirically and the prose makes a mockery of Alyson; her comedic depiction highlights proper feminine behavior in the role of wife because the Wife of Bath is the antithesis of propriety. Likening her sexual appetite to those of a vain, promiscuous cat further reveals her character.

Chaucer borrows a familiar cat story for the "Manciple's Tale," too. Aesop's "A Cat and Venus"[11] tells of a man who fell in love with a cat. He begs Venus to turn the cat into a woman, which she does. But after they've been intimate, Venus decides to test the transformation to see if the cat's nature had been affected along with her shape. Venus releases a mouse into their bedchamber, and the transformed woman is unable to restrain herself: she leaps out of bed and chases the vermin. The goddess is so affronted by the display that she turns the woman back into a cat. The moral of the story: you may be able to dress it up as something else, but nature cannot

be changed. Chaucer plays the story out through Phoebus. Phoebus keeps his wife locked up in the house because, like a cat, she could be surrounded by the finest things with all her needs met, but she will still chase after something else. In the case of a cat, it will always hunt down a lowly mouse; in the case of Phoebus's wife, she cheated with someone beneath his status – an act for which Phoebus eventually murders her. The moral of this story: women and cats have natural instincts that cannot be broken. The same theme appears in medieval proverbs like "Chase the cat away from the dish and she runs to the roasting pan" and "Honest is the cat when the meat is upon the hook" (Rogers 20).

By the early modern period, cats were being used to add symbolic meaning to art in scenes of religious imagery, ordinary life, and in portraits. Often depicted stealing food from cupboards or counters, hiding beneath tables or chairs, and fighting with dogs or chasing mice, a cat created a sense of reality in art. At the same time its ambivalent nature and metaphoric connotations meant its presence could represent a range of complicated ideas concerning knowledge, harmony, nature, and sexuality. For instance, German artist Albrecht Dürer's engraving of *Adam and Eve* (1504) depicts Eve accepting fruit from the Tree of Knowledge out of a serpent's mouth. Like the witch in "The Four-Eyed Cat" and the kitten in "Tibb's Cat and the Apple-Tree Man," Eve wanted to know too much of the world. Adam stands next to Eve with his right hand grasping a branch on the Tree of Life. His right foot seems to be stepping on the long tail of a mouse. Centered at the bottom of the frame is a cat, eyes half-closed with its four feet tucked under its body and tale curled around Eve's foot. Behind Adam and Eve are a rabbit, elk, and ox. Art historian Caroline Bugler notes that the animals represent the four medieval humors: the rabbit stands for sanguine, the ox is phlegmatic, the elk is melancholic, and the cat is choleric (71). A choleric humor translates to bad tempered and easily angered;

qualities that describe the cat's tendency to turn on its benefactors. It was believed that the humors were balanced before the fall and in the aftermath of Eve's actions human nature became discordant. This engraving captures the tipping point. Once Eve accepts the fruit, the serene cat will inevitably attack the mouse.

Art historian Stefano Zuffi tracks the cat across classes – it is depicted in the poorest shack as well as palaces of nobility. Although it was present in art depicting the upper-class, the cat wasn't considered a noble animal like a pedigree dog or an aristocratic animal like horses. The cat is unique in that it "crossed all thresholds and, significantly, accompanied humans at all stages of their lives" (Zuffi 132). Both Zuffi and Bugler mention that cats are the "preferred" companions of older women. Dutch painter Quiringh Gerritsz van Brekelenkam's *The Grace* (after 1622-c. 1669) captures a solitary woman saying grace over her humble supper of soup, bread, and cheese. Behind her is a spinning wheel and off to her right a cat crouches near her feet. The 1656 painting *Old Woman Saying Grace* by Nicolaes Maes, another Dutch painter, depicts an almost identical scene. A woman prays over her humble supper, but this time the cat is not sitting off to the side. While her eyes are closed, the cat, which is in the foreground of this painting, stretches up to steal food from the table. In *Cat Having Its Fleas Removed by an Old Woman* (c. 1640) by Flemish artist David Teniers the Younger, a seated peasant woman is doing exactly what the title says: patiently picking fleas off her cat. Sitting outside a humble setting and surrounded by a wheel barrow and jugs, she sits with her cat on her lap. She is clearly focused on her task: staring at the cat's back with both her hands roving over his neck. The cats head rests on its paws looking over her knees as a dozen black mice emerge from the right hand side of the painting. Zuffi argues that this painting might be playing with the proverb "While the

cat's away, the mice will play" (155). The mice aren't just peeking from behind the yard's clutter, they have crowded around to observe and possibly taunt the temporarily restrained cat.

It is also during the early modern period that cats are used to connote sexuality more explicitly. Most frequently it was women's sexuality. For instance, French painter François Boucher's provocative painting *The Toilet* (1742) presents a theme consistent in Rococo art: a cat in the bedroom. In the center of the frame Boucher paints a seated young woman with skirts lifted, tying up her stocking with a pink garter. Her legs are spread wide and she looks off to the side at a maid holding up a cap. Between her feet a brown tabby bats at an unraveling ball of yarn. Its mouth is open, mid-mew and it stares out of the frame at the viewer. Bugler argues that "the woman's décolleté and spread legs hint at a voyeuristic intent" and that the cat adds to the "lascivious mood" (136). By no means is the cat's association with sex and sexuality new – we know it was part of the representation of Egyptian goddesses – but its connotation of lechery and promiscuity lent itself to subtle eroticism throughout the early modern period. In particular, "cats rubbing against legs or parading on rumpled sheets" create sensual atmospheres focused on tactile feelings (Bugler 133). Cats and sensuality continue as an artistic theme through the 19th and 20th centuries.

Portraits of men and women from the early modern period occasionally featured cats. While some artists may have simply included a cat as an accessory to the person or a way of balancing the overall image, others included cats for their symbolic connotations. Zuffi remarks that Italian painting in particular endows cats with enormous allegorical meaning. Cats are almost always linked to the senses or temperament (99). For instance, in Giuseppe Maria Crespi's *Young Woman with Rose and a Cat* (c. 1695-1705), a dark-haired, light-skinned woman holds a cat closely to her chest. With her left arm she secures the cat and with her right she

playfully pets at the cat with a rose. She carefully holds the flower avoiding the prominent thorns and gazes directly out of the frame. Zuffi argues that the image could be capturing the way cats like to be caressed, but that there is likely another message. Since it's a thorny-stemmed rose doing the poking, the cat could be hurt. Zuffi suggests the meaning might be a warning about flattery as a disguise for bitter truths (148). Another portrait with symbolic animals comes from Italian painter Dosso Dossi[12] in the *Youth with Cat and Dog*. The imagery is ambiguous. The human figure wears a turban and wide-necked tunic. The facial features are androgynous, but there's a ghost of an Adam's apple. Dossi might have been trying to make a larger statement about human and animal nature. The cat and dog are in the foreground and might be held by the figure, but the painting is framed in a way that doesn't make this clear. Zuffi states, "This pose might perhaps allude to reconciliation of contrasting aspects of the human soul – represented by the docility of the dog and the insolence of the cat" (99). There are multitudes of portraits with men and women holding cats that do not necessarily have symbolic connotations. Cats were cherished companions, and by the end of the late modern period and into the 1800s cats signaled less about witchcraft and more about a happy, comfortable home.

Conclusion

Ambivalence characterizes how humans understand the cat. As this general treatment of history has shown, their status has gone up and down throughout time, but their ambivalent connotations have remained consistent. Even when raised as a sacred animal in ancient Egypt, cats simultaneously represented safety and protection as well as danger and merciless destruction. A simple house cat in a medieval European village could make a complete picture of domesticity or it might be a direct connection to the Devil himself. A familiar, a sign of

innocence, sex, and on and on; the cat is a screen on which humans project their fears and emotions. Folklorist Lynne S. McNeill argues that although cats are part of the natural world, they straddle conceptual categories – they are domestic and wild, lazy and vigilant, nocturnal and diurnal, needy and independent – which makes them constantly in a state of liminality. Humans typically go through liminal periods when they are between conceptual categories (i.e. the time of engagement between a person's single life and their married life). It is unsettling and temporary in the natural world, but, McNeill explains, supernatural creatures are permanently liminal. Thus cats are considered part of the supernatural world. McNeill connects the "discomfort" many people feel toward cats to the uneasiness women tend to strike in people as well. She believes it's due to the perception that women and cats exist between domesticity and wildness. In a patriarchal society women have been consistently positioned as deviations from men, who make up the norm. Like cats, women have succumbed to a system and are seemingly tamed, but could snap at any moment and return to the wild. And if this were to happen cats and women would be completely fine. The ability to survive outside the system makes those who benefit from patriarchy uncomfortable.

Since women won't be domesticated, they must be kept in check in other ways. The loose history provided in this chapter sets the stage for the containment strategy that's to come. Women who transgressed beyond cultural norms were ostracized or put to death. The repercussions for breaking social mores changed over time. Instead of repressive punishment, containment strategies are increasingly focused on dictating choices, influencing decision-making, and self-policing after the 18th century. The following chapters show how representations of women and cats build on the layers of female/feline symbolism collected over two millennia. The themes of backlash and ambivalence continue. Single independent women

transgress social norms, challenge heteronormativity, and query traditional femininity. Their difference problematizes binaries like masculine/feminine, human companion/animal companion, and normal/abnormal. Proud spinsters, unproductive old maids, crazy cat ladies, and reprehensible animal hoarders are ways of dealing with the alternatives brought forth by single independent women. Representing single independent women as selfish, aggressive, unnatural, disgusting, and/or incompetent manages their potential threat to traditional gender roles and patriarchy.

CHAPTER TWO.

THE CRUX OF IT ALL:

AMBIVALENT REPRESENTATIONS OF SPINSTERS DURING THE FIRST-WAVE

The years following the Industrial Revolution saw dramatic shifts in terms of the opportunities available to women, the social and cultural expectations of womanhood, and the ways women's lives were represented in popular media. Gains made during the American and European first-waves opened up new spaces where women could imagine themselves. Loaded with potential and fused with action, women were threatening to explode into the public sphere and everything would have to change. Patriarchal systems that had been in place for centuries were relentlessly challenged. And it didn't stop after women got the vote; the push for gender equality seeped into other areas and the whole of Euro-American society teetered on the edge of reform. Amidst all the rapid and dramatic change was an equally strong push to adhere to tradition. The system wasn't broken some commentators assured, it is women that need fixing. The backlash created enormous friction between traditional femininity and new opportunities. It hinged on ideas about women in the public sphere, apprehensions about the fate of domesticity, and independent women as signs of progress versus the beginning of the end. Spinsters were cast as political and social deviants because their lifestyle embodied freedom as they broke from tradition. The cultural backlash aimed at single women, specifically spinsters, demonstrates not only how transgressive the women's movement was, but also how powerful it was *perceived* to be. Spinsters who broke from convention were deemed an unpatriotic menace. The mass media worked to blot out their potential by pathologizing and demoralizing single women.

This chapter looks at the waves of cultural tension surrounding women's changing roles between the mid-1800s through 1930. Uncertainty generated by the impacts of first-wave feminism in America and Europe, changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution, and insecurities about life in the modern age mark these as decades of crisis. While men's and women's lives ruptured from long accepted norms, it was women who were put under the microscope. As women seized education opportunities, found gainful employment, and expressed their opinions in public they tested the boundaries of womanhood. There was backlash to every transgression. Initially, though, women's foray into the public sphere was tolerated and in some cases applauded in the mass media. But as the 1800s came to a close and women continued taking advantage of their new freedoms and seeking equality the rancor of lost privilege took hold. The mass media focused on the crisis of femininity while the corresponding crisis of masculinity was all but ignored. Women were cited as instigators dangerously rocking the boat, especially educated women who remained single. Their defiance was contagious, so they needed to be silenced before their ideas spread to another generation. The representations of single women ceased to be ambivalent after 1910. Single women were torn apart in the mass media: declining marriage and fertility rates were blamed on their selfish inclinations; education corrupted women's natural preference for domesticity; employed women were reportedly stealing jobs from men; female friendships were deemed childish and potentially linked to lesbianism; and sexologists reported how sick these women were.

Today's cat lady characters are teased out from the negative spinster representations that took root during this time. The spinster icon was White, middle- to upper-class, and educated. She had aged past her prime without snagging a husband. Perhaps she failed because she was peculiar; she couldn't relate well with people. Maybe she had been corrupted by feminism and

(mis)spent her youth pursuing a career; she was so busy rocking the boat that she missed it. It's possible she overindulged in women's new freedoms – drinking, smoking, and engaging in affairs – leaving her an undesirable mate. Or perhaps she was stricken with mental disorder or physical disease. These spinster formulas are the same conditions cat ladies signify at the turn of the 21st century. And like the spinster before, cat ladies address anxieties about women's and men's changing roles. Spinsters are the outcasts in their families and communities; they remind female audiences of the woes of unwed life. Similarly, cat ladies are brought in to accentuate the emptiness, loneliness, and unhappiness of single life. Cat ladies are postmodern spinsters revived to participate in this longstanding containment strategy.

To understand the cat lady we must examine the spinster – who she was, what she signified, and how this parceled out in the media. This chapter begins with a brief history of spinster life, focusing predominantly on the years between 1845 and 1930. By contrasting their lived experiences with the ambivalent media messages we can better see how the representations were used to deal with larger social anxieties. After 1900 the caricatures rarely reflected the lives of single women they supposedly represented. I borrow Susan Faludi's idea of backlash to frame the ways in which representations were divorced from reality to manipulate women into their own subjugation. I put Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-fashioned Girl* (1875), and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes: Or the Loving Huntsman* (1927) in conversation to demonstrate the ambivalent mythology surrounding single, independent, White female characters. Written by independent, feminist women, these texts contradict negative portrayals of spinsters. Through their main characters Brontë, Alcott, and Warner critique the ways women's inherent potential is limited through social maintenance.

Etymology and Everyday Life: Understanding Spinster Origins

Initially, the term "spinster" was an employment category: wool spinners. During the 17th century this was women's work and it identified a class of working women. It wasn't until the end of the 17th century in France that it became a descriptive term that identified an unwed woman on her own who was also in need of an income. At the same time "Old Maid" was being used in England. Rather than describing a class of women, Old Maid signified more about the woman's personality. Old Maids were busy-bodies, vain, flirtatious yet past their prime, proud, uncharitable, and repulsive. Similar iconography was sprouting up in America at the same time. A woman who was unmarried at 23 was considered a spinster in New England. If she was still unwed by the time she was 26, she was called "thornback," named after an ugly spine-backed fish in the Boston area (Chambers-Schiller 11). Journalist Betsy Israel tracks the mutations single girl stereotypes have undergone since the 1700s. She argues that unlike the productive, working-class spinster, the old maid was a "parody of the uneducated minor noblewomen who had been trained for nothing more than marriage and then had failed to capture a husband" (Israel 16). The spinster stereotype's upper-class status continued to be important during the gender crisis in the 1800s. It made her departure from the norm serve as a more severe cautionary tale: if a rich, educated, White woman can go this far off track, it must be even easier for a woman of lower standing to go off the rails. It's a more effective way to warn all women that they must always be consciously maintaining their gender. American Studies scholar Naomi Braun Rosenthal asserts:

> It was precisely because the spinster was always portrayed as a woman of the 'superior' sort that her one deviation from the ideal – the fact that she was

> unattached – came to define her as a key figure in an evolving series of debates about womanhood. (11)

Israel locates the Industrial Revolution, particularly the late 1700s, as the point when these two "apparitions," goodly working-class Spinster and crazy upper-class Old Maid, melded to form "the spooky lone woman who was neither brilliant nor beautiful" (16).

But what about real spinsters? Who were they? What did they do? Women's history scholar Joan Perkins examined the lives of Victorian spinsters and found marked differences between perceptions, rights, and quality of life between spinsters of different classes. Upper- and middle-class spinsters had the most freedom in their singleness because they had fewer financial constraints and wide networks of support. An 1854 report on English spinsters revealed upper- and middle-class spinsters had the right to property, protection from the law, could act as a trustee, bequeath her personal property, and she paid taxes to the state – the same as a man (Perkin). Whether a widow or a lifelong spinster, it was easier to be a single woman if one had money. The wealthy spinster often travelled abroad, had extended visits with family, and led her life as she chose. As Frances Power Cobbe stated in her autobiography:

> The 'old maid' of 1861 is an exceedingly cheery personage, running about untrammeled by husband or children; now visiting her relatives' country houses, now taking her month in town, now off to a favourite pension on Lake Geneva, now scaling Vesuvius or the Pyramids. And what is better, she has found not only freedom of locomotion, but a sphere of action peculiarly congenial to her nature. (quoted in Perkin 158)

Cobbe's exuberant description reveals a woman free to visit family, see the world, and make new friends on her own accord without the responsibility for or expectations of husband or children.

Also within Cobbe's words is the assumption that "old maids" have access to money that affords travel and time to pursue such leisure activities. Only a certain class of women could hope to have such a single life, and for those with the funds it was a lifestyle that could be maintained.

Middle-class spinsters worked at three major occupations: governess, paid companion, or seamstress. These positions often required women to leave their families and move either to urban areas where there were more opportunities or into the homes of their charges. Working-class spinsters who were uneducated and unskilled made money through domestic service, factory work, street selling and manual labor, and prostitution often barely earning enough to scrape by (Perkin; Israel). The wages for working-class spinsters were so low they were unable to afford homes of their own. Whether middle- or working-class, a spinster who relied entirely on her earnings to support herself led a precarious life. In 1844 social commentator Adrienne Richelieu Lamb pointed out it was not being an old maid that made women unhappy, rather insufficient incomes put them in a difficult position (Perkin). By the time backlash had fully settled and women were actively denied or pushed out of employment it had become even harder for women of all classes to find a job. In 1913 British socialist and feminist politician Ethel Snowden said, "The plain unvarnished truth is that work open to women is not sufficient in amount or sufficiently well paid to enable them to live in a condition of ordinary comfort and decency" (quoted in Perkin 174). Regardless of the decade, though, non-white spinsters or spinsters with lower class status were trapped compared to their free-wheeling, wealthy, White counterparts.

Spinsters typically stayed with their parents or extended family. While it was the duty of relatives to take in these women, by no means was it a free ride. The expectation for these old maids and spinster aunts was self-sacrificing service to the family. Whether upper-class,

gainfully employed, or working-class, all spinsters were expected to return home when relatives fell ill; to assume care-taking roles for aging, infirm parents; and to help out the family after a death. Perkin provides evidence of some women enjoying the usefulness these responsibilities gave to their lives, but other women wrote about feelings of exploitation as if they were imprisoned by the ceaseless obligations. As one maiden aunt put it: "My dear, if you don't marry, you will find that you have on your shoulders half a dozen husbands, and as many families of children" (quoted in Perkin 161).

Despite the difficulties connected to remaining single, more and more middle- and upper-class women in England and America were *choosing* spinsterhood during the mid-1800s. Some joined the workforce during their youth and, after achieving some success, found they enjoyed working and the financial benefits. After the huge loss of life brought on by the American Civil War, many women in the United States had no choice but to get a job. Women working challenged traditional perceptions of female gender. Contrary to (centuries-old) popular belief, gender didn't seem to dictate what a woman physically, intellectually, and emotionally could or could not do.

Women working created other issues related to gender roles and performances. There was less time for courting. Work provided women means for financial independence. Women pursued advanced educations. By 1900, one in three women were attending college, and their numbers increased through 1920 when they made up 47% of the campus body (Rosenthal). Work, education, and travel[1] were not only "genteel means" for young women to move away from home, but were also respectable activities for women to engage in (Franzen). Women could imagine lives beyond marriage and family. Female friendships during this time and through 1900 were passionate and lasted a lifetime. Journalist Betsy Israel describes

"smashing," in which special friends who met in boarding school essentially "went steady" (28). In theory these friendships taught young women trust, loyalty, tolerance, and patience in preparation for marriage. Some women found their smashed friendships more satisfying than their relationships with men (Israel; Jeffreys). With school, work, and travel young women were exposed to female role models, established a network of female friendships, and broadened the boundaries traditionally expected of women. Joined together they were increasingly political, fighting for abolition, public health, child welfare, and suffrage (Rupp).

Attitudes about marriage were already under debate in American antebellum culture. Marriage and advice manuals advised young women to put off marrying until they found a worthy man. Maintaining one's integrity was better than the misery of a bad marriage. According to historian Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, staying a single female was better than "[risking] her character, eternal soul, and earthly well-being in the lottery of marriage" (13). In England women were also reassessing what women got out of marriage and found it lacking. More than their married counterparts, single women had a voice. In the eyes of the law, married women did not really exist in the public sphere and their rights to property and position in the community defaulted to their husbands. In 1844 Ann Richelieu Lamb wrote:

> The unmarried woman is somebody; the married, nobody! The former shines in her own light; the latter is only the faint reflection of her husband's, in whom both law and public opinion suppose her 'to be lost'…Surely the state of the much ridiculed spinster is better than this very equivocal position, in which there is a great risk of losing our very identity. (quoted in Perkin 158)

More than the laws and public sphere, Lamb likens marriage to an institution that strips women of their personal identities. Without a space for her opinions or a place to make her voice heard, married women were invisible.

Midcentury women's literature from England and America still privileged marriage as the ideal state for women, but their support was visibly wavering. Novels that concluded with heroines tying the knot still critically analyzed the institution of marriage. Chambers-Schiller sees authors' ambivalent portrayals as a way to circumscribe their support of marriage. Literature limited the notion of marital bliss in three ways: it confirmed that a single life could be a happy life; it argued for "true" marriage, or marriages based on mutuality instead of male dominance; and it stressed that ideal, mutual marriages were the exception rather than the rule (17). The "limitations" expressed in literature coincided with evolving ideas about men's and women's relationships personified by the Cult of Single Blessedness and celibate spinsters.

Rooted in Protestantism, the Cult of Single Blessedness encouraged single women to search for happiness outside of marriage by living purposeful, useful lives either through religion or intellectual instruction. Chambers-Schiller underlines the fact that this freedom from domesticity still wasn't free. The kinds of activity and decorum were strictly monitored, and women needed to reflect the feminine spirit of humility and selflessness. Appropriate works included caring for parents, relatives, and community members in need – the sick, poor, orphaned, et cetera. The Cult of Single Blessedness venerated women's potential for a calling higher than marriage and domesticity. Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies Home Journal* in the late 1800s, applauded the hundreds of spinsters who had found personal missions they could "better accomplish untrammeled by domestic cares," and further stated, "By their self-sacrifice, these women are heroines" (quoted in Rosenthal 45). He encouraged readers to respect these women's

choices and recognize the gains they achieved on behalf of all women. The effects were widespread once popular literature began featuring Maiden Aunts and Sisters of Charity as respectable characters. Authors accentuated the point that these women were womanly rather than beautiful. They had power, integrity, volition, and were respected in their communities. Importantly, the subtext didn't implicate these women's lifestyles as deviant or threatening. The Cult of Single Blessedness elevated public opinion of spinsters between the years of 1830-1850. Chambers-Schiller tempers the positive effects by pointing out that the social approbations were always framed conditionally: the character had to uphold traditional female gender roles and her singleness was due to difficult or tragic conditions. Spinster characters could not choose to be single and they were not shown reveling in their freedom.

Celibate spinsters, on the other hand, were revelers, vocal in their refusal to marry[2]. The intent of their boycott was to reform men's sexuality, which had been considered forceful, devious, and immoral since the Middle Ages. Victorian feminist and author Lucy Re-Bartlett saw the rise of celibacy as a "positive decision" that would eventually tame men's animal nature and a new spiritual relationship between the sexes could be formed (quoted in Jeffreys 90). Some of the women participating in the physical protest identified as feminists[3], but not all. Regardless of their affiliations, celibate spinsters were cast simultaneously as affirmed "warrior maids" and condemned "social nemeses" (Jeffreys). Their actions addressed the limitations of love, marriage, and happiness – ideological promises made to women from childhood. More than an individual protest, celibate spinsters joined together as women to question patriarchy loudly and publically. Cicely Hamilton, also a Victorian feminist and author, argued spinsterhood was the only alternative to marriage for women in England after convents closed in the Middle Ages. Without alternatives, women had been – and continued to be – forced into an

inherently unfair system. In her 1909 book *Marriage as a Trade* Hamilton proposed a way to make marriage equal for men. If men treated women equally, compensated women for the work they did that made men's lives easier, and saw women as more than sexual objects, then marriage could be considered voluntary for women, (Jeffreys). Both Hamilton and Re-Bartlett felt a celibate class was necessary in order to improve every woman's position in society. While Hamilton believed the energy spent on sex could be rerouted to fight for the emancipation of women, Re-Bartlett saw the withdrawal from men as a necessary step to completely re-imagine the system. She argued "Woman cannot truly struggle for the new order, until she hates the old" (quoted in Jeffreys 91).

The Cult of Single Blessedness and celibate spinsters created quite a stir and their numbers were on the rise in America and England while marriage rates dropped. Educated women in particular seemed to have abandoned the idea with only 60% marrying during this time (Israel). Census data from 1851 revealed there were 405,000 more women than men living in England (Perkin). Likewise, the 1855 census in New England showed there were 45,000 more women than men (Chambers-Schiller). American and British media immediately portrayed the glut of spinsters as national emergencies. The backlash ignored cultural conditions impacting the disparity like a diminished male population during and after war, men postponing marriage until they secured wealth, and new positive attitudes toward bachelorhood. Women, specifically women who chose to remain single, were considered the cause. They were called "redundant," "surplus," and "human excess" (Jeffreys; Rosenthal). Commentators on both sides of the pond searched for immediate solutions. The proposal for restoring the gender balance in England was to send single women away to places like the U.S. or Australia where the population of men was higher than women (Perkin; Jeffreys). In similar fashion, American commentators suggested

sending single women either to Canada or out west where they could tame the land and pioneer men.

Social tensions percolated, but representations of single women remained ambivalent. An example of these mixed messages comes from *Ladies Home Journal*. American Studies scholar Naomi Braun Rosenthal's research examines representations of spinsters in fictional stories, nonfiction essays, and apologia printed in the magazine from the Progressive Era through World War I. Aware that "old maid" had become a term of derision, Louisa Knapp Curtis, the creator and first editor of *Ladies Home Journal* who served from 1883-1889, strove to include authors who "described spinster life with respect and admiration and portrayed never-marrying women as sophisticated and attractive – although asexual – exemplars of a new form of existence" (Rosenthal 40). Rosenthal notes the positive spinster stories she analyzed from *Ladies Home Journal* weren't necessarily the norm, nor were they random; she sees them as "accepted variants of the genre" (15). As a cultural text instrumental to shaping gender norms, *Ladies Home Journal* helped define what a woman was and what she could be. The magazine held women's education in high esteem during this time, celebrating and normalizing the college experience for women in the late 1880s. *Ladies Home Journal* published spinsters' write-ins, providing these women with a space to editorialize themselves as "heroines of their own lives" (Rosenthal 47). These works affirming female independence were printed alongside critiques and articles that mildly condemned spinsterhood. This changed in 1893 during Edward Bok's tenure as editor. As stated above, Bok initially praised the good works of spinsters, but his tone shifted as the spinster population grew. Bok also used his editorial notes to openly rage against the selfish, eccentric, and subversive nature of women who "turned their back on marriage" (Rosenthal 83). He began to warn female readers about the emotional, social, and personal

dangers resulting from work. Increasingly in the early 1900s, college women were provided with advice for proper activities, demeanors, and expectations for female graduates. The university had become the backdrop for catching a husband and obtaining an MRS. Degree.

Ladies Home Journal's 1893 change in tone coincides with the wider spinster backlash sweeping America and England. The tipping point between spinster ambivalence and spinster baiting occurred between 1880 and 1913. On top of marriage rates plummeting to an all time low, the birth rates were now visibly affected and divorce was on the rise. By 1910 fears surrounding "political and social deviants" like suffrage supporters, free-lovers, childless women, Bolsheviks, and anarchist bombers were at all-time highs (Chambers-Schiller). And as World War I came to a close, concerns about potential "race suicide" swept the U.S. as leaders and eugenicists "sounded the alarm" about low birthrates in White, Anglo-Protestant, middle-class women (Franzen). President Theodore Roosevelt condemned women "of good stock" who avoided their domestic duties and portrayed them as selfish, unpatriotic adversaries to the continuation of the White race. But even before then spinsters had been upgraded to enemies of the state.

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* journalist Susan Faludi uses backlash to bookend 20th century women's experiences. Faludi's extensive research reveals counterattacks on progress occurred every time women made advancements toward equality. She locates backlashes throughout history whenever women's positions were *perceived* to be on the rise. Looking into antiquity she cites the restrictive property laws, penalties for unwed and childless women, heresy judgments against early Christian female disciples, and medieval witch burnings in Europe as early examples of backlash. Faludi deems the expansion of mass media and mass marketing during the mid-1800s the most "effective devices for constraining women's

aspirations" because they "rule with the club of conformity….and claim to speak for female public opinion" (48). Popular literature, newspapers, magazines, informative pamphlets, medical and health information, cartoons, and other cultural texts widely distributed ambivalent messages about women's independence. Praise was always balanced with censure. This back-and-forth causes Faludi to imagine women's progress as a tilted corkscrew, seeming to move forward but never going anywhere. She describes the contrary motion as follows:

> In any time of backlash, cultural anxiety inevitably centers on two pressure points in that spiral, demographic trends that act like two arrows pushing against the spiral, causing it to lean in the direction of women's advancement, but also becoming the foci of the backlash's greatest wrath. (54)

Women's progress turns and turns without getting very far. The field of cultural values shifts toward fear and anxiety as the backlash turns women's advancement back on itself time after time.

For Faludi the "two arrows" are women's financial liberation through their increasing presence in the workforce and women's control over their own fertility. Both of these set up a "paradox of private behavior and public attitudes" (Faludi 55). Since the industrial revolution women have been continuously employed outside the home and in the second half of the 1900s fewer and fewer women had a choice in the matter. Along with work, women have also been pursuing advanced educations in order to better their position. Yet when we look at the other realities of working women, as Faludi lays out, women have been pushed into the worst positions or occupations, paid the lowest wages, and refused child care or family leave from their admittance into the working world. And during their adventures in employment women are also chastised for selfishly pursuing career over family, pressured to return to the domestic sphere,

and portrayed as dangerously transgressive in the media. These arguments may sound familiar because they're still being directed at women today in the 21st century, which will be explored in depth in the following chapter. But back at the beginning of the 20th century the rising female workforce began leaving people uneasy. Positive representations of women workers became far and few between as the backlash took hold. Instead of useful and purposeful, they were increasingly suspect, their very nature deemed uncooperative, potentially radical, and un-American (Israel).

The same can be said of the backlash surrounding women's fertility. Celibate spinsters may have filled a necessary gap in community development by caring for those in need, but they neglected their reproductive duties in the process. The resulting media representations waffled between two extremes. On one end, celibate spinsters were depicted as heroines sacrificing themselves for a higher good. Despite never marrying, these kind-hearted women upheld traditional femininity and devoted themselves to the family structure. At the other end of the spectrum celibate spinsters were presented as bitter women who took their own domestic misfortunes out on the institution of marriage. They hated men yet invaded his territory by entering the public sphere. Based on their transgressive activities, celibate spinsters were not considered full-blooded women. They had broken with their gender and become something else: a mutation that would never be male, but certainly wasn't entirely female (Chambers-Schiller). Sexologists pathologized celibate women, working women, and women who deviated from their gender roles. Spinsterhood became associated with sickness or perversion, and sexology provided serious scientific proof for such claims. Singleness was like a social disease that spread through ideas. It needed to be cured…or cauterized lest it infect the rest of the female population.

The medicalization of spinsters attacked from the two backlash arrows: financial liberation (autonomy) and fertility (celibacy). Health concerns were further couched in ideas about gender, motherhood, marriage and the female body. In the early 1800s the connections were only intimated, but by the 1870s autonomy and celibacy were viewed as the causes for a wide range of female ailments. Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller explains that women's beings were increasingly correlated with their bodies, namely their reproductive capabilities. In this understanding women's "natural" biological function is pregnancy, thus marriage and childbearing were women's natural social roles. To opt out, then, was unnatural, which made spinsters biologically *and* socially deviant. In response to their aberrant existence independent women were called "amazons," "semi-women," "hermaphrodites," "mannish maidens," "unsexed," and "lesbians[4]" (Chambers-Schiller; Jeffreys; Rosenthal). Since women were considered the weaker sex, working women were prone to burn out according to midcentury medical research. While it's true that many feminists and activists reported feeling overwhelmed by the things they wanted to accomplish, medical journals reported links between mental deficiency and female ambition (Chambers-Schiller). Victorian physicians cautioned women that spinsterhood and the inevitable celibacy that accompanied it would shorten their life span (Jeffreys).

Celibacy itself brought on a host of similar diagnoses. According to medical information from the time, sexual activity with men, which in this understanding is strictly penetrative intercourse, was vital to the health of women. A woman whose reproductive organs weren't used and weren't "regularly bathed in male semen" would atrophy and cause a litany of physical and mental ailments (Chambers-Schiller). Without penetrative, heterosexual sex women were likely to become neurotics "either bitter and twisted or gushingly sentimental" (Jeffreys 95).

Another diagnosis came from Freudian analysis: women's transition from adolescence to adulthood hinged on sexual intercourse with a man. Without sex, women remained immature and childlike. Revolutionary activist and Women's Studies scholar Sheila Jeffreys argues this medicalization reinforced the heteronormative belief that women were not "normal" unless they were married and procreating. From the 1920s on, celibacy was indicative of subconscious conflict instead of a healthy, personal choice.

"Frigid" was another sexological category that only applied to women, but married and celibate women could be diagnosed with it. 19th century sexologists estimated 40-50 percent of all women were frigid, and educated women were likely to be the coldest of all (Israel). To better understand this female disease we have to look at marriage and sex in the mid-1800s. As mentioned above, the ideal of a mutual, "companionate" marriage had taken hold – men and women were partners and friends in an intense, exclusive relationship. There were new ideas about marital sex as well. Sex became the cornerstone of marital relationships. While the idea itself may not seem new, there were new expectations for women in the bedroom: they needed to be passionate, stimulating, and exciting between the sheets. Jeffrey's calls this turn "the eroticization of the married woman" and it continues to be an ideal for women in the 21st century (166). In 2004, rapper Ludacris calls for "A lady on the street and a freak in the bed" as the ideal woman in the song "Yeah!" (Usher). But back in the late 1800s, many wives did not embrace their new role as eager sex partner; it ran contradictory to the previous expectations of a woman's pleasure during sex. Good, moral Euro-American women were not supposed to enjoy sex – it was meant for procreation, and pleasure was all but left out of the discussion. And, let's be honest, there wasn't really a "discussion" about any of it during Victorian times. So for the

lady who was hesitant in the bedroom, did not enjoy sex with her husband, or resisted the call for a freak in the sheets there was a new name: frigid.

Frigidness was only experienced by women, not men, and it could be brought on by mental imbalance, sexual immaturity, stress caused by working outside the home, and, in the most extreme cases, lesbianism. Sexologists were fascinated with "abnormalities" and homosexuality was researched extensively during the early 1900s. A lesbian, or "invert," was identifiable by traces of masculinity in her appearance specifically exhibited in her "neurotic desire to reject woman's accepted role in marriage and family and an 'inverted' desire for genital sex with other women" (Chambers-Schiller 199). A flawed performance of femininity was a sure sign that a woman might be a lesbian[5]. Medical, psychological, and scientific literature attempting to deal with the "new woman" characterized by independence created a third sex for these feminine aberrations: hermaphrodite. Chambers-Schiller elaborates:

> The hermaphrodite combined a female body and genitalia with the male attributes of independence, intelligence, ambition, and love of women. Although the connections were made earlier in Europe, by World War I Americans increasingly linked together lesbianism, feminism, and spinsterhood. All women infected with such "isms" shared certain characteristics, behaviors, or attributes: independence, self-assertion, careerism, devotion to other women, and a rejection of marriage. (199)

It became more and more difficult to be an autonomous, working, or critically thinking woman without being categorically disqualified. Feminists, spinsters, and independently-minded women were quickly cut down to size or simply ignored once labeled "prude," "lesbian," or "sick." With fears of lesbianism on the rise female bonding was considered suspect as well. The long-

term, close special friendships between women were recast as immature, "proof that women underneath were really children who could not put away girlish toys and dolls and sit properly alongside their mates" (Israel 29). Ardent female friendships, or smashing, was discouraged. And needless to say the bonds of sisterhood were the most suspicious. Coming together as a group became that much harder for women.

There were plenty of proposed cures for these new ailments. Obviously, women could embrace domesticity and restore the natural balance in the world and in the womb. Quit working. Don't seek advanced education, because learning makes women more prone to marital dissatisfaction. But do learn to enjoy sex, ladies. This might be achieved through a visit with a psychoanalyst or gynecologist, better sex education, or more firmness from the husband on the wedding night. Another publicized way for women to achieve sexual pleasure was to "accept their natural subordination" (Jeffreys 183). These "treatments" were published in medical journals, reported in newspapers, and repackaged in sex advice literature written by men in the early 1900s (Jeffreys). Sex advice literature focused on the disgrace of abnormality. While promoting the so-called medical facts, sex advice literature identified sites of inadequacy women needed to manage in themselves. The undercurrent to all the proposed cures warned that if the spinster/frigid/lesbian problem wasn't solved, civilization would unravel. Jeffreys summarizes the three-phase social consequences that scientific and medical research indicated would result from an empowered class of woman: "male dominance would be overthrown, the exercise of male sexuality severely curtailed and eventually the numbers of men in the population severely reduced" (173). In this argument, women's celibacy has nothing to do with women's choices, their bodies, beliefs, and attempts at social change; it is simply framed as an attack on men.

That's the thing about backlash – it focuses on women and refuses to acknowledge the accompanying crisis of masculinity. When women are accused of transgressing into masculine domains, then, according to public attitudes, men are forced into more feminine positions. It's as if there is some unspoken balance between masculinity and femininity, and equality between the sexes throws it off. *Backlash* author Susan Faludi feels this resonates most acutely in terms of women in the workforce because successful masculinity has been equated with being "a good provider for his family" for over a century (65). Economic equality, then, challenges the foundation of masculinity. According to this understanding, if a woman is financially secure she has no need for a man. If all it takes is financial security for women to opt out of marriage entirely, then it seems like patriarchal institutions – church, university, medicine, law, and science – doth protest too much. Efforts to promote marriage, love, and domesticity sell women on these ideals while sweeping the attached oppressions under the rug. They have to be sold and made desirable because women's roles are consistently at the short end of the stick. Domesticity and serving as a wife, homemaker, and mother cannot be natural if it has to be constantly drummed into women from birth. The fear is that without the incentive of security women might recognize that the atomized, nuclear family is not the only kind of community structure. If spinsters, feminists, and independent women were not reined in, they threatened to demolish patriarchy, a system privileging men through the centuries. Just their existence was enough to destroy the illusion.

Case Studies: Agnes Grey, Polly Milton, and Laura Willowes

Representations of spinsters from the mid-1800s through 1930 reflect the range of feelings about them in real life. While initial depictions in the mass media were ambivalent,

newspapers, informative pamphlets, medical and health information, and cartoons were more likely to address cultural anxieties surrounding women's autonomy. Popular literature, magazines, and cultural texts penned by spinsters offered more consistently positive representations. With fewer feminist and spinster writings published, representations began to define who the spinster was: a prudish, bitter, man-hater who was mentally and emotionally unwell (Israel). The reported number of spinsters declined through the 1920s until they were practically extinct by the 1930s (Franzen; Jeffreys; Rosenthal; Chambers-Schiller). The period of ambivalence, though, had opened up the option of positively reading spinster characters. The following analysis looks at a few examples of positive spinster main characters from this time period: Agnes Grey from Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*; Polly Martin from Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl*; and Laura Willowes from Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes: Or the Loving Huntsman*. Agnes and Polly were written during the period of ambivalence, whereas Laura comes after the backlash set in and spinsters were portrayed negatively. These fictional spinsters present spinsterhood as a plausible course for any woman's life. Agnes, Polly, and Laura provide windows into the sense of female opportunity and threatening backlash brewing at the times of publication. Each has a cat companion for a portion of the story. Brontë, Alcott, and Warner are all considered feminist writers and spoke highly of female autonomy and independence during their lives. None of these authors married[6]. They were also women who worked as well as wrote: Warner in a munitions factory, Brontë as a governess, and Alcott in a number of positions including seamstress, nurse, and many more. Each novel explores their main character's womanly potential and subtly critiques femininity, women's oppression, and the rising backlash against women.

Agnes Grey

Published in 1847, Anne Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey*, follows Agnes from youth to adulthood. After her father puts all their money into a faulty investment, the family is thrown into poverty and ruin. Agnes wants to be useful and insists upon becoming a governess. Her family tries to dissuade her from the plan, but Agnes is excited to have a way to help out. She argues her position clearly and everyone begrudgingly agrees that Agnes's plan is the only way to alleviate the financial strain.

Although excited to have something purposeful to do, Agnes is still nervous about leaving; she dearly loves her family. The reality sets in as Agnes sits packed and ready to go. She thinks about the bleak months ahead without her family. She realizes her kitten would be a cat by the time she is permitted a visit. The relationship she'd built as the kitten's playmate would likely be forgotten by the grown cat and Agnes would be a stranger. She thinks, "I have romped with her for the last time; and when I stroked her soft bright fur, while she lay purring herself to sleep in my lap, it was with a feeling of sadness I could not easily disguise" (30). The presence of an animal friend in *Agnes Grey* is not surprising. Literary and cultural scholar Katharine M. Rogers found that both Anne and Charlotte Brontë used cats and other small animals to draw distinctions between sensitive characters "who considered the feelings of an animal even if it was not conventionally privileged" and obtuse characters who were often described as "[despising] cats as the associates of women and peasants" (98). Characters' temperaments are revealed through their treatment of animals throughout *Agnes Grey*, beginning not with a cat, but with Tom Bloomfield and baby birds.

In her first position Agnes works as a governess for the Bloomfields. She's in charge of two little monsters spoiled rotten by their parents. Tom, the eldest of her charges, relishes

ripping off the wings and mutilating baby birds. Mrs. Bloomfield, Tom's mother, believes the behavior indicative of his independent personality. Mr. Bloomfield, Tom's father, and Uncle Robson both encourage Tom calling him a "noble scoundrel" (78). The mistreatment of animals is considered part and parcel of growing up to be a strong man. At one point Tom tries to get Uncle Robson to kick Agnes instead of one of his dogs. Laughing at the boy's actions, Uncle Robson declares, "Damme, but the lad has some spunk in him too. Curse me…He's beyond petticoat government already" (81).

Uncle Robson frequently brings Tom full nests to destroy. On one of these occasions, Agnes tells Tom she will not permit him to torture the birds and instructs him to return the nest. Although young, Tom repeatedly uses his higher social standing to disregard Agnes, and on this occasion he threatens to create a scenario that would force his parents to dismiss her. After arguing and pleading with the "little tyrant" Agnes asks what he plans to do with the birds. Tom replies with fiendish glee a list of torments, and while he's distracted Agnes drops a flat stone upon his intended victims crushing them flat. In addition to painting Tom as a monster, Brontë uses this event to further illuminate larger issues of entitlement, cruelty toward animals, and the constraining nature of a governess position. Victorian literature scholar Maggie Berg sees the purposeful alignment of human and non-human abuse as a demonstration of Brontë's feminist politics. Tom and Uncle Robson are stand-ins to "[outline] the systemic nature and effects of a violent hierarchy of male domination" (186). Their treatment of animals, especially "lower creatures," is means of enforcing supremacy. In the Bloomfield house, and in larger Victorian society, male brutality is rewarded. Mr. Bloomfield and Uncle Robson instruct Tom in cruelty and Mrs. Bloomfield affirms his lessons. Brontë uses the Bloomfield house to show the ways masculine identity is dependent on keeping lower creatures oppressed, whether birds or Agnes

(Berg). Agnes's transgressive act, putting the birds out of their misery, has larger repercussions on her life in the Bloomfield's house: Agnes is fired.

Tom and Uncle Robson aren't the only characters whose nature is revealed through their treatment of animals. After a time of unemployment, Agnes is hired on with the Murrays to tutor their four children: Rosalie, Matilda, John, and Charles. Although the family is different, the children older and more receptive to Agnes's instruction, many of the issues remain the same. Agnes does have more time to herself and is allowed to venture out on her own when her duties are fulfilled. She often visits Nancy Brown, a poverty-stricken widow who lives alone in a small cottage with her cat on the Murray's property. After Nancy suffers from an inflammation in the eyes, Agnes visits to read aloud to the woman. Nancy is sitting in a way to best accommodate her cat who lies dreaming on her lap and the satchel she is knitting. She tells Agnes about the rector, Mr. Hatfield, who had paid her a visit earlier in the week. Brontë had previously painted Mr. Hatfield as a capricious man completely taken with Miss Rosalie Murray. Miss Murray, aware of his feelings, flirts and encourages his attention. Under the pretense of caring about Nancy, Mr. Hatfield had paid the widow a visit. Nancy wanted to discuss religion because her ailments were causing a crisis of faith, but Mr. Hatfield ridiculed her concerns, suggested she come to church (impossible of late due to her ailment), and rerouted the conversation to ask after Miss Murray's whereabouts that morning. When Nancy said they'd already stopped by he kicked her cat in his haste to chase her down. Brontë's description of Nancy's distress over the event and Agnes's dismay over the rector's behavior make Mr. Hatfield seem thoughtless, uncaring, and mildly despicable.

On the contrary, Brontë also reveals characters' kindly nature through their treatment of animals. Mr. Weston, the new curate, visits Nancy as well. When her cat jumps on his knee he

merely pats it instead of throwing it off or acting as if Nancy does not keep her house in order. Later in the story Mr. Weston finds and returns Nancy's cat after it disappeared. Covered in cat hair, he amiably greets Nancy and agrees to stay for a cup of tea, further solidifying Mr. Weston as an agreeable character. His kindness extends to Agnes as well when he acknowledges her presence with a bow – an act of manners Agnes hadn't seen since becoming a governess. The position made her invisible to gentleman because she was so beneath their standing. Brontë often encapsulates a governess's solitary life in asides like this to the reader. She does not ridicule governess work – it's bad manners, class conflict, and gender performances that are taken to task in her writing. Brontë makes clear that being a governess wouldn't be so bad if the families and their children weren't so terrible or the workload sustainable. She shows the ways Agnes's social identity determines how employers and community-members treat her. It is in Agnes's reflections, as she weighs her lived experience against her values and sense of self worth, that Brontë critiques social mores.

For most of the story Brontë focuses on Agnes's adventures as a governess. There are no real prospects in terms of marriage and dating. Agnes has feelings for Mr. Weston, but understands her social standing negates the possibility of marriage, even if it were to a curate. She has no dowry to speak of and in taking work as a governess Agnes recognizes her fate is to continue in this line of work until she is no longer hirable[7]. Privileged Rosalie Murray provides an opportunity for Brontë to critique modern sensibilities of upper class femininity. Unlike Agnes, Rosalie's mother has been coaching her on the importance of marrying since she was a girl. Prioritizing marriage has made Rosalie proficient in flirting and not much else. She entertains several potential suitors and regales Agnes with tales of dalliance, treating her more like a confidante as the years pass. Through Rosalie, Brontë captures the joy women take in

strategizing courtships as well as the aimlessness they come to know after successfully becoming wives. She also shows how trapped these young women feel when marriage is the only path. For instance, Rosalie prattles on about the potential suitors in town. She's unsatisfied by the prospects, but confides that she loves coquetry. After an evening spent flirting with five men, she bemoans that she must marry at all. Rosalie maintains if she could stay young forever, she would remain single, never marrying until she was "on the verge of being called an old maid" (128). Even then, the only reason Rosalie cites to marry is to avoid the scandal of her youth and the infamy of old maidenhood. Agnes attempts to reason with the flirtatious girl, but ultimately suggests if those are Miss Murray's feelings, then she should never marry. Rosalie ignores the advice and marries a horrible man. When she brings Agnes out for a visit, she takes time to show off baubles from her honeymoon and the poodle that keeps her company, but Brontë's diction exposes a sad young woman who is unhappy in her marriage and doesn't know how to handle being lady of the house. She paints Rosalie as a silly woman with no direction or ambition after securing a husband.

Like many novels from the mid-1800s, Brontë does not leave Agnes a spinster. Despite critiquing a flawed union through Rosalie's marriage, Agnes's marriage to Mr. Weston, the curate, is an example of an ideal marriage based in mutuality. Their relationship is companionate; they are partners and friends. He respects her and compliments her brains in his proposal. He explains that no one *but* Agnes could be his wife. Agnes had stated similar thoughts about Mr. Weston calling him the person she "loved and honored above everyone else in the world" (297). Marriage is not looked at as an institution or an obligation like it is presented in the case of Miss Murray. Based on Brontë's overall depiction of single women, spinsters, and widows, readers are left with the sense that these women are noble, kind, and not

to be pitied. They clearly have a place in society, but while they may not be ridiculed their lot in life is not necessarily a celebrated one.

Polly Milton

Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl* focuses on Polly Milton, the so-called old-fashioned girl suggested in the title. The first portion of the story was serialized in the children's magazine *Merry's Museum* in July and August of 1869. The second portion was published six years later with the same amount of time passing in the characters' lives. The initial story takes place over the months 14 year-old Polly spends visiting her friend, Fanny Shaw, in the city. The Shaws are a well-to-do but internally disconnected family – in modern parlance, they'd be considered dysfunctional. Despite their wealth and social standing, Alcott presents the Shaws as unhappy, aimless, and unfulfilled. Polly's presence teaches the Shaws that family coherence is not naturally occurring; family values must be practiced. Polly is not perfect. Her quaint country upbringing and wholesome values are frequently tested because Polly is envious of Fanny's fashionable education and urban sophistication. As the story unfolds Alcott shows that though Polly's values may be old-fashioned, her compassion, drive, and zeal are timeless.

The second half of the story is of particular interest to this research. Polly, age 20, returns to the city as a music teacher. She is devoted to her family, and sends most of her earnings to her brother, Will, in order to help him complete his schooling[8]. Polly lives somewhat on her own, rooming with the spinster Miss Mills who lets her stay for free. Polly has two roommates: a canary, Nicodemus, and a gray kitten, Ashputtel. Despite her positive personality and cheerful demeanor, Polly still has bouts of doubt and dissatisfaction with her life. She is lonely, work is exhausting, and it is difficult to make ends meet with most of her paycheck sent

back home. Alcott threads her own commentary into the story by stacking cultural critiques on normative femininity, class conflict, and American values in the personalities and actions of the characters. For instance, Alcott narrates Polly's first few weeks as a working girl: "…in her first attempt to make her way through the thicket that always bars a woman's progress, was the discovery that working for a living shuts a good many doors in one's face even in democratic America" (164). Polly's actions are progressive, but her purposeful employment still limits who will socialize with her. Her friendship with Fanny had opened doors previously, but the connections were lost once Polly became a working girl. Alcott stresses that "fashionability" in Fanny's social sphere is measured by keeping up with clothing trends, snaring a husband, and having the right connections. Her writing repeatedly frames these activities as silly, wasteful, and divisive.

When it seems Polly cannot bear much more of her life as an independent working girl with no spare time or money for herself, Alcott provides a scenario that assures readers Polly's path is righteous. For example, after helping Fanny get ready for a night on the town Polly feels depressed. She stops in to visit Miss Mills who tells Polly about little Jane. Jane, a 17-year old girl on her own with no family or means, had attempted suicide that very day. After trying to make ends meet by working long hours at poorly paid jobs, Jane got sick and the only cure doctors prescribed was less work. But if she did not work, she would not be able to pay rent or eat. In her suicide note, Jane said she intended to end it all because there was no place for her and she was tired of being a social burden. Miss Mills rescued Jenny (her pet name for Jane) by taking her in. Hearing Jane's tale of woe makes Polly feel foolish and puts her comparatively minor troubles into perspective. Again, Alcott's observations about gender, working conditions, wages, and class are lodged within the story. She contrasts Polly, who is barely making ends

meet for herself, with Jane who is caught in a cycle of overwork, poor health, and still not enough money to scrape by. Both are working women, neither of them particularly happy with the long hours and low pay. Alcott positions Polly differently in that she has a wealth of friendship and the admiration of her family, while Jane is all alone.

The notion of strength in community, especially sisterhood, is an important point Alcott stresses throughout the book. For instance, Miss Mills encourages Polly to suggest Jenny's sewing services to Fanny and her wealthy friends. Although she wants to help, Polly hesitates because sensible conversation or philanthropic suggestions attempted during their socializing was routinely shut down. Polly, whose conversation is usually sensible and who engages in good works, had frequently been ridiculed for breaking their rules. Polly tells Miss Mills she's tired of being called old-fashioned or worse "rampant woman's rights reformer" (208). Miss Mills laughs and gently argues she herself is not a rampant woman's rights reformer either, but charity and care for those in need are essential to genuine happiness in life. Miss Mills says:

> I think that women can do a great deal for each other, if they will only stop fearing what 'people will think,' and take a hearty interest in whatever is going to fit their sisters and themselves to deserve and enjoy the rights God gave them. There are so many ways in which this can be done, that I wonder they don't see and improve them. I don't ask you to go and make speeches, only a few have the gift for that, but I do want every girl and woman to feel this duty and make any little sacrifice of time or feeling that may be asked of them, because there is so much to do, and no one can do it as well as ourselves. (208)

Alcott's feminist background shines through the prose. Alcott herself worked as a seamstress, governess, teacher, nurse, housemaid, and author. She supported herself and remained a spinster

her whole life. In 1868 she cautioned young women with the following: "the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss.'" (quoted in Chambers-Schiller 10). Alcott reportedly stated she was certain she felt as happy with her decision to remain single as women who chose to marry (Israel).

Polly reflects these attitudes throughout *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. Female camaraderie eventually helps Polly realize that it's her choice to work instead of focusing on potential husbands. With the help of Miss Mills, Polly is brought into "a little sisterhood of busy, happy, independent girls, who each had a purpose to execute, a talent to develop, an ambition to achieve, and brought to the work patience and perseverance, hope and courage" (224). Polly fits into this community where women take care of each other, thrive in their independence, and seek something more than to serve as a wife or mother. In the enclave of teachers, artists, and writers, Polly finds solace many women sought in female networks. Alcott shows how the women's friendships transcend into their work as well and they rely on each other for feedback and creative help. Alcott asserts it is the group's "plans, ambitions, successes, and defeats" as well as their active lives that gives every member a reason to thrive (261). Alcott further insists American women's issues with restlessness, aimlessness, and illness are based in their distance from purpose (224). Through Polly and her industrious friends Alcott shows the benefit of work while using Fanny and her high-society cohort as examples of festering angst brought on by idleness.

An Old-Fashioned Girl also provides an example of the changing thoughts on close female friendships, marriage, and family structure in the 1860s. Bess and Becky, two members of Polly's sisterhood, are best friends and roommates. In an aside Fanny comments that all it would take is a man to end the women's friendly relationship. Polly tells her to observe Bess

and Becky while they lunched. Toward the end of the luncheon Polly asks when the two will dissolve their partnership to which Bess replies, "Never! George knows he can't have one without the other, and has not suggested such a thing as parting us" (262). Offering up an alternative to the atomized family unit, Alcott has Bess engaged to be married, and Becky joining them in their new home. This kind of alternative occurs safely within the sisterhood and decidedly bohemian lifestyles of artists and authors, and stands contrary to social expectations of marriage and family. George, though, has accepted the new arrangement and the bonds of sisterhood can continue. This family structure is not mocked by any of the other characters, although Fanny is mildly shocked; it is depicted as a new alternative to domesticity.

Although Polly spends most of her energy helping friends and family and working, she does get crushes and struggles to maintain her strong character in light of those feelings. Early on she exhibits mixed emotions toward Fanny's older brother, Tom. Later she entertains a mild flirtation with Mr. Sydney, one of Tom's good friends, but when she learns Fanny fancies him, she backs off. Polly doesn't receive offers from any men, and during a night at the opera Tom and Mr. Sydney teasingly grill Polly about why she is unattached. She insists she's not pining away, masking flirtations, or silently dying from unrequited love. That kind of reactionary, passive behavior runs counter to her personality. She tells the men that if she were struggling with those feelings, she would simply bear them because "Disappointment needn't make a woman a fool" (238). Tom, whose affection for Polly has also fluctuated throughout the story, quickly retorts "Nor an old maid, if she's pretty and good; remember that, and don't visit the sins of one blockhead on all the rest of mankind" (238). Tom's phrasing makes clear that old maids are not pretty and good like Polly.

Like Agnes Grey, Polly doesn't remain single at the end. She happily marries Tom Shaw. It would have been controversial if Polly clambered on a happy spinster, but the positive representation is not lost. Alcott leaves the youngest Shaw, Maud, unwed. In the conclusion, Maud is said to have "remained a busy, lively spinster all her days, and kept house for her father in the most delightful manner" (371). What sets *An Old-Fashioned Girl* and *Agnes Grey* apart from other stories published during the mid-1800s is that the female protagonists don't spend the bulk of the narrative trying to snare a husband. The female characters whose only hobbies are flirting, courting, and attending balls are presented as either vapid wastrels or duplicitous vipers. Whether dimwitted or malicious, Alcott and Brontë depict these young women as profoundly unhappy with only their small, self-propelled dramas to give them something to do. Both authors make clear that marriage should not be the only goal for a woman. Emphasizing marriage as women's only objective in life sets them up for unhappiness. After spending their youths training in skills for a temporary quest, women are left unsatisfied once achieving their objective - the rest of their lives are seemingly without purpose or direction. Alcott's and Brontë's solutions for a happy life are in work, family and friends, charity, and kindness.

Laura Willowes

Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes: Or the Loving Huntsman* was written in 1926, nearly 60 years after *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. Ambivalent depictions had tipped to the negative by this point. Happy, productive spinster characters were either replaced by the regretful, pitiful old maid or the mentally ill "vicious psycho-spinster" (Israel 144). All forms of female autonomy had been made suspect. Women were granted the right to vote in 1920, so the media declared feminists' work completed. Spinsters' participation in the suffrage movement

was used to make them seem antiquated; their purpose had been served, there was nothing left to complain about, and they were no longer necessary. Popular press presented strident female independence as old-fashioned – modern women didn't need what sisterhood or feminism had to offer. Susan Faludi highlights these backlash tactics after second-wave feminism as well. Many women internalized backlash messages and retreated back into the home – fewer women sought advanced education and marriage rates increased. According to Faludi, backlash is the most powerful when women self-police and collaborate in their own subjugation. Spinsters wrote memoirs and autobiographies attempting to contradict the stereotypes with their lived experiences, but there was not much of an audience and it was difficult to find a press (Franzen). Affirmative fictional accounts of spinsters were rarer. This is one reason Laura Willowes is such a fascinating character – she's brazenly critical of society's role in containing women. Sylvia Townsend Warner uses Laura to probe a spinsters' personal turmoil. She challenges the lifelong exploitation spinsters are put through by family, social limitations that clip women's potential, and the injustice of a life without freedom.

Warner begins the story with the death of 30-year old Laura Willowes's father. She is forced to move to Apsley Terrace with her brother, Henry, his wife, Caroline, and their children: Fancy, Marion, and Titus. Laura had spent her youth as her father's companion after her mother's death. Warner presents young Laura as a content spinster child as she assumes the role of female caretaker. Laura's father neglects to "socialize" Laura properly: she didn't attend school and never entered society. But all of this was perfectly fine with Laura; she loved her father's estate and solitude. Warner does note that Laura's isolation meant she was disastrous when it came to company. She hadn't learned to feign interest in polite conversation or different ways to entertain, which over time created a "deficiency" that made her "insensible to the duty of

every marriageable young woman to be charming" (26). Warner's third person prose, in Laura's thoughts as well as descriptive asides, is rife with cultural critique and sarcasm like this. Instead of coquetry or genteel manners, Laura learned rural traditions like brewing, healing plants, and sensitivity to the land. After her father's death, Laura is transplanted from her beloved country home, known as Lady Place, into the city with her brother's family. In another aside Warner stresses this was the way of the time and it never occurred to Laura or her family that there might be other paths for a single woman to take. Yet Warner also likens Laura's new position to that of an "inmate" or "a piece of property forgotten in the will," and further suggests the Willowes's adherence to social mores may have been the reason no one from the Willowes family had ever risen to success (3; 7; 22).

The book is divided into three main parts, each part representing a section of Laura Willowes's life and marked by changes in her name. As a girl, she is Laura to her family. When she is captive as a maiden aunt, the adults and children refer to her as Aunt Lolly. She doesn't care for the name Lolly, but since so much of her identity was lost in the move from country to city it seemed natural to lose her name as well. It is also during her many years at Apsley Terrace that her brother and sister-in-law attempt to push her into society. When suitors come to call they refer to her as Miss Willowes. Neither Lolly nor Miss Willowes captures how Laura thinks of herself, but "Laura was put away" during her tenure in Apsley Terrace (62). Her name, role, and responsibilities are no longer her choice and she is nothing beyond how others define her. When she comes across her full name, Laura Erminia Willowes, while witnessing a document her brother has drafted, the name "seemed much a thing out of common speech as the Spinster that followed it" (62). When Laura moves to Great Mop in the third part of the book, she practically becomes nameless. The townspeople are cordial enough, if not a little taciturn,

but Warner doesn't include any form of address. When Laura converses with the Devil he refers to her as Miss Willowes, but it is only in their two conversations she's ever called by name. Throughout the story Laura consistently thinks of herself as Laura, but it is in Great Mop, where her nameless presence announces her more than any name could, that she seems the most complete.

When living at Apsley Terrace her sister-in-law Caroline often reflects on Laura privately. She pities the "unused virgin," and although she did not necessarily attach value to her own wifehood and maternity since they were womanly duties, she does feel "emotionally plumper than Laura" (60). Warner uses Caroline's voice to paint a picture of normative gender performances. It gives Warner a chance to contrast what outsiders think of Laura with Laura's opinion of herself. Caroline sees Laura as an example of failed femininity, her womanly duties unfulfilled. When Caroline reflects on Laura, it is to weigh the burden of a maiden aunt against her usefulness in the house. Laura's presence is tolerated because she serves as an extra set of eyes and hands to take care of the children. Laura has her own set of interests, but she's not allowed to stray far from the family because they find her too useful. Warner takes the eager-to-serve old maid stereotype to task. In submitting to the family's needs and wants, Laura's go unnoticed and untended. She is not a complete person because her time and energy belong to everyone else. Laura submits to the work of Aunt Lolly, but privately despises the redundant facelessness to her life.

At the age of 47, Laura decides to leave Apsley Terrace and live on her own in a small village known as Great Mop. She gently breaks the news to her family; a scene where Warner further illuminates the novelty of Laura's wishes through her family's reactions. Initially in disbelief, they quickly deconstruct her grasp at liberty as a joke. Titus, now grown,

lightheartedly supports her decision, but Laura mistakes it for genuine interest. Her brother Henry, in the final jest of the evening, suggests she can finally get back to the land, hunt catnip, and become the village witch (98). His comment conjures familiar images of witchy women with knowledge of the land, alone save for their cats. Laura wholeheartedly agrees, though, believing this joke to be his approval for her plan to move. When she approaches Henry the next morning he's completely taken aback and they argue. She is dismayed and hurt when she realizes no one had taken her plans seriously. Over his objections she explains that his family no longer needs her with the children grown and the girls married, but he counters with the whole plan's impracticality. Laura retorts, "Nothing is impractical for a single, middle-aged woman with an income of her own" (104). He eventually yields and reroutes Laura's inheritance into her control, and Laura moves to Great Mop.

Great Mop is a small village where people keep to themselves and rarely go out of their way to speak to Laura. She lets a small room and does what she likes when she likes. Having a choice in her daily activities agrees with Laura and she finds herself hiking the countryside and returning to nature. She appreciates solitude and the space it gives her to think, and readers are allowed into her thoughtful meditations. This is completely different than peripheral old maid caricatures; Laura is a relatable main character with whom readers can identify. Warner humanizes the spinster character by making her inner monologue available. She inserts nuanced observations about the world as Laura ponders her life, people, and society. One day Laura thinks about the concept of forgiveness, specifically if she could forgive her brother and his family after the years of disregard and misery. Warner writes an interlude in which Laura debates the notion of whom to forgive because it is not entirely the family's fault. She realizes to even begin forgiving, she would have to forgive "Society, the Law, the Church, the History of

Europe, the Old Testament…the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen other useful props of civilization" (152). All are institutions of male privilege and hegemony. Living outside of society in Great Mop grants Laura the perspective to see that her family's individual actions are merely extensions of ideological institutions. It's futile to harbor any anger toward them since they are acting according to the tenets of "civility." She is at peace in this place where she can independently act without society bearing so hard on her interests and inclinations.

Peace goes out the window when nephew Titus decides to join her in Great Mop. He declares Great Mop a great place to write a book and settles in. Titus's presence puts Laura back in constraints she thought she had broken free from permanently. She doesn't want Aunt Lolly to return, in title or presumed responsibilities. His masculine presence ensured both those fears would be realized. Warner makes clear Titus is completely unaware he makes Laura feel miserable and powerless. This is comical alongside his actions because he treats Laura like a nursemaid, tour guide, and entertainer. His obliviousness comes from a place of unquestioned, infuriating male privilege. He plagues the space that Laura felt belonged to her alone. She experiences his stay in Great Mop like an invasion, usurpation, and assassination of her liberty.

Warner carefully plots Laura's internal resentment toward her nephew. One day while walking together Titus declares his love for the countryside and Laura is revolted. Laura finds Titus's love to be a familiar/unfamiliar horror because "It was different in kind from hers. It was comfortable, it was portable, it was a reasonable appreciative appetite, a possessive and masculine love…He loved the countryside as though it were a body" (162). The more admiration Titus demonstrations for Great Mop, the more Laura feels estranged from it. In examining love as a gendered experience, Warner underlines Laura's love as a perception, a

feeling, an affectual relationship. Titus's love, on the other hand, is simply an appreciation of the landscape limited to the beauty he sees with his eyes and the land his hands can take. Laura feels his way of loving the land imposed upon her and it changes the way she connects to the whole of nature in her newfound haven.

The pinnacle of Warner's critique occurs when Laura is overcome with anxiety; she realizes if Titus stays, she will be forever trapped as Aunt Lolly. In a panic, she starts walking and seethes over her life. She feels cheated by the momentary freedom of Great Mop. More than that, Laura does not know if she is capable of submerging her own interests in favor of others' once again. This is her womanly duty, but what does that make Laura if she cannot perform? And if she was not a woman, what was she? Alone and boxed in by woods with darkness creeping in, Laura, practically suffocating from her situation, pleads for help. She claps her hands and cries, "No! You shan't get me. I won't go back. I won't….Oh! Is there no help?" (167). She is physically, emotionally, and spiritually ensnared, and her terror is palpable. Warner's commentary alongside Laura's experiences places the blame on society. Framing Laura's life within the context of social mores, expectations for womanhood, and culturally reproduced stereotypes makes her the victim of circumstances. How can one woman fight against these enormous, invisible institutions? This scene makes clear the return of Aunt Lolly, and all that the name implies, will kill Laura Willowes.

After pleading to the darkness and begging for help, Laura feels significance in the silence and understands she may have made a pledge with whatever inhabits the land. She returns home to find a small black kitten has made its way into her room. She doesn't like cats, but the feisty little creature makes her smile. As she moves to pet it, the kitten rolls over biting and scratching her hand. It gives her a lick and then falls asleep. Laura instinctively knows

"She, Laura Willowes, in England, in the year 1922 had entered into a compact with the Devil" (172). The deal was sealed through the blood her familiar kitten had drawn and sucked from her hand. Laura's unquestioning acceptance of this situation is somewhat laughable, but Warner builds relief into her pact with the Devil. After Laura's near implosion in the woods, the Devil is seen as a better alternative than the return of Aunt Lolly. Laura is excited for her life as a witch with the kitten she names Vinegar.

She takes solace knowing she need not fear Titus, her family, or society. They could not drive her out, or enslave her spirit any more, nor shake her possession of the place she had chosen. Laura is confident the Devil will remove Titus from Great Mop, which he does through a series of mild, but unfortunate events and a new love affair. Later thinking through the situation, Laura argues to herself that the Devil is the only person who would come to her aid and answer her plea. Warner again points out "Custom, public opinion, law, church, and state – all would have shaken their massive heads against her plea, and sent her back to bondage," but the Devil had freed her (223). Through Laura, Warner demonstrates how spinsterhood could serve as a desirable alternative for some women. Lifelong singleness is not a kind of bondage; rather ideological institutions, repressive state apparatuses, and social expectations around spinsterhood are what make spinsters slaves to everyone and everything but their own desires.

Eventually, the Devil, who is the Loving Huntsman from the title, visits Laura and they discuss what had happened. He wants Laura to state in her own words how she understands this situation, his role, and the nature of witchcraft. She explains that she sees him as a knight who rescues gentlewomen. Witches need him because "Women have such vivid imaginations, and lead such dull lives. Their pleasure in life is so soon over; they are so dependent upon others, and their dependence so soon becomes a nuisance" (238). She further suggests becoming a

witch gives older women a place to exist in a society that disregards them. Echoing Alcott's and Brontë's critiques, feminine wiles are practiced for the short-lived quest to find a husband, and often it's all women are ever praised for. Once the husband hunt is over, women's lives are awash with purposelessness. Regardless if she captures a husband or remains single, the pressure to maintain social expectations of femininity continues into old age when she is considered insignificant. The performance never stops. Laura feels Satan pursues spinster's forgotten souls even after their bodies are deemed undesirable by society. She recognizes religion may fill this void for some women, but for others:

> What can there be but witchcraft? That strikes them real. Even if other people still find them quite safe and usual, and go on poking with them, they know in their hearts how dangerous, how incalculable, how extraordinary they are. Even if they never do anything with their witchcraft, they know it's there – ready! (241)

The means to exert one's subject position offers these so-called witches private knowledge of personal power. Laura suggests becoming a witch provides alternatives for women unavailable through any other outlet. Witchcraft is not something typically sought in malice, rather a means to satisfy the adventuress nature most women are forced to repress and a way to actively rebuild the small and dwindling spaces allotted for them. She tells the Devil, "It's to escape all that – to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others" (243).

Warner uses Laura's life to illuminate the conflicting conditions spinsters existed under during the early 20th century. As a woman with a modest means from her father's inheritance and relatively few constraints on her lifestyle, Laura is seemingly free to do anything. But Warner consistently boxes Laura into a life devoid of her own interests or personality as family, social obligation, and ideological expectations undermine her freedom. Laura becomes acutely

aware of the double bind while in Great Mop because she'd forcibly removed herself from the so-called comforts of family. It is from this place she can analyze the conditions that simultaneously created and negated opportunities available to her. Warner makes clear nothing was in Laura's control, nor was it in the control of her family; everyone fulfilled their social roles and met the expectations society dictated.

Conclusion

The years between the mid-1800s and 1930 were rife with cultural tension. Brought on by women's progress, these years were made up of equal parts exciting potential and fear of social meltdown. New attitudes toward women's education, enfranchisement, and financial independence knocked normative gender expectations into a tailspin, especially masculinity. Spinsters came to symbolize the power of autonomous females, and ambivalent representation reflected the anxieties surrounding changes in women's roles. Although never completely safe, spinsterhood was viewed as an acceptable alternative to marriage and domesticity. For a time, though, ambivalence created an environment where women could see a range of possibilities and imagine themselves stepping into alternative roles. Agnes Grey, Polly Milton, and the positive spinster stories from *Ladies Home Journal* show the kind of tentative, exploratory acceptance of women's autonomy. Laura Willowes, on the other hand, is a spinster character on the other side: defending her right to exist.

Contradictions are always present when representing authentic people, places, and ideas. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall illuminated, popular culture is an important battlefield in the fight over hegemonic consent and resistance. Ambivalent representations of spinsters demonstrate the back-and-forth negotiation between empowerment and containment. When dominant ideologies

were unable to co-opt it, spinsterhood had to be marginalized and ridiculed in order to thwart alternatives that threatened patriarchy. As women's autonomy came under fire, the symbol was turned on its head. Instead of strong, ambitious heroines, spinsters were depicted as subversive, immature, bitter, undesirable, lost, and possibly mentally ill. Independence even signaled that the spinster in question might not be a woman at all. Changes in attitudes about sex in the early 20th century warped spinster's (assumed) abstinence into sexual peculiarity. Coinciding with news reports, medical studies, and anti-feminist pamphlets produced in the late-1800s and early-1900s, representations of a celibate life and presumably celibate spinsters began to symbolize feminine failure. This carries through to today; cat lady characters have issues with intimacy and are either asexual or suffering from some kind of sexual dysfunction.

Pathologization and bad press were ways of bullying women into conformity…and it worked. The reported number of spinsters steeply declined through the 1920s. By the 1930s universities were referred to as "spinster factories" (Israel 161). In terms of career, education, and personal opportunities, life was better for women at the end of the 19th century than it was during the mid-20th century. Between 1910 and 1930 more American women had careers as professors and nurses than in 1950 (Chambers-Schiller). One in five women attended graduate school in 1915 compared to one in ten in 1950 (Rosenthal). Women had been compelled to marry, have babies, and focus on their family's needs. But World War II meant women were needed back in the public sphere. Jobs needed to be filled while men were off at war, and the women who were best able to help were single. Back-peddling on the backlash, it became glorious and patriotic to be single again. Newspapers, newsreels, and magazines boosted the single woman's profile. Women were strong *and* capable! And when war was over, the men returned and women needed to be guided back into the home again, so the media helped out with

that transition as well. Reports on women's health said women were the stronger sex in 1948. They'd stepped up, effectively performing men's jobs, maintaining the home, and helping the war effort. But here's the twist – instead of women's success or national victory, the story cautioned that the stronger sex would end up alone because women live longer (Israel 165). This example demonstrates that the same old single woman backlash was back, ushering in a new era of conformity following a period of gender confusion.

The term "spinster" slowly faded after the 1950s, yet spinster representation remained consistent in novels, magazines, films, and cartoons. Some scholars believe the spinster character went extinct during the 1980s. She ceased to resonate with audiences, so message-makers retired the icon. Activist and scholar Sheila Jeffreys argues that the cultural threat spinsters posed had subsided by the 1985 publication of her book (87). Patriarchy had been successfully maintained when women returned to the home. No longer a national crisis, there was no need to beat a dead spinster horse. American Studies scholar Naomi Braun Rosenthal also finds spinsters and old maids anachronistic in American pop culture after the year 2000. She claims the character lost its symbolic impact and fell out of use as stereotypical shorthand (6). But I am arguing that, like a phoenix, the spinster has been born again as the cat lady. Spinster iconography served as the basic template, but new modifications reveal a caricature better suited for postmodern women. The cat lady picks up where spinsters left off, still maintaining traditional gender roles. Work and fertility, Susan Faludi's arrows of backlash, are still what propels the tilted corkscrew of women's progress, and cat ladies are part of the containment strategy. As the following two chapters elaborate, cat ladies continue to address social anxieties about womanhood at the turn of the 21st century.

CHAPTER THREE.

ELEANOR ABERNATHY AND ANGELA MARTIN:

CAT LADIES AS POSTFEMINIST SPINSTERS

At the end of the 20th century Western culture was in the wake of second-wave feminism, and another so-called "new woman" needed to be addressed. The "new woman" of the 1980s and 90s was pursuing a college education, exploring career possibilities, and taking advantage of all the benefits feminists had been fighting for…not unlike the "new woman" at the beginning of the 20th century. And also not unlike the early 20th century, there were considerable growing pains as women navigated new personal opportunities around the persistent social expectations of gender. Backlash surrounding women's advancement was nothing new as we've seen in the previous chapter, but the 1970s saw enormous gains for women's independence especially in the arenas of their enfranchisement, finances, and fertility (Faludi). New opportunities impacted women's life cycles then and now: marriage is put off in order to further a career, cohabitation continues to rise, and easier access to birth control allows women to postpone having children. Some studies report it has become more common for women not to marry or have children (Taylor). The new woman's life inherently challenges traditional gender norms and patriarchal values. Considering these changes, it is no surprise that the cat lady has become particularly salient at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. The old harbingers of womanhood – marriage, children, and domesticity – no longer look the same, and the cat lady embodies anxieties surrounding the changes in women's lives. The cat lady character reminds female

viewers if they stray too far from gendered social expectations, they'll become laughable, pitiable, or possibly monstrous.

Postfeminism and Femininity

To fully understand why such an old stock character has been resurrected to address modern anxieties we have to look closer at the cultural moment. But to address the postfeminist zeitgeist of the 1990s and 2000s requires looking at 1980s backlash. Second-wave backlash primed a generation of audiences about feminism and "modern" gender roles. As discussed in the last chapter, backlashes have always accompanied any perceived gains made in women's lives. In her tremendously important book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, journalist Susan Faludi examines the media's role in creating such a caustic environment for women. News reports, magazines, TV, and film in the 1970s applauded the new "new woman" and encouraged women to embrace the opportunities brought on by second-wave feminism. 1980s media, on the other hand, was characterized by the exact opposite: women's liberation has enslaved them and women's unhappiness is the result of their freedom. News media and pop psychology bestsellers shamed women's choices, namely postponing marriage for personal, educational, or professional pursuits, and "diagnosed" their decision-making as functional disorders. Faludi charges that women's continued "influx" into the job market is the reason for ongoing "antifeminist furor" (53). Single women, childless women, and career women frequently found themselves in the cross-hairs.

Faludi's research highlights the similarities between 1980s and 1900s backlash arguments. The following are backlash threats the 1980s and 1900s have in common: feminism has destroyed women's happiness; education turns women into spinsters; employment distances

women from their natural, feminine path; new opportunities for women are creating new medical conditions impacting women's health (particularly their fertility); women are making all the wrong choices because they were tricked by feminism and women's rights; society's future hangs in the balance because women aren't reproducing enough; and on and on. It's the same old threats recycled to address the same old anxieties about women's progress.

Popular culture continues to be the place where struggles over femininity, gender roles, and social expectations are reflected and negotiated. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Victorian era proved mass media and marketing to be the most "effective devices for constraining women's aspirations" because they "rule with the club of conformity….and claim to speak for female public opinion" (Faludi 48). Throughout the 20th century magazine writers, clergymen, scholars, doctors, and popular novels, film, and TV helped turn feminists into villains and feminism into a bad word. For Faludi the moment women internalize backlash thinking and begin hearing that backwards logic in their minds is when the backlash has won. Women self-police according to backlash rules and logic – shame and reproach – which now seem to come from within (455). Writing almost two decades later, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie builds on Faludi's concept of backlash focusing specifically on the ways power, enforcement, and containment are replaced by new, individualized pressures to conform in the postfeminist era.

In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* McRobbie argues that by the last two decades of the 20th century feminism itself had been incorporated into Western political and institutional life. Messages from the front lines of the Women's Liberation Movement including reproductive rights, legal inequalities, sexism in the workplace, sexuality, family, and validating women's unique experiences had been "taken into account" (14). The mass media addressed these issues in fiction and nonfiction contexts. Business practices across

the board had been impacted thanks to the efforts of second-wave feminists. Feminism could not be ignored; it was in the wider discourse. This is not to say there weren't negative portrayals of feminists; rather the changes brought on by second-wave feminism had become part of the cultural fabric. Feminism and feminist messages were accounted for in the popular culture lexicon.

Just because it was accounted for, McRobbie hazards, does not mean popular representations addressed feminism's complex and diverse nature. To the contrary, feminism's many branches were reduced to liberal feminism. Liberal feminism predominantly focuses on equality between women and men. Change is pursued through legal, political, and institutional reform and deals with individuals' rights in the public sphere (Beasley). This kind of feminism prioritizes personal autonomy. Individuals are viewed as masters or mistresses of their own fate (Mann). Rather than enacting revolutionary forms of change, liberal feminism works within the system and puts trust in government intervention. Since it works within the system to create change, liberal feminism reinforces the existing confines of patriarchal capitalism in modern Western society. Issues like systemic inequalities and complex, intersectional identities are not addressed in this kind of moderate feminism.

There were two major impacts that mainstream liberal feminism had on perceptions and representations of feminism and feminists. First, by consolidating different kinds of feminism into a singular, concrete definition, feminism was stripped of its intricacies. Part of feminism's power[1] lay in its diversity; McRobbie points out that feminism's definition shifts depending on the feminist defining it, which is empowering on an individual level and encourages collaborative discourse. This kind of feminism is organic, local, and extremely useful in critiquing social norms, examining traditional notions of gender, and exploring intersectionality.

The 1960s and 70s proved that feminism's regenerative, self-reflexive nature posed a huge threat to institutions established on or benefitting from patriarchal power and gender hierarchies (McRobbie; Faludi; Mann). Popular culture's rapid inclusion of liberal feminism is an example of hegemonic incorporation: it acknowledged the tip of the iceberg – gender equality in terms of education and career, personal choice, and sexual empowerment – while ignoring the historical and social implications of patriarchal capitalism. Granted, the media's coverage of the women's movement still improved many women's lives, but the capitalistic power structures and patriarchal systems framing centuries of inequality remained in place and for the most part undisturbed. This is leads to the second impact of mainstreaming liberal feminism: the myth of postfeminism.

With the media adopting feminist language and federal policies acknowledging the Women's Movement's most liberal objectives, feminism was reframed in popular culture. In the mythology of postfeminism women no longer need to fight for equality and feminism is obsolete (McRobbie; Tasker and Negra). Representing feminism in this way reduced it to a closed chapter in history. Media scholars Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra succinctly state: "Postfeminist culture involves an evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular, even as aspects of feminism seem to be incorporated within that culture" (5). Feminism is relegated to three main areas in postfeminist mythology: educational and professional opportunities available to women and girls, freedom of choice in terms of personal lifestyle (i.e. work, domesticity, parenting, etc.), and sexual empowerment (Tasker and Negra). Feminism is now understood as an outdated notion, along with feminists who are frequently depicted as old, shrill, angry anachronisms (McRobbie; Tasker and Negra; Faludi). It is a process of "vilification and negation" making feminism "unpalatable" to younger generations (McRobbie 1). In its place

new faux-feminisms produced by agencies of the state are substituted for the supposedly outmoded version of feminism and circulated in media and popular culture.

So the cultural moment during the late 1990s and 2000s is mired in postfeminist mythology, informed by second-wave backlash, and still dealing with social anxieties. Women's enfranchisement, financial stability, reproductive control, and changing life cycles further destabilized gender roles. This partly explains why the cat lady has been yanked from the periphery and into the limelight: she embodies those anxieties. Single, childless, and independent, the cat lady could be an exemplary "new woman," but instead she is framed as silly or pathetic. She is never empowered and doesn't choose to become a cat lady. All single female characters undergo a degree of this treatment. Feminist cultural critic Anthea Taylor connects the ways modern media rankle with single women to its overall treatment of Western feminism: full of tension and contradictions. In *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism* she argues that single women in popular culture are "allowed, endorsed, even celebrated; yet simultaneously disavowed as that which must be pitied, scorned, and emptied of her oppositional potential" (13, emphasis in original). Sound familiar? It's the same containment strategy spinsters underwent over 100 years ago. Taylor posits that the postfeminist new woman at the end of the 20th century appears empowered, but her threat to dominant hetero-patriarchal ways is controlled. The resulting single-women characters are ambivalent representations, with their independence permitted yet criticized. Singleness is tolerated in a female character as long as her narrative drive is actively working to become part of a couple.

The majority of Americans now spend more time single than they do married (DePaulo *Singled Out*). This statistic applies to both men and women. Yet in the media singleness is still characterized as the temporary, transitional state between childhood and adulthood. To

compensate for women's prolonged singleness new names like "freemale," and "Singleton" became the new designations for the time in a woman's life between adolescence and marriage during the late 1990s and early 00s. The names attempted to capture the nature of the new "new woman" who works, has sex, is financially independent, and confident in her position. But these names were riddled with the same old conflicting traits, attitudes, and myths connected to independent single women. Like spinsters at the beginning of the 20th century, single career women, no matter what you call them, are still emblematic of social upheavals, transitioning intimate relationships, and decentered gendered subjectivities (Taylor).

Singletons and freemales embrace postfeminist femininity. Distancing themselves from identity politics, they "come forward" as consumers able to buy whatever persona they choose (McRobbie 9). They are fine with being girly. This is actually encouraged in the postfeminist mythology: until a woman's relationship status moves from single to couple she is encouraged to remain a girl, or, at least, act girlish. Some theorists suggest that the media's representation of middle-aged girlishness combined with career mindedness and interpersonal conflict is a new backlash tactic (Taylor; Israel; McRobbie). It makes independent, strong, enfranchised women seem like they are faltering on the path to heterosexual partnerships which are still the gold standard for womanhood.

This paradoxical extension of girlhood has been explored across media. Although critics disagree on the overall implications, HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), FOX's *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), and NBC's *Friends* (1994-2004) are often cited as cultural texts that dealt with the troublesome single woman in her 20s, 30s, and 40s (Johnson; Taylor). The characters' singleness is often celebrated on the programs, but the overarching impetus for every plot is still establishing a heterosexual connection and, ideally, a relationship. These programs along with

many other postfeminist media texts play with the conflicts between independence and companionship. Plots featuring single women on television, in film, and in literature consistently focus on undoing that defining element of singleness by snaring a mate. The existence of these single characters is contingent on their desire to be otherwise; the woman must always be improving herself for a relationship (Taylor; Wearing; McRobbie). It is no accident that this single woman trope and her predictable story arc to coupledom are repetitively drummed into audiences – it exemplifies the process of maintaining patriarchal capitalism, asserting gender hierarchy, and re-securing heterosexual desire.

Specifically, marriage is emblemized as the result of successfully maintaining those social norms. Social psychologist Bella DePaulo sees the media's continuous drone of marriage mythology as "mental blanketing" (13). Marriage is portrayed as the ultimate goal, the series finale, the last magical ritual able to change a person. According to the mythology it "transforms the immature single person into a mature spouse…creates a sense of commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness where there was none before. It is the one true place where intimacy and loyalty can be nurtured and sustained" (DePaulo 13). Every other affectionate relationship comes after marriage. The most seductive angle played up is the idea that marriage will deliver the thing so many people struggle to have for themselves but can't buy: happiness. But promulgating the myth is hard work and it requires constant upkeep of two major ideas. DePaulo succinctly states:

> On the side of singlism, every sliver of the single life that might prove validating or rewarding must be diminished or dismissed. On the side of matrimania, marriage must be unstintingly extolled so that it maintains its mythical place as a magical and transforming experience. (13)

In order to accomplish the former, single female characters are used to offset coupled characters in postfeminist popular culture providing the juxtaposition of the other "against whom 'normal' (i.e. coupled) women are discursively constituted and brought into being as particular gendered and sexed subjects" (Taylor 20). These representations are frequently inserted into narratives to show a distinct comparison between successful womanhood and failures of femininity. Singleness is never the route to happiness. Since marriage is framed as the only solution to loneliness, singleness, then, can only be lonely – and lonely is not happy. Maintaining patriarchal capitalism requires that singleness *not* be seen as an option. It cannot look like a desirable position women seek out for themselves; singleness must appear to be the undignified result of a woman's unavoidable incompetence or personal misstep.

This all boils down to the discourse surrounding women and girl's freedom of choice. In postfeminist mythology all women are presumed to start their lives independent and free to create whatever life they choose. Education, career, relationships, and other milestones are equally available to everyone; it is up to women make the right choices in order to live the "good" life. The so-called "right to choose" connects back to feminism and the act of choosing becomes a feminist act in postfeminist rhetoric (McRobbie 66). Despite popular culture repeatedly assuring women they are free to choose whatever lifestyle they fancy, choice itself works as a modality of constraint. Women are pressured to choose "correctly." The responsibility is solely the individual's and, as McRobbie states, "The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices" (19). The push to self-police is stronger than in the past, but the laws being upheld are still dictated and reinforced through popular culture in women's magazines, the fashion and beauty industries, and visual media like television and film. McRobbie refers to the so-called "new" system as a "horizon of *self-*

imposed feminine cultural norms" (63, emphasis mine). As Tasker and Negra and others have pointed out, the sets of available choices have been manipulated; all of the choices available to women in the postfeminist era fit within consumption and patriarchal capitalism. Women's subjecthood is contingent on their ability to consume and the individual choices they make to construct their lives.

The illusion of choice is one place where postfeminist mythology connects to old patriarchal models of control. While the old patriarchal model relied on male reprisal to keep women in their place, women keep themselves in place by self-policing in the postfeminist era. Susan Faludi noticed this shift in the 1980s. Whereas marketing during the Victorian era told women femininity was what they wanted, liberated woman after the second-wave choose femininity. Media like women's magazines, the fashion and beauty industries, and television and film subtly encourage women to choose to maintain boundaries of normativity. Internalizing new norms of contemporary femininity and proper expectations for womanhood means women at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st must plan their lives in order to take advantage of the new opportunities provided by second-wave feminism. "Having it all" means climbing the corporate ladder[2] as well as taking steps to secure and sustain a relationship. McRobbie asserts that a well-planned life is a new social expectation of contemporary femininity. She further suggests women who "misstep" in their planning are seen as flawed or deficient. To misstep signifies some kind of pathology signaling "failure or a symptom of some other personal difficulties" (77). This manifests in cat lady characters; they are either responsible for their singleness or they are written off as mentally or physically incapable of making the right lifestyle choices.

Cat lady characters are defined by the ways they became cat ladies. Locating reasons for their singleness proscribes any notion of empowerment. Across genres there are three cat lady roots: deficiency, compulsion, or choice. These are not isolated causes; often roots are blended together to completely strip the cat lady of any agency. As the term deficiency suggests, the individual is lacking something. The woman is a victim to some kind of physical, emotional, or personality defect leaving her unwillingly single. She's rejected by men because she is ugly, unlikeable, unstable, or possibly all of the above. The cat lady has no choice but to have a relationship with her cat because she is deemed undesirable. If the character is an unmarried older woman, she may be marked deficient by her lifetime of singleness.

The second root for a cat lady's singleness, compulsion, suggests a misunderstanding of the normative human-animal hierarchy. Their affection for companion animals instead of people companions makes it seem like they have a skewed perception of animal-human relationships. Cat ladies have overstepped the "natural" parameters between humans and animals, which indicates something about the character's mental faculties. She might be suffering from a minor mental imbalance like social anxiety; she could be a hoarder who collects cats[1]; or she might be completely crazy. This link to mental or emotional disorder connects compulsion to deficiency. There is not an exact science connecting cat lady representations to potential mental illnesses. Suffice to say compulsively collecting cats implies that the single woman is unstable, out of control, and unable to comply with socially accepted norms.

The final root for a woman's singleness, choice, is more complicated than it sounds. As discussed above, the act of choosing singleness is itself construed as impossible. Media narratives reinforce this implausibility by consistently undermining the transgressive potential in

[1] The following chapter will further examine the ways in which reality television presents hoarding, focusing specifically on women and cats.

choosing to be single. The choice to not couple up, not get married, and not have children rejects patriarchal expectations, challenges gender roles, and calls the institution of marriage into question. But in the media cat ladies are rarely presented as active agents seeking alternatives to domesticity. Instead they are consistently painted as victims who "default" to singlehood. A woman never chooses to be single; she chose incorrectly and her singleness is either construed as an accident or the punishment for this mistake. These options are two sides of the same coin with varying degrees of caution and pity or reproach and derision. There are a number of scenarios in which choice is dismantled in the media.

For instance, one single woman portrayal might look like this: a woman chooses to pursue a career instead of focusing her efforts on finding a man. She has chosen wrong because she has thrown away her most marriageable years. Later in life, she will have no choice but to find solace in animal companions because no man will want her: she is old, presumably unattractive, and her body is no longer fit for reproduction. She does not choose singleness; it is an unwanted, undesirable result of her other life choices. Or, to put it in McRobbie's terms, she did not plan her life well enough.

A similar scenario related to choosing a career is the idea that working women are different from domestically inclined women. Either their DNA is different from regular women (hence their unprecedented success in the business world) or their success in higher education and the workplace has changed them. Regardless of why they're different, working women no longer appreciate the average man (Taylor; Faludi). Singleness becomes a regrettable side effect of high achieving women because education and experience leads to higher expectations. The critique shifts blame to women for their pickiness and high standards. Not unlike the diagnoses of frigidness and hysteria in the early 1900s, women's rising standards are sometimes framed as

a "sickness" or something women need to keep in check. This argument plays out in narratives across media, but self-help books, popular nonfiction, and popular journalism serve as particular purveyors of this rhetoric.

A different scenario involves underlining that single people made the wrong choice and singleness is their punishment. This tactic can be applied to single women and men. Although it has existed for centuries, the idea of "having it all" means *not* being single. This idea is especially salient in our current moment. In order to have it all you need to be half of a couple and have more than just yourself. If someone did choose to *not* have it all, then they chose wrong and deserve to be punished. Single people in this scenario do not deserve any of the rewards married people do because they chose wrong. Social psychologist Bella DePaulo describes a tit-for-tat marital mythology in which people who have found a mate are thought to have worked towards that goal. Presumably, these individuals made it their *job* to get and sustain a relationship. In this meritocratic understanding of companionship marriage and all the perks that come with it is the reward. The "perks" DePaulo refers to are the privileges given to married people in the federal tax structure, health insurance, Social Security, and advantages in the workplace. So if you "chose" to be single, you chose to focus on things other than partnering up. Ipso facto, you do not deserve any of the rewards connected to marriage in the United States. Choice here is still a zero-sum game.

Choosing singleness is tantamount to choosing loneliness, misery, and an unfulfilled life. It is up to women to choose correctly (marriage and family) and plan their lives accordingly. A woman who prioritizes romantic relationships over other life goals and takes steps to secure a mate exemplifies a modern woman successfully performing femininity. On the other hand, the single woman who "does not object to or fear her own singleness…embodies a glitch in this

postfeminist representational economy" (Taylor 17). The glitch is corrected by dismantling the notion of choice. So when digging into cat lady roots choice is always rerouted in the text in order to make their singleness the result of other choices or it is linked to compulsion and deficiency. Cat ladies are never shown as agents acting of their own volition. Reducing single women and cat ladies specifically to compulsive, deficient, or unwise decision-makers puts them outside ideological and social norms.

Case Studies: Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin

While there are a number of isolated cat lady examples available, I have chosen to focus specifically on two cat ladies, Eleanor Abernathy from *The Simpsons* (voiced by Tress MacNeille) and Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) from *The Office*. Both of these cat ladies are part of ensemble TV sitcoms on network channels, FOX and NBC respectively. Unlike film where characters are represented for a few hours on screen, television provides a unique arena where cat ladies could recur over several years. As far as I have found, Eleanor and Angela are the only two recurring cat ladies. Outside of reality TV, which focuses on hoarding and tends to depict cat ladies as sick individuals in need of personal intervention, most cat ladies on television exist as punch lines in jokes or comedic fringe characters in one-time fringe narrative references. The cat lady trope is familiar iconography suited for one-liners or brief interludes of humor. Eleanor and Angela, on the other hand, are longstanding characters who have had years to develop, and because they recur they have had weekly opportunities to challenge stereotypes. Instead, the characters demonstrate the ways narrative, mise-en-scène, and formal elements work to undo possibilities for empowerment, reassert traditional gender roles, and maintain patriarchal systems. Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin show how minor characters in the cultural

imaginary can be strategically employed to contain opportunities and alternatives available to women.

The rest of the chapter is broken up into two parts. The first looks at genre and format. *The Simpsons* and *The Office* are two very different shows and Eleanor and Angela help drive the plot in different ways. The programs' structures set up specific kinds of comedy and affect the ways characters can be viewed. The second part is an in-depth analysis of Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin: examining the ways they are employed in narratives, breaking down how their cat lady-ness is created and what it brings out in other characters; and tracking the root causes used to other them. I look closely at Eleanor and Angela's storylines to find locations where deficiency, compulsion, and choice are written into the script and narrative.

Comedic Contexts: How Genre and Form Construct Comedy

Although *The Simpsons* and *The Office* vary in visual form and comedy styling, both are primetime half-hour situation comedies airing on network television. Both *The Simpsons* and *The Office* are self-aware texts; creators often play with the limits of the form by having characters break the third wall, leaving some narrative threads unresolved, and including intertextual references. Frequently characters will refer to current events or the plot will mimic a news story allowing it to play out in the smaller worlds of animated Springfield and the office of Dunder-Mifflin. Additionally, characters discuss popular culture trends in music, literature, film, television, online gaming, toys, viral videos, and celebrities. Neither program employs a laugh track. This is noteworthy because pre-recorded audience reactions insert authoritative control over when and at what producers believe audiences should laugh (Gray). Without a laugh track viewers have more freedom to read situations, dialogue, and actions as points of comedy.

In addition to fitting into the genre of television sitcom, *The Simpsons* and *The Office* are both hybrid texts. Blending the generic conventions of sitcom with animation in *The Simpsons* and documentary-style filming in *The Office* creates different opportunities for comedy unavailable to strict genre programs. As genres continue to borrow elements and blend together, texts must be considered in their historical, temporal, and varying contextual elements, particularly when genres come together to form something new (Mittell "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory"). Blended genres produce new contexts for familiar subject matter. A clear grasp of the ways mixed genres interact with the narratives on *The Simpsons* and *The Office* provides an avenue for understanding how comedy is constructed on the shows. Analyzing the programs' genres and formal elements (i.e. camera angles, character proximity, shot type, mise-en-scène, etc.) helps diagram how cat ladies Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin are positioned as the butts of jokes, the comically juxtaposed 'Other,' and, occasionally, pitiful side plots.

Sitcoms typically rely on realism as part of their framework and the humor employed must work within this frame. Audiences need to find verisimilitude, or plausibility, in the fictional program's version of reality, yet also require distance from reality so comedy can occur. Genre conventions and narrative framing typically provide that distance and set the comedic tone, usually through visual form (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 31). For the most part *The Simpsons* relies on traditional sitcoms' formal elements as well as narrative focus to create verisimilitude. Plots often examine every day American life, parody contemporary pop culture, and address national as well as global current events. While these characteristics are typical of sitcoms, animation on *The Simpsons* breaks down the traditional limits of unanimated texts; it allows for comedic violence too graphic for live-action, impossible visual gags, camera techniques that call

attention to the visual limitations of photorealism, and ensures audiences have enough distance for the comedy to occur (Knox; Mittell). In his early work on genre analysis, hybrid form, and *The Simpsons*, media scholar Jason Mittell argues that in an animated series "writers can heap indignities and trauma upon characters without making audiences feel bad for them" (22). While *The Simpsons* does not employ *Looney Tunes* antics like heart-shaped eyes to signify romantic feelings or anvils falling on characters' heads, audiences can still laugh at cartoonish gags like cats playing with Eleanor's detached eyeballs because she is not real. Audiences know that physical injuries, public shame, and personal crises will either be solved by the show's conclusion or forgotten by the next episode.

The visual form of *The Office* goes completely in the other direction: simulated hyper realism. The mockumentary genre[3] blends the format of non-fiction filmmaking with a fictional narrative to create a different kind of comedy vérité (Kocela). Cinéma vérité techniques like hand-held camera work or obscured shots to suggest the filmmakers are hidden and following and filming subjects in their "natural habitat" make scripted, fictional programs like *The Office* seem more realistic. Occasionally shots will be through windows, framed through doors, and the camera work might be shaky to simulate "realness." Other documentary techniques are employed to the same effect: archival or security footage; talking heads; switching between diegetic and non-diegetic sound as characters' dialogue is juxtaposed against footage taken from another time; and eliminating the laugh track. Mockumentaries do not just mimic the formal elements of documentary or factual filmmaking; they employ these aesthetics to form a larger critique about objectivity (Mills, "Contemporary Sitcom ('Cinema Vérité')" 89). This intent makes the blended genre different from traditional sitcoms because mockumentaries are telling the same stories from an angle that also critiques the generic form.

In order to achieve the distance required for comedy to occur *The Office* relies on editing. In particular, cross-cutting between a talking head and observational-style "footage" draws attention to disparities between characters' private opinions and their external actions. "Talking heads" are scenes and footage compiled from character interviews that occurred separate from their colleagues. The interviews are usually conducted in the conference room with a single character and the unseen documentary crew. These talking heads are edited so the interviewers' questions are unheard and the character seems to be speaking candidly and unprovoked. The interviewee typically sits in front of a blank wall or against an internal window with a view into the rest of the office. Depending on the subject being discussed, the framing might include more of the office in the background and the blinds will either be open or shut. This layout builds additional comedy as characters either unknowingly move in and out of frame or attempt to look in or overhear the private conversation. Often those characters are the subject of the interview. Typically, in talking heads the camera frames the interviewee in a medium close-up or close-up. The camera's closeness creates a more personal moment with that character, which often reflects the more sensitive, private information being shared. The assumption, at least on the part of the interviewee, is that whatever information is shared in the interview will not be seen or heard by any of the other office employees. Contrasting to the talking heads are the scenes of "footage" they are edited alongside. Unlike the close nature of an interview, footage on *The Office* is usually pulled further back in long shots or medium long shots. This creates the illusion of a documentary film crew stepping back to observe subjects in their natural habitat. It is a hallmark of documentary-style filmmaking, and when used here in a scripted television format it highlights characters' personal attitudes, corporality, and relationship with the rest of the office.

Characters behave and act differently when the camera crew is further away and they believe they are not being observed.

When talking heads and footage are edited together it often reveals the inconsistency between characters' personal thoughts and their subsequent actions. It highlights the methods of self-censorship characters use in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings or making a situation awkward. This rupture between thought and action is comical because the audience is privy to the characters' true feelings and then witnesses whatever politically correct or socially expected lie characters use to keep things civil (Kocela). This is true for every character *except* Angela. Angela frequently shares how she feels about her coworkers during the talking heads, but what makes Angela different is that the juxtaposition of her private thoughts and public action is not distinct. She treats her colleagues with the same contempt or derision that she expresses behind the closed office door. While other Dunder-Mifflin employees try to disguise these feelings, Angela seems to have no filter between how she feels and what she says or does, even if her actions will violate codes of social etiquette or hurt someone's feelings. Disregard for decorum and insensitivity to others makes it seem like Angela either cannot read social cues or does not care when she violates them.

While she's more than willing to talk about *other* people, Angela does not open up to coworkers and won't share her personal life with the documentarians. Without Angela's willing confession in talking head interviews audiences never have a chance to know her. Other characters like Pam, Jim, and Michael use the talking head interviews to create a bond between themselves and the documentarians or assumed audience. During footage scenes they intentionally glance into the camera and react by smirking, raising an eyebrow, or twisting their lips to communicate with the audience. They include viewers by sharing their reactions and the

audience is complicit. Instead of reaching out to include the audience, Angela rigidly compartmentalizes what she reveals about herself during the interviews. Angela is confident in her self-righteous condemnation of others, but works very hard to avoid the same kind of scrutiny on her own actions. She is comfortable talking about everyone else in the office, but works very hard to keep her life and actions private. Rather than confessing anything in the talking head interviews, Angela's secrets are "discovered" in webcams, security tapes, and footage when Angela does not know she is being recorded[4]. For instance, during her secret relationship with Dwight, there are shots of small private smiles to herself or physical reactions that are in-frame but not the focus. It is clear these moments are private because once Angela realizes she is on-camera, she amends the action by returning her face to a grimace, making a snide remark, or rushing away.

Angela is "caught" on tape more than any other character, which is further accented by the use of different security camera "footage." These scenes are typically presented as evidence that reveals something private about Angela or demonstrates a discrepancy in the information she shares in a talking head interview. The footage is usually in black and white, grainy, and either obstructed or shot from a high angle. Many times when her private life is revealed to the audience she is doing the kinds of things she criticizes. She is a hypocrite, but refuses to apologize or even acknowledge her double standards. This might gain her favor with the audience, but instead she is indignantly self-righteous. She's finally forced to face some of her duplicity when the documentary begins airing promotions. Watching a commercial for the show on the web Angela recognizes footage from things she did when she believed she was off-camera. More than anyone else in the office, she is panicked over footage and sound taken when she was unaware ("Promos").

Audiences are positioned to observe Angela at a distance since she has closed the modes of direct communication through the talking head interviews and reactions during footage. The voyeuristic tactics like security camera footage, shooting through windows, and filming from obstructed, hidden locations prime audiences to watch Angela from a distance. This is the distance required to consistently make Angela the butt of a joke. She is harder to empathize with and easier to laugh at because she is repeatedly framed as separate from the audience. As humor theorists have pointed out, comedy holds the power to bond people into a group by establishing outsiders (Purdie; Gray). Media scholar Brett Mills believes this is because comedy "involves an understanding of who is 'us' and who is 'them', with 'them' often forming the butt of jokes made by 'us'" (*Television Sitcom* 11). Social power is established in comedy when marginalized or outsider behaviors are deemed beyond the realm of propriety or are denied entrance. By establishing a "correct" position, a shared group understanding of ideological, cultural, and social norms is formed. Humor theorist Susan Purdie argues that it generates an intimacy between the joke teller and audience based on excluding something or someone. The joke provides a space for a briefly shared subjectivity. In the process of degrading the butt of the joke, tellers and audiences call attention to the butt's "perceived position of power" (Purdie 5). The butt is worth lampooning because tellers and audiences believe it holds some kind of power. This draws attention to larger matrices of social power and, in the process of joking, reinstates normative values.

In *Television Sitcom* Mills uses genre analysis to show how television comedy functions in three forms: performance, representation within the form, and audiences. Mills stresses that comedy's invocation of and focus on difference does not always reinforce social inequalities; the power of a particular joke depends on the context of audiences, tellers, and butts (11). The

manner in which Angela and Eleanor are framed in the editing, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and narrative, positions the characters as outsiders. This doesn't mean comedy's construction dictates the way audiences will interpret a joke, rather the format of a joke endorses a particular reading. For audiences to understand that violations or degradations are being made, there must be some accepted or understood meaning transgressed in humor. Targets are not only made to seem inept or discursively incompetent, they are othered and made abject to fully distinguish them as separate and different from the accepted group ideals (Purdie 59). This makes those in the majority feel secure in correctly upholding ideological expectations and reinforcing social norms. For Purdie, most targets have some agency or power that is compromised in joking, which houses the political power of satire and the poignancy of some kinds of comedy. She also recognizes that some targets come from the fringe and disturb the collective by their existence; they are similar to the idealized majority minus one respect. In this sense, those groups are always a threat to the other because they show an alternative to the normative values and practices in ideologically-constructed everyday life. In the case of cat ladies women have lives beyond the boundaries and practices of traditional domesticity. Cat ladies are shown working, find alternatives to companionship, and are self-reliant. This is a powerful position that threatens patriarchal capitalism (Taylor; McRobbie). It is powerful because alternatives outside the status quo highlight the construction of everyday life. When there are alternatives present normalcy can just be seen as another option instead of "the way it is." And when the patriarchy, domesticity, and gender norms are questioned it jeopardizes the patriarchal social structure. The system is in need of constant reinforcement (Purdie; McRobbie). In order to maintain independent women, or other potential threats to patriarchal capitalism, their representative forms need to be maintained. Highlighting marriage, dating, coupling off, and heteronormativity

reinforce the status quo. Main characters show viewers what-to-do. Cat lady characters symbolize independence gone too far, so they're either subjects of ridicule or pity. When stripped of their power they help remind audiences what-*not*-to-do.

Eleanor Abernathy

Eleanor Abernathy is a recurring minor character on *The Simpsons* (1989-present). Besides the Simpson family, there are hundreds of recurring characters and thousands of special guests in Springfield. Eleanor first appeared during the show's ninth season and, at this writing, has only appeared in 18 episodes. In every appearance she screams gibberish and throws cats at passersby. This running gag makes her more recognizable as "The Crazy Cat Lady" than by her name. Consistent with *The Simpsons* aesthetic, her appearance hasn't really changed over time. None of the characters visibly age and if they do change their look (i.e. Homer intentionally gaining weight, Marge dramatically increasing her muscle mass, Lisa donning a new outfit, etc.), it only lasts for a single episode. Eleanor is drawn with straggly gray hair, toothless except for one that juts out of her upper gums, and prominent wrinkles on her arms, neck, and face. Her upper lip is rippled to further show her missing teeth. She's layered in traditionally feminine colors: ankle-length pink dress with a white lacy collar, a lighter pink apron, a mauve cardigan, and purple hiking boots. Usually one pupil is drawn larger than the other. Sometimes the larger pupil is filled in with gray, further accentuating the difference. Since Eleanor's mental stability is frequently under question, the pupil helps delineate when she is crazy and when she is lucid. Eleanor's most important accessory, perhaps, are the cats in her arms, in her pockets, or, more often than not, clinging to her body.

Eleanor Abernathy first appears in the episode "Girly Edition," which originally aired in 1998. Lisa Simpson gets the opportunity to be a news anchor on the show *Kidz News*. While she tries tackling hard-hitting news, her brother, Bart, has more charisma than she does and focuses on sensationalized topics. Lisa ends up getting bumped to co-anchor. After Bart produces a sentimental piece pandering to audience's emotions, Lisa copies his tactics by doing a news report on the "Cat Lady." She positions herself outside Eleanor's house with a camera and microphone and begins the segment by saying, "They call her the cat lady. People say she's crazy just because she has a few dozen cats, but can anyone who loves animals that much really be crazy?" The front door squeaks open and Eleanor emerges from the house yelling garbled nonsense with four yowling cats under one arm. She quickly throws one of the cats directly at Lisa who ducks and flails. Eleanor runs out onto the lawn, throws another cat, and charges the camera still screaming gibberish. Lisa runs off screen, but her shouts are still audible. In the same episode Lisa botches a second local news story. The supposedly abandoned Union Pacific railroad she was reporting on tears across screen, clearly still running trains. After the train streaks behind her and Lisa drops her head in frustration, Eleanor inexplicably appears on the far side of the tracks. She is now holding six cats, three under each arm. She lets out a guttural yell and throws an armload of three cats repeating the gag. Lisa shrieks and drops her microphone running toward the camera with Eleanor chasing her, still screaming and throwing another cat. Both times that Eleanor comes out toward the camera it's as if she is unaware of its presence. She gets very close, which suggests she is unaware of the camera space and being on screen.

Almost ten years after her first appearance, Eleanor is finally given backstory in the episode "Springfield Up." The episode parodies *The Up Series*, a televised British documentary installment that has followed the lives of 14 British children since 1964. *The Up Series* updates

every seven years, noting the changes its subjects' lives have undergone, social expectations set by class, and life in Britain. *The Simpsons* uses the documentary-style of *The Up Series* to re-frame the childhoods of various Springfielders audiences have only come to know as adults. Relying on flashbacks from previous installments of *Growing Up Springfield*, unknown histories are brought to light. To visually cue audiences that footage is older and indicate transitions in time the animation moves from black and white to color. Eleanor Abernathy is one of *Growing Up Springfield*'s participants. She is shown in black and white sitting on the school steps in knee socks and what looks like a school uniform tightly clutching a book to her chest. The text across the bottom of the screen reads, "Eleanor, Age 8." She brightly tells the camera she wants to become a doctor and a lawyer because "a woman can do anything." There is a jump cut and voice-over reports Eleanor achieved her goals; she graduated from both Harvard Medical and Yale Law at 24, and was practicing both careers at the same time. She is shown arguing a case in the courtroom while still wearing a stethoscope draped around her neck. Her hair is long and neat, she wears lipstick, and a skirted blue suit with a beaded necklace. She asks the judge for a continuance in order to deliver a baby. Another jump cut signifies the passage of another eight years. Rather than starting with Eleanor, the establishing shot is of a high-rise apartment building followed by a close-up of an ashtray filled with cigarette butts and a hand stubbing one out, and then a long-shot showing Eleanor sitting in peach pajamas on a green couch with a full glass of wine. In front of her is a coffee table with an open bottle of wine and the ashtray. The window behind her shows an afternoon sky that is too late for pajamas and too early for drinking wine. She says, "I'm a little burned out, so sometimes, don't shoot me, I have a glass of wine with Buster here." She cackles to herself while petting Buster, the orange tabby that jumped up next to her. She continues, "He's a real comfort. I might even get a second cat." Instantly, there

is another jump cut, another eight years has presumably passed. She is drawn in a medium shot, which puts her suddenly and significantly closer to the camera. Eleanor throws a cat toward the camera its body temporarily blocking everything else in the shot. After it sails by Eleanor stands in a dark alley looking as she always has before on the show: frazzled gray hair, pink lacy dress and cardigan, and throwing cats at the camera while jabbering nonsense. She has a cat perched on her shoulder as she bends down out of the shot to grab and throw her framed Yale law degree. She bends down again, throws another cat, takes the cat off her shoulder and throws it. The camera zooms out and she has seven cats mingling at her feet. She raises an eighth cat over her head with both hands and throws it. This one lands on the filmmakers off screen, but you can hear a male voice crying out in pain repeatedly.

Most of the time Eleanor's appearances are brief and rely on the established visual gag of throwing cats. For instance, in "I, D'oh Bot" Lisa's cat, Snowball II, gets run over by a car. After adopting two more cats that both came to untimely ends, Lisa sits on the porch and wistfully declares, "I guess I'm not meant to own a cat." A shadow creeps over Lisa's face as if someone were walking toward her. Looking up, Lisa sees a blurry figure resembling a lumpy angel rapidly approaching. Lisa squints and the mirage eventually becomes Eleanor covered in cats. A cat is perched on top of her head, three are scattered on her outstretched arms, and two more are peeking out of her apron pocket. She tosses the black cat from her apron to Lisa and walks off yelling gibberish. In "Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass" the Simpson family walks through the local park discussing how rundown it has become, she suddenly appears behind them saying, "Ugh. This whole place is disgusting." Marge agrees with her before seeing who had made the comment. She turns, recognizes Eleanor, and asks, "Hey, aren't you that crazy cat lady?" Eleanor responds affirmatively and explains, "Thanks to this psychoactive medication I

enjoy brief moments of lucidity." She pulls out a bottle of pills from inside her cardigan and extends them to Marge who inspects them. Marge points out that instead of medicine the bottle is filled with candy. Eleanor reaches back into her cardigan and pulls out a cat she then throws at the Simpsons. Yelling, she reaches in again and pulls out another to throw. The family all runs away. Eleanor also appears in "The Blue and the Gray." The episode's focus was Valentine's Day and the opening scenes show the town of Springfield bedecked with Valentine's Day decorations. Eleanor is on the street with six cats. As she throws one to the right, a dog sails over her head. The camera pans over to show the man who had apparently thrown the dog. The crazy cat lady and the crazy dog guy both garble angry nonsense at each other, but Eleanor's expression suddenly and inexplicably softens. She drops a cat like a lady dropping a handkerchief and the man picks it up. She drops the cat again and the two giggle and garble more. The camera pulls back to show their dogs and cats fighting. Similarly "The Scorpion's Tale" has Eleanor in the streets with her cats. After Lisa discovers a wildflower has the power to calm down agitated scorpions, Homer tests the plant's effects on his father, Abe Simpson, and finds it makes older people happy. The wildflower is quickly put into pill form and mass-produced. Bart steals the untested drug and sells it on the black market. Soon, people realize the pill has a serious side effect: it makes people's eyes fall out of their sockets. In a montage depicting people's eyeballs swinging out of their heads, Eleanor is shown leaning over a shopping cart with three cats in it. Two of the cats bat at her dangling eyeball. She says, "Oh, oh…who loves mommy's eyeballs? Oh, there's a kitty that's gonna sleep good tonight. Yes, you are." She then cackles to herself.

Eleanor's biggest episode to date is in "A Midsummer's Nice Dream" (original air date March 13, 2011). Marge and Lisa Simpson end up at Eleanor's house after the Simpson family

dog, Santa's Little Helper, chases a cat into the house. After they knock at the door, Eleanor opens it and tosses out a cat that sticks in Marge's hair. She lets Marge and Lisa into the house to look for their dog. As they follow her in, the camera pans across stacks of boxes and newspapers bundled and piled high. There are seven cats in the initial scene inside the house. The music becomes more dramatic, highlighting Marge and Lisa's growing concern over the dilapidated conditions of Eleanor's house. The next scene shows a carousel horse, boxes filled with dentures, combs and brushes, tennis rackets, and other random collections of junk. It is dark and there are hissing and yowling cats. Lisa starts listing the contents of the house and Marge says, "I hate to say this about the cat lady, but I think she's crazy. She's a hoarder." Marge vows to help her like they do on the reality TV programs. Marge returns to Eleanor's house with a team dressed in hazmat suits. There are three cats drawn on the house and in the yard. She lets the team know Eleanor has been sent off the premises to distract her. There is a jump cut to Eleanor sitting in a large theater. She is flanked by an upper-class woman in a fancy hat and holding opera glasses on her right and the town's doctor on her left. Still dressed in her standard cat lady cardigan and apron, Eleanor strokes a cat seated on her lap. Someone sings out of frame and the next shot shows Eleanor is at the Andrew Lloyd Webber play *Cats*. As the song "Memories" continues, Eleanor tears up and cries/garbles, "It's so beautiful." She then uses the cat to blow her nose and, from a box of tissues that was not in the previous shot, she pulls out another cat, places it on her lap, and begins to stroke it. Another jump cut puts the audience back at Eleanor's home as the final bits of debris are removed. Eleanor returns and, although she is still garbling her words, begins to speak clearer as she thanks Marge for cleaning out the clutter in her home and the clutter "in her mind." As Marge begins to tell the garbage truck to drive away, she stops and gets excited over some of the trash. Having spent time in Eleanor's

cluttered collection of garbage, Marge appears to have "caught" hoarding. Although hoarding is not contagious, she starts obsessively collecting junk in the same way Eleanor had. Marge doesn't collect cats but she fills her home with pretty much everything else. Homer brings Eleanor over to talk some sense into Marge. Eleanor is fully coherent. She wears a navy suit and pearls, her hair is brushed, and she speaks clearly. As she attempts to reason with Marge, she becomes overwhelmed with the "value" of all the trash and simply reverts to incoherency. In a final scene, she leans out the front windows and yells while beating on her chest in Tarzan-like fashion. This call echoes through the city and cats are shown perking up as they hear her in trash cans, in trees, and then filling the streets in droves. In the background of the next shot, you can see at least 22 cats streaming into the house.

Even though this episode uses Eleanor as a major plot point, her total amount of time on screen is approximately three minutes. This is the longest she has ever appeared in an episode of *The Simpsons*. The repeated visual gag of throwing cats while garbling nonsense makes Eleanor a very memorable character, yet almost every appearance is less than a minute long. The back story laid out in "Springfield Up" is exactly 30 seconds long; the Valentine's Day scene lasts 15 seconds; the cats playing with her eyeballs lasts six seconds. Granted, *The Simpsons* is only a half hour program, which means that after commercials the show lasts approximately 20-22 minutes. It is also known for its tight writing style, rapid-fire jokes, and moving action quickly from one scene to the next (Fink). Considering the hundreds of recurring characters, the crazy cat lady's relatively limited time in front of the camera suggests audiences do not need much time to recognize the character and all she signifies within the world of *The Simpsons* and within the larger picture.

When attempting to flush out Eleanor, *The Simpsons*'s resorts to hackneyed backlash anxieties and the trope's root causes to provide a semblance of character depth. The back story revealed in "Springfield Up" positions Eleanor's ambitions as a professional woman as the cause of her cat lady condition. Clearly influenced by feminism, eight year-old Eleanor pronounces that she's capable of doing anything because she's a woman. She achieves all of her goals, but burns out despite her apparent success. Eleanor did not choose to become the "Crazy Cat Lady," but her other life choices left her old and alone with only the company of cats. Her Yale law degree, the symbol of her achievements as a professional woman, is thrown away just like the cats.

This story mirrors a familiar backlash narrative: feminists pushed forward too fast, they brought too much change too soon, and wore women out (Faludi). Her dreams and accomplishments may have actually caused Eleanor's craziness. When she transgressed into traditionally masculine careers she was successful for a time, but pushed the "limits" of her gender and snapped. Eleanor seems incapable of correctly performing femininity now. She screams at people. She takes up too much space. She's aggressive in public and is clearly full of rage. She does not try to keep up her appearance. These qualities along with her erratic moments of clarity, the garbled words, and the running gag of throwing cats call her mental state into question. Audiences know there is a screw loose because she behaves so unpredictably. There also are references specifically to a health condition being treated. She is lucid in "Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass" because she is on psychotropic medication presumably trying to treat her illness. The root of compulsion is taken a step further in "A Midsummer Nice Dream" when *The Simpsons* diagnoses hoarding as another possible reason Eleanor fell apart and became a cat lady.

Like Icarus before her, Eleanor flew too close to the sun when she tried to prove women can do anything men can. Her ambitions were her undoing. Failure, a life alone, and mental instability are all that await women who forget their place and transgress too far.

Angela Martin

The Office (2005-2013) is set in Scranton, Pennsylvania at a branch of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, Inc. While Angela appears in every episode of *The Office*, she is rarely featured prominently. In the ensemble production Angela is usually in the second tier of the cast. Depending on the season she is one of five to seven women in an office of 13-17 regularly appearing employees. Her job title is head of accounting and she oversees two other employees, Kevin Malone (Brian Baumgartner) and Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nunez). This position of power also means Angela has a high level of responsibility. In a talking head interview from the episode "Boys and Girls," she tells the documentary crew that she considers herself to be a professional woman and is proud of the life she has led. In addition to her responsibilities in accounting, she is the on-again, off-again chairperson of the Party Planning Committee (PPC). She runs the group like a tyrant and uses her position to belittle Phyllis Vance (Phyllis Smith), browbeat Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer), and frighten any employee who gets in her way.

Angela is sharp-tongued with a stringent sense of moral turpitude. She directly addresses her colleagues when she feels they violate her sense of propriety. This makes her an extremely difficult coworker. Since she measures everyone to her high, sometimes confusing standards her colleagues often are taken aback by the verbal abuse cast in their direction. Angela clearly feels righteous during these attacks, but in enforcing her sense of decency and decorum she is the one who looks ridiculous. Early on she wins "Biggest Tightass" at the office's unofficial, somewhat

insulting awards ceremony, but refuses to accept. Her objection to the award further underlines how humorless Angela is ("The Dundies"). She is deservingly called "unpleasant" by her coworkers because she openly criticizes them whenever they rub her the wrong way or fail to meet her incalculable standards. For instance, she berates Kevin for making accounting mistakes, being "pathetic," and his terrible eating habits; she makes subtly offensive comments about Oscar's sexuality after he is outed; she calls Pam "hussy" and "the office mattress." Although almost every employee at Dunder-Mifflin comes under fire, Phyllis inexplicably catches the brunt of Angela's aggression.

Phyllis is possibly the oldest woman in the office. She's depicted as nice, dull, and matronly, but occasionally engages in tongue-in-cheek discussions about sex. In "Phyllis's Wedding" Angela snidely congratulates Phyllis on her marriage and says, "You look lovely. Your dress is really white. So white my eyes are burning." In "Women's Appreciation" Phyllis is flashed by a man in the parking lot outside the building. Visibly upset by the incident, the women of the office crowd around Phyllis and attempt to comfort her. Like all the women, Angela is appalled, but instead of consoling Phyllis she accuses her of inadvertently cheating on her husband. In a bizarre moment of victim-blaming Angela reproachfully says, "Phyllis, you're a married woman!" Both Phyllis and Angela are mainstays in the Party Planning Committee (PPC). They frequently disagree on theme, food, decorations, even colors. Phyllis begrudgingly accepts the verbal abuse and mockery, but sidelong glances at the camera and talking head interviews throughout the series let audiences know her feelings are hurt. In "Launch Party" Phyllis searches the internet for proactive ways to deal with "difficult people" and discovers a few tactics that she hopes will discourage Angela from treating her so poorly. When Angela admonishes her for misspelling something, Phyllis tries to get her to communicate her feelings in

a different way. Angela raises her voice and her tone becomes more agitated in response to Phyllis's request. Later in the episode Phyllis attempts a second tactic: calmly telling Angela that when she uses harsh tones it makes it difficult to listen to her. Angela's tone shifts from shrill and upset to condescending and slow, as if she was talking to a child. She says the same mean dialogue but in a sappily sweet tone and deliberate pace. Initially proud of her efforts, Phyllis looks simultaneously crestfallen and angry. Her third and final tactic is to write out all of Angela's demands on Post-it Notes and inform her that it is too much work. Phyllis tells Angela she can choose one Post-it and she will do that task. Angela snidely retorts that if Phyllis did the same slapdash job she always does, then she shouldn't have any trouble completing all of the tasks. Phyllis loses it, wads up a Post-it, and hurls it at Angela's face. Later, in a talking head interview she simply states, "That seemed to shut her up."

Angela is aware that she hurts people's feelings and makes them uncomfortable, but she doesn't care; she is self-righteous and comfortable judging her coworkers. She seems to have a difficult time apologizing – even if it is on behalf of the company. When a batch of paper with an obscene watermark is shipped to clients everyone in the office has to field customer service calls with Kelly (Mindy Kaling). Kelly tries to teach her how to fake her way through appeasing customers on the phone. Angela parrots the lines Kelly gives her without any inflection of remorse or care. The entire scene plays out as if Angela is either incapable of apologizing or the skill has atrophied from disuse ("Product Recall"). When Pam and Karen (Rashida Jones) throw a competing Christmas party to ruffle Angela's feathers in "A Benihana Christmas" a feud breaks out. With most of her colleagues attending the other party, she insists on carrying through the competition instead of burying the hatchet. She proudly declares, "I don't back down. My

sister and I used to be best friends and we haven't talked in 16 years over some disagreement I don't even remember. So, yeah…I'm pretty good."

Besides belligerent and unapologetic, Angela is also the office's stick-in-the-mud. She won't participate in good natured office pools or flip a coin because she does not believe in gambling. When it comes to games she refuses to take part or is a poor sport. Everyone is playing the desert island game, she can only think of two books to bring: the Bible and *A Purpose Driven Life*. When reminded she has a third option she declines, but then changes her mind and says she would bring *The Da Vinci Code*, one of Phyllis's book choices, just so she could burn it ("The Fire"). She won't leave work early, play hooky, or participate in the time-wasting activities in which her coworkers frequently engage. When people are trying to get out of work early on St. Patrick's Day, she admits she would like to leave, too, but only to protest the holiday ("St. Patrick's Day"). In "Halloween" Pam speculates that Angela is likely the neighbor who gives the trick-or-treaters toothbrushes, pennies, and walnuts instead of candy or sweets.

Even her eating habits are presented in a way that makes it look like it is impossible for her to have a good time. Jim (John Krasinski) invites everyone in the office over to his house for a party. When Angela complains about sap making her sticky on the porch, Jim suggests she go inside and help herself to hotdogs, hamburgers, or chicken. She brusquely replies, "I'm a vegetarian," and the camera cuts to Jim shrugging and shaking his head in defeat ("E-mail Surveillance"). In a later season the office gets together to celebrate Diwali. At the party Angela surveys the buffet table filled with a wide array of Indian food and says, "I'm a vegetarian, what can I eat?" The young man serving responds, "It's all vegetarian." She looks dubiously at the unfamiliar foods again, wrinkles her nose, and states "I'll just have some bread." He hands her some naan and she scoffs when he uses his hands to give it to her. Angela often exhibits distaste

for things unfamiliar or foreign to her – a trait that makes her come off as provincial and mildly racist.

Angela's domineering personality contrasts to her petite stature and meek appearance. She's White with smooth skin, hazel eyes, and light blonde hair. On evaluation day, in a talking head interview, she shares that she used to be on the youth beauty pageant circuit and as a result relishes being judged because she can "hold up very well to severe scrutiny" ("Performance Review"). This comment makes clear that Angela fits within the ideologically constructed realm of attractiveness – blonde, thin, White - but it also veers into the mildly unsettling and oft ridiculed world of children's beauty pageants[5]. Although it isn't addressed, Angela's seems to be in her mid-30s. Her appearance does not offer a more specific number, but gauging by the ages of the other women in the office, Angela is neither the oldest which would be represented by Phyllis or Meredith Palmer (Kate Flannery) nor the youngest which is clearly Kelly Kapoor. Angela's costuming shifted as the series matured. Since *The Office* is set mainly at work, she's usually costumed in business attire: fitted separates in pastels, modest button-up blouses, knee-length skirts, sweater sets, and minimalistic accessories. As the narrative progressed and different aspects of the character's personality solidified, Angela's styling began to reflect her stringent sense of propriety. Not unlike a buttoned-up Victorian spinster, Angela's costuming incorporated high collars buttoned to the neck, predominantly long sleeves, and almost always a cardigan. To contrast the severe look and fit of this look, the clothes are accented with hyper-feminine laces, ruffles, and sheer materials. Angela's overall aesthetic is a polished and modernized rendering of Victorian fashion meant to correspond with her prudish personality.

Angela's appearance becomes a regular joke in the series. In particular, comments are made about her age, fashion, and petite stature. Michael Scott calls her "pipsqueak" and

"booster seat" ("Launch Party"). In an office trip to the mall she reveals that she is "forced" to shop at the American Girl store for colonial doll clothes when Gap Kids clothing proved to be "too flashy" for her taste ("Women's Appreciation"). Her cardigan habit is made into a joke when she and Dwight are returning one another's things after a break up. Amongst the things Dwight returns were two cardigans: a daytime cardigan and her "sleep cardigan" ("Money"). Regardless of the jokes around her appearance, she is still acknowledged as attractive in multiple episodes.

Unlike many cat ladies, Angela's character is given three serious romantic relationships over the course of the show. She's pursued in the office by Dwight Schrute and Andy Bernard. After dating Dwight she moves on to Andy, but then starts up an affair with Dwight. She later marries state senator, Robert Lipton, and has a child with him. Despite a very active love life, dating does not soften Angela or undo her peculiarities. Oftentimes the relationships' dysfunctions further highlight her oddities and suggest it's not a missing heterosexual relationship that makes Angela intolerable; she has other issues. In addition, the relationships are riddled with idiosyncrasies that further implicate her abnormality.

For instance, her relationship with Dwight is kept secret from coworkers. Viewers have an opportunity to see them together because *The Office*'s mockumentary format allows for stolen moments to be edited into the narrative. The secrecy is distinguished by scenes shot through blinds, obscured behind shelves, and taken from closed circuit security footage. When they do want to speak to one another in the office, they go to the break room, but rather than look at one another, they sit with their backs facing and talk to the walls. This does not mean Angela does not care, she simply values her privacy. Despite the secrecy, she calls it "the healthiest relationship of her life," but this statement is juxtaposed next to a montage of her awkwardly

moving around Dwight in the office, both characters panicking, Dwight avoiding her eye contact, and both scrambling to get as far away from each other as possible ("Boys and Girls"). Keeping an office relationship secret is not unusual considering the strict rules many companies have about fraternization and some people prefer not to have their private lives under scrutiny when they are in their place of business. But within the narrative world of *The Office* where the employees have agreed to let their lives be filmed and their stories shared with a wider audience, Angela's efforts to conceal the relationship goes against this agreement. Her desire for privacy is conflated with denying audiences information they should be privy to – information that other couples in the office like Jim and Pam or Kelly and Ryan Howard (B.J. Novak) willingly share. These characters talk about their relationships during talking head interviews: sometimes alone and sometimes as a couple. Angela never uses the talking head interviews as a confessional, though, and even when she seeks advice from other coworkers she uses code names or generally describes a relationship situation without providing any details. She ends the relationship with Dwight after he kills her cat, Sprinkles.

Her relationship with Andy begins as a rebound from Dwight. He was very public about pursuing her and everyone in the office knows they're dating. Angela is much chillier with Andy than she was with Dwight. Every romantic gesture Andy makes is met with annoyance, anger, or thinly tolerated. It's unclear why she continues to date Andy because she doesn't seem to like him and they don't share any common interests. On the night she agrees to marry Andy, Phyllis and the documentary crew walk in on Angela and Dwight having sex in her cubicle. She carries on the affair throughout her engagement, meeting Dwight in the warehouse to make love. Every time Andy brings up some kind of wedding plan, she pages Dwight to meet her for sex. This occurs repeatedly while Andy blissfully plans their wedding. Clearly uncomfortable with

the looming nuptials, Angela makes outrageous demands for the ceremony: it needs to be in a thousand year-old church in the continental United States with a 24-hour vet on call and a butter sculpture of a cat. For the most part Angela acts like she has not been caught; in a well-edited sequence following one of their interludes Angela is shown in a talking head interview. She states "I have a nice comforter and several cozy pillows. I usually read a chapter of a book and then it's lights out by 8:30. *That's* how I sleep at night." Audiences don't hear the question but can deduce she was asked "How do you sleep at night?" in response to her cuckoldry. It's not clear if Angela picked up on the filmmakers' meaning or if she's just acting as if there is nothing to talk about ("Weight Loss"). Dwight and Andy end up dueling for Angela's affections, but during the course of the fight they find out she slept with them both. Andy ends their engagement and Dwight breaks up with her.

Seasons later Dwight approaches Angela about having a child with him. The whole thing is treated like a business transaction, but Angela seems to think they might rekindle some kind of relationship. This is shown through her excitement when he initially proposes the idea as well as secret smiles she has when she thinks no one is looking. They meet secretly in the warehouse, but instead of a romantic tryst, Dwight is on the typewriter hammering out the details like a business transaction. After they exchange IDs and sign the contract, Angela raises an eyebrow and asks how he'd like to celebrate, but Dwight says he's nauseous and walks out on her. His discomfort with the contract does not fade yet Angela continues to try and renew their relationship. During a night out with coworkers Dwight goes so far as to hit on Pam's friend, Isobel, in front of Angela. She follows them around like a third wheel trying to engage in their conversation. Dwight finally pulls her aside and declares the contract null and tells her to go away. She doesn't, instead Angela confronts Dwight and Isobel in the parking lot. She yells that

she plans to serve him with papers and informs Isobel of Dwight's intent to have a child with her. Angela is mid-sentence when Isobel reaches over and slaps her in the forehead and says "Whack!" like she's playing Whac-A-Mole. Stunned and humiliated, Angela runs off and Dwight turns to Isobel, tells her she's a "specimen," then dips and kisses her. The entire situation is silly, yet at its conclusion, with Angela telling Isobel the truth and threatening Dwight with legal action, she's painted as the most ridiculous character. Isobel's smack drains Angela's complaints of their validity and she is reduced to a woman out of control ("Happy Hour").

Her relationship with Robert is also made into a farce because the character is gay and closeted. Initially Oscar, the only out gay man in the office, recognizes it, but Robert's interactions with Oscar set up situations for viewers to be in on the secret. For instance, when Angela introduces Robert to Oscar the camera focuses on Robert's face who holds Oscar's eye contact. Later in the episode, Ryan, another young, attractive employee walks by and the camera follows Robert gazing at Ryan's butt. The camera then pans to Oscar who turns and breaks the third wall looking out at the audience with raised eyebrows ("Classy Christmas"). There is other evidence of Robert's sexuality when Angela shows off some photos. There are three images, but rather than depicting just the two of them out and about there are other men in the picture who have caught Robert's attention. Michael obliviously asks Angela if Robert "could be the one." Oscar, who's positioned behind Michael in this shot and out of Angela's eye line, shakes his head slowly "no" ("Goodbye Michael").

After awhile everyone in the office knows that Robert is gay except for Angela. They meet in the break room to discuss if they're obligated to tell her. They weigh the pros and cons of telling Angela but ultimately decide not to because, as Phyllis points out, it's probably

Angela's last chance to have a family. Pam agrees and adds that Angela has seemed happier since dating him. Oscar makes the final call; they will not tell Angela because she's happy. The marriage happens and Angela has a son, Phillip. Unbeknownst to Angela, though, Robert has begun seeing Oscar on the side. When she learns of the affair she is distraught and hires a man to break Oscar's kneecaps, but ultimately stays with the senator. He dumps her and Oscar at the same press conference where he reveals his homosexuality to the public. The first things the unseen reporters ask are "Did your wife turn you gay?" and "I have a question for the senator's beard," which bring Angela into the conversation as a cause for the homosexuality or a knowing participant. The senator continues stressing how *fully* homosexual he is by stating, "I once believed that a gay person could be somewhat straight. It wasn't until my marriage to Angela that I realized how charmless I find the female body." During the press conference Angela stood beside Robert, face crumpled and humiliated.

Although not as blatant as Eleanor's cats, cats are incorporated into Angela's workspace, costuming, and her personal narratives. Her desk has multiple cat figurines, her computer's desktop image is a photograph of her and her cat, Sprinkles, and there are small images of cats with motivational quips along the bottom. Occasionally she wears a sweater with cats on it or some small piece of jewelry featuring a cat's silhouette, but the costuming overall isn't bedecked with cat paraphernalia. While setting and costuming indicate Angela is fond of cats, it's the personal narrative that highlights the ways in which Angela has stepped out of bounds with her companion animals. There are isolated incidents in cold openings and passing conversations that draw attention to her cat lady-ness. For instance she is shown retrieving a cat she stashed in a file cabinet behind her desk ("Stress Relief"). During her pregnancy she bonds with Pam who's also pregnant. When she and Pam realize they both plan to name their unborn sons Phillip the

two argue over who should get to use the name. Pam explains that her grandfather's name was Phillip, but Angela counters "Philip is the name we're using; it's after my favorite cat." Pam laughs, then stops and firmly repeats, "It's after *my grandfather*." Angela disbelievingly retorts, "It's after *my cat*." Pam's reaction and pointed eye contact with the camera work to make Angela look off-balance in her devotion to her cat and unreasonable in her insistence that she be able to use the name ("Garden Party"). These quick interludes often accent Angela's already questionable sense of propriety and values.

There are two major cat-focused events that bring Angela under more ridicule in the office and, by extension, for audiences as well: the death of her cat Sprinkles and the webcam mishap with her cat Princess Lady. Both events show Angela extending beyond the realm of acceptable human-animal relationships in emotional and physical terms. They give audiences a sense of her distorted perspective.

When Meredith gets hit by a car, everyone in the office plans to visit the hospital during their lunch hour. Angela tells Pam she can't go because her cat Sprinkles is sick, so she needs to go home to have lunch with her, pet her, and give her medicine. Pam points out that the other cats could keep Sprinkles company, but Angela explains, "There's bad blood. Jealousies. Cliques." The scene between Pam and Angela is cross-cut with one of Angela's talking head interviews. She tells the documentarians that Sprinkles had been sick for awhile and, uncharacteristically, kindly thanks the unseen interviewer for asking because nobody else in the office cares about her sick cat. Angela's concern for her cat's health is neatly juxtaposed with other employees' concern for their injured coworker; it makes her values seem out of order. Cutting back to observational footage, Pam passive-aggressively uses Angela's position as Party Planning Committee chair to imply how important it is that Angela go to the hospital. Bowing to

her responsibility, Angela agrees, which forces her to ask her then-boyfriend, Dwight, to visit her home and take care of Sprinkles. Since their relationship is secret, she meets him in the alley behind the warehouse to give him an exhaustive list of Sprinkles's pills, ointments, and treatments. The two do not know they are on-camera. Dwight does go to Angela's house and ends up mercy killing/murdering her cat by over-sedating it. While the cameras do not follow Dwight to her house, shots of him callously informing Angela of her cat's death come from security footage taken from the downstairs lobby.

The rest of the episode prominently features Angela as she grieves the loss of Sprinkles. Her grief is public and she seems unable to hold back her anguish. Her costuming switches from a white sheer button-down to a black sheer button-down as she begins to mourn. She cries openly and repeatedly when asked how she's doing or if people express their condolences. In a talking head Angela retells audiences what happened in her own words and shows photographs of her and Sprinkles. The first picture is outside on a picnic blanket. There is a bunch of green grapes on Angela's plate and a few grapes in Sprinkles's bowl. She is holding Sprinkles so both of them were facing the camera. Behind the photograph, Angela's face is still in focus and viewers can see Angela's distressed expression. She explains, "This is Sprinkles. She was my best friend." She holds up another picture of Sprinkles visiting her at work. In the background of this image, you can see she has made the previous photo of her and Sprinkles at the picnic her computer desktop. In the second photo Angela is again holding Sprinkles and making her paws touch a large calculator (like she's helping with accounting). In the image Angela's face has a large, untroubled smile unlike any smile caught on camera at work. Clearly, in these images, audiences are seeing Angela at her happiest. She continues, "I kept her going through countless ailments," and shows another photograph. This picture shows Angela and Sprinkles having a tea

party and Angela is tipping a tea cup toward Sprinkles. She continues, her tone changing from sad and reminiscent to angry and hard "I asked one Dwight Schrute to feed her once and she is now deceased."

This whole time the camera is at a distance to keep the still photos in focus as well as Angela's face behind them. At this point the camera zooms out and Angela flips through the photos. Finding another upsetting image, her brows crease, she clucks her tongue, cocks her head, and sighs. In a bleary voice Angela says, "This is Halloween last year…" and holds up a photo of her dressed in white tights, a knee-length white furry skirt, white long sleeve shirt, and a headband with kitty ears. She is holding Sprinkles who appears to be wearing a black cape. She sniffles, "…just a couple of kittens, out on the town." Somewhat out of focus she begins to cry. This range of emotion is not normal for Angela's role in the office and it is the most she has shared in an interview. She had cried in previous episodes, but usually they were tears of frustration when things did not go according to plan or when self-made stress got the better of her; never had something moved Angela to this extent on camera. While this event pushes her character to a new level of emotionality, it's important to keep in mind that the impetus for this new range of emotions is not Meredith being in the hospital, arguably the main plot of this episode; it's the death of her cat ("Fun Run").

The second major event to highlight Angela's distorted perspective on human-animal relationships occurs when she gets a new cat, Princess Lady. A few episodes after Dwight dumps her and Andy calls off their engagement, Angela enters the office kitchen extremely chipper and smiling. Oscar asks why she's so upbeat and she announces that there's a new addition to her family: a hypo-allergenic third generation show cat. She paid $7,000 for the new cat. Everyone is shocked at the cost, and Creed lets her know that he could have got her a kid for

that kind of money. They're further astonished when she tells them she sold her engagement ring from Andy to afford the cat. Kevin asks why she didn't return the ring to Andy, but she brushes aside his question and announces the cat's name is Princess Lady. Meredith returns to the point that the cat cost $7,000 and says she has to see the "bitch." There is a jump cut to Angela's computer screen. She has installed a webcam at home so she can watch her cats while at work. There are at least seven cats roaming around her living room: perched on the table, in the window, lounging on cat trees, and playing with toys. She tells her colleagues that she would normally use vacation days to welcome a new cat, but was out. She then rebukes Dunder-Mifflin's employment policies because the company "still doesn't recognize cat maternity leave" and women who have kids can have a year off. She says, "I just want to make sure Princess Lady is acclimating well. She means more to me than anyone." Kevin interjects, "Any cat you mean." Angela, looking at Princess Lady on the screen, smiles and replies "And person." She smiles even bigger while the sound of cats meowing grows louder. Meredith, Oscar, and Creed all look uncomfortable and Kevin breaks the third wall looking directly at the camera.

As the day progresses, yowling can be heard coming from Angela's computer. Kevin, Oscar, and Meredith return to Angela's desk to see what's happening. One of her mutt cats, Mr. Ash, is mounting purebred Princess Lady. Angela, upset at the coupling, yells for Mr. Ash to stop. Always one for propriety, she tells her gathered co-workers that Mr. Ash is fixed and this display shouldn't change their impressions of her "good, decent cats." She leaves the office to go home and stop the cat intercourse. Later, Angela's voice comes through the computer as she talks to her cats. Oscar and Kevin rush to her computer to watch. She reprimands Mr. Ash and picks up Princess Lady. Angela starts acting like a cat. She meows, hisses at the other cats, and

gives Princess Lady a bath with her tongue like a cat would. The editing cuts away from the webcam footage to a close-up of Oscar and Kevin's confused and repulsed faces.

Angela returns to the office and realizes the webcam was still streaming to her computer and would have caught her actions at home and broadcasted them to the office. Both Oscar and Kevin act as if they had not seen anything, but as Angela coughs and removes something from her mouth, Oscar's voice-over says, "I want to get that image out of my head." The editing cuts to Oscar in a talking head interview where he says, "The psychological issues that go behind licking a cat are not things I want to go into. Also, I'm pretty sure she coughed up a hairball." Co-workers in the office may have had their concerns about Angela's mental state before the incident with Princess Lady, but after her psychological well-being was open for everyone's analysis ("Lecture Circuit Part Two").

Sprinkles's death and Princess Lady's bath present Angela crossing boundaries with her cats. Taking care of a sick animal when a colleague is injured demonstrates Angela's inversed priorities. Angela doesn't care about Meredith as much as she does her cat, and it's only when Pam shames her that Angela submits. It isn't that she cares what her co-workers think, but Pam points out that it's Angela's responsibility as Chair of the Party Planning Committee. Angela's obligation to her duty is what forces her to visit Meredith. The Princess Lady incident occurs after Angela's dramatic double-dumping. A $7,000 purebred is framed as an outrageous purchase and resembles Angela's version of a rebound. The only reason she can afford the purchase of Princess Lady is by selling her engagement ring: the lone remnant of her relationship with Andy. She crosses a second boundary of propriety when she questions the fairness of maternity leave for people who don't have children but do have cats. So why have her cross further by giving Princess Lady a tongue bath? What does this accomplish? Like the security

footage and the obstructed shots of Angela in the warehouse, the webcam provides a window into Angela's guarded personal life. The secret footage of her relationship with Dwight gave viewers a chance to see the "real" Angela, and the picture it paints is an unusual but traditional heterosexual relationship. It is familiar and almost comforting to see such odd people find one another. The webcam incident does the opposite. Viewers are again provided an opportunity to see Angela in her natural habitat, behaving as she would at home, but the resulting broadcast is horrifying. She is *not* normal. Similar to the situation with Meredith, Angela does not seem to be ashamed that she licked her cat; she is concerned that her co-workers saw her actions.

Like Eleanor Abernathy, *The Office* draws from the three root causes to diagnose Angela's singleness. She has an abrasive personality: she takes out her frustration on others; she is condescending; she refuses to apologize; and she is mean. Ultimately, she is unlikeable and seems to be missing the qualities that might make someone want to date her. Sometimes Angela seems completely unaware she's hurting people's feelings. This lack of self-awareness calls her mental state into question. How could someone be so unconscious of their effect on others? At other times she seems to knowingly inflict pain on her coworkers, which suggests she is not only in control, but relishes cutting others down to size. The question then becomes how could someone be so calculating and dismissive of others' feelings? There are not definitive answers provided within the text, but her psychological wellbeing is called further into question when she is caught licking Princess Lady and publically grieves Sprinkles. She trespasses beyond the boundary between humans and animals, and the root compulsion appears. Pinning her choice to pursue a career as the cause for her cat lady-ness would be difficult in a show set in the workplace. There are other women on *The Office* who are nothing like Angela, so it cannot simply be the stress of working, education, or professional ambitions.

Even with deficiency and compulsion cited as possible roots, Angela engages in three major relationships during *The Office*'s nine year tenure. For Angela singleness is not a prerequisite for being a cat lady. Despite the fact that she dates, marries, and has a child, she is still peculiar. Having a relationship no longer proves normalcy. The new critique lies in the type of relationship, and all of Angela's relationships are framed as ludicrous. She's obsessively secretive about her relationship with Dwight. She seems frigid and unaffectionate with Andy. Her husband Robert is gay. It is not enough for a woman to be coupled in postfeminist times; she must also embody traditional feminine ideals, self-police, and fit in. Angela cannot or does not manage herself in a way that properly expresses postfeminist femininity.

Conclusion

Angela Martin and Eleanor Abernathy are unique because they are the only two longstanding, recurring cat lady characters on TV. All three roots – deficiency, compulsion, and choice – are used to explain who these women are and how they came to be. Eleanor went overboard pursuing the new opportunities for women. She not only burnt herself out, but she drove herself crazy. She's impossible to know because she throws cats at anyone who gets close. She literally uses cats to drive people away. Her aggressive antics look like rage, which Eleanor still doesn't own because she's depicted as mentally unstable and out of control. Angela's persnickety personality and rigid standards are what keep people at bay. Rather than outright aggression, Angela is passive aggressive. While it doesn't make her more likeable in the office, it's one of the only ways women can express aggression without being construed as transgressive or mentally unstable. Minus one episode where she flirts with a dog-guy, Eleanor is presented as asexual. Her age, health issues, and overall unkempt appearance position her as the antithesis to

postfeminism femininity. Her poor choices are written on her body. Angela, on the other hand, has multiple, long-term relationships. She has a child. These aren't enough to rescue her from being a cat lady. Angela marries Dwight in the series finale, and even though she's found her match, guests are shown arriving with cats as wedding gifts.

What do we learn from Eleanor, Angela, and other cat ladies in fictional texts? For one thing, the anxieties surrounding women's interest in postponing marriage and motherhood, women's desire for advancing their education and careers, and women's independence are alive and well. But gender roles have been destabilized for women *and* men over the past century. Alongside these changes has been a crisis of masculinity. Cultural critique has focused predominantly on women, though, which makes it seem like women are the ones rocking the boat. Women are held responsible for the distance between the imaginary 1950s nuclear family and modern family structures. Leaving masculinity unquestioned in popular culture reaffirms that it is the standard against which everything else is measured. Liberal feminism doesn't tackle systemic problems or deconstruct cultural norms. Patriarchal capitalism remains unacknowledged; everything within its structure is still bound by its limits.

Cat lady characters demonstrate one such limit. Female independence can go too far. Cat ladies remind viewers that enfranchised, empowered women may be temporarily alluring, but ultimately women who transgress their gender have something wrong with them. Attributing her singleness to deficiency, compulsion, or poor life choices destabilizes the cat lady on every level: appearance, personality, emotional or mental stability, and her accomplishments. Each of these becomes a site where the character can be lampooned. Ugliness, craziness, disability, or lacking common sense are already familiar turf for comedy, so the cat lady is a great butt for a joke. Destabilizing every aspect of the cat lady diminishes the potential power a single,

employed, self-reliant female character could have. Feminist cultural critic Anthea Taylor posits that in postfeminist media culture "…specific ways of thinking, speaking, and knowing singleness are foregrounded over others…this process works to ensure that certain forms of feminine subjectivity are culturally legitimized over others – a process that itself has material effects" (9). Cat lady characters don't force women to accept any marriage proposal, but their quiet threat constantly drones in the background. Like other backlash logic cat ladies persuade women to collaborate in their own subjugation. The ceaseless drone has been internalized and women know they must police themselves. More than accepting marriage, women need to *choose* to actively pursue it. That's the only choice. It demonstrates a woman's commitment to upholding gender expectations. Career, friendships, independence, and cats don't prove a woman's success.

What it means to be a woman or a man – from expectations to lived reality – continues to be a conflicted subject. Popular culture reflects the state of 21st century life through ambivalent representations of single characters. Prioritizing personal choice makes individuals responsible for their level of success, but the standards are still set by outside forces. Media provide examples of lives well lived and lives wasted. While technological advances have made it easier than ever for individuals to publicize their personal experiences, mass media relentlessly hammer home dominant messages. Representing single characters ambivalently acknowledges alternatives to domesticity, but more often than not the alternatives are shut down. In the case of cat ladies, both the narrative and form disqualify them as possible alternatives. Cat lady characters are established as victims of circumstance, victims of mental instability, and victims of their own poor planning. They've failed according to long held assumptions about gender and in the light of "new" postfeminist qualifications. Formal elements like framing, costuming,

editing, and performance further bury the potential housed in a single female character. Cat lady representations are unforgiving: derided, ridiculed, or regarded with pity.

If a single female character wants to make good, she has to fight back against her "condition." Popular representations of single women reward characters consumed with undoing their singleness. Most narratives revolve around dating, marriage, and starting a family. If coupling up isn't the focus of the plot, it's the conclusion. Cat lady characters are completely outside of this narrative success. Her differences are not beneficial because they're always presented through the lenses of deficiency, compulsion, and failed decision-making. Within this context the only thing cat lady characters can do in fictional texts is affirm normative characters' lives. This minor character's tenure has largely been spent in the fringe of narratives until the late 1990s and early 2000s. More recently the media's gaze has been particularly "diagnostic" toward single women drawing fictional cat ladies into the realm of real animal hoarders. By excluding and pathologizing alternative performances of womanhood traditional gender roles are further legitimized in mainstream media culture. The next chapter explores how cat ladies have been brought to life in reality TV programs about animal hoarding and documentary film.

CHAPTER FOUR.

MAKING THE BOOGEYMAN REAL:

CAT LADIES IN REALITY TV AND DOCUMENTARY

While the previous chapters have explored mythology and lore from antiquity, serial fictions and novels from the 19th and early 20th century, and sitcom television characters from the years leading up to and following the millennium, this chapter focuses on purportedly true depictions of cat ladies. Using two reality television programs that focus on hoarding, *Hoarders* (2009- present) and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* (2010-present), as well as the 2009 representation of Susan Boyle on *Britain's Got Talent*, another reality program, and the 2009 documentary *Cat Ladies* as case studies, I examine the way factual media, or media construed as reality, contribute to the containment strategy. When presented through the lens of reality the cat lady is "proven" to exist in real life. In the cases of *Hoarders*, *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, and *Cat Ladies*, the cat lady's connection to mental disorders is further solidified. It is in the formula of reality TV and the conventions of documentary that the cat lady evolves from a social stigma to a mental disorder that can be diagnosed and treated.

Before diving into textual analysis, two important premises must be outlined. First, I want to clarify my stance regarding cat ladies and animal hoarding. I do not see these two synonymously. As I have argued, the cat lady has been a popular Western trope across centuries present in a variety of texts. In its most extreme form the cat lady is positioned as an animal hoarder. Not all cat ladies are animal hoarders, but it is a likely outcome if their focus on cats goes unchecked according to the narrative. The connection between animal hoarding and cat

ladies has become stronger in recent years. This might be connected with *The Simpsons*'s popularity or the recent attention given to animal hoarding on reality programs. It is the connection between seemingly factual representations of animal hoarders and the trope of the cat lady I am querying in this chapter, not the reality of animal hoarding.

So what is animal hoarding? To begin, it is a subset of hoarding, which is considered a subtype of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and has also been connected to a range of anxiety disorders. There is no set definition of hoarding because the term itself is used to describe "a complex set of behaviour that exists on a continuum – from being a messy and very disorganized collector at one end to living in abject filth and squalor at the other" (Frank and Misiaszek 1088). In the most general sense, hoarding is characterized by four qualities – excessive accumulation of material possessions of dubious value and quality; the possessions interfere with an individual's normal social, functional, and vocational roles; the individual cannot or will not part with these possessions; the individual does not recognize the danger connected with these possessions (i.e. risk of fire, falling stacks, vermin, health issues connected to animal waste, etc.) (Frank and Misiaszek; Lepselter). Currently, collecting animals is viewed as hoarding with an organic twist. Understanding a hoarders' possessions as items with "dubious value" does not take into account the individual's attachment to the animals, which may stem from sentimental reasons to monetary value. Additionally, the above understanding of hoarding ignores an animal's capacity to suffer.

In an effort to distinguish animal hoarding from a collection of material objects, the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) clarifies the four major characteristics of animal hoarding:

1. Having more than the typical number of companion animals

2. Failing to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in illness and death from starvation, spread of infectious disease and untreated injury or medical condition
3. Denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household, and human occupants of the dwelling
4. Persistence, despite the failure, in accumulating and controlling animals. (Snowdon et al.)

In their book *Severe Domestic Squalor*, Snowdon et al. differentiate types of people who hoard animals. There are three kinds of animal hoarders. Some are individuals who exploit animals for financial or emotional gratification. This kind of animal hoarder does not care about the welfare of their animals and it usually takes criminal charges, fines, or litigation to get them to give up their animals. The second type of animal hoarder consists of people who breed animals. Hoarding occurs when they become overwhelmed either from over-breeding or a life change that makes caring for the animals too much. For instance, a family that profits from an in-home dog breeding business that is unable to keep up the cost or maintain the animals' health is within the current definition of animal hoarding. Snowdon et al. dubs the final type of animal hoarders "rescuers," or people who believe it is their mission to save animals (87). This type corresponds closest to the way animal hoarding is portrayed in the media; someone who has filled their home with strays. Unlike exploiters or overwhelmed breeders, rescuers often do not see their intervention in the animals' lives as detrimental and cannot see the harm they are causing the animals. While the three types may seem distinct, the authors stress that there is considerable overlap among them with some animal hoarders exhibiting characteristics of all three.

Part of the reason its categorization remains loosely defined stems from the fact that hoarding, whether objects, animals, or a combination, is the result of a variety of causes,

manifests in a variety of ways, and can be dealt with through a variety of solutions (Snowdon et al.; Frank and Misiaszek). Snowdon et al. explain there have been no studies examining mental disorder in animal hoarding cases because these issues are often dealt with through animal control, city inspectors, and property code enforcement. Animal hoarding is usually discovered when neighbors complain about the smell or raise concerns about animal cruelty, which are reported through city or state institutions. Mental health professionals are not routinely brought in to address these issues (which HARC actively tries to address in its outreach efforts). Despite experts' agreement that hoarding is a mental disorder, the complex range of causes, parameters, manifestations, and treatments alongside incomprehensive, limited data make hoarding difficult to diagnose, treat, or prevent. It is complicated and cases are never clear-cut because its causes and treatments depend on the individual.

Hoarding and animal hoarding on *Hoarders*, *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, and *Cat Ladies* are not presented within this frame of complexity. Like many fiction and nonfiction representations of mental illness, the aim in these texts is to create melodrama; ideally, melodrama that can be resolved in under two hours. Despite being framed as nonfiction media and grounded in real stories from real people, it should not be forgotten that documentary texts are built to heighten the drama. The resulting representations create the impression that certain disorders are more common than they actually are and, many times, propagate misleading information about particular disorders (Pirkis et al. 530). Some researchers are concerned that the disproportionate focus on disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar, addiction, and hoarding will provide audiences with false information and perpetuate stereotypes about mental disorders and the people affected by them (Kosovski and Smith). Factual media and reality TV in

particular can naturalize the trajectory of a disease; the complex causes, the range of manifestations, and the diverse methods of treatment are turned into simple formulas.

This leads to the second premise of this chapter. I am positioning reality TV and documentary film in the same chapter not because I believe them to be equivalent purveyors of truth, but because I believe they share a role in representing and shaping the discourse of "the real" that makes them comparable. In addition, reality TV borrows visual techniques and rhetorical strategies from those used in documentary filmmaking. In the words of journalist Alissa Quart, reality shows are the "uncouth heirs of the observational tradition." The camera angles and framing, talking head interviews edited alongside observational footage, naturalistic sound as well as the use of sound effects, voice over, and silence all demonstrate reality TV's family resemblance to documentary filmmaking. But not all reality shows are created equal. Between the shows derived around survival, dating and relationships, weddings (from buying the dress to planning the big day to brides behaving badly), real estate, weight loss, child beauty pageants, addiction, and many, many more topics, reality TV subjects run the gamut. Media scholar Susan Murray emphasizes how difficult it is to compare across the genre. She points out that the reality programs most resembling documentary films have a committed focus on the everyday experiences of their subjects in their natural habitat without the backdrop of a game or competition, use cinema vérité techniques, and do not brandish corporate sponsors or prizes during episodes (67). Programs like A&E's *Hoarders* and Animal Planet's *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* fit within the above parameters, while shows like ABC's *The Bachelor* (2002-present), CBS's *Survivor* (2000-present), MTV's *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), and ITV's *Britain's Got Talent* (2007-present) do not.

The major distinction between documentary filmmaking and reality TV, in the minds of many critics and audiences, lies in the intent. Documentary films are understood to be socially engaged serving the public interest by disseminating information, showcasing social justice, and focusing on public values (Murray; Corner; Spence and Navarro). They often serve an educational purpose. Murray argues that this can be the case in some reality TV programs but with commercial breaks interrupting the narrative to remind viewers of sponsors and their products the educational value is compromised. Considering that all television is for-profit it is surprising that some reality programs are deemed more authentic than others. This may be connected to the channel on which the program airs or a show's subject matter. For instance, reality shows produced for MTV, VH1, E!, Lifetime, and Oxygen are viewed differently than those produced for A&E, TLC, or PBS. Media critic Jennifer L. Pozner argues that audiences *know* reality programming is often edited in misleading ways, can be scripted, and, in many cases, is fake, but it does not stop them ranking the authenticity of a program or believability of behaviors and personalities viewed on reality TV. Once "real" people make the transition to on-screen personalities, they cease to be "real" and are treated like the caricatures they are reduced to on their shows. In the hierarchy of authenticity, documentary films are at the top. Their focus on underrepresented subjects or the minutia of everyday life grant documentaries "social weight" because "they are seen by many viewers and critics as doing this for the greater good of the subject, the viewer, and the society at large" (Murray 68). Social weight is all about audience perception. Depending on the kind of reality TV networks want to market, they can choose to play up tawdriness or interpersonal drama or focus on the public good or educational value.

Documentary films are still generally regarded as unbiased representations of people in their natural habitat. This presumption ignores two key points: the practice of documentary

filmmaking has changed over time and the truth, or reality, in a documentary has been shaped by the filmmakers. In the case of the former, all documentary filmmakers hope that their films will be seen. Ideally, the message will reach a wide audience. The trend in the past thirty years has been to borrow from Hollywood film structures and utilize hybrid media in order to increase popularity and, at the very least, visibility (Ruoff; Corner; Spence and Navarro). Media scholar John Corner conceptualizes this global shift as an infusion of "lightness." Linking the shift to changing views of public and private life as well as perceptions of social knowledge and emotional experience, Corner argues:

> Such processes have strongly national dimensions, of course, but at their broadest, they involve the way in which selfhood is set within culture and culture is set within a particular political and economic order. The terms of 'seeing others' and 'seeing things' on the screen today are very different from those of the defining moments of documentary history, those moments when an expository realism seemed to resonate at least partially with a public, democratic rhetoric of reform and progress. These stealthier and more long-term changes are ones to which the newer forms of factual programming, with their emphasis on microsocial narrative and their forms of play around the self observed and the self-in-performance, seem to have brought an accelerated momentum. (55)

New forms of meaning-making in documentary reflect not only changes in society and politics, but shifting cultural values as well. From production to reception, documentaries are neither created nor received in the same manner as they once were.

This is linked to the second point: documentarians shape the truths seemingly captured on film. Film theorists Susan Kerrigan and Phillip McIntyre explain that while cinema vérité and

observational mode filmmaking may seem unbiased, all documentaries undergo extensive sculpting depending on the filmmaker's intent. Understanding creativity within documentary practices means reconciling the notion of actuality with the undeniable fact that documentary filmmakers also participate in the social construction of reality. Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, film theorists with specialties in documentary film production and reception, identify things like editing events' order, building a story arc, and subtle rhetorical strategies used to persuade audiences are all part of the documentary filmmaker's toolkit. The documentary's structure of meaning creates order in real-life situations lacking a definite course because, as Spencer and Navarro argue, "[Documentary filmmakers] organize knowledge and give shape to what might have otherwise lacked a specific plan or design" (113). This is the same process in reality TV: hours of footage undergo significant sculpting in order fit the generic formulas of television programming and create a story arc that resolves within the time slot.

Filmmakers and showrunners infuse their work with meaning. Everything from the subject of the work to how it is focused on (i.e. editing, ordering, framing, sound, etc.) reveals the author's intent[2]. Whether fiction or nonfiction, there is *always* an argument or a point of view housed in the film or TV series. There is always intent even when filmmakers and showrunners do not make their intent overt. These messages are usually under the surface, disguised by the familiar ways stories are presented (again, through the editing, ordering, framing, sound, etc.), which, as mentioned above, have undergone serious changes. In their discussion of "dramatic documentaries," or nonfiction films whose narratives are framed like Hollywood films (i.e. *Man on Wire* (2008); *Bus 174* (2002)), Spence and Navarro stress that these films seem *less* manipulative than documentaries with arguments positioned in plain sight

[2] Intent here refers to the bigger message contained within the work, not the overall intent of media, which is usually to generate money and satisfy the commercial parties who pay for the program or film by building an audience.

like the films of Michael Moore or *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Spence and Navarro suggest part of the allure within nonfiction filmmaking (and I would add reality TV) that makes it seem natural and unbiased lies in audiences' "familiarity with a formula common to many fictional narratives, in particular to Hollywood films" (139). They warn that documentaries blurring the lines between fictional formulas and nonfiction techniques are more "insidious" because "the particular worldview they embrace – the message in the film – is eclipsed by the seemingly natural quality of the plotting" (138).

This is true of reality TV as well. When the goal is to entice a broad range of viewers, strong, possibly polarizing positions are undesirable. The result: audiences are left to make their own assumptions about the message or intent. This is one reason reality TV showrunners consistently underline the genre's meaninglessness. Jennifer L. Pozner argues that this tactic wraps up the author's intent making it seem nonexistent while simultaneously reasserting core American values to viewers. The people, places, and stories in reality TV are purportedly real, so reality programming assures viewers that these ideological constructions are indeed the-way-it-is. Despite the seemingly neutral stance as apolitical entertainment, reality shows still contain strong messages about cultural values like love, power, consumption, and happiness as well as gender, race, class, and sexuality built into their representations of reality. Documentaries and reality TV are always shaping reality regardless of how prominent the argument may or may not appear.

The ideas from these premises will continue to emerge throughout this chapter. With a clear outline of the relationships between reality TV, documentary film, and real life as well as an understanding of animal hoarding, we can now dive into examining the next cat lady site:

nonfiction media. The formulas for *Hoarders* and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* provide an excellent starting point for showing how "reality" gives the cat lady trope a sense of veracity.

Confessions: Animal Hoarding and Hoarders

At the beginning of every episode of *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, teasers featuring snippets from the upcoming episode highlight the drama that is to come. This is followed by an all black screen with white text, an insert title, with the following message:

> Animal hoarding is a serious and growing problem. It affects every community in America. Animal hoarding is a compulsive need to possess and control animals. It is a dysfunctional behavior with no known diagnosis or treatment. In most cases it is not addressed unless it becomes a crime. Until now.

In the first few minutes of the program, viewers are told that this show is acting as an intervention in the lives of individuals suffering from animal hoarding. The show also establishes itself as the last defender standing between these sick individuals and the authorities who will punish them for their crimes.

Confessions: Animal Hoarding (2010-present) airs on Animal Planet. Each episode pairs two unrelated cases of animal hoarding, and moves back and forth between the subjects' stories. In the first season of *Confessions* episodes were titled with the first names of the subjects like "Lolette and Robin," which is how *Hoarders* titles their episodes. This method of titling changed in the second season opting for sensationalized phrases like "Chihuahua Hell," "My Cats Are Killing My Daughter," or "80 Cats and a Baby." Subjects on the show are both men and women, and the animals collected have ranged from cats and dogs to the more exotic like

rabbits, snakes and reptiles, birds, horses, pigs, goats, or sometimes a combination of the above animals. The numbers of animals range from the teens into the hundreds.

Each episode follows a general formula. Usually subjects are introduced away from their homes or separate from the animals. Then, in another insert title, the number of animals in the subject's home is revealed. Sound is used to transition between the subject's introduction and unveiling the quantity of hoarded animals. Initially, music plays in the background. The sound is light consisting of strings and sometimes acoustic guitar. When the insert title divulges the subject's number the music is replaced by either a dramatic sound effect (similar to a bomb detonating or a door closing in slow motion) or a solitary piano arrangement. The change in sound helps establish the subject's transgression for viewers through this audiovisual arrangement. Film historian and documentary filmmaker Jeffrey Ruoff explains that the positioning of sound, like music or effects, in a documentary can create mood, facilitate a scene change, and, importantly, comment on the action because they provide "an editorial perspective for interpreting the images" (228). Exposing the subject's number is not a neutral presentation because the sound guides viewers' interpretations by providing the showrunners' commentary.

Following the reveal is a montage of observational footage taken from the subject's home. The visual focus shifts away from the person to a sensory spectacle of animal hoarding: long shots capturing throngs of animals intercut with close ups and medium shots of sick animals (i.e. oozing eyes, sneezing or wheezing, vomiting, etc.), the home's filth (i.e. overflowing litter boxes, destroyed carpets, walls spackled with brown grime, etc.), and, in several episodes, evidence of other hoarding (i.e. rooms filled with stacks of unused items, counters piled with dishes and other flotsam, etc.) or general disarray. The repeated shots hovering around or tracking through the mess are meant to create the sense of overwhelming strangeness. Often

these shots are intercut with talking head interviews with the subjects, family members, and other concerned participants like neighbors and coworkers. During this portion of the show, the individual's reason for hoarding animals is "determined" through the subject's personal reflections on their past. This version of history is confirmed by stories other participants tell in talking head interviews. Participants provide an outsiders' perspective on the subject's decline, but all the commentary substantiates a specific cause for the animal hoarding. Their concern, disgust, or fear for the subject is contrasted by intercut scenes of the subject's interviews either explaining their commitment to the animals, comparing the animals to their children, or stressing that taking care of animals is something they are compelled to do. Ordering and editing scenes in this manner builds a story arc revolving around the cause of hoarding and its effect on the subject. Intercutting participants' commentary alongside the subject's rationalizations makes the subject's devotion to animals seem like a delusional side effect from past trauma. The ordering positions participants as voices of reason better connected to normalcy. They are able to see the subject and the cause for hoarding clearly. In contrast, footage, shots, and sound bites of the subject are edited in to show how out of touch they have become.

For instance, in "80 Cats and a Baby" Carol and her husband Albert want to have a baby, but they have 82 cats they keep inside their home. They are both White but their class is unclear. Carol states, "God put animals on the earth. We're supposed to take care of 'em." This is followed with footage of her sitting on a piano stool in a cluttered living room dangling a feather on a string to the surrounding dozen cats. After footage of Carol and Albert eating dinner in a kitchen mobbed with cats, talking head interviews with family members provide outside testimonials about the filth inside of the couple's home. These interviews become voice-overs paired with footage of the house's squalor focusing specifically on the destroyed carpets,

describing the permeating, persistent cat smell, the overwhelming quantities of cat feces and urine, and cat snot all over the walls. The show shifts to discussing Carol's past. It is worth noting that Albert, Carol's hoarding husband, is not focused on in the same way despite his active role in catching, keeping, and caring for the cats. He is just as passionate about "rescuing" the cats as Carol – he says so in talking head interviews and observational footage shows him working alongside her. Yet it is Carol's past that gets examined, Carol's family interviewed, and Carol's animal hoarding that is the focus. While Albert is presented as an active participant in the animal hoarding duo (i.e. he is not presented as an innocent bystander or even as an enabler), his story and his hoarding goes unexamined. This is the case on several episodes of *Confessions* as well as episodes of *Hoarders*; many times it is the woman in the relationship who's the focus rather than presenting a dual story about hoarding.

In "80 Cats and a Baby" the death of Carol's mother, who also "rescued" stray cats, is deemed the starting point of a good thing gone out of control. Carol's father is used to kick off the trip down memory lane and her aunts corroborate his version of the past. As he talks about fatherly love, faded snapshots show Carol as a young girl, Carol growing up, and Carol with her mom. Her father says, "Carol and her mother had a relationship that got so close…that…I felt it was unhealthily close. They didn't go anywhere without the other." When her mother died Carol inherited the house and her mother's cats. Both aunts confirm her mother's passing as the "real" beginning of Carol's animal hoarding. The diagnosis is concluded with a shot of Carol sitting on a couch with nine cats while her voice-over says, "They are my pride and joy. I really truly believe God put all the cats into our lives for a reason. God wants me to look after his creatures, his animals that he made."

Confessions may start by stating that there is no known diagnosis or treatment for animal hoarding, but throughout the series it is clear that certain moments are highlighted to hinge the hoarding behavior to a cause. Subjects discuss different kinds of trauma ranging from parents' divorce, losing a loved one, childhood abuse, issues with abandonment, personal substance abuse, the addictions of a family member, miscarriages, life-altering accidents, illnesses like depression or anxiety, and the hoarding tendencies of a parent or care giver have all been cited. These events are plucked from the subject's past and become sites to explain away the hoarding behavior. Cultural Studies scholar Susan Lepselter found that the backstories from reality programs about hoarding were most frequently about emotional loss, which creates the trope of "the hole-inside-me" (930). Lepselter argues that this sets up a formula where psychological symptoms "have clear referents and can be fixed," which is simply not true. The program wants to provide a narrative arc that ties up loose ends in under an hour, as well as create a relatable story, which means things have to be generalized.

While subjects or family members reconstruct a purposeful past on *Confessions*, old photographs showing the subject during their younger days flash by and provide viewers with a trajectory of hoarding. Again, sound is used to indicate the moments in the personal narrative when the hoarding tendencies might have started as the light music turns darker or is replaced by dramatic sound effects. As with many documentaries and reality TV, the talking head interviews are filled with declarative statements; interviewers' questions are never heard and everything is said in full sentences, which accomplishes two things. In terms of the program, this documentary-style interview tactic builds the sense of narrative continuity. Viewers are provided with a traumatic cause and the potential hoarding effects; the rest of the episode focuses on "curing" the issue or, at the very least, clearing out some of the animals. The second thing

this tactic accomplishes is that it makes *Confession*'s self-styled cause(s) for the hoarding seem concrete and indisputable.

After identifying the cause for animal hoarding, the formula for the second half of *Confessions* focuses on subjects relinquishing the animals. Therapists, psychologists, counselors, veterinarians, and animal welfare agencies like the Humane Society, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), and Animal Control, are brought in to guide subjects back to normal. The on-air treatment most often used is family intervention under the guidance of a mental health professional. Family members plead with the subject to give up the pets, reveal how the hoarding hurts them, and assert how important and special the subject is. Subjects almost always admit they have a problem or need help and agree to give up some of their animals. Rarely do the authorities have to seize the animals on *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*. Seizure would create a different scenario, which the show actively works to avoid. As it states in the introductory title insert, the program is poised to intervene *prior* to subjects becoming criminals, or at least before their animal hoarding is recognized as criminal through the official channels. Only a few of the participants have criminal charges or fines for their animal hoarding at the time of filming. *Confession*'s formula is pretty straightforward: a problem is identified, its cause located, and at the end the subject is "cured" successfully. As subjects recognize their issues, accept help, and agree to voluntarily relinquish some of the animals a narrative of personal achievement is created. It is restorative, has closure, and leaves viewers hopeful. Involuntary seizure, on the other hand, would mean subjects had crossed to the other side of the law. This is usually the terrain of *Hoarders*.

When it comes time for subjects to relinquish their animals on *Confessions*, vans and trucks are shown arriving with large teams from an animal welfare agency. The person in charge

meets the subject outside and has virtually the same conversation across episodes: the animals come first and everyone is here today for the welfare of the animals, subject included. This tactic puts everybody on the same team, and, ideally, decreases some of the subject's defensiveness about outsiders entering their home and speculating on the subject's ability to care for the animals. Surrendering the animals creates the second opportunity for spectacle in *Confessions*. While the quantity of cats, filth, and disarray characterize the first half of the program, the second half is all about surging emotions. Subjects go through a variety of feelings as they let their pets be taken away. Some experience grief, some get angry and lash out at the animal agency volunteers and family members trying to help, some fret over their animals' distress at being caged, but all are inconsolably tearful. Viewers watch as men and women sob while the cats, dogs, and other animals are caged and carted away. Many try to explain that it is like letting go of their children. One woman says, "I feel like I'm being disemboweled" (Mary K., "80 Cats and a Baby"). Then, in the final moments of the show, most subjects address the camera directly and express gratitude and relief as the animals are driven off. Many comment on the painful process, but state that they are optimistic about their futures. The light music swells as subjects seemingly return to normalcy. There are updates on the subjects at the very end provided through inserts letting audiences know what happened in the months after filming. While some have not gone back to hoarding, others reveal that the subject was not "cured."

Hoarders follows a somewhat similar formula with a notably different tone. The focus of the program is hoarding in general, so animal hoarding comprises only a small percentage of episodes. Like *Confessions*, every *Hoarders* episode begins with teasers of the episode to come. This is followed by a title insert providing viewers with information about hoarding. Their version states: "Compulsive Hoarding is a mental disorder marked by an obsessive need to

acquire and keep things, even if the items are worthless, hazardous, or unsanitary. More than 3 million people are compulsive hoarders. These are two of their stories." Rather than beginning with the individuals and focusing on the human side, *Hoarders* immediately dives into the visual spectacle of hoarding. Cameras glide through rooms ankle deep in garbage intercut with close-ups of specific points of squalor like mold, rotting food, insect infestations, and/or animal feces. Whereas *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* revolves around subjects giving up some if not all of their animals, *Hoarders* focuses on clearing out the clutter (which sometimes means animals) and cleaning up the home.

The sound vacillates between maudlin guitars and pianos to threatening tones similar to *Confessions*. During the montages of filth and piles of garbage violin screeches (a lá Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho*) accompany the visuals. This familiar sound clues viewers into the horror unfolding before them and inserts the producers' subtle editorial perspective.

Hoarders pays particular attention to outsiders reacting to the homes, and providing viewers with details that may not be available through their televisions. Specifically, smells are discussed in great detail. For instance, in "Jake and Shirley," Jake's boyfriend describes the house's smell like "mildew meets dog barf meets human barf or like hot garbage…or something…it's a really putrid smell." On episodes with animal hoarding, animal waste overpowers people who do not live in the homes. Volunteers wear Hazmat suits, galoshes, protective eye wear, and respirator masks. In early seasons of the show, subjects provided most of the context for their hoarding with a few insert titles providing facts from medical journals and animal welfare agencies about hoarding. In later seasons, family members do point to the ritual behaviors that contribute to the hoarding (i.e. feeling exhilaration when finding a deal, the knowledge that the items could be used for some future project, the emotional connection to

objects or animals, etc.). Experts like therapists, psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, and hoarding experts as well as law enforcement come in to help through the process of clearing out the clutter. The purge and cleaning is more of a focus on *Hoarders* rather than curing the hoarder or locating an impetus for hoarding, but the program still tries to isolate a cause. Unlike *Confessions*, *Hoarders* frequently compares the hoarding to addiction. The therapists and other mental health professionals present on *Hoarders* are there primarily in the initial walk-through of the home and on cleaning days. They are shown guiding subjects through the purge, having them rank their levels of anxiety, and talking through what they are feeling in that moment.

The purge on *Hoarders* episodes featuring animal hoarding establishes a different tone from the relinquishing scenes in *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*. The conditions within many of the homes mean that if the cleanup is not thorough or within the time limit established by the show, the subject's home will be deemed unlivable or it could be condemned. The stakes for animal hoarders are even higher because when animal welfare agencies walk through the home they are assessing the level of animal cruelty. This means tallying up signs of abuse including neglect, starvation, dehydration, disease, and death. *Hoarders* raises the spectacle to another level during this portion of the show. Beyond *Confessions*' spectacles of homes teeming with animals, abject squalor, and highly emotional subjects, *Hoarders* adds the spectacle of dead animals. In episodes with cats it is not unusual for litters of mummified kittens to be found in an attic or bones from several cats trapped under boxes somewhere in the home. Animal remains are brought out to subjects who often seem completely unaware that these specific animals had been in the house, which further demonstrates how blind they have become to the their situation and shows they do not have a grasp of their animal population. In other cases subjects are eerily detached, seemingly unmoved by the parade of corpses.

With criminal charges and eviction on the line, tensions run very high between the animal welfare agencies, the cleaning crew, and the subject. The goal is to have the property livable again, and while therapists and other mental health professionals are present during the purge to assuage anxieties and occasionally challenge subjects about their thinking, the conclusion of the episodes rarely feels like the story is over. Whether the house is back to normal or not (which happens quite a lot), the final title inserts make clear that the road to recovery is long with most participants continuing to get help through therapy, counseling, or some other treatment. Like *Confessions*, though, some people have returned to their hoarding behaviors a few months after filming.

The formulas used in *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and *Hoarders* create a distorted image of this mental disorder. Cultural studies scholar Susan Lepselter warns that mediated hoarding narratives "form an overarching structure that defines, contains, and circulates a seemingly unified syndrome" (921). In their work on media representations of addiction Jason R. Kosovski and Douglas C. Smith found a similar formula in the structure of *Intervention*, another A&E reality program; the cause of addiction was consistently attributed to failure of the nuclear family. Kosovski and Smith stress that addicts often are from broken homes or underwent some kind of childhood trauma, but these are not the sole and universal causes of such behavior. Their concern is that within the parameters of reality television and the repetitive structure of these programs that the public's understanding of addiction will be skewed in one direction and in the dark about other causes and treatments of the disease or disorder.

The same can be said of the formulas for *Confessions* and *Hoarders*. The disorder is streamlined. Past traumas are easily identifiable by the hoarder and their families and friends as the cause for the hoarding. These shows only focus on a few treatments despite the range of

therapies available and sometimes required. Finally, by condensing the ongoing process of wellness to one hour with commercials hoarding seems to be relatively simple to treat. Although most episodes point to the fact that treatment continues beyond filming and some people returned to their hoarding when the cameras were gone, the overwhelming sense of resolution at the show's conclusion warps the timeline and work necessary to address this disorder.

Cat Ladies

Perhaps it is not surprising, given the close ties between reality TV and documentary film, that Christie Callan-Jones's documentary *Cat Ladies* (2009), shares much with *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and *Hoarders*. *Cat Ladies* claims to provide an emotionally honest portrait of four cat ladies. The documentary's website states:

> It's not the number of cats that defines someone as a 'cat lady', but rather their attachment, or non-attachment, to human beings. They create a world with their cats in which they are accepted and in control – a world where they ultimately have value. ("About the Film")

There are four women profiled in *Cat Ladies*: Margot, Jenny, Diane, and Sigi. After providing brief characterizations of the four cat ladies, the synopsis concludes that while society may dismiss these "crazy cat ladies," they are ultimately suffering from things everyone goes through: alienation, loss, and loneliness in a society that devalues the "different" ("About the Film"). Despite the different topics, portraits of cat ladies versus treating hoarders, the narrative formula created in the film looks very similar to those used in *Confessions* and *Hoarders*. *Cat Ladies* derives specific causes from each woman's past that determined their closeness to cats and distance from people. It also uses similar filming techniques to heighten sensory spectacles like

large numbers of cats and the women's living conditions, especially Sigi and Diane. Finally, the kinds of editing employed, sounds used, and framing further make *Cat Ladies* feel like an episode of *Confessions* or *Hoarders* without the narrative closure provided on television.

As mentioned above, intent is one of the major differences distinguishing documentary film from reality TV. The documentary's website makes Callan-Jones's intent explicit: render these women and their experiences relatable to viewers. But this goal does not translate smoothly to *Cat Ladies*. In an effort to generalize the four subjects' experiences and urge audiences to see their own potential for cat lady-ness, there is a forced sense of identification. Documentary film theorists Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro warn that identification can be tricky territory for documentary filmmakers. When done well, creating relatable inlets into subjects' lives sutures audiences to the film; it increases the sense of shared responsibility or sheds light on common human experiences. When it is not done well, identification can be patronizing. Spence and Navarro argue this is the case when "filmmakers tempt their audiences to feel sorry for a person or situation portrayed. Shared experience turns into pity. Or even worse, condescension. The communal bond is reduced to stooping to the level of the suffering subject" (105). Margot, Jenny, Diane, and Sigi answered the call for women who consider themselves or have been called cat ladies; director Callan-Jones plucked and arranged specific scenes and sound bites to create a spectrum of cat ladies in the film. While they may exhibit varying degrees of social awkwardness and self-awareness, what unites the four cat ladies and ties them to film viewers, if Callan-Jones's intent succeeds, is past personal trauma. Not unlike the narrative formulas about hoarding in *Confessions* and *Hoarders*, cat lady "tendencies" are the outcome or effect of something (i.e. feeling misunderstood, being different, etc.); it is not a personal choice according to the documentary.

Cat Ladies was profiled on an episode of *20/20* called "My Extreme Affliction." Couched between stories about people with physical illnesses and mental disorders – a young woman who developed alopecia and lost all her hair, prematurely aged children suffering from Progeria syndrome, and families of hoarders – is an interview with director Callan-Jones. To set the tone for the documentary segment voice-over narration explains the women in *Cat Ladies* "struggle with alienation, loss, and loneliness and have become *uncontrollably* connected to cats" (emphasis mine). The narrator continues that the women derive self-worth and value from cats. Clips from the documentary are shown while the interviewer asks Callan-Jones more detailed questions and the two engage in arm chair theorizing about what went wrong for these women. When Callan-Jones is asked why the four women in the documentary chose cats, she replies, "For all the women there is some trigger in their past that precipitated this relationship with cats. Something happened." These "triggers" become a driving force in the documentary's narrative arc.

For the most part, interviewers' questions are not heard in *Cat Ladies*, but they can be pieced together based on how the subjects' statements are phrased and the related topics covered. Along with trolling the four women's past for reasons why they identify as cat ladies, another question seems to pop up across interviews with Margot, Jenny, Diane, and Sigi. They were each asked to explain what it is that makes them cat ladies. This line of questioning forces them to piece together a general definition of "cat lady" and position themselves within it. The following section examines how each woman responded to this question and summarizes the different trauma attributed to each cat lady in *Cat Ladies*.

Margot, who has three cats, calls herself a proud cat lady happily stating, "I don't live alone; I live with three cats." She demonstrates their different meows and shows off her

collection of lost whiskers. Prompted to talk about her personal history, Margot discusses what it was like to be adopted at 15 months into a family of "high achievers." She explains that she was always different; from her looks to her accomplishments, she felt like she could not do anything right. Margot stresses that cats saved her because they love her, do not get mad at her, and accept her for who she is. These sweet statements are contrasted with several shots of Margot allowing Fritz, one of her cats, to lick her face. Jenny, who has 16 cats, locates her cat lady roots in her father who was a "raging alcoholic, wife-beating, child-abusing, bigot cop." While he was a source of pain, her mother and the cats were warm, safe places. The cats in particular were always there for her. When answering what qualifies her as a cat lady Jenny states, "I'm a cat lady because I love kitties because they're independent, they do what they want to do – they don't care, and I have 16 of them." While Jenny and Margot frame their relationships with cats in terms fulfilling personal companionship, Diane and Sigi represent the other end of the cat lady spectrum: animal hoarding. Both women identify as cat rescuers. When asked how she became a cat lady, Diane, who has 123 cats, concisely replies, "Because some cats came my way." Diane turned to rescuing cats after she was laid off when the bank she worked at for 40 years went through a merger. She says the "crazy" in crazy cat lady for her comes from the fact that what she does "saves the cats but it doesn't save me." Sigi has more cats than Diane, but no exact count is provided. Unlike the other three cat ladies profiled in the documentary, Sigi does *not* see herself as a cat lady. When she is forced to answer the question, though, she states, "My name is Sigi and I am a cat lady because there are too many strays and abandoned cats out on the street that are neglected and need a place to go." In her reconstructed past she says she did not fit into her neighborhood as a child, and was teased for speaking German. These experiences made her an underdog, so she has spent her life fighting for other

underdogs. At one point she compares the old, sick cats she has rescued to second-class citizens like "the negroes back in the day who had to sit in the back of the bus." Later she calls herself the "Mother Teresa" of cats.

Sigi, Diane, Jenny, and Margot's stories are woven together through editing. Despite living conditions, personalities, and the ways they identify with cats being very different, the moniker of cat lady lumps them together. Out of the four Sigi is the only one who is happy with her life. She repeatedly stresses that she is misunderstood and what she does is only unusual in contrast to "normal" people. According to Sigi there is nothing wrong with her; she just thinks differently. These thoughts are juxtaposed with footage of her enormous collection of cats, many of which are sick, in cages and running loose around the house and shots of her filthy, condemnable home. She is also the only cat lady whose story is intercut with talking head interviews featuring Agent Trey Smith, lead investigator for the Toronto humane society, who provides information about animal hoarding. For instance, Agent Smith looks earnestly at the camera as he says, "I think a cat hoarder and a cat rescuer are almost one and the same because when you ask a cat hoarder, they believe they are rescuing those animals from the street." There is a jump cut in the editing and his commentary becomes voice over as Sigi loads up cat-catching cages in her beat up minivan. As she struggles to back down a driveway Agent Smith says, "They believe they're making a difference and providing shelter for that animal whereas it would die in the street or be in the cold or extreme heat." Sigi is most certainly an animal hoarder. But her portrayal in the documentary does not look to address this; she is simply a cat lady, a title she actively resists. Sigi's resistance is presented as if she is the most out of touch from the bunch.

The rest of the women say they are unhappy with their lives. Diane no longer wants to return to her home full of cats. She is exhausted from taking care of them. Time lapse footage

taken from wall mounted cameras in her apartment reveal Diane barely sleeps because she spends most of the night up emptying litter boxes, feeding cats, and straightening her apartment. She says that rescuing cats gives her life purpose right now, but she wants to stop. She no longer goes out with friends or visits family. This is revealed as she re-listens to a year-old answering machine message of family singing "Happy Birthday." Her conclusion in the film shows her trying to lower her numbers by adopting out some of the cats, yet at the film's conclusion she states that her dream is to move to the country with all of the unadoptable cats. Margot similarly desires stronger relationships with people but concludes, "I hope that one day, someday, I'll be able to have a relationship with a person that is just as amazing, but for now, cats are where it's at."

Compared to the other women, Jenny has the most conflicting thoughts about her cats and the idea of being a cat lady. She is shown struggling to explain away her ongoing singleness as she ages. At the time of filming she is 35. Intercut with footage of her begging the cats to cuddle in bed are conflicted interviews where Jenny vacillates between loving and resenting the cats. She calls them an "excuse" for her personality and the state of her life; they drive men away and she can always blame them for her failed relationships. She seems to have similar feelings about herself. In one moment she calls herself a catch and in another scene she describes herself as a tough sell to men. Jenny's sardonic self-reflections are meant to be humorous, but often hang uncomfortably in the documentary. For instance, Jenny stresses that if marriage and kids do not happen for her that it is not a sign that she is "defective." Then she coldly laughs and states, "I'm defective, but not in a bad way." The following collection of dialogue further demonstrates Jenny's ambivalence:

> I wish I didn't have so many, but I don't know going back that I would be able to do it any differently than how I've done it…Yeah, they've stopped me from doing a lot of things: forming relationships, travelling…Given my personality they're a good excuse, too. I don't like to fail (sniggers). So if you don't try then you can't fail, right? And if you've got a good excuse not to try, then there you go…I can't end up having 30 cats. Then it's completely over. This way I'm still OK. I'm not sure what the magic number is. I'm pretty sure it's close to where I'm at now, but to go over…no, then I've just like…given up.

At this point a woman's voice interjects from off-screen and asks, "Then are you a crazy cat lady?" Jenny replies, "Yeah, then there's no hope."

Documentaries try to present one story that can stand for many similar tales; they encourage collectiveness and promote a sense of generalizable yet personal knowledge. Spence and Navarro point out, "Even when they seem subdued or impartial, documentaries tend to capitalize on this affective connection with the spectator" (124). Like *Confessions* and *Hoarders, Cat Ladies* tries to make its subject seem like it might happen to anyone. But unlike the reality programs this documentary is not looking at a mental disorder, it is presenting "emotionally honest" portraits of cat ladies. Yet throughout the film cat ladies are presented like they have a catching condition that can land on anyone for a range of reasons. According to *Cat Ladies*, women who dote on their cats to an unhealthy degree, a degree which is alluded to in the film but never defined, have a root cause that sets off this abnormal behavior. The film does not acknowledge that abusive parents, feeling like a black sheep at home, neighborhood bullying, and midlife crises after a job change are things that befall people the world over, but not everyone becomes a cat lady in the aftermath. It does not look at the fact that men are not at-risk

for becoming cat men. It does not distinguish between women like Margot who dote on three cats and women who have over 100 cats like Sigi or Diane; all women with cats could be cat ladies. Rather than interrogating cat lady mythology, *Cat Ladies* reaffirms that there is something wrong with women who choose to spend time with cats instead of developing human relationships. By projecting cat lady tendencies in retrospective histories, a cause for cat lady-ness is determined. It sloppily glues reality to fiction and "proves" that this boogeyman is real: becoming a cat lady could be any woman's fate. And if she does not address the deep-seated issues, issues the documentary presents as relatable and ubiquitous, or keep her love of animals in check and human relationships intact, then any woman is susceptible to this fate.

Return of the Spinster: Susan Boyle on Britain's Got Talent

Part of what lures audiences into viewing reality programs like *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and *Hoarders* and even documentaries like *Cat Ladies* is "cinematic schadenfreude," the German term for taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. Looking specifically at reality TV media critic Jennifer L. Pozner highlights the normalizing effects schadenfreude has for viewers. She states:

> That "What's wrong with you?" reaction is the viewer's equivalent of rubbernecking at an accident. Sometimes it makes us laugh, sometimes it shocks us, but we're unable to turn away from the cathartic display of other people's humiliation. Often it makes us feel superior: No matter how bad our problems may be, at least we aren't as fill-in-the-blank (pathetic, desperate, ugly, stupid) as those misguided enough to sign up for such indignities on national TV. (16)

Schadenfreude explains the pleasure some audiences derive from the failed auditions on FOX's *American Idol* (2002-present). The montage of contestants whose dream of singing their way to stardom is peppered with failure: off-key singing, people who do not fulfill traditional standards of beauty, desperate pleas for second chances, and humiliating rejection.

Scholars have used schadenfreude primarily to discuss reality TV shows that focus on competition, romance, and the body (Pozner; Mendible; McRobbie). Looking at the body might be figuring out how to dress it in TLC's *What Not to Wear* (2003-2013), changing how it looks through exercise on NBC's *The Biggest Loser* (2004-present) or through surgery on ABC's *Extreme Makeover* (2002-2007), or exploring its quirks like TLC's *Strange Sex* (2010-2011). When researching humiliation and subjectivities in reality TV, feminist scholar Myra Mendible found moral weaknesses, body flaws, and intimate betrayals heightened the sense of authenticity. For Mendible the "cycle" of humiliation requires a third party, the viewer, to gloat or experience some kind of observation or reaction about themselves. This opens up the idea of schadenfreude further to include the pleasure some audiences take when watching shows like TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-present), WE's *Bridezillas* (2004-present), any of Bravo's *Real Housewives* (2006-present), or familiar fare like *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, *Hoarders*, and *Cat Ladies*. These programs provide half-hour to hour-long freakish spectacles that potentially create a space where viewers can gawk, balk, and feel better about themselves. Sitting from a place of judgment viewers watch another's humiliation, or what they deem a humiliating scenario, and might feel guilty, sad, complacent, superior, or any range of emotions about themselves.

It is important to mention that not all audiences are the same and blanket statements about schadenfreude don't give enough credit to the critical engagement many viewers have with

reality TV. Media communication scholar Katherine Sender is one of the few researchers interviewing audiences about their consumption of reality TV. Participants in her study were regular watchers of makeover shows like *What Not to Wear* and *The Biggest Loser*. Contrary to the theories available about reality TV audiences, many of the participants voiced concerns over the ways subjects were represented by the programs and were sympathetic to subjects who were humiliated. Some described "affective identification" with makeover show candidates: feeling shame and humiliation on their behalf as well as internalizing their struggles and triumphs. Sender found participants felt ambivalent about the kinds of shaming built into the program's different formulas. To deal with this ambivalence some developed conditional structures to differentiate shame from humiliation. Shame was an appropriate method "of promoting positive change" when the subject had transgressed "socially valued norms of self-presentation and behavior" (88). Humiliation, on the other hand, was a "gratuitous display of shortcomings for the purpose of entertainment" (91). Shame was read as regenerative and a means to help subjects get back on the right track. Humiliation symbolized that the situation or person was hopeless. Interviewees in Sender's study felt humiliation signified heavy-handed manipulation by producers meant to boost drama at the expense of helping makeover show participants.

Although Sender acknowledges the social body being used to counterbalance the process of shame is not universal or neutral, this does not come through in participants' discussion of shame's positive potential. Their subtle approval of shame over humiliation is an endorsement of the ideological norms already reinforced on reality TV. Media critic Jennifer L. Pozner also looked at the show *What Not to Wear* and posits the purpose of every episode is to pull subjects back in line. Pozner further suggests the big reveal is more ideological than visual; by the conclusion of the show "Protestations about frugality, comfort, and nontraditional gender

presentation vanish. One stiletto-clad foot after another, these Stepford shoppers now march to the same consumerist beat" (153). The so-called "socially valued norms of self-presentation and behavior" being corrected on makeover shows are taken at face value, which is exactly what this project has rankled against. Difference is eradicated, choice diminished, and alternatives shut down while the structures of gender, race, class, and sexuality are maintained and legitimated. Pozner challenges the accord struck between reality fans' awareness of crafty editing and sometimes scripted material in reality TV and their judgments on participants' behaviors and the shows' marks of authenticity. It is a reflexive, complicated process. Viewers may experience schadenfreude in varying degrees and feel ambivalent about the tactics used to correct subjects' transgressions, but the threat and thrill of shame has to be understood as part of nonfiction media's draw.

The discussion of schadenfreude leads to the final cat lady pulled from reality TV: Susan Boyle. On April 11, 2009, Boyle was part of the initial auditions for ITV's *Britain's Got Talent*. In addition to auditioning in front of the show's judges, Simon Cowell, Amanda Holden, and Piers Morgan, contestants performed in front of a live studio audience in Glasgow's massive Clyde Auditorium. When Boyle walked onto the stage, the crowd as well as the judges sniggered at her appearance and demeanor; she matched the disillusioned ilk indicative of schadenfreude goldmines on reality TV competitions. Although prepared for a humiliating spectacle, the judges and the crowd ended up rising to a standing ovation less than a minute into her rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" from Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Les Miserable*. Boyle's audition went viral; it was uploaded to YouTube and received millions of views. Articles popped up around the globe with titles like "Singing Scottish Spinster a Global Sensation," "A UK Talent Show Has Unearthed a Woman to Rival Opera Star-from-nowhere Paul Potts - a 48-

year-old Scottish Virgin," and "Susan Boyle: The New Face – and Voice! – of the 'Spinster Cat Lady'." Some version of spinster, virgin, or cat lady made it into everything written about Boyle in the days following her success on *Britain's Got Talent*.

What happened during Boyle's seven and a half minute segment that lead to this kind of reception? It's all in the manner she is introduced: the portions of interviews included, types of shots, editing, and sound. She spends a little more than two and a half minutes singing; that leaves five minutes to establish Boyle as a virginal spinster cat lady.

As the segment begins, establishing shots show Scottish landmarks and the enormous crowd waiting to perform for *Britain's Got Talent*. The voice-over narration discusses the growing tension backstage in the search for talent. Footage shows a young woman with colorfully streaked hair and a painted face, people lined up to compete, and a woman bouncing on the balls of her feet with a nervous expression. The voice-over sets up the transition: "Next up is a contestant that thinks she has what it takes to put Glasgow on the map." The music which had been reverent tones changes with the jump cut. The solemn music is replaced by cartoonish music that might accompany an animated hippopotamus. The change in sound accentuates the first shot of Boyle: seated alone and taking a bite out of sandwich. Pozner calls this kind of transition in the music and visuals "audiovisual mockery" (138). While the other contestants have been standing nervously or fidgeting, Boyle is seemingly unperturbed by the competition as she munches on her sandwich, unaware she is being filmed. She is older than the others and plump with frizzy gray hair. She wears a knee-length formal dress that is gold with an overlay of lace, a satin sash at her waist, dark hose, and modest white heels. This behind-the-scenes look at contestants is also broadcast into the Clyde Auditorium, so the crowd is seeing Boyle backstage as well. Their peals of laughter reacting to Boyle's initial introduction can be heard by viewers

at home providing proof of the live studio audience and increasing the authenticity of the moment. It also stands in as a laugh track.

The next shots of Boyle are compiled from more backstage footage: Boyle waits to go onstage, conversations with Ant and Dec, the show's hosts, and talking head interviews. The cartoonish music continues as Boyle states that she is nearly 48 years-old and unemployed, and is looking forward to singing on the show. After bantering with Ant and Dec about her nervousness, shots from a talking head interview position Boyle in a close-up where she confesses, "I currently live alone with my cat called Pebbles, but I've never been married…never been kissed." She makes a pitiful sound and scrunches up her face and exclaims, "Shame!" Then from behind her hand, she jokes, "But it's not an advert!" Shots of Boyle preparing to go onstage are intercut with shots of the seated judges and broad takes of the mammoth audience. Boyle promises to make them all rock.

As Boyle takes the stage the audience can be heard loudly laughing, presumably at her appearance and the footage they had just seen of her backstage. Judges Cowell and Morgan talk with Boyle asking her where she is from and how old she is. When she again responds that she is 47 a reaction shot shows Cowell rolling his eyes. The audience laughs and there is a wolf-whistle from the crowd. It cuts back to Boyle who good-naturedly plays up the crowd by swinging her hips back and forth and saying, "And that's just one side of me." An inserted shot has Morgan furrowing his brow in disgust followed by a cut to Cowell making a similar expression. The next shot has Ant and Dec laughing in the wings with Boyle visible on the stage behind them. They mimic her hip gyration saying, "Hello!" Intercutting the image of Boyle standing on stage waiting to perform are shots capturing the massive audience's laughter and a shot of Cowell's aversion to Boyle as he puffs out his cheeks and exhales "Wow" under his

breath. This particular sequence frames Boyle's silly actions as grotesque demonstrations; her age and appearance annihilate any expression of sexuality. Interestingly, Holden, the only female judge on the panel, is not shown at all during this initial interview. She asks no questions and there are no reaction shots. By focusing only on the men, Boyle is deemed out-of-bounds from traditional gender norms and heteronormativity: too old, too ugly, and too insolent.

Women's reactions are included when Boyle answers questions about people who inspire her and her hopes about performing on *Britain's Got Talent*. As she earnestly answers questions her responses become the voice-over for cross-cut shots capturing audience reactions. There are two shots in particular that stand out. Boyle says her dream is to be a professional singer. Intercut with this is a medium-shot of a teenage girl rolling her eyes and sneering. The girl then casts a sidelong glance at the woman sitting next to her and subtly shakes her head no. Boyle is asked who she wants to emulate as a singer, and she responds she would like to be as successful as Elaine Paige. Her answer becomes the voice-over for another medium-shot with a different woman who makes a disbelieving face.

As Boyle begins to sing "I Dreamed a Dream," we see reaction shots from the judges and audience: Cowell's eyebrows raise, Holden's mouth drops, the hosts back stage are agog, young women in the crowd clapping and yelling affirmatively. At the conclusion, Morgan declares Boyle is the biggest "surprise" during his three-year tenure at the show, and while the crowd may have initially been laughing at her aspirations they were no longer laughing after hearing her sing. Holden follows up that everyone in the room had been cynically against Boyle initially and her presence and performance were a "wake up call." Holden's comment refers to the judges and audience evaluating Boyle's talent based on her appearance, but everything in the show's initial construction of Boyle set her up as a pratfall. The details of her life edited into the

introduction, the footage of her eating a sandwich, and the musical cues all set the table for a schadenfreude buffet.

Had Boyle failed, this segment would have gone unnoticed: just another delusional contestant on a silly reality show. Instead, Boyle was lifted up as a diamond in the rough emblematic of the potential inside every ugly duckling (or "hairy angel" as she was quickly dubbed in the media). In her analysis of Boyle's significance in celebrity culture, Su Holmes looks closely at the juxtaposition of Boyle's introduction and the reaction shots of judges and audience members. The manner in which she deconstructs the scene is worth quoting at length:

> The panel of judges as well as members of the audience express a combination of disbelief and scorn at what is seen as the apparent disjuncture between Boyle's physical appearance, social status, and professed aspirations. In this regard the sequence offers a somewhat predetermined subject position in which a superior, judging gaze is directed at a seemingly 'deluded' subject, her middle-aged status and physical appearance apparently making her desires even more unacceptable than those of the typically young, fame-seeking 'wannabe.' (75)

Holmes believes Boyle reaffirms the ideological myth of talent, meritocracy, and success. Boyle's reality TV fairytale makes talent seem like a tangible quality that anyone might possess; it just needs the right venue to shine. Holmes argues that the pervasive sense that anyone can make it acts as proof that the system is working because success is possible for everyone if they work hard and are in the right place at the right time. Even a frumpy spinster like Susan Boyle can become rich and famous.

Media critic Joan Smith agrees that Boyle's amazing story fulfills the David and Goliath, underdog story particularly loved in the Western world. What troubles Smith, though, is the

lingering impression that Boyle wanted to be accepted into TV celebrity. In the weeks that followed her initial audition, Boyle tried to change her appearance when scrutinized by the media; she dressed in ways that suggested she was trying to fit in, and underwent makeover after makeover. Boyle's escalation to fame was accompanied by people digging into her past. She was hyperactive and bullied at school, there were back and forth rumors about a disability due to lack of oxygen at birth, and possibly epilepsy (Iley; DePaulo; Holmes). Much was made of her erratic behavior and explosive temper in the competition. She may have had a makeover but she was still a woman out of control. The day after she came in second on *Britain's Got Talent* Boyle checked into a mental health hospital. In the weeks following, Boyle missed several concerts affiliated with the show because she "missed her cat" ("Britain's Got Talent's Susan Boyle Misses Show after 'Cat Screaming Fit'"). Smith ultimately questions the notion of "fairytale" so oft applied to Boyle's experience on the show emphasizing how "excruciating" it would have been to be in Boyle's shoes. She concludes, "Fairy stories are full of woodcutter's daughters who get transformed into princesses, but what's happened to poor Susan Boyle has much more in common with a freakshow."

Conclusion

Comparing the subjects of reality TV to freaks is not all that unusual. Cultural Studies scholar Susan Lepselter likened the subjects of *Hoarders* to freaks as well. She explains her use of freak is not categorical so much as the way the hoarder is "encouraged to step outside her own phenomenological involvement with the items she has hoarded and to see the whole mess – and herself – as a freakish spectacle" (928). Through this presentation, subjects can adopt the normative and social point of view necessary to re-connect with society. Interestingly enough,

this wraps back around to the idea of shame. Reality TV that focuses on transformation like home and personal makeover shows a lá *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, and *Hoarders* use shame to goad subjects into reform. Deviants are brought to heel when their transgressions are held up to public scrutiny. Media communication scholar Katherine Sender argues that the power of shame is forcing the subjects of these shows to see themselves through the eyes of another. While Sender mainly researches reality makeover shows, she found that "shame projected onto the physical body also extends to its habitus" (87). For the people on *Hoarders* and *Confessions* as well as the women profiled in *Cat Ladies* it is a combination of self and home up for scrutiny.

Are you born a freak or are you freakish only when society deems you as such? Are you born a cat lady or do you become a cat lady when life gives you lemons and you opt for cats instead of lemonade? So far the narratives about cat ladies in reality TV and documentary films suggest that all cat ladies are the results of mental disorder, emotional distress, and tough childhoods. Like the other media discussed, there is no room for a narrative of choice. Once launched into the public eye Susan Boyle's behavior, personality, and relationship status were tethered to a range of medicalized conditions. The "emotionally honest" portraits in *Cat Ladies* refused Sigi's unapologetic insistence that she chooses cats by interrupting her story with information from the Toronto Humane Society. The same tactic is used on *Hoarders*. Medical information appears on insert titles to remind viewers that the subjects are sick and to educate them about the trajectory of disorder and treatment. Most viewers will be able to relate to the subjects' various causes or "triggers," yet the framing discourages audiences from identifying with them. More than the ambivalent tools of identification, there is another angle completely avoided. These media texts fail to factor in or even acknowledge the larger social fabric that

impacts everyday conditions. Similar to the popular psychology texts during the 1980s backlash, these medicalized narratives frame the subjects as either victims of their own poor choices or incapable of restraint. There is no analysis of the changing social, cultural, and ideological circumstances that connect us all.

The nonfiction media analyzed in this chapter provide an image of cat ladies in the extreme. On the one hand, the narratives chalk up cat ladies as victims of themselves: trapped by their own mental disorder. Cat ladies are predisposed, temporarily out of control, and can be cured. On the other hand, since the causes presented in the media are simultaneously vague and universal, it makes it seem like all women could become cat ladies. If their personal histories are not investigated, their emotional baggage not rifled through, and their connection to cats not kept in check, then any woman could turn into the nightmare depicted on screen. Even if she only has one cat like Susan Boyle or is married or in a relationship like many of the subjects on *Confessions* or *Hoarders*: cat ladies walk among the normal. In fictional media, the cat lady offsets correct practices of domesticity and womanhood. Characters like Angela Martin from *The Office* and Eleanor Abernathy from *The Simpsons* are so one-sided and extreme that it becomes difficult to identify with them even if you yourself partake in the undesirable behavior. They still serve as a warning, but their power is in the periphery; a quiet reminder to uphold traditional gender roles lest you be seen as unattractive, socially awkward, or failing. In nonfiction media the cat lady is moved from the periphery to the center of the narrative where cats are a symptom of much larger issues. The association with hoarding puts the "crazy" in crazy cat lady. It does not matter that the animal hoarders depicted on *Hoarders* and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* are people from all walks of life. All hoarders may not be cat ladies, but all cat ladies have the potential to become hoarders. This is the message of the

documentary *Cat Ladies*. Beware! Women who care "too much" about their cats are unstable. It is no longer a social stigma; it's medical.

But how do we diagnose? There is no number of cats that categorizes a woman as a cat lady. There is not a specific set of behaviors that can be exhibited to diagnose a woman as a cat lady. It might be anything from spending too much money to taking too many photos to talking about them too much, but how much is too much has yet to be defined. There is no age or relationship status that can prove a woman is *not* a cat lady anymore. The historical weight of the cat lady, her longstanding presence in Western culture, provides the foundation where a scaffolding of truth can be built, confirmed, or simply falsified. Documentary film and reality TV have shown us the proof. No longer a character from fiction showing women what-not-to-do, the cat lady is the monster within that must be controlled. The boogeyman is real.

CHAPTER FIVE.

CONCLUSION

In the final stages of this dissertation, comedian Michael Showalter published a book entitled *Men Can Be Cat Ladies, Too*. Showalter, who has eight cats with his wife, attempts to retrain men to be more cat-compatible. He locates his potential audience as "guys" who are forced to associate with people who have cats: girlfriends, new roommates, and bosses, as well as the rogue "cat-curious" guy. In Showalter's typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, he assures his presumably male audience that it's OK to be unsure around cats because "Men are from Mars, cats are from Venus" (3). The book is full of silly lists, how-to guides, illustrations, photographs, and quizzes to document the reader's progress toward becoming a cat lady. He tells his presumably male audience:

> You will be transformed from a butt-picking, misshapen, semi-incompetent caveman into a true pet-loving gentleman, into maybe, just maybe, a FULL. FLEDGED. CAT LADY. That's right, you heard me correctly, a Cat Lady. Fellas, if you complete my course all the way to its final chapter, you too can walk around all day in sweatpants mumbling to yourself about coupons while thousands of little cat eyes watch your every move. (2)

He moves from exaggerated, Neanderthal-like masculinity to the scattered, disheveled stereotype of failed femininity symbolized by the cat lady. There is a cartoon cat lady illustrated throughout the book: hair up in a bun, cardigan-clad, and speech bubbles with absurd cat lady quips like

"Sometimes when I'm in public I forget my cats aren't with me and I talk to them anyway! Isn't that a hoot?" or "Does this chutney still look fresh?" (42).

He doesn't call her crazy outright, but he doesn't have to. The evidence is still there. In a progress report halfway through the book, the reader is asked to identify which example is most like themselves. There are three men pictured and the reader is told to choose the one that best represents who they are. The first two men are dressed identically: collared button-ups with slacks and leather shoes. They have similar facial expressions. The information about these men lets you know they haven't become Cat Lady Guys yet; the text points out that there's not much cat hair on them and that they still have social lives. The third man, though, looks completely different. He wears a sweatshirt with a winter-scene screen printed across the front, ill-fitting pants, and ugly white sneakers. He's smiling hugely and has a pair of oversized glasses with thick lenses, too. The information provided about this man shows his cat lady qualities: dark circles under eyes from cat-caused sleepless nights; a cell phone chock full of cat pictures; and cat pee on his shoe (114). If a reader most identifies with this third man, he is an "intermediate" cat person, and well on the way to becoming a Cat Lady Guy. A few pages later there is a photo of a cat lady. She wears the same over-sized glasses and winter-scene sweatshirt with the same syrupy smile.

At the end of the book, Showalter has a mock self assessment. The Cat Lady Guy final exam asks questions like "How many cats do you own?" and "How do you treat stray cats?" The final task is to order a list of possessions the reader owns. The instructions specify to rank based on quantity, least to greatest. The options are old magazines, saved birthday cards, empty water bottles, kitty litter boxes, string, and cardboard boxes. The familiar scene of useless objects and trash indicative of hoarding appears again. Part of assessing the reader's "progress" toward cat

lady-ness is to identify as a hoarder. This is followed by an official "Cat Lady Guy Certificate" and another image of the cat lady clad in a sweatshirt and over-sized glasses. This time six cats sit at her feet. The speech bubble over her head states (and possibly threatens): "Congratulations! You're like me now" (167).

Granted, Showalter's book is completely in jest. There are a few serious points about supporting local shelters, cat care, and human self-improvement. He promises that it's more than becoming a Cat Lady Guy, "it's about becoming an all-around better person" (24). Perhaps the point of humor is that the whole premise is too absurd – men can't be cat ladies. There are men who like cats and men who have several cats. Some cat hoarders are men. But the photographs of the Cat Lady Guy in Showalter's book don't show a man with cats; the Cat Lady Guy is only recognizable as a cat lover by his cat lady drag. Although Showalter jokingly recommends readers adopt 25 cats, the illustrations are of one man and his one cat. There isn't a male equivalent for this trope[1]. Men aren't boxed in by their feline appreciation. And this is part of how a containment strategy works.

I've used Foucault's notion of containment strategy to scaffold this project from the beginning. Containment strategies are the "techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal" (*Discipline and Punish* 199). In Foucault's sense of disciplinary power, these strategies help to create and maintain a culture of individualized, ordered, and branded subjects. No matter what historical moment, there are always strategies at work to divide a population of people apart. To contain a subject provides "ways of saying and seeing, discursive practices and forms of self-evidence" (Deleuze 48). Like animal taxonomy, containment plucks out individuals, identifies and names subjectivities, defines and circumscribes, and then categorically groups them together. But how to order and rank?

Foucault found that certain human behaviors, practices, acts and characteristics were problematized and became subject positions that tied people to specific identities (Yates). The problems were perceived as a kind of deficit or lack compared to the norm. The comparison is a key point because it defines through the negative: I am this because I am not that. For instance, diagnosing some people as mad is necessary for others to be seen as sane.

Philosopher Shelley Tremain explains that disciplinary power is not a repressive form of power (although it can be in the extreme); rather its focus is "guiding, influencing, and limiting" an individual's conduct as well as their freedom (10). It's more about productive possibilities. Instead of rigidly restricting options, the focus is instead the options available – options individuals can *choose*. In addition to being classified, individuals are expected to classify themselves and behave accordingly. Tremain argues that subjects are "formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of them" (10). Disability Studies scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell argues that when something is deemed "unruly, monstrous, and boundary-breaching" like disability, it must be distinguished from other "fluid and leaky categories" such as illness, poverty, and aging (112). Containment, then, creates "a civilized workability for procedural justice, a regulated liberty that produces practices of normality, rationality, and pathology" (112). Campbell looks specifically at the strategies of disability's containment, but the idea applies to any subjectivity that falls outside the discursive "normal."

The goal with containment strategies is obedience. What does being obedient mean? In a word, normalcy: resolutely upholding normal, performing normal, and keeping a watchful eye for those who aren't normal. There are rules for staying in-bounds for every ontological identity including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and ability. Docile, productive citizens will respect the rules and do their best to participate in the capitalist system by working, reproducing,

and training future generations of little workers. Those hegemonic norms are dictated by a totalizing network of individuals working for and against an automatic and anonymous power. The process of normalizing "traverses all points and supervises every instant"; it compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 183). The process of normalization is pervasive. Foucault stresses that disciplinary power is productive, and this productivity is part of what helps it remain an invisible, guiding force. Disciplinary power "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 194). Ideological state apparatuses instruct and assess subjects' adherence to the norm. There is always more work to be done on the self, behaviors and attitudes to be fixed. School, church, medicine, family, and media train us in the normal – what it is; ways to achieve it; and, importantly, what it's not.

Containment strategies are corrective. They teach by example and their lessons are constantly reaffirmed through ideological state apparatuses. The case studies in this project – the crazy cat lady, the reprehensible animal hoarder, the proud spinster, the unproductive old maid – show viewers what *not* to do. They are cultural models of failed womanhood. When cat lady Angela is contrasted with the other female employees on *The Office* viewers can see the many ways she fails to perform 21st century femininity. Kelly is bubbly and hyper-feminine. Pam is fun, laid back, and friendly. Phyllis is sweet and motherly. Angela is domineering, rude, uptight, unapologetic, and self-righteous. The comparison highlights the ways Angela is different, which are understood as departures from the norm. More than identifying abnormality, cat ladies, spinsters, and old maids help distinguish the norm. It's like two lessons in one, a "Goofus and Gallant"[2] for the ages! Kelly, Pam, and Phyllis's desirability is highlighted against

Angela's undesirability. In general, the cat lady's presumed life of loneliness, assumed physical failings, and pathologized madness show viewers what lies on the other side of normalcy. Animal hoarders on reality TV and in documentary film are also framed within difference. Dysfunctional behavior and mental disorder are the foundation for *Cat Ladies*, *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and *Hoarders*. From their outset these texts are dedicated to making the abnormal visible. Focusing on abject living conditions, mental illness, and interventions not only defines hoarding, but it also gives viewers new lenses to examine their own potential hoarding tendencies. With the knowledge of hoarding symptoms and treatments viewers are equipped to effectively self-police. Rather than focusing on an abnormal cat lady character the reality TV programs and documentary film examined in this project look to diagnose abnormal behaviors.

As discussed throughout this research, cat ladies, spinsters, and old maids are visual shorthand for independent single women in the media. These female characters transgress social norms, challenge heteronormativity, and query gender roles. The containment strategy perverts any positive potential in their difference. They are deconstructed so thoroughly, boxed in so completely that, ideally, audiences will *choose* normal. Rather than opening up gender expression, any alternative is inverted. Women who succeed at work aren't like "normal" women. Women exploring different kinds of sexual expression (including celibacy) are "deviant." Women who don't have children are neglecting their "natural" biological functions. More than these messages, the characters need to clearly show how improper, incorrect, or monstrous transgression from the norm can be. Cat ladies provide viewers with a not-so-subtle reminder: enfranchised, empowered women may be alluring for a time, but women who transgress gender have something wrong with them. Deficiency, compulsion, and choice, the three root causes outlined in Chapter Three, destabilize the cat lady on every level: appearance,

personality, emotional or mental stability, as well as her accomplishments. Even her decision-making abilities are undercut. Choice is rewritten as incompetence. Perhaps she mismanaged her life and ended up single. She chose to focus on her career, not her romantic relationships. She's incapable of making decisions for herself because her mental state is questionable.

If the containment strategy works, the potential power of a single, employed, self-reliant female character will be undermined. Ideally, the alternative will look so undesirable that audiences will choose to adhere to the norm. The cat lady may not have a choice, but those in the audience do. Cat ladies, spinsters, and old maids instruct from the periphery: stay in-bounds, toe the line, but do not cross it. By no means do cat lady characters force women to avoid careers or haphazardly marry the first man to propose, but that's not the point. That would be repressive, top-down power. Instead, representations like the cat lady quietly, constantly buzz in the background – *Stick to the norm, or else!*

Obviously, cat ladies, and the real women this stereotype supposedly represents, are not the only figures on the edge of society. They are joined by people whose values counter the mainstream or whose membership to a systematically subordinated group put them there. Fiona Kumari Campbell underlines the fact that the "normative citizen" is usually White, heterosexual, able-bodied, politically conservative, and middle class. If that's the norm, then there's a lot of abnormal out there that needs containing. In her research on law and disability, Campbell argues that disability is not regarded as a neutral category. I would add that there is nothing matter-of-fact or neutral about any ontological category. These categories are "value laden" and, as with disability, are often "underpinned by a theory of tragedy that makes possibilities of 'pride' difficult (if not impossible) to generate" (Campbell 117). Within a system of disciplinary power, groups of people are separated out from the rest, quantified in their adherence to the norm, and

made visible. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze suggests that "Power relations designate the 'the other thing' to which statements (and also visibilities) refer, even if these latter elements are virtually indistinguishable" (83). Single points of difference are stressed in a binary. Binary on top of binary, that but not this, this and not that: disciplinary power reminds us that we choose and thus actively create our unique identities. Never mind that choices were always limited and their framing highly manipulated, there were still options available. Foucault states: "The disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate" (223). For individuals to be "disqualified and invalidated" and identities to become "value laden" ideological state apparatuses must ensure the abnormal is framed very specifically. To encourage specific ways of reading abnormal containment strategies rely on mobilizing particular affects.

Different affects catalyze a range of reactions that seep into the ways individuals feel, write, think, and act (Probyn). According to Cultural Studies scholars Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, affects are "integral players to a body's perpetual becoming…With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself – webbed in its relations – until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter" (3). Entwined in the process of acting on and reacting to the body, affect proves to be a very powerful tool for encouraging certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors over others. Anna Gibbs, a negative affects scholar in the Affect-Image-Media Research Group, posits that affect is "the primary communicational medium for the circulation of ideas, attitudes, and prescriptions for action among them" (339). Visual media in particular function as "amplifiers and modulators" of affect (Gibbs). In other words, when considering affect in media, affect is what makes things matter; they're emotional cues. When the media broadcasts affect,

it's not necessarily a raw stream of emotion. Affects can be manipulated, co-opted, and created. They can be edited together, pulled apart, and reassembled to form affective sequences. One example Gibbs provides is the sequence startle—terror—distress—anger. This four-part affective sequence was increasingly common in Western post 9-11 media, but any number of affects can be strung together to build specific sets of feeling. Affect theorists Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie use the term "refrain" to discuss affective sequences. A refrain, like an image, is simple, but simple refrains can be combined to form complex refrains which is often the case in television or film production (149). Aesthetics of the image like lighting and framing, facial expression, tone of voice, body comportment, sound effects, and music all transmit affect. Different texts (i.e. news report, commercial, sitcom, etc.) or even different moments within the texts (i.e. reporting on a serial rapist's most recent victim versus reporting on the baby marmot being raised by a Labrador retriever) necessitate different affective sequences or refrains in order to push the audience toward a specific range of responsive affects.

Imagine affect like sections in an orchestra. Different instruments produce different affects. While a single note alone can elicit a reaction, stringing together several notes from multiple sections adds more depth to the sound. Depending on the arrangement, the sound intended may be beautiful, mundane, or discordant. In other words, affective sequences or refrains contextualize the ways producers feel certain texts should be read. In an increasingly media-saturated environment, they provide order and structure to chaos (Bertelsen and Murphie). While a refrain can open up new kinds of expression, Bertelsen and Murphie warn that they can also render others inexpressible (139). Put differently, there's always potential for alternative and negotiated readings of texts, but some longstanding, familiar refrains have well-known hegemonic messages. Viewers, regardless of their conscious feelings or personal opinions, can

be thrown into a problematic affect by a complex refrain (Bertelsen and Murphie 149). According to Gibbs, this is because "Affective states experienced in particular contexts call up the unconscious beliefs and characterological dispositions or attitudes familiar to them" (339). Consider the cat lady. She's a historical figure with layers of meaning spackled on over centuries. Built on top of spinsters, old maids, and the complex attitudes associated with them, cat ladies are meant to instigate a specific set of feelings.

As this research has shown, negative depictions of spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies play on pity, disgust, fear, and anxiety. While positive affects like joy, freedom, success, and desire might seem like they'd be the best personal motivators, it's actually negative affect that instigates action. In fact, critic and poet Sianne Ngai argues that "ugly feelings" are the "psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs" (3). Negative affect better motivates people to self-police. As Greg J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg point out, affect always points to an unknowable future. It hints at things to come, things always out of view from the present moment. But the power in affect, positive or negative, is that that version of the future may never arrive. The reality of the future doesn't matter, though, because affect is "*virtually* present in duration" (Seigworth and Gregg 21, their emphasis). Social theorist Brian Massumi echoes this sentiment in his discussion of post 9-11 affect and the affective power of threat. Even if a threat is found to be harmless or nonexistent, it is still real because it was *felt* to be real (53). Ngai also points out that "spurious" emotions dictate how well the stock market does, so much so we might consider our system an economy run on emotions. There are very real effects attached to affect, regardless if the threat or emotion behind it was "real."

For instance, anxiety is a negative affect focused completely on the future. Anxiety is all about the ways an unknown future might affect the self and the world it inhabits. It's an

"expectant" emotion (Ngai). Unlike some of the other ugly feelings Ngai discusses, anxiety can be projected onto another person or thing "usually as a form of naïve or unconscious defense" (210). Instead of recognizing anxiety from within, it's externalized. The source of unease or angst can be outsourced away; self-reflection is no longer required because any unease is coming from something or somebody else. Anxiety always validates the anxious person's concerns; it reaffirms their rightness (Ngai 247). Ngai suggests anxiety is always turning away from something, never moving toward. By projecting anxiety, the anxiety-ridden needn't be introspective because they're forever blameless. The moments of backlash discussed throughout this research were riddled with anxiety surrounding the changes brought on by women's empowerment. Those invested in patriarchy were able to turn away from the source of their anxiety, empowered women, and felt validated in their subject identities. The threat was always future-oriented. Presumably celibate spinsters were driving down birth rates and ruining future generations. The changes in women's gender roles foreshadowed the impending breakdown of society. Ngai calls the movement away a "revolutionary uplift" that allows subjects to move away from their source of anxiety (247). The consternation was directed at women: women's sexuality, women's roles in society, women's health, changes in femininity, and so on. Yet, as Susan Faludi pointed out, the real site of anxiety was men and masculinity. The anxiety was externalized and the projected problem was women, not men.

In her discussion of disgust, possibly the ugliest of ugly feelings, Ngai understands it to be "dialectically conjoined" to desire (333). Disgust cycles between fascination and repugnance. Cultural objects forged from taboo and prohibition can unintentionally make the disgusting alluring (Ngai). Unlike anxiety, disgust cannot be projected onto something else. It remains resolutely tied to the person, place, thing, or whatever it's connected with. While some of the

other negative affects require subjects to empathize and identify with something outside of themselves (i.e. pity, embarrassment, shame), disgust actually "blocks the path of sympathy" (Ngai 335). More than prohibiting any kind of sympathy, disgust, in Ngai's understanding, "seeks to include or draw others into its exclusion of its object, enabling a strange kind of sociability" (336). What can be classified as disgusting is completely othered and becomes not only un-relatable, but a site that unites people in their aversion. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller explains that stigmatized groups are often associated with disgust. Miller lists the obese, the disabled, the deformed, the mentally ill, the grotesquely ugly, the criminal, and anyone who does not "qualify for membership in the generous category of 'normals'" as those most often connected with disgust (199). That which characterizes each of these groups can't be ignored; they're too far out, too abnormal. Thanks to disciplinary power these stigmatized groups are highly visible, and, as mentioned above, ontological categories are not neutral. The negative affects connected to stigmatized individuals include alarm, disgust, contempt, embarrassment, concern, pity, or fear (Miller). According to Miller, these negative affects "confirm the stigmatized person as one who is properly stigmatized" (199). The stigma is deserved because it wouldn't feel wrong if it was right.

The negative affects attached to the cat lady signify that she is dangerously distant from normal. Pity, disgust, fear, and anxiety are mobilized to further shut down any alternatives produced by a single, independent woman. Negative affect is layered on top of negative affect; the goal is to make her as undesirable as possible. Yet her positioning is in the periphery, almost always a minor character – why go through all that effort for a supposedly insignificant character? Why dismantle her so completely if she doesn't embody a threat? That's the tell. Stripped down to the basics, minus all the negative affect and divisionary tactics, the cat lady is a

single independent woman. She *chooses* work over dependence, cohabitating with animals instead of humans, and breaks from gender expectations rather than succumbing to normal. She has completely opted out of the patriarchal system and that makes her loaded with potential power. Systematically annihilating the cat lady contains the threat single independent women create and quells anxieties around changing gender roles. Eradicate all traces of agency and choice. Shroud her in negative affect so that everyone knows hers could be the fate of any woman who transgresses too far.

The expansion of mass media and mass marketing during the mid-1800s changed how people experienced containment strategies. Messages circulated faster than ever before. People were further categorized as intended audiences, but also assigned themselves to demographics based on their interests (i.e. were you a *Godey's Lady's Book* girl or a *Ladies' Home Journal* woman?). Popular literature, newspapers, magazines, informative pamphlets, medical and health information, cartoons, and other widely distributed cultural texts let people know what was and wasn't normal. These texts also helped guide readers feelings through affective sequences. Widespread and totalizing, popular culture rules through conformity while claiming to have originated from public opinion (Faludi). Media messages confirm connections between specific affective responses to certain genre conventions, narrative structures, and stereotypes. Their repetitions ensure that particular sets of affects are mobilized (Gibbs). Media and marketing help to condition audiences.

Research for this project starts in 2000 BCE, well before the expansion of mass media and marketing, to show that the affective currents surrounding women, cats, and women and cats have oscillated across time. While modern iterations position cat ladies as pitiful, disgusting, and anxiety-inducing, this has not always been the case. Cats were considered sacred in ancient

Egypt because they protected human food stores and homes from vermin and other biting, stinging pests. Once they agreed to domestication, cats could be observed up close and personal. The cat's (perceived) ambivalent nature was symbolically linked to protection, fertility, sexuality, and motherhood as well as aggression, destruction, and fierce fighting skills. These symbolic traits connected goddesses with cats, especially the goddesses Bastet and Sekhmet. These could be protective forces, but were just as likely to turn on that which they were supposed to protect. Like cats, goddesses with feline associations were characterized by their ambivalent nature. In statues, reliefs, and tomb paintings goddesses were depicted with leonine heads, carrying kittens, or holding sistrums to show their moods and associations with other goddesses. The relationship between women and cats was extremely powerful.

In the Middle Ages witches and their female familiars were also thought to be powerful, but unlike goddesses in ancient Egypt their power led to fear which resulted in prosecution and persecution instead of reverence. Ambivalence wasn't tolerated in a time of religious upheaval and social uncertainty. Cultural anxieties fluctuated as war, rebellion, plague, and famine swept through Europe during the Middle Ages. The violent spread of Christianity vilified rural religions and old traditions creating an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Cultural anxieties can be seen through the accusations of witchcraft, sorcery, and heresy. Women and cats were often accused of all three. Heresy was the first step toward marginalizing a portion of the population during this early version of the containment strategy. But this was prior to the switch from repressive forms of power to disciplinary methods; if you fell into the category of abnormal you could be put to death. Women and their familiars were often burned at the stake together.

Ambivalent iconography of women and cats still present today took root during the Middle Ages and early modern period. Cats were connected to the Devil, bad luck, and just

general evilness. They also simultaneously symbolized otherworldliness and represented the natural world. It was during the early modern period that cats indicated a happy, peaceful domestic situation. Increasingly, women and cats were used to signify sex, sexuality, and sensuality. Paintings, lithographs, newspapers, and popular literature help spread these symbolic connections along with their accompanying positive and negative affects. The arrival of Gutenberg's printing press in 1450 sped up media production. Images and ideas could be mass (re)produced quickly and disseminated wider than ever before. This was just the beginning of a well-oiled containment strategy.

Spinsters, old maids, and cat ladies, cultural models from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, reveal a highly adaptable, resonant containment strategy. The trope seems to resurface in times when the gender order is under pressure. The mid-1800s through 1930 were marked as years of crisis brought on by first-wave feminism, the Industrial Revolution, and general insecurities about life in the modern age in both America and Europe. Representations of single, independent women were characterized by ambivalence; praised and condemned, spinsters and old maids were put through the ringer. They were ambitious for seeking an education and pursuing careers, yet selfish for stealing men's jobs. They put society ahead of themselves when they chose not to marry and have children, yet were cast as examples of aberrant womanhood because they neglected their natural female duties. They were happy and healthy, yet depressed and sick (mentally and physically). The same ambivalence characterizes media representations at the turn of the 21st century. The cat lady finds her home in television, fiction and nonfiction film, and the web. 1980s backlash maligned women who took advantage of the new opportunities: marriages delayed to further careers; rising rates of cohabitation; and easier access to birth control allowed women to postpone having children. The anxieties were the same and so

were the conclusions: women are selfish, women are denying their nature, women are sick. Naturally, the framing has been updated to accommodate 21st century conditions but the containment strategy is remarkably unchanged.

Eleanor Abernathy, Angela Martin, the women in *Cat Ladies*, and participants on *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* and *Hoarders* are the most visible forms this containment strategy takes. For the most part, it continues to operate from the periphery. Cat ladies are most recognizable as a minor character or in the punch line of a joke. These passing references demonstrate how powerful the containment strategy is. She doesn't even need to be pictured or physically present. This implies that everyone in the audience is on the same page and agrees that a cat lady, and all she represents, is laughable, pitiable, monstrous, or mentally ill. But once you start looking for her and see the cat lady, she's impossible to un-see. Yes, she's in the periphery, but she's everywhere.

A containment strategy is never airtight; it can't exist in a vacuum. It expands and contracts based on the cultural zeitgeist. Although insidiously pervasive, I believe this particular strategy is not long for this world. 21st century feminisms, new social movements, cultural theory, and animal rights activism are working to break open the fields of sociology, psychology, biology, and history. Animal Studies in particular opens discourse and reframes the cat lady's feline associations positively. Cat ladies are defined by close, boundary-breaking relationships with their cats. They dote in ways reserved for other human beings. This transgresses one of the oldest binaries on the books: human/animal. But recent research on cognitive abilities, emotional atmospheres, and new understandings of the human-animal bond has made it difficult to maintain the strict boundaries between humans and animals.

Non-human animals have been othered for centuries to better define what it is to be human. Animal Studies compares people's treatment of animals to racism, slavery, colonialism, citizenship, and sexism and understands the modern world to be built on the backs of human and non-human slaves (Berland; Haraway; Novek). Theologian and active participant in the Animal Studies community Aaron Gross argues that the human/animal binary is the foundation of Western ethics, which means querying it requires rethinking fundamental questions of morality, justice, and compassion. He further states "Animal studies is thus equally preoccupied with questions of ontology and ethics because it strikes at the roots of how both domains are conceived" (3). Once you start tinkering and asking questions, the seemingly natural distinctions between animal and human fall apart. The differences aren't concrete; there's a lot of fluidity between humans and animals. Yet this human/animal binary has been used to define not only what it means to be a human being, but serves as the basis for human language, symbol, myth, subjectivity, and religion (Gross 17). To tamper with this binary means rethinking the foundational values of culture and humanity. Yes, this is an enormous endeavor, but full of equally enormous possibility: a systemic overhaul.

Understanding companion animals goes beyond the human tendency toward apotheosis; this line of questioning takes it into the minutiae of everyday life. Cultural Studies scholar Jody Berland examines companion animals' unique roles in human life. Whereas the human/animal binary is reflected in most animal categories – wild animals, edible animals, working animals – companion animals are different. She states:

> The companion animal category invites ambivalence because it threatens to reveal the arbitrariness of all these categories. It's another series of arguments that threaten to topple once reevaluated. Companion animals are privy to the insides

> of homes and witness and participate in private, intimate behaviors. They also play a role in constituting these spaces and habits. (437)

In addition to constituting space, companion animals are being researched in several different fields. For instance, psychologist Sue-Ellen Brown has found that companion animals can help their caretakers maintain a cohesive life and provide the human with a sense of self. Since there isn't widespread acceptance of non-human animals as constitutional forces in human life, the benefits of companion animals have been drastically overlooked. Communication is another area being challenged within Animal Studies. In their research on the feline-human bond, sociologists Janet M. Alger and Steven F. Alger determined that cats routinely engage in symbolic interaction. Until recently, symbolic interaction was considered dependent on human language, but Alger and Alger determined that cats have strong cognitive skills, select courses of action based on concepts of past and future outcomes, and understand the intents and emotions of a role partner (79). Even the idea of domestication comes under question. Just like it takes two to tango, it takes two to domesticate. Interdisciplinary superstar Donna Haraway's research argues that species develop together in complex, inextricable ways. Domestication can't be reduced to master-slave; domestic animals were, and continue to be, active participants in their domestication.

Considering the above research, it's going to get harder and harder to pathologize people's relationships with their companion animals. Animal Studies' growing sphere of influence and multidisciplinary stretch will hopefully continue challenging the human/animal binary. Additionally, we may have entered another ambivalent moment. Since starting research for this project in 2010, negative cat ladies have been counteracted with pro-cat lady messages. Pop singer Katy Perry has said she's trying to take back the term cat lady and make it cool. In a

skin-tight purple and pink leopard print body suit, Perry bats at an enormous ball of yarn in print ads for her perfume "Purr." Her second fragrance is called "Meow!" The retailer H&M is pushing a line of clothes featuring feline-prints and cat silhouettes dubbed "Cat Lady Looks." Etsy.com, an online marketplace for arts, crafts, and unique goods has 4,000 items listed as "Cat Lady." At the same time, though, are toys like the "Cat Lady Action Figure," which comes with six cats of all colors and sizes as well as a plastic woman. The woman wears house slippers, pajama bottoms, and a bathrobe with a cat in the pocket and one peeking out from behind her flustered whitish hair. Her eyes are wide and her face is wrinkled. The back of her package comes with a questionnaire helping anyone identify their cat lady potential. There's also the Crazy Cat Lady board game – "The *insane* game where collecting a herd of feral felines is a good thing!" (emphasis mine). And in medical news, T. gondii, dubbed the "Cat Lady Parasite," has been highly reported over the past few years. Despite the fact that most people exposed to T. gondii never experience any symptoms or side effects of toxoplasmosis, much has been publicized on its possible links to suicide and schizophrenia (Mohney). Litter boxes have been cited as the gateway to toxoplasmosis, but T. gondii can be found in drinking water, unwashed vegetables, and raw or undercooked meat (Mcauliffe). My hope is that the ambivalent messages poke a few holes in the containment strategy and make it harder to completely write-off the character. I want to believe that the cultural products above challenge the cat lady without insinuating the reality of the cat lady or further containing the cat lady's potential. I think this is possible given the cultural moment.

This project has been infuriating and enriching in the way all good research projects should be. It's one thing to research something from the past, but the cat lady keeps popping up in unlikely places. On the one hand, I'm relieved because it confirms that this topic is still

relevant; the cat lady containment strategy is still in play. On the other, I'm aggravated that this tactic still works. It's circumscribing, othering, and rejecting. How much longer can the cat lady threaten women? What might she shape-shift into next? Those are just a few of the questions this project opened up, but for my next trick I'd like to consider another cat-related trope: sex-kitten. This trope exists at the other end of the cat lady spectrum: flirtatious, capricious, (hetero)sexual, and within heteronormative gender expectations. I'd like to approach this through an in-depth analysis of the character Catwoman. Catwoman originally debuted in the comic book series *Batman* in 1940. She is strong, sexual, and cast as both an anti-hero against and love interest for Batman. Her relationship with cats makes Catwoman an interesting counterpoint to the pitiful spinsters-cum-cat ladies. On screen she's been portrayed by Julie Newmar, Lee Meriwether, and Eartha Kitt in the 1960s *Batman* television show, Michelle Pfeiffer in the 1992 film *Batman Returns*, Halle Barry in the 2004 film *Catwoman*, and Anne Hathaway in the 2012 film *Dark Knight Rises*: sex-symbols in their own rights. Unlike a project in containment, analyzing the sex-kitten might go in the complete opposite direction.

In the meantime, though, let's retire the cat lady. She and her sisters, spinster and old maid, have had a three century reign. It's time to vanquish this containment strategy: acknowledge its presence, fight against it, and render it powerless.

END NOTES

Chapter One: Ambivalent Tails and Tales

[1] In her book *The Cat in the Human Imagination: Feline Images from Bast to Garfield*, cultural historian Katharine M. Rogers suggests that female cats dictate the mating process. When a female cat goes into heat she is called a "queen." She yowls and caterwauls to attract mates from the surrounding area. Her racket brings in multiple suitors, or tom cats, that gather around the female who purrs and writhes in the center of their circle. But what makes this mating process unique is that the female cat *chooses* the first mate. After consorting with one, she'll allow other toms to mate with her for as long as she remains in heat.

[2] Bastet is sometimes considered to be one of the seven Hathors, which are present when babies are born and determine the child's fate (Turner and Coulter, 206).

[3] Satire surrounding the traditions and reverence around sacred animals attempted to highlight the primitive nature of Egyptian culture and lampoon the moral compasses of those who revere uncivilized beasts. The Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria found the ostentatious architecture and elaborate temples alongside the solemn religious reverence to be laughable when the god being worshipped is revealed as "a cat, or a crocodile, or a native snake, or a similar animal, which should not be in a temple, but in a cleft or a den or on a dung heap. The god of the Egyptians appears on a purple couch as a wallowing animal" (Houlihan 2). Although the statement conflates sacred animals with animal worship, it does capture Greek attitudes about the inessential nature of animals in devotion.

[4] In a move to contain Isiac worship, the Early Church purified places of her worship by building churches on top of them. Statues of Isis were renamed St. Mary (Curl). The goal was to incorporate a few aspects of the pagan beliefs in the larger push for Christianity and monotheism. In fact, many of the so-called Black Madonnas may be statues of Isis (Curl; Parramore).

[5] These were also the routes that brought cats out of Egypt and made them commonplace in Europe. Rats and vermin lived wherever civilization was because it guaranteed a store of food. The cat's value as a hunter cannot be underestimated.

[6] I compiled this information from several sources including: Turner and Coulter, Amodeo, Zuffi, and Rogers.

[7] When she saw four dwarves creating a beautiful amber necklace, she was overwhelmed by her desire for the piece. She asked what price they would want for it, but the dwarves already possessing many valuable things said they would only give it to her if she would share each dwarf's bed for one night. She agreed without hesitation and "The Necklace of the Brisings" became another of Freyja's token items (Turner and Coulter).

[8] Eostre, a pagan fertility goddess, was symbolized by the hare. Both hares and cats were called "puss" through the 18th century. Hares were associated with witches before cats were, but the imagery of witches and cats has been the most longstanding (Rogers).

[9] Although part of the Salem witch trials, cats weren't nearly as persecuted in America as they were across Europe. Cats were mentioned but played a considerably smaller role.

[10] It was believed that water would reject witches and other agents of the devil by making them float at the surface instead of sinking. To properly swim a witch, the accused was stripped down and often had their hands tied to their feet and townsmen held ropes and poles to push them out or pull them into a nearby river or lake. For those who floated, they were often pulled out and their bodies were searched for the mark of the devil. If any mark was found they would be tossed back into the water. This process could be repeated up to three times. If they floated, they were once again pulled out of the water and then hung. Many of the accused drowned during the swimming, but that meant they died cleared of heresy (Darr).

[11] This summary of Aesop's "A Cat and Venus" is based on the version printed in de Caro's *The Folktale Cat*.

[12] *Youth with Cat and Dog* is attributed to Dosso Dossi, but it's not clear. Zuffi marks it as Italian School considering its ambiguous origins (99).

Chapter Two: The Crux of It All

[1] It should be noted that many women who worked, travelled, and furthered their education were not necessarily taken seriously as professionals in the male-dominated public sphere (Perkin).

[2] The presumption was that if women did not marry, they didn't engage in any kind of sex. All spinsters were understood as sexless, but this was not always the reality. Some women had affairs without being married and for others the choice to remain single might have stemmed from their sexuality. Many historians and cultural scholars have drawn connections between spinsterhood and lesbianism (Jeffreys; Rupp; Franzen).

[3] "Feminism" and "feminist" weren't widely used terms during the early 1900s. Scholars and historians researching feminists point out that the terms weren't included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1933 (Israel). There wasn't a collective understanding of feminism and a wide range of behaviors, activities, and speech were deemed "feminist." The terms were often used as insults. According to Chambers-Schiller, feminism had almost immediately been turned into a joke along with the women's movement in the media: more evidence of backlash and containment strategies.

[4] "Lesbian" was not a sexological category during the 19th century. An excellent resource for more information is exploring this topic is Leila J. Rupp's *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*. Rupp attempts to define what she understands the term lesbian to mean. She argues that in her project, it must consider sex to be central to the expression of a lesbian

identity throughout time, but there are other "lesbian-like" lifestyles. Characterized by seeking independence from men, lesbian-like describes women who joined together and attempted to build lives separate and independent from the control of men.
[5] I would argue that this continues to be the case – gender performance often impacts perceptions of sexuality.

[6] That's not to say they didn't have other kinds of relationships. Brontë purportedly had unrequited feelings for her father's curate. There were rumors Alcott had a romance with a Polish man while touring Europe and was possibly attracted to women. The Penguins Classics' 1989 edition of *Little Women* contains an interview between Alcott and author Louise Chandler Moulton in the introduction. Alcott states: "I have fallen in love with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man" (xiii). Warner had an affair with a man during her youth, but her longest relationship was with Valentine Ackland, a woman poet. Their relationship has been extensively documented and the 1998 book *I'll Stand by You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* edited by Susanna Pinney.

[7] A woman could be hired as governesses beyond the "appropriate" marrying age. In addition to the likelihood of marriage declining past your mid-20s, was the issue of a dowry, which many women of lower standing did not have. If a middle-class or working-class woman did hope to marry she would likely have to work for approximately ten years in order to save enough wages to make it possible for them to marry (Perkin 175).

[8] It was customary for daughters and sisters who worked to hand over their paychecks at the end of the week. While Perkin's research found several young women aggravated at this unfair arrangement (the boys and men were allowed to keep their pay instead of helping the family), Polly, a fictional paragon, relishes the opportunity to help out her brother. She shared this characteristic with Alcott who documented her delight in helping her family out in diaries (Chambers-Schiller).

Chapter Three: Eleanor Abernathy and Angela Martin

[1] Presumably, McRobbie is referring to forms of second wave feminism, which she finds markedly different from postfeminism. Postfeminism, from her perspective, does not have the same possibilities for empowerment because it is bound to a single understanding of feminism.

[2] Climbing the corporate ladder is certainly encouraged, but just being present on the ladder and maintaining any occupation will suffice. As long as women are participating in the capitalist system they are upholding the new expectations for women. The most important thing, as McRobbie repeatedly asserts, is maintaining the global economy through the increasingly feminized workforce.

[3] The mockumentary is a relatively new genre. Mockumentary films include Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), and Christopher Guest films like *Best in Show* (2000), *Waiting for Guffman* (1994), and *A Mighty Wind* (2003). Ricky Gervais' *The Office* (2001-2003), the BBC Two original on which the American series is based, established

the mockumentary format on television. The technique has become a popular way to frame different kinds of comedy. After the global success of the UK's *The Office* and Canada's *Trailer Park Boys* (2001-2008) programs like FOX's *Arrested Development* (2003-2006) as well as NBC's *Modern Family* (2009-present) and *Parks and Rec* (2009-present) incorporate different aspects of the mockumentary genre.

[4] Using security camera footage, shooting through windows, and filming from obstructed, hidden locations accomplishes something else: it increases the authenticity of the documentary. These make the program feel realer to audiences (Mills "Contemporary Sitcom").

[5] Films like *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and television programs like *Toddlers in Tiaras* (2009-present) and Little Miss Perfect (2009) speak to this sometimes comical presentation of children's pageants.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

[1] From what I've seen, representations of men and cats work to temper traditional, brutish masculinity. It shows that the character is sensitive or bookish. At the extreme cats intimate a queer sexual identity – the representation is feminized and heteronormative values affirmed.

[2] "Goofus and Gallant" is a cartoon feature that has been running in *Highlights*, a children's magazine, since 1948. Gallant shows readers proper behavior, while Goofus demonstrates what not to do. Typically the cartoon focuses on social skills like manners, respect, and other etiquette lessons. For instance, Gallant might be drawn helping a little girl get her cat out of a tree while in the opposite frame Goofus would be pulling a cats tail and laughing. The visuals are usually accompanied with a single sentence like, "Goofus is cruel to animals – Gallant takes care of our animal friends."

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