

Whose Fantasy Is This? Postfeminist American Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout this dissertation, I argue that postfeminism is a universalized approach to the representation of gender and sexuality that most often assumes whiteness, Judeo-Christian backgrounds, Western nationalities/cultures/ethnicities, heterosexuality, and upper middle class status for the femininity it produces. Primarily through the lens of popular films and television shows, the dissertation is an intervention into postfeminist studies in order to place current constructions of femininity in popular culture into a broader frame of American identities. I attempt to carefully illuminate the ongoing Othering constructions in our most frequently shared mediascape that may be particularly secretive and insidious in texts that can be superficially read as “feminist” or “woman-centered.”

While Simone de Beauvoir argues that “Woman is other,” in postfeminist texts there is another radical move, a “double Othering,” in which women are constructed both as “Others” to men and the construction of the woman as postfeminist subject also requires an Othering of class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, or age. I argue in this work that the production of a postfeminist character or attitude is not legible without these specific, assumed double Others. The terms of “double Othering,” as I argue about postfeminist texts, are invoked to produce very particular American subjects and often do little toward

exploring the lives of people outside postfeminist prescription: neither women as a category, nor women across various identity markers.

DEDICATION

To my parents and to my husband, Thomas Walsh.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an attempt to answer some questions that I've had for many years. While working in Washington D.C. in the 1990s after my undergraduate studies, I discovered feminism on my own. I was surrounded by savvy, powerful, and openly ambitious and feminist women, and we were reading Mary Daly, Nawal el-Sadaawi, Carole Gilligan, among others. We talked a lot about women's rights, so I was perplexed by what I now call the beginning of the postfeminist moment in American popular culture. I could not put together the written feminisms I was beginning to understand with the onslaught of what I now know is postfeminist media culture. Now I see that I was out of my moment—past the Second Wave, slightly before the Third Wave, and finding Bridget Jones nearly incomprehensible. Most especially, I could not understand the appeal of such a text to young women, nor the appeal of books springing up everywhere such as *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider (on how to “trap” a husband), and then a little later, the HBO series, *Sex and the City*. I wanted to understand why these texts made me so uncomfortable and yet seemed to please so many other women. A few years later when I returned to graduate school, I discovered the term postfeminism and then read much of the current work about the era. Many of my initial questions were answered by these texts but I also began to notice a trend in them: the texts lacked a sustained analysis of the postfeminist subject as one who requires difference for cultural legibility. I thus embarked upon such an analysis for this dissertation project.

Throughout the dissertation, I argue that postfeminism is a universalized approach to the representation of gender and sexuality¹ that most often assumes whiteness, Judeo-

Christian backgrounds, Western nationalities/cultures/ethnicities, heterosexuality, and upper middle class status for the femininity it produces. This universalism is also often echoed in academic and cultural criticism of postfeminism, if at times unintentionally or inadvertently. The introduction is a broad analysis of postfeminism that attempts to situate postfeminism within the scholarly discourse on Western constructions of difference and it conclude with a historiography of postfeminism. Within this introduction, I will thus contextualize the Otherness that postfeminist texts require for cultural legibility, discuss thematic characterizations of postfeminism by feminist media scholars, and describe the consumerist and neoliberal culture that is constitutive of postfeminism and postfeminist representations.

Primarily through the lens of popular films and television shows, this dissertation is an intervention into postfeminist studies in order to place current constructions of femininity in popular culture into a broader frame of American minoritized² groups: racialized/ethnicized, classed, and gendered/sexed identities. We often agree in academia that modes of identity must be “thought together” as coined by postfeminist theorist and scholar, Angela McRobbie, but we often struggle to find a way to do it. While previous studies and compilations of essays on postfeminism exist which do some of this work, these pieces often feel nonintegral to the larger and more emphatic arguments about postfeminism’s impact on “women” as a homogeneous category, thus creating the effect of intersectionality. Note that such an “effect” can often inadvertently work toward supporting the very norms one might be initially attempting to challenge. Like Jess Butler in her recent essay, “For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion,”

I am not claiming that previous work on postfeminism is “wrong” (indeed much previous work inspired my own) but that foregrounding the work of difference to produce a postfeminist subject “open(s) and extend(s) a new debate,” one that that has been “underexplored.”³

There is more than one danger in such a scenario of under-exploration. We may confuse or elide actual empowerment that might include more women in business, political, and academic leadership positions, for example, with postfeminist “empowerment.” This is the usually conservative construction of femininity through the white heterosexual male gaze that renders women primarily through sexual objectification and conservative (and often constructed as secondary) societal roles such as mother and wife. In continuing to produce and consume texts that construct a largely uncomplicated postfemininity, we may also continue to reinforce oppressive norms of difference which work toward maintaining a social hierarchy based on color, class, age, and sexuality and Western-ness.

Throughout my work on postfeminism I try to maintain the critical lenses of race/ethnicity, class, nationality, etc. as the central discussion. In this way, I hope to carefully illuminate the ongoing Othering oppressions in our most frequently shared mediascape that can become particularly secretive and insidious in texts that can be superficially read as “feminist” or “woman-centered.” In other words, in placing women into a narrative spotlight of what I will argue is a nearly automated thematic postfeminist repetition, a range of social inequalities tend to be subtly (or not so subtly) reinforced: racial/ethnic, sexual, gendered, classed stereotypes working toward this postfeminist

version of women's "empowerment."⁴ Thus "empowerment" for women can become another ruse of the patriarchal, androcentric, white, heteronormative, Westernized status quo. And what it claimed to be a text or persona of empowerment for women in the postfeminist age is often a clever recapitulation and reinforcement of Western gendered, heteronormative, racialized/ethnicized boundaries of difference.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex* first that Othering is a historical and pervasive mode of human thinking and second, that women are the necessary Other to men.⁵ As she states, "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object."⁶ As de Beauvoir extends this notion to gender: "For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other."⁷ De Beauvoir elaborates that this Othering of women extends through other consciousness and identities, as she identifies it as the primary Othering because women and men are necessary to one another for the propagation of the human species.⁸ Many feminist scholars have iterated de Beauvoir's ideas in the production of Western femininity, and the Othering of women is a primary focus of this work on postfeminism.

In postfeminist media, the woman may be Othered even in texts that purportedly tell women's stories such as romantic comedies or any popular text in which a woman is the protagonist. In such texts, though women may have the most screen time and lines,

the stories themselves can tend to revolve around men of not male desires and aspirations. This female Othering can take any of several forms: the woman constructed as “retreating”⁹ from her aspirations outside wife and motherhood to focus on male desires and careers, or the woman constructed as primarily desirous of getting a man, keeping a man, getting pregnant, and/or having a wedding/getting married. In postfeminist texts these are often also constructed as secondary societal roles but as proper primary desires for women. There is also a difference in agency certainly in these types of films, as exemplified by the film *He’s Just Not That Into You* (2009, directed by Ken Kwapis), whose very title suggests an asymmetrical power relationship between women and men in the film (and one that is born out in the titular story in the multi-strand narrative).

If de Beauvoir’s radical move holds true in the postfeminist age, that Woman is Other, it begs the question—especially in the relatively new space of American diversity of identity in popular media: can we theorize “woman” as a coherent category? I argue throughout this work that we cannot, that postfeminism can be characterized as rife with paradoxes and contradictions, that a text, narrative, character, or scene, for example, that may seem empowering to women on the one hand, often rescinds some of that power on the other and vice versa. Furthermore, as the postfeminist subject tends to be an upper middle class heterosexual white woman, a chief defining characteristic of postfeminist constructions is what I call another radical move: “double Othering.”¹⁰ In this maneuver, “Woman” as category becomes an assumed set of identities that *also* requires Others for her legibility, and women who do not fall into the prescribed set of postfeminist

identities, are often produced as the double Other to the postfeminist subject, either under double erasure, or binarized as abject or grotesque.

My intervention is therefore the attempt to work in an intersectional frame if not a global frame as I argue that the production of a postfeminist character or attitude is not legible without specific, assumed double Others. Postfeminist marked and unmarked modes of identity are mutually dependent, if they work asymmetrically. The terms of double Othering, as I argue about postfeminist texts, are invoked to produce very particular American subjects and do little toward exploring the lives of people outside postfeminist prescription (such as racialized/ethnicized or queered people). As Jacques Derrida articulates in an interview with Alan Bass the Western historical tendency toward oppositional identities does not create benign categories of meaning; rather Derrida describes Western binarization as a “violent hierarchy” in which “one of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.”¹¹ Derrida continues, “To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.”¹² Derrida’s position is instructive to the importance of an analysis of the double Othering that calls postfeminist texts into being. In this work, I hope to expose and analyze the “violent hierarchy” at work in postfeminist texts in order to work toward a denaturalization of oppressive, categorical identity-making.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that “Otherness,” whatever the terms of opposition, constructs atemporal static identity. But I am reminded of Frantz Fanon’s

observation of his experiences of being racialized, that once he had been interpellated by another, he was then “fixed.” Fanon writes, “the Other fixes me with his gaze...the fragments put together by another me.”¹³ Fanon describes here the dangers of Derrida’s “violent hierarchy,” that one may internalize one’s own identity as “put together” by others, (others who have a vested interest in maintaining such a hierarchy, such as colonialists). What Fanon describes would later be elaborated on and coined by sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s as “symbolic power” and “symbolic violence.” Black Hawk Hancock describes concisely the work of Bourdieu on symbolic power and symbolic violence:

For Bourdieu, symbolic systems of categories and classifications are the stakes in the power struggle between groups (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1991: 12–14). Symbolic power is the ability to control the schemas of perception and appreciation that are constitutive of the ways we comprehend and conceptualize the world, won through social conflict and struggle (Bourdieu 1991). Symbolic power produces “symbolic violence” by making particular interests and invested understandings and social relations of the world appear to be universal, natural, and true. As a result, arbitrary social and cultural distinctions and valuations become misrecognized as the legitimated assumptions through which we make sense of the world around us (Bourdieu 2000b: 186). Symbolic violence occurs not through techniques of manipulation or strategic deception but through a process of dehistoricizing our taken-for-granted categories of thought that reinforce the dominant social order.¹⁴

As I will argue throughout this work, postfeminist texts are agents of symbolic power and violence, purportedly “making sense” of femininity and thus gender for us, yet they more often work toward girding and atomizing hegemonic forces such as androcentrism, patriarchy, racialization, heteronormativity, class, religious, and nationalistic statuses.

Certainly as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have argued in different ways, there is an inherent space for resistance to discursive regimes like postfeminism, even in the routine, everyday performativity of gender and sexuality. And certainly, there is an

abundance of independently produced texts in our cultural landscape that take on the challenge of resistance to oppressive norming across media and genres. That is, there is media funded and created outside the nearly omnivorous control of global media conglomerates that might not adhere to a production model geared to 18-34 year-old white, heterosexual males.¹⁵ And there are certainly exceptional moments even within our mainstreamed media that challenge normative constructions. However, my project is an analysis of the repetitive constructions of postfemininity in popular cultural texts because it is the wide and reinforcing circulations of identity and power in this media that many if not most Americans share. Thus popular culture is our largest arena of play in which we negotiate identity and power.

Though I mention the infusion into and atomization of other media discourses into mainstream culture from time to time, throughout this work, I focus my arguments and analyses on film and televisual texts primarily. As Hilary Radner describes her choice to use films to probe the social: "...films often include highly schematic representations of contemporary discourses in which the tensions and controversies of an era are writ large."¹⁶ To this end, through discourse analysis I argue that film and television are productive media through which to interrogate gender/sexuality in American culture as it they are yet nationally popular formats. While the term "representation" is an ambiguous category that can exclude temporal and cultural contexts, popular films and television series, in their reliance on representation through narrative structures, can serve as distillations of cultural discourses that can be queried and analyzed for social resonance.

Patricia Hill Collins explains her choice to use popular culture as the primary objects in her analysis of race and gender because the discourse on popular culture “is a set of ideas and practices that when taken together organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it puts together social power.”¹⁷ Further, she argues that “race, gender, and sexuality have ideological dimensions that work to organize social institutions.”¹⁸ It is at the level of the popular in which nodes of identities such as gender and/or racial norms are often emphatically (and one might argue most convincingly), produced, circulated, and reproduced. As Barbara Creed describes the new and developing relationship between people and popular texts: “...in an increasingly secular world, the contemporary media have adopted the traditional role of ritual guide.”¹⁹

This dissertation starts from the premise that popular culture is a force in dynamic relation with other social practices such as business, politics, and academia. While this dynamic relation has always been in existence to some degree from at least the late 19th century onward, increasingly in our Tweeted, Facebooked, Tumbled, Instagrammed, YouTubed universes, there is little distinction of import between reporting on acts of legislation and corporate global capitalist practice and advertisements, popular television shows, and films.²⁰ On an average popular website, one is often hard-pressed to decipher what it is on the page that deserves the most attention: the flashy ad, the streaming video trailer for a television show or film, or the buried headline for a political news story, for example. Furthermore, as more and more media is accessible online, there is an increasing homogeneity of media narratives, themes, motifs, and values, many of them

based on gender and sexuality and, as many feminist scholars argue, most of them are postfeminist in tone.²¹ This lack of distinction between, for example, advertising and content means that substantive content is sought and retrieved at the price of capitalistic advertising that is often an extreme reaffirmation of postfeminist norms. I will discuss at length the relationship between postfeminism, capitalism and neoliberalism throughout this work.

What is Postfeminism?

Though “feminism” is itself a broad and ambiguous term, scholars often use it to refer to a general sense of social and political efficacy of women. Postfeminism, however, describes the construction of femininity across media and discourses that can effectively shut down a progressive feminist imagination primarily by recasting women over and over as either hypersexualized objects for the heterosexual male gaze, or as aspiring mothers and/or wives constructed as both secondary to positions of masculinity and as the chief aspirations of *all* women. To achieve this effect, many of the arguments in such postfeminist texts concern the absorption and dilution of feminism into postfeminism. Ideas about women’s equality are then strictly enforced through the postfeminist lens that structures our popular cultural world. Given that this argument has been made quite cogently already,²² my task here is slightly different. While most if not all of the scholars who interrogate postfeminism deal with aspects of difference/Othering, whether they be race/ethnicity, class, religion, etc., there has yet been no sustained argument that the production of a postfeminist identity *requires* historically contingent constructions of difference. Any claims made about the potentials for “empowerment”

(however one defines the term) for women in postfeminist texts, must be achieved at the price of the double Othering: a reinforcement of systemic inequalities in American culture, usually through process of hierarchical (and violent) binarization, and the reinforcement of the matrix of classed and racialized/ethnicized inequalities.

Cautioned by Stéphanie Genz that “There is no *original* or *authentic* postfeminism that holds the key to its definition” but that we must analyze postfeminism as “a network of possible relations,”²³ many scholars contend that we can read *most* popular texts through the lens of postfeminism. Indeed, feminist and media scholars assert collectively that postfeminism is not only the current “feminism,” it is also the mainstreamed lens through which many Americans negotiate and understand gender and sexuality. Cognizant of skepticism to such a broad claim, Angela McRobbie warns readers about her work on postfeminism, that it sometimes “sounds like a conspiracy thesis,”²⁴ in its wide reach defining the terms of gender and feminism for us as consumers of popular culture. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra make similar claims about the deep saturation of postfeminist constructions and values across at least Anglocentric mainstream culture: “Postfeminism does not always offer a logically coherent account of gender and power, but through structures of forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms it has emerged as a dominating discursive system.”²⁵

As it is a recapitulation and reinforcement of mainstream norms of gender and sexuality, postfeminism operates most effectively at the level of the popular and the mainstream that most often assumes a male heterosexual spectator. While I do not feature a chapter in the dissertation on potentially progressive media about/for/by women, this

media and the scholarship exists, if in limited quantities compared to many other aspects of film/television and scholarship about them. Indeed Lucy Bolton's new book, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema, and Thinking Women*, articulates throughout film history the complications of producing and consuming women on screen, eventually analyzing the contemporary texts that speak to a different, perhaps non-postfeminist female subject, films such as Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003), Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), and Lynne Ramsay's *Morvern Callar* (2002). These are not the texts that primarily inform and produce American postfeminism, (though one could certainly read each of these texts as a narrative/female protagonist that is invested in a complex negotiation of aspects of postfeminist culture).

I want to stress that it is not a particular set of social or political "goods" I look for and find lacking in popular texts. Instead, I attempt to convey that postfeminist scholars see a narrowing range of potentials and types of women represented in popular media across formats and genres, and a simultaneous proliferation of reductive types. This proliferation of postfeminist norms and the comparative lack of counter-productions create a moment that perhaps *should* be probed ideologically. Without such a range of types, when women in popular culture are most often hypersexualized, infantilized, maternalized and/or cast as secondary through romance genre and narratives, we Americans lack the stuff that might invigorate a feminist social imagination unless we are specifically educated. And as I have informally polled my students every semester for the last four years, primary and secondary educations seem to be making few moves toward

an intersectional approach to history, English, and social studies—even in one of the most diverse states in the union in which I currently teach: New Jersey.

I make no claim on what a “feminist future” might look like; indeed, prescribing such a future could effectively douse the social imagination that postfeminist scholars believe needs stoking. I also do not see popular culture as charged with moving us in a particular social or political direction. In a cultural studies approach to media, I examine constructions of identity and their relationships to power within texts and how these constructions resonate in our social and political worlds. Popular media, again is an arena of negotiation and pleasure that produces certain spectators. (However, I do not centrally discuss pleasure in the consumption of media, though in my future work I hope to engage with reception studies and theories of spectatorship.) Furthermore, as I learn anecdotally from my students (who are typically women who identify as Hispanic, African American, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern) that they are thirsty for portrayals of American culture that better represent their various personal, cultural, community, religious, regional, and national identities and their aspirations outside of traditional feminine roles constructed through matrices of each of these categories. Furthermore, these young women tend to feel profoundly the effects of a hypersexualized media culture, as they consistently discuss the disciplinary regime of Western beauty in terms of punishment and torture. I should also note that we also discuss the pleasure of gender performance if not performativity, and beauty as a skill set, which often relieves many students who feel somehow “wrong” in the desire to be standardly physically attractive.²⁶

While I claim this project works toward an intersectional perspective, in its structure of binaries such as Western and non-Western I risk a reification of a constructed and often troublesome and inaccurate binaries. On the other hand, it is my position that we should not ignore, repel, exoticize or romanticize difference, but instead try to understand how norms of difference are naturalized into our discursive worlds. We can no longer claim to live in separate cultural spaces; that is, there may be multiple interpretations of boundaries, hybridity, spaces of cultural overlap, and conscious rejection and inclusion of viewpoints, characteristics, representation strategies, etc., that cannot be mapped geographically or culturally but must be, and perhaps can only be, understood in relation to one another as shared “space.” That is the space I hope for this project to illuminate.

Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to demonstrate that postfeminism, often touted as being the contemporary American woman’s feminism is, in fact, a development of cultural assumptions and stereotypes which have long been in place. In the first chapter, I analyze early texts from the age of postfeminism as compared with contemporary iterations to support the bracketing I refer to as the “postfeminist era,” and ultimately to illuminate the othering central to a postfeminist construction of identity. In the second chapter, I expand on the production of a postfeminist subject through a critical intersectional lens of African American women in postfeminism. I maintain that postfeminist constructions tend to appear in the absence of the social and political, and that the visibility of race (and often class) in a text, for example, is often deployed to undergird the centralization of whiteness and at least middle class status. I also analyze

the persona of Oprah Winfrey whose celebrity and talk show both informs and complicates postfeminist expectations. In the third chapter, I engage with postfeminist heteronormativity, analyzing some of the popular texts that feature lesbians, and some personae that inform, challenge, and sometimes reinforce mainstream sexual norms. In the fourth chapter, I engage with older women in postfeminist culture: cougar/MILF discourse, and the persona of Martha Stewart as the commodified domestic. In the final chapter, I describe the new space for postfeminist Others, that of Muslim/Arab identities in the millennial wake of American wars in the Middle East and the deployments of postfeminist gender/sex norming in a new popular cultural discourse on “homeland security.”

An Historiography of Postfeminism

This section of the introduction outlines a historiography of postfeminism, illuminating the ways in which feminist media critics use the term and critique postfeminist texts. Though I’ve formed a definition of postfeminism for analytical purposes here (as dominant Western popular feminism), debates about the posting of feminism are usually carried out within the domains of genealogical, historiographical Western feminism(s). As Misha Kavka writes about the post-ing of feminism: “There is clearly no one date, no revolutionary moment, in which feminism passed the baton to its “post,” not least because there is no one discourse that can claim to exhaust the range of thinking and projects undertaken in the name of feminism.”²⁷ Posting feminism can certainly be a critical stance (toward feminism), but it is not generally thought of as a mode of analysis unlike other “posts” such as postcolonialism or post-structuralism.

Postfeminism as produced through popular cultural discourse is not an interrogative practice, nor is it a multi-layered representation—on its own terms, postfeminism is not generally a social critique, but set of values and positions variously deployable in the constructed absence of the social. As Kavka, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (separately) argue, the “post” in feminism as it was concretized as term in the 1990s came to refer to a “ ‘pastness’ of feminism,”²⁸ but that certainly the use of the term itself denotes an ongoing feminist theoretical engagement. It is a relatively new term in academia, and one that is still finding its “material, limits, and theoretical territory.”²⁹

It seem pertinent to briefly distinguish postfeminism from Third Wave feminism as they are coterminous discourses. Also an ambiguous term, “Third Wave” is attributed to women such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their popular book on feminism, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. In their definition, Third Wave feminism refers to the next generation of women after the Second Wave who are primarily interested in (variously defined) social equality.³⁰ Third Wavers, as Baumgardner and Richards claim, see themselves as feminists and activists on a range of issues that may not centralize gender as the primary oppression. In this vein, Third Wavers often look to be more inclusive, multicultural, and even more global and eco-focused in their outlooks than Second Wavers. Indeed a more inclusive and flexible agenda and is often the primary (if yet ambiguous) way in which Third Wavers distinguish themselves from Second Wavers.³¹ Thus the Third Wave is a loosely described activist desire that mostly applies to young women informed by the Second Wave who are looking to reimagine their social worlds.³² However, it is yet a loosely

applied term and usually does not refer to shared narratives of oppression or activism, nor does it apply to concrete political agendas or action. Even in its ambiguity (perhaps its liminality), the Third Wave definition of an inclination toward activism is very different from the more descriptive term, “postfeminism.” And while neither term is well known nor often used, postfeminist culture, as the gendering force in the American mainstream, *by far* overshadow the presence, efforts, and the efficacy of Third Wave feminists so far.

Though the focus of this work is on contemporary media—texts produced in the new millennium—for the purposes of explanation and description, the television show, *Ally McBeal*, and the book and film franchises of *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*³³ have become the iconic texts of postfeminism. Together, these productions mark a new era in the popular discourse on American femininity. These are texts with a typically white protagonist of the middle or upper middle class (or one who has the means to get there) centrally concerned with policing her appearance for the heterosexual male gaze and performing her heterosexual life, a life that almost never acknowledges the existence of minoritized and/or marginalized people. The postfeminist protagonist is almost always driving her life toward heterosexual mating, if not the creation of a nuclear family, and is often infantilized in this process. Thus, to put it more accurately in the terms of romantic comedies, the postfeminist protagonist is usually bumbling toward the inevitability of marriage and children, and her failures are the primary source of the comedy in postfeminist texts. Romantic pursuits, especially those that end in marriage and family in postfeminist films are portrayed as women’s highest calling and

unquestionable primary desire, a desire that subsumes other desires, and postfeminism is thus implicated in upholding the cultural norms of androcentrism and patriarchy.

Generically, postfeminism is reinforced most emphatically in romantic comedies, and in self-help literature aimed at single, heterosexual, middle to upper class, and usually white women (though we find iterations of postfeminism across media and genre). The tone of postfeminist culture is one of female transgression, confession, and reformation as stages a woman must endure to gain happiness and fulfillment.³⁴ Thus the narrative arc of postfeminist texts, particularly romantic comedies, often involves women's potential and likely failures: their inability to look and behave as they think they should to secure a suitable mate, and thus their inability to get married and get pregnant— if not always in that order. Often women are instructed in both romantic comedies and self-help literature to curtail their professional ambitions, learn to see patriarchy as natural law and men as masters of their fate, and submit to the inevitability that their male partner's needs should come first, personally and professionally.

Though this work does not claim to be an historical authority on the romantic comedy, it is useful to briefly discuss what kind of heterosexual romance narratives came before the postfeminist era in Western texts. Postfeminist tone or sensibility is markedly different from previous eras of romantic comedy in Western texts. While the genre has often probed constructions of masculinity and femininity at least since the Shakespearean era, these former constructions interrogate gender/sex roles to various social and political ends. Gender has long been an arena of cultural play. For example, some theorists and historians refer to American comedic cinema during the Great Depression in the 1930s

(and into the 1940s) as the “golden age” of romantic comedy. During this era, we saw the rise of “screwball comedies,” in which women and men engaged in witty, rapid-paced banter and often traded positions of power, public and personal, between one another.

As Kay Young argues, these texts often allowed the male characters to be “feminized” in some way, which opened space for female characters to assert their “masculinity:” their verve, wit, and determination, and that the romantic coupling of the two personalities tended to move toward the idea that the whole is better than its halves.³⁵ The fifties and sixties saw the rise of “good girl” comedies starring actresses like Doris Day in which her characters are often the naïf, and usually the butt of joke between savvier men trying to sleep with her. Throughout the next two decades, there were a few notable romantic comedies (such as *Annie Hall* in 1977), but media scholars have not classified these decades into prolific romantic comedy eras. Thus it becomes all the more interesting that Hollywood romantic comedies resurged in the late 1980s as a force whose main business it was to articulate “proper” gender roles and particularly to dictate conservative roles for women. As filmmaker Paul Haggis describes the era, it is the range of representations of women that is missing in contemporary media: “We had many more interesting characters on screen in the 20s, 30s, and 40s than we do now. And we allowed women to really embody all the contradictions that make up a human being...we accepted that; they were complex human beings.” Haggis adds that in this historical moment, “we tend not to write women as human beings. It’s cartoons we’re making now.”³⁶ This trend launches the era of postfeminism.

At least since the early 1990s (in the original production periods of the television shows *Sex and The City*, *Ally McBeal* and the *Bridget Jones* franchise), postfeminist texts have proliferated exponentially in various strands of media. As described by most feminist media theorists, postfeminism has almost single-handedly undertaken the work of articulating girlhood, womanhood, and feminism with little challenge or counter discourse in widely available American media, including discourse on intersectional identities such as gender, race, class, nationality, and religion, among others.³⁷

Thus, for example, we find a proliferation of “princess” media for women and girls, aided by the multiple Disney films over the last two decades celebrating princess culture. We also see a new proliferation of media in the postfeminist age the related genre, “bridal” media, in which femininity is prescriptively performed with punitive consequences for failure, and the inherent patriarchy of both genres are masked by glittery celebrations of “little princesses” and women’s (one) “big day,” or her wedding day. There are multiple reality television shows dedicated to weddings such as *Say Yes to the Dress* (2007—) and *Bridezillas* (2004—) which produce women as self-involved and often immature in their singular quest for the “perfect day.” The postfeminist impetus to portray women seeking a wedding is perhaps brought to its most emphatic in the 2009 comedy, *Bride Wars* (directed by Gary Winick), in which two longtime best girlfriends end up at “war” with one another over their wedding plans. Postfeminism weaves narcissistic princess and bridal culture into the fabric of girls’ and women’s lives and then constructs marriage as the inevitable “happy ending” in which women must relinquish centrality in their own lives to revolve around the lives of their husbands and children.³⁸

However, paradoxes are common in postfeminist culture and one is the postfeminist woman constructed as the “psycho-stalker,” or a woman who wants a man to commit to her too much, and she is thus portrayed as desperate and creepy. From Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) to Isla Fisher in *Wedding Crashers* (2005) to a 2013 commercial for an Android phone,³⁹ women are commonly depicted as “crazy” or “psychos” if they want a commitment from a man who doesn’t, even in a culture that will brand them as failures at femininity and womanhood if they don’t succeed in “catching” or “trapping” a man in marriage. Even the vernacular used to describe such endeavors is indicative of a postfeminist problem. In contemporary culture, one can now read elements of postfeminism in most popular American media because gender and sexuality are foundational features of contemporary identity and postfeminism is the primary mode through which we understand gender and sexuality in the U.S., a mode that most often completely eclipses potential alternate views.

The gender policing mechanisms of postfeminism are echoed and reproduced through the mode of address in many postfeminist texts: fear-mongering about age, loneliness, sexual appeal, etc. The rise of postfeminist texts dovetails with the onset of neo-conservatism in the mid-1990s and these texts often concede cinematic representation of gender to the neoconservative rhetoric of the time. Many feminists have described neo-conservatism as largely anti-feminist, or as a feminist containment strategy that postfeminist texts often reinforce, exemplified by the frequent theme in these texts to be “normal:” to reject or neutralize physical or social strength, and under the organizing imperative logic of the middle class nuclear family, to valorize mother-and wifhood at

the expense of, indeed to wipe out the desire for, any other mode of personal fulfillment.⁴⁰ These neoconservative/postfeminist values, of course, can only be presented as social solution if we maintain ignorance of the social and material contexts of most women's lives, in other words, the fantastical spaces that make up postfeminist texts. The origins and reinforcements of postfeminism, though emphatic, are widespread and serve many—and sometimes contradictory—interests.

Backlash and Anti-Feminism

Some feminist critics, most famously Susan Faludi, have argued that postfeminism is a direct and negative response to Second Wave feminism in the form of “backlash,” which is also the title of Faludi's book on the subject. Her text is one of the most often cited in discussions of the historiography of postfeminism and Second Wave backlash and she distills a number of Second Waver concerns in her book. Though Faludi doesn't employ the phrase “postfeminism,” its constructions and valences have been described by later critics in much the same way as she describes “backlash.” In her work, Faludi describes the repudiations of Second Wave feminism in the late 1980s by politicians (particularly right-wing politicians) and how these constructions of feminism have been produced, normalized, and reproduced in mass media and mainstream popular culture. Based on the numerous media “warnings” in the 1980s citing women's increasing unhappiness, such as the abundance of headlines in major magazines and newspapers about being eternally single and infertile, Faludi asserts that despite the substantial gains in equality that women have achieved over the past several decades, many women yet lament that their lives are *more* difficult. According to Faludi and

others, many women claim that they seem to be working harder than ever both in the workplace (or workplaces, as many women hold more than one paid job and often also work in a caretaking capacity in their homes) with very little time for themselves to develop educationally, professionally, artistically, or personally.

Among other feminist media scholars such as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, Faludi also claims that these types of widely circulated “warning” stories operated as scare tactics in an albeit implicit and unorganized attempt to police, if not close down, a potential for a new women’s movement that may have seemed imminent in the early 1990s. She notes a brief moment of feminist resurgence in these years in which there occurred a well-attended reproductive rights march in Washington D.C., a galvanization of feminist attention and public discussion around the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings, the formation of the nonprofit EMILY’s List whose mission is the promotion and support for women in public office, and a record-breaking number of women elected to political office.⁴¹ Thus Faludi’s thesis is that women’s public dialogues and protests about rights and inequalities drew so much attention as to form a backlash against women’s rights (and women) generally. This was particularly noticeable among conservative politicians’ stances, but the conservative positions on gender also traveled out to form a kind of postfeminist attitude of gender norming of women and of course, of men as well.⁴²

Thus we see at the same time that ultra-conservative Newt Gingrich takes over the spirit and aims of the 104th Congress in 1995, a spate of media directed at women in the form of scare tactics such as the 1996 publication of *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for*

Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right (developed in 2012 to a book series and a website) by “dating coaches,” Ellie Fein and Sherrie Schneider. And two years later in 1998 came the publication of the infamous cover of *TIME Magazine*, “Is Feminism Dead?” featuring a timeline of feminists: Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and ending with Ally McBeal—a fictional, popular television character who is known for her neurotic personality and anorexically thin appearance. Though Ally McBeal is employed as a lawyer, her chief concern is depicted as the search for a suitable man. That *TIME Magazine* equated such courageous, historical activism with a trivialized television depiction of a modern woman and all but declared feminism “dead,” is an example of the type of speech acts that, perhaps in addition to the crass capitalism of media provocation, attempt to silence and dismiss the potential for a revival of Second Wave feminist concerns—or, even more threatening, a re-envision/reinvention of new feminisms.

Faludi concludes that the feminist gains achieved in the early 1990s, or the emergent feminist spirit or attitude, was understandably short-lived, and that vast inequalities persist with very little organized protest. She enumerates a list of grievances of contemporary women in U.S. culture, a list that is thorough, instructive, and unfortunately still accurate and relevant into the new millennium. Faludi describes the inequalities between men and women in U.S. culture as based on continuous, long term wage disparities, the nuclear family assumption of free/unpaid mostly female care giving and cleaning in the home (whether the women caretakers are employed outside the home or not), stagnation in career potentials (particularly being mired in middle management in the white collar market, and being sidelined in low-wage service jobs with little chance

for promotion or pay increase in the service sector), decreased and continually threatened access to reproductive health medicines and treatments, increased sexual harassment in the workplace, increased domestic violence and sexual violence, lack of adequate childcare for single mothers/parents, lack of adequate family leave legislation, lack of women in powerful positions in politics and business, vastly more women living in poverty, without health insurance and vastly more older women living without pensions than are men.⁴³ Women of color, women from the working class, and women living outside the norms of heterosexual life experience these disparities to a greater rate and degree than do middle class white, heterosexual women.

The conditions above describe the cultural and political space that critics such as Faludi argue can be policed by the practices and construction of postfeminism as backlash. Thus, any number of unappealing if not outright vilified stereotypes for women can be deployed in media and in language to contain women's protests against discrimination and disparities and/or to contain women's aspirations and achievements. Some examples of these terms and portrayals are "spinsters," "feminazis," "ball busters," "baby killers," etc. As Faludi notes, some of these terms can become clichés from popular cinema such as the term from the film, *Fatal Attraction* (1987), "bunny boiler" to denote any woman who demonstrates her anger (appropriately or not) or one who assertively pursues a sexual life outside marriage (the act of "assertion" being the problem) or as a "psycho," one who is emotionally unstable. "Bunny boiler" can also be used to describe a woman who threatens the "sanctity" of the already established nuclear

family by serving as a mistress, and also the sole scapegoat for an extramarital affair with a man who remains inculpable as her “victim.”

Feminist backlash, according to Faludi and others, lacks a central organization but it does not lack organizing principles. Those are, in her argument, blaming the Second Wave women’s movement for any and all ills and grievances that women experience in either their personal lives or their careers—particularly if they choose to pursue both a family and a career simultaneously— and the coterminous thriving patriarchy seeking to deflect and diffuse any further advancement by women for equality with men in U.S. culture.⁴⁴ Women in postfeminist cultures are routinely chastised for “wanting it all” or trying to “have it all,” phrases that connote winning something, some excessive wealth and luxury women have deluded themselves into thinking they should want and can obtain. But this “excess” of a nuclear family and professional success can only be described as incredibly hard work for women at long hours and often with less, little, or no pay for their efforts. Though “having it all” is an ambiguous term, it usually refers to women who want both a fulfilling career and a family. However, the “having it all” derisions are tacit with the attendant notions that “it all” is greedy if desired and implies a failure on one or both fronts if achieved.

In this produced scenario, women are caught in a matrix of paradoxes and double-binds in postfeminist discourse. At least in American postfeminist structures, a woman is performing her femininity incorrectly if she is not a wife and foremost a mother; failure in this regard is tantamount in some scenarios and social milieu to moral ineptitude. Yet a woman is also derided for having a family and “choosing to work,” the assumption being

that women are sacrificing proper mothering/wifedom for their personal fulfillment.

Women are also criticized for choosing to stay home with their children on at least two fronts: they aren't supporting feminist goals or their sister feminists in the acceptance of women in the workplace, especially in positions of high power. But their choice to remain at home with children is also used against them as proof that women can't serve a company as well as a man in time, performance or commitment. Further, choosing to stay at home with children can be characterized as women's retreat from political or corporate competition, proof that women do not measure up to male standards of work ethics and potential achievements.

As I've already described, in reality, the *vast majority* of women in the U.S. and worldwide, middle and working class, struggle financially (either to make ends meet or to maintain a lifestyle) and devote much of their "free" time to the care of others.⁴⁵ However, in the cruel logic of postfeminist rhetoric and its universalism, all women are sternly punished (particularly by the media) if they choose to pursue their careers instead of either having a family or raising the family they do have, and they will also be punished if they are financially fortunate enough to choose to stay at home and pursue no professional or personal goals outside wife and motherhood. It is important to note that these threats of punishment are easily and routinely internalized by women who are yet socialized to feel inferior in patriarchal social systems in which male privilege is the norm and even racialized and some homosexual men receive a patriarchal dividend not available to any woman. Family structures outside patriarchal and postfeminist norms,

such as straight and gay couples raising children together, are yet seen as abominations, even by some non-religious self-proclaimed liberals.

There has been a spate of recent media attention to “having it all” debates. Many of these feature Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, her national seminars and her book published in 2013, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, encouraging women to work on their professional goals while reassuring them that they don’t have to give up the idea of having a family—a family in which they also participate actively. Sandberg is placing the profits of her book toward a nonprofit to start conversations among women nationwide to encourage them to “lean in” or take responsibility for their own, individual successes. The book, though just released this week as I write, has already been criticized for its class, racial and ethnic blindness, and its tacit message of blaming the victim, i.e., telling women their lack of professional success is their own individual faults for not asking for what they deserve, demanding better pay and promotions, etc. Thus Sandberg has unwittingly created a shining moment for postfeminism in reproducing what is already ubiquitous in our culture: using guilt and shame to coerce women to more fully participate in the capitalist system without the acknowledgement that large parts of the system are already rigged as androcentric, patriarchal, ethnocentric, racist, ageist, classist, and homophobic.

Critics of the book such as Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times*, accuse Sandberg of self-promotion in the name of equality for women, and it is indeed difficult to square Sandberg’s heavy emphasis on individualism with a social movement.⁴⁶ Sandberg, even in response to these explicit charges, seems blind to the paradox.⁴⁷

Though most women are probably in full support of boosting the confidence of women in the workforce, a women's movement many feminists would like to see is one that illuminates structural inequalities in the workforce and an agenda to tackle such inequalities through changing state, national, and corporate policies. This kind of movement would not require an individual to "lean in" and ask for more personal wealth and success. Rather, it would require women and men coming together in protest of a culture of individualism that yet privileges white, middle-class, and mostly heterosexual men.

Alternatively, Princeton professor and former U.S. State Department official, Anne-Marie Slaughter, also garnered a spike of publicity for her article in *The Atlantic* claiming in a confessional and penitent tone that she sacrificed her family in order to pursue her professional goals.⁴⁸ In fact, Slaughter cautions young women mournfully that women can't "have it all." Some bloggers and individual online responses to these articles have expressed the limitations of framing feminism in these ways, as it is a tried and familiar way that the debate on women's roles and rights gets characterized, sidelined, and then mired. To have yet another conversation on "having it all" thus seems antiquated and mostly unproductive. Instead, the general sentiment of many professional women seems to be that we might focus on concrete action that could improve the lives of women, men, and children, such as comprehensive basic health care with and beyond "Obamacare," or adequate family leave for either the care of newborns or ailing family members instead of reconsidering the hackneyed and circular questions of "having it all." Furthermore, most important and least discussed by the media is that these debates,

Sandberg's and Slaughter's, once again center on wealthy white women who are fortunate enough to be able to make these kinds of decisions, and wealthy women are a tiny fraction of people living in the U.S. Thus these media conversations, from the outset, are staged in postfeminist, neoliberal self-serving tones that do little to illuminate the social and political factors that keep most women in a state of poverty and professional, political, and often personal, stagnation.

In her book on contemporary feminisms, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism*, Imelda Whelehan makes an even more strenuous argument than backlash, that postfeminism is, simply, anti-feminism—an attitude that “runs through the language of culture, politics, and the mass media.”⁴⁹ She states that “...feminism has been recently parodied and misrepresented as a prudish authoritarian orthodoxy”⁵⁰ and that “...we have passed into an era of ‘retro-sexism’—nostalgia for a lost, uncomplicated past peopled by ‘real’ women and humorous cheeky chappies, where the battle of the sexes is most fondly remembered as being played out as if in a situation comedy...”⁵¹ It is important to point out here the popularity of television series such as *Mad Men* and its knock-offs (such as the two short-lived series, *The Playboy Club* and *Pan Am*, both initially aired and cancelled in the fall of 2011) in support of Whelehan's claim that we create or construct the past in postfeminist media in order to reify the present state of dominant culture privilege and thus to preserve inequalities that benefit hegemonic patriarchy. Patriarchal/dominant culture (again, undirected and decentralized) can rely on popular culture to enforce “correct” and “preferred” gender roles and stereotypes with the attendant safety feature that such operations can often be routinely dismissed as harmless

mass entertainment. Thus feminist media critics who describe the potentially destructive contours of postfeminism (such as postfeminism's tendency to laud women's worth as based on their success as heterosexual objects) are often facing the charge of taking popular media "too seriously," or of "reading too much into" texts made simply for amusement. Whelehan also makes the crucial point that though explicit anti-feminist sentiments may be directed at self-designated feminists, the arguments are put forth in order to undermine attempts at equality and are therefore pointedly attempting to revoke the autonomy and rights of *all* women.⁵²

Feminist media scholar Hilary Radner, however, disagrees with other critics who describe postfeminism as a series of setbacks, disappointments and troubling constructions of identity markers such as gender and race. Rather, Radner recasts and renames postfeminism as "neo-feminism" in order to claim a space for this new historiographical and less critical approach to postfeminism. She argues that neo-feminism/postfeminism did not develop as backlash to Second Wave feminism; instead, she claims it grew alongside the Second Wave, that it is the result of a Helen Gurley Brown approach to feminism still in operation today.⁵³ Unlike Second Wave feminists' commitment to social justice and responsibility (even if it was a narrowly conceived commitment) Radner sees neo-feminism/postfeminism as consistent with the principles of neoliberalism and late capitalism in their shared intense and singular focus on the individual and the individual's self-improvement as a purchasable commodity.

Radner's thesis has two major tenets. The first is that the "new" girlie culture that others mark the beginning of in the 1990s is actually a natural progression from the early

part of the nineteenth century, finding its most articulated voice in Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* published in 1960, and in Gurley Brown's subsequent founding and leadership of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Here, Radner states that Gurley Brown advocated a position of "continual change and self-improvement as a sign of individual agency" well before notions of backlash and postfeminism in the 1990s.⁵⁴ Second, Radner claims that girly culture, or neo-feminism, in stressing the "sexual availability" of particularly young women" can be understood as a space of empowerment.⁵⁵

Radner's new historiography seems cogent. However, while Radner does claim that postfeminist cinema, in particular, is a contradictory discourse of both feminist potential and postfeminist backsliding, to claim that it provides a feminist space of reimagining social lives and identities is debatable. The implication in Radner's work is that women are able to read sexual empowerment into a series like *Sex and the City*, that the conversations about sex, the friendships depicted between women, and the sexual escapades and serial monogamies of the characters were widely received as liberating to women of all ages. But, as I will describe later in this work, many of the feminist gains are undercut in these texts, and, as many scholars analyzing postfeminist culture have observed, this undercutting is itself a constitutive feature of postfeminism. Like Radner, a few other feminist media critics argue that postfeminist texts may be read as a negotiation of complexities in the lives of young, Judeo/Christian/secular, contemporary, middle-class, Western, white, heterosexual women and should not be reduced to a wholesale rejection of Second Wave feminism.⁵⁶ But I argue that postfeminist texts ultimately tend to fail at progressive feminist imagination due to the elision of a social and material

context that we see in what is emphasized in postfeminist texts. For example, though postfeminist characters often have careers, careers in the real world that are serious, difficult, and meaningful to society—as well as to a sense of social identity and self-worth; rather, postfeminist texts refocus on the characters' lack of heterosexual romance, insecurities about (hetero)sexual appeal, and consumer activity as a stand-in for agency. Would it matter if Carrie Bradshaw, Bridget Jones, or Ally McBeal had a different (white collar) job? Would that radically change the focus of their narratives? Does it matter how Hannah Horvath of *Girls* is employed, or if she is at all when she has two wealthy parents to send her money?

The feminist media critics who laud the potential of postfeminism tend to cite the enthusiasm of the upcoming generation of women for postfeminist texts and values as the basis for their acceptance of postfeminism as potential progressive space. Many would agree that it is good feminist practice to generously consider and support (even if conditionally) the practices and ideas of women and especially younger generations of women whose experiences with postfeminist culture are sometimes the only means they know to grapple with American culture of gender and sexuality. It is our responsibility as feminist media critics to provide language for young women to analyze the way the world, the marketplace, the cinema, online culture, etc., constructs us as gendered and sexualized beings (as well as other nodes of identity, of course) and thusly assigns cultural values.

Indeed gender essentialism is a central problem in postfeminist texts in that they tend reify such assumptions more often than not, such as offering women positions of

power at the start of the narratives such as physicians or CEOs, only to circle them back into “retreatist” scenarios, a term coined by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra to describe the postfeminist attitude that, as a woman, one should consider wife and motherhood as the highest calling, and return to it if one has the opportunity—even if that means abandoning good educations and jobs. We see this scenario in postfeminist cinema frequently: the female protagonist gives up her career and personal aspirations to find “real” or “true” happiness as the heterosexual partner/wife of a man who must follow his professional and artistic dreams to be fulfilled as a human. Motherhood often follows for the female leads of such postfeminist texts and the final scene in many postfeminist films is often a depiction of the happy couple enjoying their wedding if not the creation of their nuclear family.

For example, in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), and *Just Like Heaven* (2005) the female protagonists, Mila Kunis and Reese Witherspoon respectively, must “retreat” from their jobs and lives to support and follow their boyfriends so that the men can fulfill their own professional and artistic destinies. Each film features a male protagonist who has not been able to reach his potential, reaffirming the one-way cliché that “behind every great man is a great woman.” It is the narrative trajectory of both films that meeting the right woman can set him on his path to success. Note that his career success is also the greatest source of the woman’s personal fulfillment as she has given up her life (explicitly so in *Just Like Heaven* as Reese Witherspoon’s character is dead and only interacts as a ghost) or career to follow him. Thus we see in both films in the final scene—at the fruition of the love story—portrayals of the female characters as regaling

in the creations of the male protagonists as they either come back to life (Witherspoon) or leave paradise (Kunis). In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the male protagonist has written a produced a musical puppet show, and in *Just like Heaven*, the male protagonist has designed and built an urban rooftop garden. Meanwhile Kunis' character has given up her hotel management job in paradise, and Reese Witherspoon's character is killed early in the narrative to remove her from the busy life of an emergency room physician so that she can find time for romantic love. Witherspoon appears as a ghost throughout most of *Just Like Heaven*, but is "brought back to life" by falling love and heterosexually coupling. Indeed, the male landscape architect seems to have greater powers of resuscitation than the female emergency room physician.

These texts are representative narratives of postfeminist culture, common in themes and in executions. Postfeminism might offer a limited space to reimagine our social lives in that women are (at least superficially) central to the narratives; they are often unburdened by sexual moral conventions, and their primary dramatized relationships can be with other women. However, these textual moves are most often undercut by "retreatist" scenarios or some other form of conservative backsliding. In fact, one of the constitutive elements of postfeminist texts is a romantic celebration of the removal of women from the realm of personal fulfillment, professional, artistic, or otherwise, and often so that they can serve as the support system for men's achievements. To demonstrate how these postfeminist ideas are normalized and naturalized into U.S. cultures, imagine what it would look like, for example, to experience a popular cinema that regularly produces romantic comedies in which a male protagonist "retreats," gives

up his career and/or artistic aspirations so that his wife or girlfriend can pursue hers. There are a few popular films out there which attempt such a scenario,⁵⁷ but the story is crafted for crass comedy that tends to fall back into a reaffirmation of patriarchal and postfeminist culture. Though, of course, I make no claims on prescriptive feminism in popular texts (the very idea would likely be illegible to popular media producers), it is safe to say that these texts are not designed to invigorate imaginations of progressive social futures.

Postfeminism is both derivative and transformative of feminist politics through the Second Wave and pervasive neoliberal rhetoric. Postfeminism is an outgrowth of thinking about women, both radically conservative and, at limited moment, progressive. Stéphanie Genz posits that postfeminism can seem to be plural, hybrid, and liminal.⁵⁸ However, postfeminism does have a shape and a texture; it's not a continuously amorphous, indescribable entity. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have coined the phrase "postfeminist sensibility"⁵⁹ that seems to inform popular, mainstream culture generally. There is a guiding sense of how to represent and understand gender that is both comforting in age of uncertainty and conforms to the insidiously pervasive, if undirected, goals of neoliberalism.

Postfeminism, Consumer Culture, and Neoliberalism

Like Susan Faludi, feminist media critic Angela McRobbie never uses the term "postfeminism" to describe current popular feminism, but her descriptions of its contours are identical to those who do call it postfeminism. And McRobbie would likely agree

with Faludi about the pervasiveness of postfeminism as the following quote illuminates her position on the current state of Anglo feminisms⁶⁰ or postfeminism:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in the media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly ‘modern’ ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure a new women’s movement will not re-emerge.⁶¹

Here, however, McRobbie’s focuses on another aspect of postfeminist rhetoric that of the discursive “positive” operations of postfeminism, particularly the way that feminist terms such as “choice and “empowerment” can be loosely used in order to forward a more conservative agenda for women than a progressive feminist one. McRobbie would also agree with Faludi as she goes on to emphasize that women’s right to equality in many arenas has been hijacked by a patriarchal consumer culture in which women are consistently told that feminist goals have been achieved so that a new, reinvigorated women’s movement (which might, for instance, argue for something as culture-changing and pragmatic as governmentally subsidized childcare for single and/or low income parents) is made to seem unnecessary and redundant. Women claiming to be feminists who protest discrimination or inequalities are thus made to seem shrill, unfeminine, potentially homosexual/deviant throwbacks from a bygone era.⁶²

Interestingly, in her recent fifteenth anniversary (second) edition of *Backlash*, Faludi included in the new preface that she would no longer describe the state of feminisms as a “backlash.” Instead, she would agree with McRobbie that feminist attitudes have been claimed or reclaimed and redeployed by consumer culture, most

pointedly in explicit and implicit marketing products and services to young women. “The very fundamentals of feminism have been recast in commercial terms,” she writes.⁶³ Faludi is referring to the common discursive operation in postfeminist culture that Angela McRobbie described: touting women’s empowerment in maneuvers that many would argue actually close down opportunities, or recycle women back into traditional and/or patriarchal roles. “Empowerment” is a strong theme in postfeminist marketing to women, but it is often positioned to be procured through (hetero) sexual allure and availability and the achievement of the ability to purchase one’s way toward this goal. Marketing is understood in this context to mean both the direct marketing of products to women such as beauty products, clothing, etc., but it also refers to the way femininity is produced in popular cultural texts through the lens of marketing such that we find a plethora of images of ultra-thin, white women as the beauty standards for all women, for example. Faludi also notes that she believes that this hijacking of feminism by consumer culture is a primary source of modern angst among women: a constant message that women can fill a spiritual or emotional void with material life, that material life is itself the source of empowerment and agency, that women are at their best when participating in rampant, unchecked consumer practices.

Many feminist critics of postfeminism would agree with Faludi’s assessment of postfeminism and consumer culture, and several have written extensively on the co-opting of feminism by the late capitalist consumer culture in Anglo countries. In fact, the premise of Rosalind Gill’s and Christina Scharff’s essay collection, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, is that the omnivorous nature of

neoliberalism easily redeploys feminism as marketing savvy and the promise of fulfillment in the perfection of self as appearance and “correct” behaviors. They outline three tenets of neoliberalism with which feminism, or the expression of women’s equality and achievements, can be efficiently aligned: individualism, continual self-reinvention, and women as the “ideal subjects” of neoliberalism.⁶⁴ Individualism they describe as a pervasive sense of identity “that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves.”⁶⁵ Of course, I must note here that this conception of self can only be produced and maintained if one is privileged enough to have certain unmarked statuses, such as whiteness and at least the appearance of heterosexuality.

Gill and Scharff point out the lack of political and social movements in contemporary culture among women and other minoritized groups⁶⁶, and they imply that postfeminist texts, at least for young, white middle class women, can serve as a replacement and salve for gender-based grievances in institutions such as education or the workplace. In other words, postfeminist texts can reassure women, particularly young women, that the gains of “feminism” have been achieved, and that modern women need only concern themselves with their personal, individual success and well-being—an idea which is itself defined by the marketplace. Furthermore, the term “feminism” is rarely used (and rarely defined when it is used) and the achievements of feminisms are rarely if ever enumerated. This is because concrete feminist achievements won through political pressure and/or protest (such as *Roe V. Wade* and Title IX) would hearken back to (or worse, reawaken) a type of feminism that postfeminism must strenuously avoid in order

to maintain its stance that feminism is the “empowering” outgrowth of a buyable (yet strictly produced and monitored by the market) femininity.

In the neoliberal marketplace, feminism refers to the ability to be individualistic absolutely. Thus, it is in this atmosphere of personal, individual well-being that postfeminist marketing can be at its most insidious, convincing women that they are personally failing at femininity, or at being a woman generally, in order to persuade women to purchase their way closer to those goals. This tactic effectively masks or directly or subtly derides women’s efforts toward social justice and equality. Much data and many studies exist which analyze the preponderance of media directed at women, particularly in “women’s magazines” and advertising, designed to convince women of their shortcomings and geared toward convincing women that all their grievances have been properly addressed and the solutions have been developed.⁶⁷

Postfeminist films, which compose most of the popular cinemas dealing with women in the U.S, support these aims of the marketplace in that they showcase stereotypically thin and standardly attractive white women who possess enviable possessions and wardrobes, and who live in lavish apartments or houses in stunning locations (even when the occupations of the women would never provide the means to acquire these sorts of living accommodations). Most romantic comedies in American cinema, at least, feature these types of characters, including many of the films starring postfeminist icons such as Sandra Bullock (*The Lake House*), Kate Hudson (*Something Borrowed*, *A Little Bit of Heaven*, *Bride Wars*), and postfeminist celebrity A-list newcomers, Mila Kunis (*Friends with Benefits*) and Emma Stone (*Easy A*, *Crazy Stupid*

Love). It must be noted that “thin and conventionally attractive” are the prominent commodities in neoliberal and postfeminist culture, in that they encompasses the space of intertextuality and star personae. It is no accident that we often see celebrities, particularly female stars, on magazine covers and in online news stories, photographed going to and from gyms and that their interviews more often than not feature a section on their workouts and diets. Postfeminist icon Gwyneth Paltrow has even developed her own website, *Goop*, devoted to advice for women on how to purchase one’s way to a happier life. She refers to the site as a “lifestyle company” she “curates” and aims to be the “most trusted girlfriend on the web.”⁶⁸ Thus, Paltrow markets her “sisterhood,” a name for a traditional feminist goal that can, once again in consumer culture, be purchased—by the very, very wealthy, that is.

Postfeminist culture dutifully pushes the products: feminine “perfection” can be bought through the idea that “thin and attractive” are always cast as commodities through the purchase of gym memberships, personal trainers, personal chefs, surgery, the ability to consume products and clothing, and so forth, a lifestyle personified by rich and famous actresses specializing in postfeminist work. Thus a resurrected or buoyed and maintained career in postfeminist culture often involves a bodily transformation from out of shape or post-pregnant to thin. The preponderance of media on “post-baby bodies” and the shedding of weight in general is itself a source of postfeminist acclaim. Thus we see celebrities such as Jennifer Hudson, Kirstie Alley, Marie Osmond, and Valerie Bertinelli maintaining or revitalizing their careers as spokespersons for weight loss corporations. Their success is not just based on their efforts toward tremendous weight loss, but on

their willingness to confess their failures at femininity (with the attendant, deliberately “grotesque” pictures of their “transgressions”) and then their subsequent return to the postfeminist fold as marketplace proselytizers of products that promise to postfeminize other bodies, or convince women of their failures and the potential for their readmission into capitalism and into the male heterosexual gaze, which often operate seamlessly tandem.

What is rarely noted in popular or academic discourse is that although one can buy thinness, for example, one cannot buy whiteness or heterosexuality; thus, neoliberal and capitalistic enterprise politics as deployed through popular culture and U.S. cinema work to demarcate white heterosexuality as exceptional, unmarked and preferred.

Equally troubling, postfeminism is emphatic in its market quest to convince women that achieving material success (including the achievement of the perfect femininity) is the necessary preface or prerequisite to personal fulfillment in relationships with others, particularly heterosexual romantic couplings that lead to marriage and to the creation of a nuclear family. Postfeminist culture insists that one won’t/can’t be loved by others if one doesn’t know how to “correctly” perform femininity. Though there is certainly a history of “ugly duckling” texts before the postfeminist era, the ugly duckling story can serve as a particularly rich narrative arc for postfeminism’s production of heterosexualized femininity through the male gaze. Postfeminist films deploy version of this story frequently to narrativize such a transformation: the “unattractive” woman whose femininity lies outside the bounds of mainstream heterosexual allure. Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality* (2000) becomes the beautiful and desired sexual object by

changing out of baggy clothes into a tight, short dress and heels, and wearing makeup. Rachel Leigh Cook in *She's All That* (1999) takes off unflattering glasses and wears a party dress. Amanda Bynes in *She's the Man* (2006) pretends to be a boy in order to play soccer with them. Notably, Amanda Bynes' character must give up competitive soccer with guys—with whom she can hold her own—in order to fall in love with one of the soccer heroes, or have him fall in love with her. Thus the narrative satisfies another attribute of postfeminist texts—that women must put their aspirations and abilities aside, and preferably behind those of men, in order to be desired, accepted, and loved.

I speculate that both the already-answered quality of postfeminism or as McRobbie says, “feminism taken into account” renders social protest based on being discriminated against as a woman as seeming redundant and that the market has successfully convinced many women, of all identities, to stay in the liminal, dynamic space of failure and potential (purchasable) transformation. Second, as Gill and Scharff noted, neoliberal markets thrive on individuals believing in individualism as a right. So how would someone convinced that individualism is the primary mode of self-worth design a protest or join with others to protest for the good of the whole? It is anathema to neoliberal culture to think this way.⁶⁹ There is also a feature of postfeminism specific to younger women that demands a relaxed, ironic attitude toward the postfeminist sexualization of culture so that items such as wearing “stripper heels” and exercising on stripper poles become mainstream practice. Once again, the marketplace inspires fear to contain feminist urges in that young women feel as if they may risk social alienation if

they interpret the sexualization of culture as anything other than ironic or worse, natural and unassailable.⁷⁰

Postfeminism, Feminist Media Critics and Difference⁷¹

Notably, in *Backlash*, Susan Faludi does not articulate notions of difference into her conceptions and constructions of feminism(s), and Whelehan mentions difference only in passing, a commonality both disappointing and unfortunately normal among Anglo feminist media critics. Angela McRobbie makes a stronger effort to keep difference in the frame of her arguments, but even in her work the discussion of difference can often feel nonintegral to the arguments. I believe that the explanation for such omissions or inabilities is at least partially due to a genealogical understanding of feminism more than it due to an attempt to privilege the agendas of dominant culture—though the outcome is the same, of course. In an historical analysis, one of the reasons why the women’s movement in the 1970s is often understood to have lost momentum was its lack of ability (or willingness?) to incorporate difference among groups of women. In other words, feminists from the Second Wave women’s movement treated “women” as a monolithic and static category for the most part.

For example, one of the most poignant examples of difference in feminist action and protest of the Second Wave is the normativizing of white women in the fight for reproductive rights, which became a constitutive feature of women’s protests in the 1970s. To draw the matter rather starkly, while white women were protesting and campaigning for better, safer, and cheaper access to birth control and legal abortions, African American and Native American women were undergoing forced sterilizations by

state governments in programs of eugenics, a fact which never became a central feature of the Second Wave fight for women's rights. Furthermore, with the exception of a few contemporary collegiate women's and gender studies textbooks, these egregiously cruel policies are not being written back into popular historical narrative of feminism, nor into the educational or popular history of the U.S. for that matter.

Another example of Second Wave feminist universalism is one I've mentioned and it is the argument attributed most often to the famous, self-declared feminist, Betty Friedan—that women should be freed from family life/care giving work, and encouraged to pursue jobs outside the home. Once again, stay-at-home mothering and housework in one's own home was a scenario encountered by mostly white, middle class women. Historically few women of color in the U.S., for example, have had the economic stability to even consider the potential to stay at home with their children. They were, in fact, (and many are yet) often employed in the care of the children and homes of others, and lament the time they spend away from their own children and families. Friedan also infamously likened stay-at-home motherhood to Nazi camp imprisonment which served to alienate Jewish intellectuals and Holocaust sympathizers from her cause, if not from the Second Wave movement itself.⁷² These and other failures of the Second Wave feminist movement convinced African American women, among other women of color and those without recent European ancestries that they were not represented by a group of women claiming to include them, and more importantly, that they felt alienated by a movement claiming to speak for them. Furthermore, much discourse on postfeminism

continues to ignore the divergent histories of women producing different types of feminist subjects.

As Becky Thompson argues, the organizing logic of the women's movement was that all women face the same inequalities which in turn, constructed the white middle class women's movement that it came to be.⁷³ It is partially because the feminist dialogue from the 1970s assumed whiteness and middle class as the unmarked status of all women that we often continue to speak of women's rights as a universal set of ideas begun decades ago and now carried forth into the present. In today's feminist dialogues and discourses, this genealogical approach and understanding is still not adequately problematized and "women's movements" often yet naturalize whiteness and the middle class (as well as now Judeo-Christian religion and Anglo nationalities). For example, much of the discourse on postfeminism either ignores difference entirely or it features an additional essay or section on difference. I argue throughout this work, however, that in the U.S. at least, there is no understanding of whiteness or middle class without a clear and present Othering which serves to undergird naturalized (and usually binarized in the U.S.) ideas about gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, cultural affiliations, and other markers of identities in cultures.

Postfeminism and Women's Actual and Metaphorical Empowerment

It should be clear by now that postfeminism is not a "movement" in the way that we typically characterize collective social movements and political action. Unlike Second Wave feminism in the 1970s, for example, a moment of intense social and political action in historical time with a group of women (and some men) who referred to themselves

using the “feminist” moniker and with a loosely inscribed set of actionable ideas and policies, there is no perceived shared postfeminist agenda among young women and few (if any) women refer to themselves as postfeminists.⁷⁴ Note that this scenario doesn’t necessarily preclude a feminist issue-based or event-based agenda among certain groups of women⁷⁵ in the postfeminist era from time to time, but as this chapter will demonstrate, the popular and most emphatic discourse on gender, women, and sexuality in our widely circulated media is postfeminist in nature.

Certainly people organize for various women’s and queer causes in the postfeminist era.⁷⁶ But even when feminist social activism seems to gain some potential traction in mainstream culture, postfeminist discourse tends to overtake, override, and outsell any form of counter-postfeminism. Further, the activist events and issues that do arise dealing with heterosexual women tend to be reactive and short-lived, such as the birth control controversies in 2011 in which the Catholic Church attempted to prohibit Catholic hospitals receiving state funds from distributing birth control, or the 2012 Susan G. Komen Foundation’s quickly reversed ruling to defund Planned Parenthood on the grounds of a pro-life abortion stance of the new Komen Foundation vice-president. After the initial media blitz that lasts a week or two at most, discussions on gender and activism tend to retreat back into normalized, *laissez faire* postfeminist discourse as if nothing ever happened. Films and television programs rarely seem to change the postfeminist script based on such infrequent and brief eruptions of women’s rights campaigns. This is the cultural space of postfeminism: through popular media and news outlets postfeminism seems to effortlessly reposition and reassert itself as mainstream discourse on women’s

issues, overshadowing most other ways, and I would argue, the most important and politically efficacious ways that we could speak of gender, sexuality, and social change. Postfeminism is just as omnivorously voracious as capitalism in explaining complicated, important situations to the American people as simplistic if not binary, and thus the most challenging cultural gender and sex-based phenomena are swiftly isolated, cursorily described, and summarily dismissed.

Again, the date is debated among feminist media critics, but at least since the late 1980s, postfeminism describes the popular constructions of a modern woman in most of Western mainstream media, especially media directed toward women and girls. Thus the term postfeminism is a feminist-derived description of a set of texts that produce gender/sexuality and of the received attitudes of contemporary audiences toward themselves as gendered subjects and women and girls generally.⁷⁷ These postfeminist attitudes are often presented in the spirit of concession: a postfeminist character, celebrity or any woman in or aspiring to a position of power must concede something to patriarchy and particularly to the male heterosexual gaze in order to be allowed to participate in formerly all-male arenas such as business or politics. And for my purposes in the analysis of film and culture, postfeminism requires these concessions for women to “earn” a spot in films other than in romantic comedies and/or roles that complicate gender and sexuality—among numerous current variables of identities.

In the realm of contemporary American cinema, one might be tempted to suggest that there are more women in roles of power in contemporary movies than there were in past decades, owning their own businesses, working in prestigious positions at least

partially due to the pervasive mainstream American sense of inevitable social progress. Geena Davis, founder of seejane.org, a nonprofit which researches gender and the media, claims that she hears this statement frequently and quickly refutes it based on her organization's commissioned academic research as simply, not true.⁷⁸ Davis is baffled by the widely held perception that women are represented more equally and complexly in contemporary media.⁷⁹ In fact, compared to the roles of women in early cinema, we see a *reduction* of complex roles for women actors since at least the 1980s and a move toward creating sexualized “cartoons” of women instead of representing a range of women as complicated human beings with agency.⁸⁰ While it is true that there have been brief moments of feminist potential⁸¹ in American cinema such as a few examples from the post Second Wave years including *Norma Rae* (1979), *9 to 5* (1980), and even perhaps *Tootsie* (1982), films that explore the boundaries of gender and sexuality norms, these individual cinematic events do not mark a movement in cultural thinking that translates to a transformation in media representation or to political change, participation, or representation of women or queers, much less increasing the visibility—in any type of role—for women, queers, and people of color, among other categories of minoritized identity. In fact, since the few years that produced *9 to 5*, *Norma Rae* and *Tootsie*, we've seen very little in mainstream media that challenges the foundations of gender and sexuality norming, much less films that augment our knowledge of and compassion for any kind of difference: ethnicity, class, or other forms of global misrepresentations, stereotypes, and inequalities.⁸²

One might argue that although women may not often be portrayed as complex agents in mainstream media, characters in the postfeminist era *can* be portrayed as particularly physically and supernaturally powerful in the super-hero media genre. However, unlike the diminutive middle-aged man, Robert Downey, Jr. in the *Iron Man* and *Sherlock Holmes* franchises, Harrison Ford still raiding the ark at age sixty-six, or even the nontraditional lean and nerdy leading men Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield as Spiderman, a woman is rarely portrayed outside the norms of postfeminism representation, including superhero media. It is a feature of postfeminist America that women's empowerment is most often undercut by either sexualizing her or degrading her for failing at self-sexualization for the heterosexual male gaze, and this tendency reaches an emphatic level in superhero media. Women superheroes rarely if ever break the boundaries of allowable appearance in sexuality, race/ethnicity, weight, or age. We almost never see female protagonists or superheroes who are not young, white, thin, and coded as heterosexual—nor are these characters, superheroines or not, allowed to romance men who are at most half their age, a common practice across decades and genres in Hollywood output.⁸³ And, even in the few instances when a woman is racialized in action media, she's not given the filmic space to recognize, much less articulate, the experience of being racialized as an equally valid and interesting mode of identity to be explored on screen as also superheroic.

There was a brief movement in the 1990s known as RiotGrrl, a group of white women who formed all-female punk bands, and wrote “zines” or self-published pamphlets on social and political issues that affect mostly white women. These women's

efforts were eventually swallowed by neoliberal conservative culture and mainstreamed into texts produced for the masses such as the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), and the Spice Girls. Certainly Xena offers a space for a reading of a queered body in her muscularity, but she was yet produced as a heterosexual object in midriff-baring and thigh-baring “fighting” costumes. The Spice Girls, a British pop group who claimed the term “girl power” and rewrote the script for empowerment back into a safe one of overtly insipid and sexualized “dolls” for heterosexual male consumption. Thus “girl power” was repurposed by corporate culture as objectified female sexuality and the average American (or Brit) would have little or no knowledge of the empowerment scenarios that generated such slogans in the first place.

The point of contention here is not that these heterosexualized and binarized representations should or should not exist, of course, but that there are so few counters to them in cinematic or other popular culture. Indeed, few other types of female action heroes are portrayed in contemporary popular films and thus their influence is vastly disproportionate to any other types of women on screen. For example, compare the list in the paragraphs above of thin, buxom women (often in bikinis or catsuits)⁸⁴ to the conveyance of physical strength in the tough, muscular, Hispanic, and queered female character, Lieutenant Vasquez, in James Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986)⁸⁵ or Cameron’s later character, the gun-toting, muscled Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) who showcased her well-defined biceps by pumping her gun one-armed. These women were not trading (or being traded) on their heterosexual allure; their appeal was the gender-bending their defiantly muscular bodies enacted. Postfeminism allows no such

deviations in its prescription for femininity which must be (hetero) sexy, maternal, participatory in capitalism, and deferential or at least either sexual or demure when a male suitor is present. Thus this era of postfeminist actresses must earn the right to participate in action films not by demonstrating their abilities and strengths through their actual muscular, powerful bodies, but they must earn their power (or super power) by serving as sexualized bodies for the male gaze. Put another way, standard mediatized heterosexual allure is the condition on which women are admitted into the arena. This is the primary if at times implicit term of concession in postfeminist culture in order to gain entry into male-dominated genres and political spaces. These characters also must coterminously and tacitly agree to occupy no more than a second class position, as their powers can be neutralized by something as common, frequent, and natural as female sexual desire.

However, these action cartoon films of women are not and cannot be created or received in a vacuum and they serve as potent metaphors for actual women seeking political power. I argue that postfeminist representations are both productions and reproductions of gender and sexuality in lived culture. Thus, postfeminist popular culture has real world investments and implications in its constructions and deployments of gender norms across landscapes of thought and behaviors. In the world of U.S. national politics we can see postfeminism at work as the media (and sometimes male politicians) criticize women politicians for their inability or unwillingness to acquiesce to performing heterosexualized femininity for the male heterosexual gaze. Thus powerful or controversial political positions taken by women politicians can be easily sidelined by

media discourse in a focus on their failures at traditional white, middle class, heterosexual femininity.

Former First Lady, former senator for New York state, and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, is probably the most famous target of this kind of public disdain that serves to remind her (and women who admire her) of the price of succeeding in positions of power traditionally held by men. For example, the national conversations about Clinton's "cankles" or her conservative wardrobe that erupt occasionally are a stern and pointed postfeminist warning to women hoping to enter the ranks of national politics: be the object of male heterosexual desire or withstand criticism for the poor performance of femininity—and suffer indignities that your male counterparts rarely, if ever, have to endure. Even Chelsea Clinton was widely criticized on her "inadequate appearance" as young as a preteen to insult and undermine Bill and Hillary Clinton by proxy, among many other examples. Thus, one of the many reasons Hillary Clinton is admired by many feminists is her willingness and ability to perform her duties without deference to or often even public recognition of the demeaning gender-based insults leveled at her, even when the insults are being chanted during her speeches.

Similar reporting in mainstream media denigrates the first woman Speaker of the House, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, on her failure to achieve the ideal look of femininity and ideal womanhood in patriarchal culture. In the documentary, *Miss Representation*, Pelosi reveals that in her initial run for Congress she fielded a barrage of accusations about the abandonment of her motherly duties even though all her children were, by the time she ran for Congress, legal adults. Pelosi has also been plagued by

media pundits mercilessly taunting her for undergoing cosmetic plastic surgery. This practice reveals a common postfeminist paradox: be the object of male heterosexual desire but don't get caught crafting your performance because it spoils the fantasy that heterosexualized feminine allure is not manufactured. "Natural" women, in postfeminist culture, are the socialized fantasies of media-saturated young American heterosexual men (and the women who have internalized this gaze), as much as "natural" masculinity harbors the rights to political decision-making. Politics, in the convergence of neo-conservatism and postfeminism, is such a thoroughly masculinized territory that it is often virtually unassailable on the grounds of gender and sex discrimination.

Furthermore former U.S. Attorney General, Janet Reno, former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright⁸⁶, current Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano and current Supreme Court Justices Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor each have endured assaults on their gender and sexualities because their single status past childbearing years positions them outside the bounds of patriarchal comprehension and their bodies defiantly do not conform to postfeminist ideals. As Gloria Steinem points out in *Miss Representation*, in a patriarchal society women lose their value past their childbearing years and thus heterosexual men, and especially those 97% of heterosexual males who control American media, rarely even circulate images of older women.⁸⁷ As Jennifer Siebel Newsom calculates in the same documentary, though women under the age of forty make up 39 % of the population, their representation on television is 71%. Conversely, women over 40 make up 47% of the American population and yet are only 26% of women on television.⁸⁸ Thus when a woman achieves prominence outside the

arena of control by the male heterosexual gaze, and especially when her job description is both one of prestige and not in any way dependent upon her allure, she must be brought back in (postfeminist) line by being reminded of her failures as a contemporary woman/object of the male gaze. Therefore, by postfeminist tacit edict she must reinstate and reaffirm her subordination to a patriarchal and androcentric order by either stepping out of the limelight or by postfeminizing herself in some way.

Likewise in the corporate arena Sheryl Sandberg, the reigning Chief Financial Officer of Facebook, is exemplary of postfeminism, as she crafts her image and messages well within the logic of success in mainstream media culture: standardly heterosexually pretty, performing business feats of awe in a mostly male and masculine corporate culture without seeming to sweat or move a hair. She is white, thin, wealthy, Jewish (increasingly understood in the United States, if not most of Western culture, as not-Muslim), and talks about being a wife and mother as much or more than she talks about being a professional success. Thus, it is Sandberg's cooperation or capitulation, we might call it, to the inherent patriarchy of postfeminism that helps her "earn" her press and the microphone to tell other women how to be successful businesswomen and mothers. She has been written about in major newspapers and magazines, regularly gives talks for women, and, as I detailed earlier, has now published a kind of manifesto for women.

Note that I am in no way suggesting that Sandberg's accomplishments in the corporate world should be diminished. What I am suggesting that Sandberg's postfeminist identity paves the way for a kind of notoriety that other women in her position, or higher than her position, have not sought or have not attained. Imagine, for

instance, another type of person coming to Western corporate power and attempting to create a national women's movement: a Muslim woman—especially one who veils, an elderly woman, an overweight woman, a single, childless woman, a lesbian Latina, a transgendered person—any one of these formulations is unlikely to be successful in mainstream culture and would likely encounter either apathy or severe criticism. If our current media assaults on women such as the powerful Hilary Clinton, the powerful and black Michelle Obama, the powerful and Latina Sonia Sotomayor, women who veil, women who have a weight outside a narrow range of acceptability, women who are lesbians or suspected lesbians or people who are trans are any indication, it seems there would be little initial support for such a person in the media or in the political limelight, *even though* any one of these people would be far closer to representing of the majority of the American culture than a wealthy, white, heterosexual woman.⁸⁹

No femininity, even the most often represented traditional white, heterosexual, middle class femininity, offers a clear path to access and enact (particularly political power) in the public sphere, including fields central to politics such as print, televised, and online journalism and the corporate sector. Thus postfeminism norms must be boldly and publicly broken in order for a woman to compete as an equal with men concretely and directly in business and politics. This attitude atomizes to the most mundane features of everyday life so that there are naturalized associations of activities with masculinity and femininity that bolster such naturalized notions of power in and outside of the home. For example, during a campaign speech in the Democratic primary of the 2008, Hillary Clinton was taunted by men chanting “Iron my shirt!” Clinton ignored the insult and not

much was made of the incident in the political media. It difficult to imagine those protesters escaping public scorn in an analogous display of disrespect for any other primary node of Western identity: race, ethnicity, class, religion, or even sexuality.

Postfeminist gender socialization informs grand events like presidential elections, but it can only be culturally legible if it is also widely circulated and reinforced in everyday, mundane activities (such as ironing) which it codes as masculine or feminine, usually depending on either the value or the physicality of the labor. Mowing the lawn (physical labor) and servicing the car (skilled labor) are yet coded as masculine activities, while cleaning the house and doing the laundry are yet associated with unskilled and unpaid labor with the attendant feminization of such tasks. Work that involves bodily fluids, particularly abject bodily fluids like waste, are often coded as feminine: mothers, nurses, home health care aides, as the inferiority of femininity has long been coded as closer to corporality—if not abjection itself—in a constitutive Western binary that pits mind and body against one another. Further, a woman working outside the home in a role directly competing with a man is yet a fraught issue in American culture.

While we may be able to cite individual couples whose relationships suggest that these gendered roles may be changing, mainstream media, for the most part, is not offering representations of an array of new and emergent lifestyles for Americans, at least not outside the genre of undercutting comedy and usually also involving a recycling of old gender rules.⁹⁰ It is no accident that *Mad Men* is one of the top rated shows in the postfeminist era, as its production of masculine dominance and feminine submission indicates that nostalgia is about the desires of people in the present. Postfeminism largely

constructs an understanding of masculinity as a white and middle class: active, public, and powerful, while femininity is also textually genealogically white, and middle class, centered on the creation and maintenance of home and family. I'll discuss this in depth in the second chapter, but I'd like to note here that postfeminist texts tend to either deploy the stereotypes or completely ignore class, race, and other features of identity that complicate Americanized cultural fantasies. Thus postfeminism revives and enlivens traditional gender norming often in support of a nuclear family model.

Postfeminism's Feminist Potential and Limitations

There are some limited feminist gains in the postfeminist era such as revived sexual freedom and a focus on female friendships. These are gains that may be best explored in a widespread revival of reception studies. However, until those studies are conducted, it is safe to say—given the preponderance of anecdotal evidence—that one of the most popular features of postfeminist texts among women is that the female characters often discuss openly their sexual desires and experiences, and in tandem, they also frequently embrace the enjoyment of performing heterosexual femininity. It is important to note that the vocalized expression of sexual desire coupled with gender performance signals a primary difference between the constructions of contemporary young women and those of their feminist forerunners.

In other words, some women take pleasure in performing femininity, have developed a skill set to that end, and understand their performance as central to their allure in attracting their desired sexual partners. Second Wave feminism is now often circulated as a set of ideas that preclude such pleasures and disregard such skill sets.

Partially because feminist histories are often either not recorded or not recorded well, certainly some of the Second Wave has been misunderstood and mischaracterized and is consistently reduced to the point of trivialization in the mainstream media with common descriptors such as “man-hating” and “bra-burning.” Though it may be painful to consider that women’s histories are yet largely invisible, these are the images against which postfeminist texts tend to construct themselves, and it is thus instructive that gender as performance linked with sexual satisfaction is a primary constitutive feature of postfeminism.

CHAPTER 1: ICONIC AND RECENT POSTFEMINIST TEXTS: THE DIFFERENCES
 THAT ENABLE THE POSTFEMINIST SUBJECT

This dissertation is an attempt to answer some questions that I've had for many years. While working in Washington D.C. In the following chapter, I set out with a dual charge: to bracket the era of postfeminism and to foreground the Othering that produces such a postfeminist subject. In the first two sections, I compare popular texts in film and television across the divide of a decade to query their constructions of femininity. This is an attempt to compare iconic and recent postfeminist texts in order to undergird the position that postfeminism is a pervasive cultural phenomenon whose themes and values inflect many of the most popular narratives in which a construction of femininity is central. In the final sections on iconic comedians from the postfeminist era, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, I attempt to describe the ways in which these texts deploy terms of difference in order to enable the production of the white, middle class, heterosexual, and secular postfeminist protagonist.

Bridget Jones's Diary (2001) and Bridesmaids (2012)

The eponymous Bridget Jones (played by Renée Zellweger) a character created by author, Helen Fielding, is a striking example of a postfeminist text as Bridget is an initial failure on all postfeminist fronts, and her failures are the singular source of the comedy for the books and films. She is overweight by Hollywood standards (yet still thinner than the average American woman). This is an explicit transgression in American postfeminist television and cinema as well as other media cultures—a postfeminist transgression that mandates public confession/humiliation and punishment which

Bridget/Zellweger endures for laughs.¹ Intertextually, Zellweger's weight gain for the role served as value-added publicity for the film, underscoring its "authenticity" as a text that speaks to the lives of real women. This intertextuality is a constitutive element of postfeminist culture: authenticating messages through both fictive characters and the lives of the stars who portray them lends a credence to postfeminist film's messages of potential and likely failures of real women on many other fronts—such as the unassailable desire for and/or lack of a proper romantic partner.² Zellweger's widely publicized weight gain also served as a collective public disapproval of women actors above a model size; the *Bridget Jones* publicity was rife with accolades for Zellweger's willingness to transform her body out of postfeminist form, and the tacit assurance that she would indeed lose the weight once her filming ended in order to deem herself desirable to Hollywood and the public in postfeminist terms once more.³

Most women stars (or the diminutive celebrity press term, "starlets") set the postfeminist standard for other women, most especially in the arena of extreme heterosexualized appearance for the male gaze. Therefore the disapproval of their appearances extrapolates out to all women who are encouraged to self-deprecate and see themselves as transgressors of the ideal heterosexualized female image. Though I will develop this idea later, to summarize here, it is a notable feature of postfeminist culture that the ideal female image in popular culture has become more than a racial type or body type; the mainstream ideal look is now informed by pornography, cartoons of women in graphic novels and the subsequent films based on them, and requires abundant money,

skill, time, and labor, if not the work of a plastic surgeon, a stylist, a personal trainer, etc., for most women to achieve.

It is thus instructive that in the first film Bridget Jones appears in what appears to be an authentic Playboy Bunny costume for a party. It is understood that the Playboy costume in part represents the willingness of women to play along with sexual objectification, indeed to play along with objectification playfully or ironically with their skills, money, time and labor, and that a woman's collusion with playfulness in self-objectification is a highly desired characteristic to heterosexual men looking for a life partner. In other words, we might ask: why *that* revealing costume, one with such loaded symbolism? It is true that the theme of the party was the common British "Vicars and Tarts," but this narrative ploy also served well the film's postfeminist ends, especially since it is well known in Great Britain that part of the fun is that many versions of these parties require the women to play vicars and the men, tarts. Why, then, did the filmmakers deem it less funny for Bridget to show up as a vicar? And why the Playboy costume—an iconic American symbol of heterosexual male sexual mastery of women? A Playboy Bunny is a constructed fantasy of men: that women are willing and able to understand their self-worth primarily as sexual objects and to "play" along with the "boys" in sexual enactment. Women in these costumes with pointed ears and fluffy tails are identified with animals, and further, this particular animal, a bunny, is coded as sexually promiscuous and simultaneously childlike and harmless, qualities that could also describe the character of Bridget Jones.

The primary conflict in *Bridget Jones's Diary* is that Bridget cannot find a suitable boyfriend who will become a husband—the most common postfeminist obsession and narrative focus. (Again it is the emphatic nature and the proliferation of such texts that sets them apart in the postfeminist era.) In lieu of a promising mate, Bridget begins a sexual relationship with her boss whose interest is a casual affair, and thus Bridget enters the space of transgression and punishment in postfeminist culture, the attendant bourgeois and patriarchal-informed morality, and particularly self-help literature directives in the inability to find a man who wants to enter a commitment with her. Note that the film presents Bridget and her boss' sexually-based, short-term relationship as *Bridget's* failure, and not her male boss's inability to achieve real intimacy with a partner. Indeed, played by Hugh Grant, the character is portrayed as a charming Lothario who shrugs his shoulders at Bridget's "inadequacies" and happily seems to ignore any emotional needs he may have. In fact, his emotional needs are—as coded by the film—met by repeated sexual escapades with various women. While I do not dispute that short-term, sexually-based relationships can be a valid form of personal fulfillment, the text suggests that emotional needs in a romantic relationship are feminine, secondary, and entirely the province and burden of heterosexual women.

In sleeping with her commitment-phobic boss, Bridget transgresses yet again in crossing the lines of allowable types of sex for the most common woman represented in American and British media: single, white, never-married, heterosexual women⁴—sex must eventually lead to a relationship, preferably to marriage and children.⁵ Bridget is not allowed a rewarding sexual life without the stress and guilt of failure to create a proper

nuclear family. Even though she is having regular, enjoyable sex with a handsome and wealthy man, the films depict Bridget as a melancholy figure, if an endearingly charming and insipid one. That Bridget is a ditz, flubbing her job assignments, showing up at party in the Playboy costume that wasn't a costume party in a "chubby" body and falling off her exercise bicycle in a frantic attempt to lose weight demonstrates postfeminism's necessary failure at femininity. In other words, Bridget's lack of intellect and transgressive body enacts much of the intended comedy, and while the character can bravely joke her way through these embarrassing situations, she is never reliant on her acuity to avoid such scenarios in the first place. Bridget is thus infantilized in her inability to progress in her career, in her lack of insight into her own emotional life, and in her overblown naiveté in social situations. The allure of white, blonde, voluptuous Bridget Jones is her artlessness and gullibility in a world much savvier than is she. Bridget Jones' likeability squarely rests on her child-like qualities in a grown, sexual woman, all neatly conveyed in the choice of the Playboy Bunny costume.

Understandably, many women who read the books and saw the films identify with Bridget and find her refreshingly relatable compared to most other Hollywood characterizations of women.⁶ However, the gratification and relief at the ability to relate to Bridget Jones is a clear symptom of the postfeminist problem, a shared lamentation of the cultural imperative to implement impossible standards of femininity and the mandates of patriarchal culture. Thus, relatability to Bridget Jones is not a move toward collective feminist analysis that produces social change, nor is it a text of feminist solidarity, nor even a move toward any form of perceived sisterhood. Bridget Jones emphasizes a

heterogeneous yet individually enforced adherence to norms of appearance and behavior, achievements that are marked by predetermined sexual, racial, and particularly class statuses. To be clear, Bridget Jones was certainly never intended to be an icon of women's empowerment; however the Bridget Jones franchise overtly capitalizes on the assurance of women's failures in a postfeminist-ordered world. Indeed, average women like Bridget Jones *must* be cast as failures for postfeminism to have taken root as cultural, social, and economic imperatives.

Furthermore, in the logic of the Bridget Jones books and films, Bridget's thorough and enthusiastic capitulation to the enforcement of patriarchy through the humiliation of women finally earns her the right to end up with a man who wants to marry her so she can continue to perform her second class citizen role in romantic partnership and society. Note that I'm not suggesting that heterosexual marriage *necessarily* leads to second class citizenship for women, but that texts working in postfeminist logic most often do. Thus, the first film, *Bridget Jones' Diary* at its conclusion expresses an attitude of "lucky Bridget," as if women have little power in choosing their social status, and that their status is mostly the province of heterosexual male choice. The texts suggest that "lucky" women can be "chubby" but must perform femininity as slightly dim-witted and openly (hetero) sexualized to achieve their romantic/life goal—at the cost or complete elision of other goals—through their acceptance of postfeminist directives and a steady demonstration of self-deprecation. The story of Bridget Jones and the attitudes produced by such texts are the typical spaces and starting places of postfeminism.

The recent film *Bridesmaids* (2011), written by comedians Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo and directed by Paul Feig, has been widely lauded in the popular press as the first women's comedy film with an appeal to both a heterosexual male and female audience.⁷ Some critics have even regarded the film as feminist.⁸ But the trajectory of the main character, Annie, is very similar to that of Bridget Jones', only perhaps Annie's situation is worse—ten years after *Bridget Jones's Diary* was released, and Annie is perhaps ten years older than is Bridget, as Annie is somewhere in her mid to late thirties. While many have read *Bridesmaids* as a text that centers on the friendships of women, the driving narrative arc is purely postfeminist in that Annie must be punished for her failures as a woman to heterosexually couple and fully participate in the order of capitalism before she can enter the space of adulthood and life satisfaction. The heterosexual coupling alone also serves as a potent cultural and postfeminist symbol of achieving adult status, particularly for women.

The film follows Annie in a downward spiral from the opening scene in which she's having rowdy sex with Ted, a wealthy, handsome man (played by Jon Hamm—the contemporary American cultural equivalent of Hugh Grant in the 1990s) who does not want a long term relationship with her. At the start of the film, Annie has already lost her business, a bakery she owned, and has also lost her fiancé who was also her business partner. Thus she has fallen away from both full participation in capitalism and heterosexual mating success. Throughout the course of the film Annie also loses her low paying job as a sales assistant in a working class jewelry store (denoted by the establishing shot featuring the Payless shoe store next door) and she loses her apartment

which was already coded as low-rent by the décor and the presence of two roommates. Most poignantly, Annie is also potentially losing her best female friend, Lillian, to Lillian's impending marriage and to a new female best friend, Helen, who is much wealthier, put together, and more socially adept and connected than is Annie.

Like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Bridesmaids* subjects Annie to a number of humiliating and infantilizing situations in the process of her downward spiral. The opening sex scene with Ted potentially could have been played as Annie having single, unattached fun with a guy who she mostly values for his looks, wealth, and sexual abilities at a point in her life when she's not looking for commitment. One could imagine Annie using Ted to make herself feel better—having enjoyable sex with a handsome guy who doesn't press her for commitment. The narrative arc could have remained the same: Annie would still be able to unravel as the maid of honor and realize the emotional emptiness of her life. Instead, like many postfeminist productions, Annie appears victimized by the sex, informed as it often is by male heterosexual pornography: being directed, bounced and pounded in all directions. She asks Ted to slow down at one point and he resists. This behavior has been overdetermined in our cultural landscape of postfeminism as Annie's inability to demand or achieve sexual satisfaction, but more deeply, that Annie has a (feminine) desire for an intimate connection that Ted does not share (as a typical construction of a wealthy, handsome heterosexual man with his choice of women). Like the sex in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, this moment underscores Annie's failure at being an American postfeminist woman and a moment that also suggests that sex for purely physical pleasure is entirely the privilege of men (and symbolizes the

“poor choices or intellects” of those women who choose to enter into a sexual relationship with such men.) In postfeminist culture, a male heterosexual’s sexual triumph is often a heterosexual woman’s failure. This opening sex scene ends with Annie climbing over Ted’s moving, mechanical fence in a particularly absurd “walk of shame,” a term used to denote and denigrate mostly college-aged women in their early morning walks back to their dorm room after a sexual experience and subsequent sleepover.

Indeed, this is just the beginning of Annie’s infantilization in the film, eventually to the extreme point of losing bodily control like a baby.⁹ Under the aegis of food poisoning, the bridesmaids each become simultaneously incontinent during a visit to a posh bridal store. In fact, this scene is a signature moment of the film in that Wiig and the rest of the female performers have been applauded for their willingness to portray themselves outside the bounds of what is considered ladylike. In other words, “gross-out” humor has often been the province of male comedians, especially humor that serves to present heterosexual adult males as content, if not eager, to behave like children while retaining all the privileges of being an adult.¹⁰ Perhaps one could thus read this scene as a form of parity, though I hesitate on more than logical grounds to offer infantilization as an achievement for any adult, no matter how much our culture seems to celebrate it in popular cinema.

Certainly, however, one can see the feminist potential in *Bridesmaids*’ bold criticism of being “lady-like,” and one could even read a simultaneous critique of the white, bourgeois lock on feminine norms in Western culture, as the bridal shop itself is represented by the “insider”: the only bridesmaid able to gain entry in to the exclusive

store is the white, pretty, wealthy, and genteel Helen. And while *Bridesmaids* doesn't explicitly offer such a critique of Western white feminine norming (even though the bride-to-be is racialized and classed), there is room for such a reading in the enthusiastic display of women clad in satiny, gauzy gowns becoming violently ill in a décor of mostly white, and one that celebrates the marriage imperative for women. We might ask, however, is it perhaps the racializing of the white postfeminist space that makes it "sick" for an assumed American audience?

Like many younger people starting out in their lives, infantilized Annie lives with offbeat, dim-witted, and disrespectful roommates in a modest apartment (before she must move out), each of which is coded in mainstream media as either a college space or a situation an adult lives in when they have failed at being an adult. I'm not suggesting that older people with roommates are failures, or that living modestly is an inferior position in life. However, in the logic of a postfeminist film such *Bridesmaids*, one that equates middle class status with maturity, and privileges middle and upper class settings over the relative poverty of Annie's, these situations are coded as abject failures. Annie also works in the small jewelry store where her co-workers and clientele seem much younger than is she. In fact, Annie's only displays of confidence in the film are in a war of words with her customers, one of whom is a teenage girl. The scene devolves into a catty argument between the two in which Annie regresses into aggressive and hostile teenage banter. Annie's taunts are directed at the young girl's sexuality, even though the girl has come in to the store wanting a pendant for her best (girl) friend. Annie suggests that the teenager will have a baby at the prom and obscenely gestures that the girl's popularity is

due to her willingness to perform oral sex on guys. Though the scene is clearly used to reinforce Annie's regression, it is important to note that a film deemed feminist by many critics and fans deals out such a harsh portrayal and treatment of teenage girls, girls who are already overburdened by the sexual imperatives of heterosexual male-run media culture. Why can't Annie square off with an adult? Eventually Annie is reduced to the ultimate infantilization of adults in the new millennium: moving back in with a parent. A pivotal scene near the end of the film finds Annie curled up in a near-fetal position on her mother's dated, floral sofa.

Annie's former career aspirations are also related to childhood and motherhood simultaneously—one could argue the only potential progressive space of the film—are represented by her ability to make themed cakes and cupcakes, an overdetermined activity coded as child-like, feminine, maternal, and thus less important than male-coded professions, even those that involve cooking. Indeed, Annie's potential suitor, a police officer (a stereotypical masculine field), Nathan Rhodes, is drawn to Annie first because he recognizes her from the food she made him, a cliché of heterosexual romance: the way to man's heart is through his stomach (and the way to a woman's heart is appreciation of her cooking?) Later, after they sleep together, instead of breakfast in bed Nathan delivers Annie to his kitchen where he ceremoniously shows her kitchen supplies, ostensibly to prepare food for him. While the unstable surface reading of the scene is that Nathan is helping Annie get back on her feet emotionally and financially, it plays uncomfortably as Annie does not react well to this offer, fleeing from Nathan's house. Thus one might read the scene for a brief moment as Annie's rejection of a traditional feminine and maternal

role, as the wifely and motherly inferior to a policeman. It turns out, however, that she is simply fearful of meeting her postfeminist manifest destiny of cooking for others as a necessary “natural” step toward a fulfilled adulthood.

Indeed cooking, particularly baking cupcakes, is unquestionably associated with the role of stay-at-home mothers and subservient wives incapable of imagining or not desiring to pursue interests outside a traditional nuclear family role, particularly the role of serving the needs of young children. However, that Annie rejects the offer to cook for someone at their request is not played as a natural assertion of agency, but as another failure of Annie as a postfeminist woman, one who can only be only understood in mainstream culture as a potential wife and mother. The film suggests early on that Annie has not realized her true calling to be a wifely and motherly as her chief aspiration, and that this lack of realization is the primary source of her unhappiness.

The backdrop to Annie in these scenes is, of course, her friend’s impending wedding and the preparations for that, thus placing Annie squarely in the space of postfeminist failure. The film suggests that Annie should also be preparing for wife and motherhood, and that she is likely to become a *lifetime* failure if she doesn’t. In postfeminist terms, Annie’s entrance into adulthood solely depends on her ability to snare a man into commitment, and to realize her “natural” role as a “cupcake-maker,” or wife and mother. Thus *Bridesmaids* brings the style of “cringe humor”¹¹ to traditional postfeminist films, but this application does not challenge our gender/sexual value system. The overarching message of *Bridesmaids* is a reinforcement of a patriarchal, androcentric system. Women who still occupy secondary positions in melancholy

characters promised to become happy only in heterosexual coupling. In other words, Kristen Wiig is, perhaps, the new Bridget Jones—an even more aggressively infantilized failure at achieving the ideal white nuclear family.

Sex and the City (1998-2004) and Girls (2012-Present)

The HBO series, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) ushered in a new wave of women unashamed to be interested in high fashion and the performance of femininity. Certainly when femininity is revealed and produced as an action that can be performed there is a space for reimagining gender and sexuality. Thus Sarah Jessica Parker's character, Carrie Bradshaw, has much in common with a drag queen, a cultural figure whose main function is to explicitly foreground gender as a social construction. Indeed, the famous costumer for *Sex and the City*, Patricia Field, often designed outfits for Carrie Bradshaw that were similar to those of a drag queen: outlandish, extreme, campy, whimsical, and offbeat, a practice that Sarah Jessica Parker has carried over into her celebrity persona even after the end of the series. In this regard, the character, Carrie, Field, and Parker together developed a female icon we had never quite seen before: one who was openly plastic in her gender performance—even if that plasticity did not translate immediately into overt or immediate challenges to naturalized femininity, to heteronormativity, or to class privilege.¹²

One might even read the genealogical progression of *Sex and the City* to something like the increasing popularity of blogger, Jenna Marbles, and her YouTube videos among young women and girls, in which she regularly exposes the manufacturing of heterosexual feminine norms.¹³ In one of Marbles' most famous videos, she puts

together a montage of looks one can achieve with make-up as she describes the semiotic meaning of each. In another, Marbles instructs viewers on how to apply make-up when one is intoxicated. And we can see vestiges of *Sex and the City* in a television show like *Cougartown*, which occasionally features a scene revealing the physical construction of preferred femininity such as armpit waxing or Botox injections. But *Sex and the City*'s primary site for feminine construction is fashion. In fact, not only is the performance of femininity through fashion a major distinguishing feature of postfeminism from the Second Wave movement, postfeminism also celebrates participation in consumption as a grounding or reaffirmation of feminine identity. Thus, once again, *Sex and the City*'s feminist potential in the recognition that gender is performed is tempered by the frequent practice of vaulting clothing designer names into the mainstream, thus tethering the successful performance of femininity to class status and capitalism, echoing the construction of femininity in the fifties in U.S. culture in which consumerism itself was feminized, or put another way, femininity was performed through consumerism.

A typical storyline in the show revolves around the love lives of the four main characters, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte, each of whom are wealthy, white Manhattanites. These episodes are generally bracketed by Carrie's voiceover in the opening orienting the viewer to the sex/love problem at hand, and ending with her weekly sex column for a fictitious New York magazine. In the first two seasons at least, the series highlighted such sexual issues such as anal sex, threesomes, "turning" gay, sex addiction, penis size, accidental prostitution, etc. Throughout all of these sexual escapades by the various characters, including Carrie, each of the women are at least

intermittently looking for a stable romantic partner. Carrie, as the protagonist has the strongest narrative thread in this regard as the series often returns to her on-again, off-again relationship with “Mr. Big,” a cipher of a character who has no other name. Notably the first film, *Sex and the City*, concludes with Carrie’s wedding to Mr. Big. However, even within the tethering of a romantic storyline, much of the popularity of the show seemed to be for its frank discussions on women and sex.

Sex and the City, in particular, is thus famous among its women followers for launching women’s heretofore largely clandestine—if not taboo—conversations about sexual experiences into mainstream recognition.¹⁴ For example, after “The Turtle and the Hare” episode about the “rabbit” vibrator, discussions about vibrators are now not unheard of in American media, even if they are yet relegated to the genre of comedy.¹⁵ And while *Sex and the City* exaggerates its most sexually adventurous character, Samantha, almost to the point of absurdity, even strident critics of postfeminism should not disregard the feminist potential of her sexual voracity. Samantha is portrayed as a type of person who enjoys sex multiple ways and with multiple partners of varying ages, races, classes, and genders, and she also happens to be female. Samantha is not conflicted about being the sexual aggressor, nor is she primarily seeking permanent partnership. (Samantha is also a successful businesswoman working in New York City, and one wonders if the sexual coups of her character would be as celebrated if she were anything other than white, rich, and metropolitan.)¹⁶

In any case, the influence of Samantha is unfortunately tempered by some postfeminist limitations: even if she’s initially portrayed as in charge of her sexual

escapades, Samantha's character presents as a typical postfeminist object of the heterosexual male gaze with her tousled blonde hair, often bright red, moist lips, and revealing clothing that showcases her ample cleavage, posterior, and thin thighs. She is also filmed in the style of heterosexual male pornography: during the act of sex with men, she sometimes seems to lose her dominance of the situation if not her agency altogether, even when the story crafts her prior to the sex act as more experienced, often older than her partner, and equally if not more sexually aggressive. To be fair, women's pornography may not yet exist for *Sex and the City* to have modeled, as heterosexual and queer women frequently lament the dearth of erotica produced for the female gaze.

Condescending jokes that subordinate heterosexual women's sexuality like "a man vacuuming is porn for women" notwithstanding, it should also be noted that though the original books were written by a woman, Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City*, a series with near cult status for its appeal to women during its original airing, was created by a man, Darren Star.¹⁷ Furthermore, 72 of the 94 episodes were written by men, and most of the rest of the episodes were at least co-written by men. It is important to make clear that I'm not suggesting that a male-led production team is inherently incapable of creating a popular text with broad feminist potential; I am merely arguing that they haven't. Many of the freedoms in *Sex and the City* that seemed new and refreshing to female audiences, particularly that sex can be talked about and enjoyed outside heterosexual commitments, are undercut by the recurrent lament about ending up alone and childless.

Furthermore, Carrie, as the main character, is, almost from the very beginning of the series, pursuing one, long-lasting romantic relationship with "Mr. Big," thus also

satisfying the more conservative viewers of this rare women's media event. Also undercutting feminist potential in new systems of thought and social structure is the grand finale of the series, the two feature films, in which each of the characters, with the exception of Samantha, are coupled with children. In fact, recent statistics from the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism back up what feminist media theorists have argued off and on for decades, that women behind the camera tend to produce texts with more female characters and ones who are less heterosexualized, though the specific reasons for this convergence have yet to be studied.¹⁸ What we know for certain is that men are quite present in creative positions behind the camera in postfeminist texts¹⁹ and that postfeminist texts tend to undercut what feminist potentials they may initially introduce with a retreat back to androcentric, patriarchal norms.

By claiming that *Sex and the City* is a postfeminist text and therefore potentially detrimental to gender and sexual rights discourse and the political efficacy of young women who enjoy it, I do not want to take away from the value of representing female friendships in mainstream media. This is, perhaps, the one shining feature of postfeminism exemplified by *Sex and the City* and other postfeminist texts that can be discussed without a caveat. The enactment of feminist ideals in representations of women's friendships should be widely recognized by those interested in gender and sex equality, particularly since women in movies even speaking with one another is a rare event—much less being offered the film space to form friendships which are central to the text. In the Annenberg study mentioned earlier, researchers found a *reduction* of mere speaking roles for the top 100 grossing movies of 2012. In fact, in the five years the study

covered, 2007-2013, the past year, 2012, has the lowest percentage of speaking roles for women, and higher percentage of the “hypersexualization” of teenage girls.²⁰

Thus Annenberg researchers confirmed empirically what feminist viewers have suspected all along. Instructively, in her comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1987-2008) Alison Bechdel formed a test to determine if a film represents a woman as a three dimensional person. In the test, the film must satisfy three basic requirements: it must feature more than one woman, these women must talk to each other, and they must talk about something other than a man. Since Bechdel’s original strip introduced this test, it has achieved cult status with a website developed devoted to recording films that do—or much more often—do not, meet these requirements,²¹ and there is much conversation particularly among young, activist women in geek culture about this persistent phenomenon in American cultural production, particularly in films. Both Alison Bechdel and the Annenberg research team (led by a woman, Dr. Stacy L. Smith) are pointing to a invisibility of women in popular texts, not to an invisibility of their bodies, but of their intellects and personalities which tend to be better demonstrated through the portrayal of women’s relationships outside and beyond a patriarchal structural lens. Feminist potential can only be actualized when women and men who support the ideas of egalitarianism come together and form professional and personal relationships. Because our mediascape features such a dearth of women speaking, and a dearth of female friendships with men or with each other, any screen time devoted to women’s discussions, especially substantive conversations, is a progressive step.

Sarah Jessica Parker and the rest of the *Sex and the City* cast have thus emerged as icons for some women who enjoy the portrayals of female friendships (even if the average viewer does not identify as feminist), as well as the vicarious fantasies of class privilege, sexual freedoms, and women discussing sex in mainstream media. However, this does not necessarily indicate that postfeminist texts are received by broader media and culture as welcome progressive enactments of feminist agency. It may be that a constitutive feature of postfeminism is that what feminist gains it provides for women are yet contained in a women's sphere of knowledge and thus neutralized in the larger patriarchal power structures. To wit, although Sarah Jessica Parker has been cast as the romantic lead in a number of romantic comedies,²² her iconic status to many women is frequently still ignored or misunderstood by the overwhelmingly male-run media industry. As Matt Stone, creator of the widely popular televised animated show, *South Park*, admits about his episode that mocked Parker in *The New York Times Magazine*:

When we were doing the episode, all the women in the room were like, "That's really mean." But what's so mean? She's on the cover of *Vogue* with her wispy clothes and her made-up face, and you're like, O.K., you put yourself out there as a sex symbol. . . . She bums me out. If I'm on the cover of *Funny Animator*, that kind of makes sense. But if I was on the cover of *Men's Health*, it would be knives out on Matt Stone.²³

What Matt Stone implies is that Sarah Jessica Parker does not meet the white heterosexual male requirements of youth and beauty ideals that give her the right to have her own television show as a sexual human being and the attendant advertising like *Vogue* covers that often comes with being a female celebrity. However, Parker is, again, a women's fashion icon whose series encourages the centrism of women's friendships to women's healthy emotional lives and that also promotes frank discussions about

women's pleasure in sexual experiences. Parker is not, and has never claimed to be, a hypersexualized object for the heterosexual male gaze.²⁴ Likewise, *Vogue* is a magazine that assumes an audience primarily interested in fashion and the performance of gender, a magazine that Stone seems to confuse with *Cosmopolitan*, whose chief aim is the heterosexualization and hypersexualization of young women.²⁵ (That Stone doesn't know the difference exemplifies our culture's trivialization of women's media, even in its relative dearth compared to media targeted to a male audience).

Stone thus undercuts Parker's success as an actor and a businesswoman, failing to recognize that as a white, heterosexual male in American culture he may not be, in some isolated incidents, the sole or primary audience for a text. Thus Matt Stone is not wrong, in a sense. Most of our mainstream media is produced by heterosexual white males for a heterosexual white male audience.²⁶ Stone is therefore merely voicing his irritation that he is being confronted with something he's never been socialized to understand. In this regard, we can see some potential for postfeminist media if only that the producers of such texts have developed an audience that is not young, male or necessarily even heterosexual, as one can imagine a number of gendered and sexual identities enjoying a show that produces a view of gender as performance.

Though *Sex and the City* may have concluded its television run, and perhaps even its cinema run, it may have inspired a new series airing on HBO, *Girls*, which also tracks four single white women in New York City dealing with gender, sexuality, and careers. One can accurately infer from the title of the show, compared to the grand *Sex and the City*, *Girls* aims to be less fantastical in class markers (they are not taking on the entirety

of the “city,” just Williamsburg). The characters are younger, and they are less sure of themselves; in fact, they are first-year college graduates at the start of the show. *Girls* is created, produced, and often written and directed by Lena Dunham, a woman not even 30 years old, unlike much of the middle-aged male production staff of *Sex and the City*, and she often crafts herself/her character as the butt of the joke. While I do not want to pit comedians who perform material written for them against comedians who write for themselves as both pursuits require artistic skill and talent, it is rarity to find a woman who writes in comedy, especially one as young as Dunham, and especially one who is willing to perform a comedy of self-inflicted humiliation.

Dunham plays the star of the show, Hannah Horvath, and she is adamant both in her debut feature film, *Tiny Furniture*, and in *Girls*, to break the postfeminist practice of displaying only ultrathin women’s bodies on screen—unless their fatness plays for comedy as exemplified explicitly by Rebel Wilson in *Pitch Perfect*, and implicitly by Melissa McCarthy in *Bridesmaids*. Dunham has received much criticism for her attempt to introduce another kind of female body into our popular cultural landscape. She received even more criticism when Patrick Wilson was cast as Hannah’s romantic partner.²⁷ It is worth noting that no such critical eruptions occurred in mainstream media when Kevin James was cast as Leah Rimini’s husband on *The King of Queens*, Mark Addy was cast as Jamie Gertz’s husband in *Still Standing*, Ed O’Neill was cast as Sofia Vergara’s husband in *Modern Family*, Seth Rogen was cast as Katherine Heigl’s boyfriend in *Knocked Up*, or Jack Black was cast as Kate Winslet’s suitor in *The Holiday*, among many other examples.

In postfeminist media, a beauty mandates applies almost exclusively to female actors who typically earn more complex roles through their willingness to heterosexualize themselves. Dunham, as *Girls*' primary creative force, is intent to overturn this longstanding requirement in mainstream American media that gained even more traction in the postfeminist era. However, like *Sex and the City*, *Girls* does not shy away from frank sexual discussions or scenes, and the series can make sex seem less glamorous and less heterosexually pornographic. In fact, sex among these characters often appears awkward, sometimes even borderline perverted. In one scene from the first season, Hannah's boyfriend masturbates in front of her, and though she stays and watches, she vocalizes disdain during the act and is clearly not turned on herself, though Hannah is often portrayed as seeking sex and enjoying it at times.

But by claiming that *Sex and the City* and *Girls* ushered in a novel approach to women's sexualities on screen, one that is frank, often funny and (heterosexually) woman-centered, I do not want to state the matter too strongly. For every text like these which approaches sexuality with a wide range of emotions and desires, there is a film like *Easy A* (2010), one that on the surface purports to speak in frank terms about young women and sex, but instead reproduces the same patriarchal logic of slut discourse that serves to penalize and contain women's sexualities.²⁸

Or there is a character like Tiffany in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) who women might admire for her compassion and tenacity, but who nonetheless describes "parts of" herself as "sloppy and dirty." Though she claims she likes these things about herself in the same speech, the line is yet constructing women's sexuality through the binarized lens

of innocence and filth, which is securely attached to a woman's worth in postfeminist/patriarchal culture.²⁹

It is important to note, if briefly, that slut-shaming or slut discourse is not merely a representational method that devalues women; it is linked to rape culture and victim-blaming as women deemed sluts are often constructed in legal cases and communities as less valuable than women constructed as chaste, and thus less worth protecting. We hear these constructions echoed in the oft-expressed sentiments that women dressing "like sluts" "deserve it" or that they were "asking for it."³⁰ There is no slut discourse in *Girls*; it is assumed in the series that the young women will lead sexual lives along with other facets of their identities. In fact, the third episode of the first season is titled "All Adventurous Women Do," as a reference to Hannah's discovery that she has Human papillomavirus (HPV) or a common sexually transmitted disease. The title refers to a blog she reads and finds empowering that "all adventurous women do" have HPV, and her pleased expression concludes the episode as she begins to identify herself with sexual adventure.

Another way to read the series, *Girls*, is as a text that details the lives of four women, recent college graduates, negotiating a world infused with postfeminism, trying to work out their lives in the milieu of *Sex and The City*—how to be sexy and alluring to heterosexual males who are socialized to objectify them and treat them as sexual entitlements, to be professional, to lead interesting lives, to accomplish goals in a world where they can be so easily marginalized, particularly because they are young women. And it seems that Dunham is well aware of the postfeminist requirements the series has

to either comply with or subvert, and that her characters must, on some level, work through postfeminist discourse. In addition to setting the series in New York City like *Sex and the City*, the opening montage for the DVD of season one, repeats a line from the pilot episode in which the lead character, three of the “girls” are reading from a postfeminist self-help text about romantic relationships, the “Hey Ladies Bible.” Jessa asks, “Who are the ‘ladies?’” Shoshanna replies, “Obvi, we’re the ladies.” But because Shoshanna is sidelined as a Jewish neurotic Pollyanna, it’s not clear who the young women characters are, or who they think they should be. In the episode itself, Jessa, in a tone of exasperation, disagrees, “We are *not* ‘the ladies,’” and suggests that women shouldn’t listen to this kind of advice, advice that is a hallmark of ubiquitous postfeminist culture. But are they “the ladies?”

Like *Sex and the City*, *Girls* is careful to portray and preserve female friendships. These women share their lives, compete with one another, argue with one another, but yet there are no “catfights,” and they are not bitter toward one another or competitive for the attention of men, which is the presentation of women in so much of mainstream media (especially reality television). The “girls’” friendships with one another are the central components of their emotional lives; they support each other, sometimes even financially. Marnie pays Hannah’s rent for a time because Hannah is too proud or scared to ask her parents for help when she loses yet another job. But even when Marnie is too frustrated by Hannah’s immaturity and moves out, the two remain close friends. They allow room for each other’s shortcomings without being cruel or “bitchy.” They give each other good advice when they can. For example, without judging her, Marnie consistently urges

Hannah to dump her boyfriend because he is absent, weird, and frequently degrading. Unlike typical reality television methods, Marnie doesn't tell Hannah what to do, try to shame her, or try to sabotage Hannah. Likewise, Jessa is so much worldlier than her cousin and roommate, Shoshanna, but she resists trivializing Shoshanna or making fun of her naïveté.

In this same vein, *Girls* also presents some older adults as complicated and misguided, but also thoughtful, caring people who recognize that the main characters *are* girls sometimes, and ones who could use some guidance. This, too, is a refreshing change from much of postfeminist culture in which women are infantilized, pitted against one another, and their worth is often dependent upon their beauty and age. Hannah's male boss touches the female workers inappropriately, but when Hannah tries to sleep with him he turns her down, explaining that he's married and he doesn't want to cheat on his wife. Hannah threatens to quit, but her boss tells her not to, explaining that she doesn't know how to do anything but he recognizes that she has a lot of potential and he's willing to pay her while she realizes it. (Hannah, in a moment of immaturity, insecurity and embarrassment, quits anyway.) In another storyline, Jessa works as a nanny for youngish Brooklyn family and strikes up a flirtation with the unemployed father. Though they never have physical contact, the wife discovers their flirtation and Jessa promptly quits her job. After some time passes, the mother visits Jessa at her apartment to ask her to return to her nanny job. She explains that Jessa is good with her girls and that she can see that Jessa is a bit lost in her life and that she'd like to help. It is a remarkable portrayal of compassion between two women, especially when the affections of a male love interest

are involved, and one that is rarely represented in any popular media, especially media from the postfeminist era.

However, even with a young progressive woman at the helm, *Girls* unfortunately also ends up reproducing similar class and racial centrist positioning to *Sex and the City*. As noted earlier, in *Sex and the City* the four main characters, all white heterosexual women, are upper middle class living in Manhattan with open and frank discussions about their active sexual lives, and this is the main reason that the series is lauded for its new and progressive portrayal of women on television. Otherwise *Sex and the City* is unrealistic to the lives of most American women, and could even be accused of trivializing the abilities and potential of women with normativizing an overt concern for a Western, white, heterosexual feminine ideal of appearance achieved through materialism and the rarefied ability to participate in capitalism as a hobby and a lifestyle.

Although *Girls* does foreground personal finances as a hurdle for young New Yorkers, it is a hurdle they seem to be able to manage with relative ease. No one in the series goes without food, shelter, clothes, or partying money, a class position that is rare, even if Dunham's larger point is to underscore the title of the show and editorialize upon her generation's failure to grow up. For example, the lives of the characters are foreign to most women living in the U.S. They have spacious apartments in Williamsburg on first job salaries—if they even have jobs—and they openly reference depending on their parents for supplements or for complete financial support. While it's typically counter-postfeminist to mention income at all, relying on parents to set up young adults in a New York City lifestyle is still well beyond the means and maybe even the desires of most

young American adults. In addition, the series has been frequently criticized for failing to include, mention, or even recognize the presence of people who aren't white and upper middle class. Set in one of the most diverse cities in the world, this omission seems as fantastically ethnocentric as *Sex and the City*.

In addition, *Girls* does not include the presence of any sexualities besides heterosexual, except for Hannah's first boyfriend, who is portrayed as a stereotype of a gay man involved in college theater, and the presentation of two straight girls kissing—mostly to irritate a straight man who wants a threesome—much like lesbian porn for the heterosexual male gaze. To be clear, certainly every show or film should not be charged with ticking off politically correct categories of inclusion. And television series with male protagonists which are centered on male lives typically have no such mandate in the public eye. However, before and during the age of postfeminism, there are so few portrayals of women generally as protagonists, and especially few representations of women of color or other genders/sexualities that any new series that seems to want to break progressive ground seems solipsistic not to include more than one type of woman, the same woman who was always the focus of Second Wave feminist efforts at that. So the series, *Girls*, is yet reliant on either an element of fantasy or an ethnocentric and heterosexist positioning for many of the storylines.

The Others of Postfeminist Icons: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are perhaps two of the most successful and prolific contemporary female comedians, actresses and writers of sketch comedy and television shows working in the postfeminist era. They are often mentioned in entertainment media

as masters of their form (a moment concretized by their invitation to co-host the Golden Globes of 2013). Their celebrity personae are often linked to progressive rhetoric about women generally, especially women's right to hold positions of power and/or positions traditionally held by men in entertainment (and, more rarely, in politics). Thus it seems fair to posit that Fey and Poehler are celebrity icons for women in the postfeminist age and the texts that they choose to write, perform, or support can and perhaps should be evaluated through a feminist lens, especially a feminist lens of critique of postfeminism, an ideology of identity which their personae and texts often work to reinforce (and occasionally resist).

Fey and Poehler have also added to the complexity of texts produced and written by and about women in the postfeminist era. They finally stripped away the "boys' club" stigma that had long plagued *Saturday Night Live*, as the first female duo of the Weekend Update team and in their individual sketches.³¹ It is useful to briefly summarize their careers in the media thus far: Fey and Poehler maintained lengthy stints on *Saturday Night Live* (Fey was a writer and cast member for fourteen years and Poehler was a cast member for nine years), and they are now circulated in the media for their respective television shows: *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*³² in which they are both the respective stars. Fey and Poehler also wrote several episodes of their respective television shows, and the two worked together in two widely successful film comedies: *Mean Girls* (2004) and *Baby Mama* (2007). Fey wrote the screenplay for *Mean Girls* but neither film was directed by Fey or Poehler (or a woman for that matter) and neither Fey nor Poehler were issued writing credits for *Baby Mama*.

Matt Besser, founding member of the comedy group, Upright Citizens Brigade, claims that in the world of improvisation and sketches, before Fey and Poehler came along, women—of their own volition—tended to play stock and stereotyped female characters. Fey and Poehler, on the other hand, developed and portrayed multiple types of characters, even male characters, breaking out of the postfeminist edict that one has to be “pretty and dainty onstage, or charming.”³³ Besser claims that Fey and Poehler are simply comedians, not female comedians.³⁴ Fey and Poehler also added political comedy to their repertoire through their keen impersonations of Sarah Palin and Hilary Clinton during the 2008 presidential election. These *Saturday Night Live* sketches may have even achieved overt political sway, especially Fey’s remarkable depiction of Palin, underscoring the vice presidential candidate’s poor qualifications.

Both Fey and Poehler each have a television series that they either write or produce that showcases the lives of professional women. Fey’s *30 Rock* has garnered a wide audience of women and men, and casts Fey as Liz Lemon, a show runner for a variety series. While its protagonist is a successful, powerful woman, *30 Rock*, however, does conform to some postfeminist habits. Lemon worries about her appearance and a fair amount of narrative strands in the series are devoted to her searching for the right man and to her ticking biological clock. The humor between her and her boss, Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) often manifests in his cutting remarks about Lemon’s grooming, appearance, and general undesirability as an object for the male heterosexual gaze. Celebration of her professional success is conspicuously avoided, as Lemon is often also the butt of the joke among her writing team of all males for most of the series. Further,

Lemon is often contrasted with the ideal of postfeminism: young, blonde and lithe Cerie (Katrina Bowden), the office assistant who paralyzes most of the male writers when she enters the room usually scantily clad. To be clear, television and media generally is an industry almost entirely run by heterosexual men.³⁵ That Lemon's character is the equivalent of Lorne Michaels, creator of *Saturday Night Live* in 1975, is never mentioned or exalted in the show itself. That is to say, it is highly unlikely that someone who presents as unprofessionally and with as little self-esteem as Liz Lemon could rise to the position of Tina Fey. This may be the ultimate postfeminist dilemma. Perhaps Fey, undoubtedly aware of postfeminist culture³⁶ has chosen to come at feminism sideways, presenting a female character in a powerful position but one who is also as reliably sloppy, goofy, and inappropriate—retaining the space for a likeable protagonist in the postfeminist age, and carving a space for herself as pioneer in women's comedy, representation, and success in the entertainment field.

Amy Poehler's show, *Parks and Recreation*, presents a very different female protagonist, a gung-ho public administration official in a minor government agency in small town Indiana. There are apt comparisons to the popular series, *The Office*, in the use of cringe humor and the filming style: using a roaming, never recognized documentary crew, as well as setting a series outside a metropolis and holding the main characters to an egotistical level of ambition reasonably applicable only in a metropolis. Poehler's character, Leslie Knope, is also similar to Steve Carell's Michael Scott in an affable and determined eagerness to succeed, questionable common sense, likeable inappropriateness, and goofy sense of humor. However, the androcentrism of *The Office*

is not present in *Parks and Recreation*—or it is presented as something that is revealed and deconstructed. In one episode, Knope decides to break into the boys' club, or a few men from the office who drink beer together in the courtyard in Tuesday nights. She also frequently walks down the corridor of City Hall looking at all the framed pictures of only men and claims her picture will one day be on that wall.

But while *The Office* can comfortably rest on poking fun at men in power because there are so many of them, Poehler's task is far more delicate. Leslie Knope is a character without Liz Lemon's postfeminist awareness; her role models are framed pictures around her office of women successful in politics: Madeleine Albright, Hilary Clinton, Janet Reno, and Nancy Pelosi, among others. In other words, Knope is not constructing herself against the postfeminist ideal in *30 Rock*, as does Liz Lemon but in light of women without irony in their identity constructions, and ones who do not groom themselves for the male heterosexual gaze. Knope frequently soliloquizes about her political ambitions. The driving narrative throughout the first season is Knope's major project is to build a park out of a pit abandoned by bankrupt developers. In wistful moment, Knope tells the invisible documentarians that she envisions one day visiting that park with her White House staff, comically subverting the expectation that she would say "with my children."

Indeed, Knope's mother is characterized as a town powerbroker who doesn't believe her daughter is tough enough to follow in her footsteps. She remarks to the invisible documentarians "I want my daughter to be successful. That's why I always told her there's nothing wrong with being a wife and mother," thus subverting postfeminist expectations for female characters in that Knope's mother is not primarily or traditionally

nurturing and maternal. Lastly, throughout its first season, *Parks and Recreation* slowly and carefully constructs a friendship between Knope and Rashida Jones' character, Ann Perkins, as central to the narrative of the series. Though Liz Lemon and the only other recurring female character, Jenna Maroney are friends in *30 Rock*, it's a shallow, limited and poorly developed onscreen relationship. Poehler and her team, on the other hand, have developed Ann's character and that relationship continues to take center stage as it evolves in the series.³⁷

A recurring feature in both *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*, and the movies they've made together, *Mean Girls* and *Baby Mama*, is however, a specific kind of racial comedy that echoes postfeminism's white solipsism. Often even when postfeminist texts include a minoritized character, the difference is the *raison d'être* for the character in the narrative, versus a character of difference developing as reasonably or as complexly as any other member of the cast in the America that is often still fondly (perhaps nostalgically and thus problematically) described as a melting pot. Though some postfeminist texts may be heralded for their progressive moves as I've described earlier in the chapter, their transformative social potential is limited by an inherent and constitutive othering that can assume various and familiar forms. Again, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are iconic and potentially empowering for (some) women throughout the postfeminist age. Fey and Poehler have accomplished enviable feats for professional women hoping to enter the entertainment business and while their achievements are certainly inspirations for some female consumers of their work—especially those who resemble them in race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality among other identity

norms— we must consider that their work tends to uphold the Othering binaries constitutive of American mainstream culture, those which are the recurring features, if not the foundations of postfeminism itself.

While some media analysts such as Linda Mizejewski cogently problematize Fey's characterization of Liz Lemon as a feminist, arguing that Fey presents a "Third Wave" or a postfeminist to us (in her analysis they are the same) in the character of Liz Lemon, one who is classist, racist, self-centered, focused on getting a husband and frantic to have a baby to ward off her ticking biological clock. In this way, Mizejewski claims, Lemon is a mess of contradictions just like contemporary feminisms themselves and that Fey has created a savvy caricature.³⁸ While it seems cogent that Liz Lemon can be read multiple ways through a variety of feminist lenses, I don't think we can argue that the caricature of even postfeminism is enough to justify or even to explain the racial/ethnic and gendered/sexual stereotypes that inform much of the humor of the show. In other words, Mizejewski's argument would make better sense if the show were not structured through the subjectivity of Lemon and her boss, Donaghy, as the voices of reason on the show in contrast to pervasive characterization of American "Others" on the show as standard American stereotypes of Others.

30 Rock's comedy and its cultural legibility rely on certain postfeminist tendencies to caricature people of difference by rendering these characters as unreasonable, obsessive, bizarre, and idiotic, if not morally or ethically challenged. In other words, the same list of qualities above also may describe accurately the primary characters of *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) and Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin)—the

two white and heterosexual protagonists of the series—as they are also bizarre and neurotic at times; but these qualities are ratcheted to the point of absurdity in the (secondary) African American character, Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan), and the gay, white, male character, Devon Banks (Will Arnett), in a recurring guest spot. Although the question about the explicit romantic coupling of Lemon and Donaghy does arise in the narrative occasionally, their potential union is portrayed as off-putting and awkward and is quickly dismissed. Thus this asexual relationship between the two sets them up to be a familiar couple from television history: Lemon and Donaghy operate much like 1960s sitcom parents: complicit, desexualized, omniscient, and often paternalistically and thus condescendingly generous to the rest of the cast, who are, in turn, infantilized, their desires trivialized, and they are rendered frequently (comparatively) powerless. The juxtaposition of the relatively reasonable Lemon and Donaghy with the overdone Jordan and Banks is a familiar strategy of binarization and a reinforcement of norms such as race and sexuality.

Thus, *30 Rock* recreates and reproduces the Americanized power structures of a historicized televisual narrative of the nuclear family, proudly chiding their “Dennis the Menace” son, Tracy Jordan, in his juvenile “acting-out” antics. They have a more “legitimate” and psychoanalytical worry about power-hungry white male Banks, who is willing to upset the apple-cart of good sixties American television in his fluid sexuality and openly sexual and material desires to take the power from his father or father figures.³⁹ Banks’ whiteness along with his “deviant” sexuality renders him more of a threat to Donaghy than Jordan’s comparatively easy-to-keep-in-his-place blackness

which may speak to an American cultural history of dismissing African Americans as competitors in assumed white arenas of power but viewing mutable sexuality as real danger to hegemonic, patriarchal order. In other words, *30 Rock* constructs Banks as territorial and threatening to patriarchy; while Jordan's "threat" is diluted as he is merely following his childish, capricious, and whimsical desires—like a child, or a white-constructed racialized/ethnicized and infantilized person in American postfeminist and popular culture.

In American mainstream discourse, Tracy Jordan's closest cultural relatives are the media-constructed African American male hip-hop star and the African American professional male athlete, often portrayed in the (white) mainstream media as figures of excess who are unable to maturely or "properly" handle their fame and fortune, and who are portrayed as in need of sage guidance, such as the guidance of a white duo of even pseudo-parents. This "inability" to handle success is commonly narrated as the natural result of the athlete and hip-hop star's (constructed) origins in a matrix of race and class. Thus Tracy Jordan's excess in *30 Rock* is demonstrated through his entourage and his outrageous, often neurotic desires and demands which are painted as the inevitable result of sudden wealth given to an unlikely—if not undeserving—recipient. Consistently throughout the series viewers are reminded of Jordan's almost magical talent in entertaining people, mostly by Donaghy's occasional yet frantic insistence that Jordan must never leave the show, not even for a single episode.

This designation of a black man as entertainer has a fraught racial history in the U.S., and one that is not tied to a right to wealth nor necessarily to individual fame. In

other words, Jordan's scripted talents fall well within the boundaries of normalized racialized/ethnicized occupations that can be commodified by white neoliberals. Notably, in a flashback and in a visit to Jordan's childhood home, Jordan's character is explicitly stereotypically racialized and classed as his childhood neighborhood and apartment building are styled in abject ghetto: urban, in a state of disrepair, garbage-strewn, frequented by prostitutes, drug users and dealers. Thus Jordan becomes a caricature of a black man who has "made it" in white America, constructed as lacking the proper discipline and intellectual abilities to master his fortune and fame.

Devon Banks, on the other hand, is automatically legitimized in his whiteness and thus appears to have a racial lineage that permits an unquestionable access to power and wealth. But Banks is also constructed as a stereotypical gay man whose sexual lust is portrayed as excessive (almost out of his control) and thus it is his chief defining characteristic and perhaps the reason for his downfall. This representation of voracious sexual desire is common in the stereotyping of gay men who are commonly constructed as sexual deviants and, it is in part these very appetites that often undergird the fear of particularly gay males in the hegemony of heterosexual culture. Furthermore, the most frequent object of Banks' lust is Kenneth Parcell (Jack McBrayer), a page whose youthful looks, sexual innocence and overwhelming naiveté (partially achieved by "ruralizing" and thus classing Kenneth as southern) also infantilize Kenneth's character so that Banks' lust tacitly falls into another derisive and stereotypical categorization of gay males as pedophilic. Indeed, though Banks marries the boss' daughter for greater access to her father's wealth and position, she is characterized as developmentally disabled and thus

also infantilized as his significant other, and stressing the gender/sexual deviance of Banks.

More pointedly, Banks' driving ambition is to take over the company, a proclivity and desire that is represented as a quality to be respected and part of the natural order in the white heterosexual male, Jack Donaghy, but is coded as devious if not villainous in Banks at least partially due to his sexuality—which, like Jordan's race and class—is portrayed as perverted if not abject. More importantly, perhaps Banks' ineptitude at achieving his goals (not being able to take over the company) also essentializes white male heterosexuality as “naturally” inclined toward (particularly material) success, while queer Banks serves as a kind of impostor, and thus not the heir apparent to a white and heterosexual genealogy of corporate success (though he has more legitimate shot at taking over than female Lemon or black Jordan).

However, it is certainly Banks' combination of gender and sexual mutability that renders him as an object of ridicule and disgust, and thus the inferior, deviant, impossible successor to the throne of corporate power. If Banks—or Jordan for that matter—were Donaghy's equal in sexuality, race, class, and standardized good looks where would a postfeminist text like *30 Rock*, one which colludes with androcentrism, patriarchy, and as this chapter articulates, race and class binarizations, find a source for the comedy? In other words, *30 Rock* relies upon viewers educated in the othering of popular culture and postfeminism or the comedy would not make sense (or presumably be funny).

A hallmark feature of postfeminism is a submission to patriarchy so we should ask why the battle for corporate power in presumably woman-led *30 Rock* is constructed

as masculine (even through a contested masculinity such as male homosexuality) while the women characters stand by, wincing on the sidelines. Why doesn't Lemon vie for Donaghy's job or for any job above and beyond the one she has? Furthermore, why is show-runner Liz Lemon constructed as a pitiable postfeminist character, rife with self-doubt and self-deprecation? The postfeminist always already characterization of women as secondary to positions of power is most emphatically personified through the character, Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski), who is an overgrown child star originally cast as the lead in the original fictionalized production in *30 Rock: The Girlie Show*. That fictional series was sidelined by the hiring of Tracy Jordan and reimagined as "TGS," an acronym of a name once explicitly designating women's entertainment but now rendered unimportant, meaningless, and unmarketable (despite the contemporaneous real success of *Sex and the City*). It is underscored frequently throughout the series that Jordan's performance is both effortless and crucial as the "natural entertainer" (partially signified by his blackness and his performance of blackness) while Maroney is treated by Lemon, Donaghy, and the rest of the cast and crew as if she's being generously and patronizingly indulged by the allowance for her to perform at all.

Reading against the grain in a feminist interpretation, we could view Maroney's character as a survivor of an erasure of women. Certainly her character's storyline is consistently driven by her desire (portrayed as compulsive and insatiable) to return to the center of attention where she feels she justifiably belongs. However in postfeminist *30 Rock*, Maroney is more closely aligned with immature, indulged, self-centered and ill-behaved young women and little girls often encouraged, enabled and spotlighted in

reality television, particularly in the venues of pageant/princess and bridal media. Thus Maroney is the fully grown, indulged (if not despised) little girl/princess who has no complicating or tempering masculine counterpart in the postfeminist sphere. (The infantilization of grown men in the postfeminist age is often presented as a lament for the loss of “freedom” through partnership/marriage with a woman or the infantilization is celebrated in men as freedom itself.)⁴⁰ This treatment is very different from the portrayals of infantilized women, who are usually ridiculed and maligned for behaviors which are similar in regressive tendencies to their celebrated masculine counterparts.

Similar to the characterizations of women and girls in reality television, Jenna Maroney also seems to be modeled upon a “diva,” or a person performing as a woman whose only viable paths to power are culturally coded as excessive and self-centered desires and demands. Furthermore, like a drag queen in the expressive externalization of the slippage between nature and acting, Maroney is a focal point for real cultural critics who do not understand the idea of gender as performance, and who reduce Maroney derisively to a simplistic “manufactured” identity, (as if all identities are not manufactured in multiple ways). In other words, Maroney serves as a representation of women’s career ambitions coded as trivial approaching deviant, particularly because Maroney is portrayed as content with being childless and single throughout much of the series. Her sole, driving life focus and ambition is the progress of her career and this focus—unlike Donaghy’s naturalized career focus as white heterosexual man—is overdetermined as child-like, obsessive and outside the bounds of respectable, normal behavior for a grown woman.

It is also no accident that Jenna's eventual love interest and husband, Paul/Tomas (Will Forte) is a cross-dresser who performs as a drag queen,⁴¹ most often as the character of Jenna Maroney. In fact, we might concede what could be the construction of the penultimate act of narcissism and self-indulgence in the postfeminist era is that Maroney essentially marries herself. Thus in Fey's postfeminist text, the only other female cast member who has regular speaking lines, Jenna Maroney, is coded (like Jordan and Banks) as narcissistic, abnormal, and deviant. *30 Rock* also follows a postfeminist script in that Lemon, the only realized female character, is always secondary in rank and power to Donaghy, and that even minoritized characters, excepting Banks, are usually male heterosexuals. There does not seem to be room in *30 Rock* for more than one female three dimensional character or for women to desire or achieve pinnacle positions. I am again reminded of 1960s television in this postfeminist moment. I return to this thought because on the surface, Lemon's closer genealogical relative is Mary Tyler Moore, the single, female character with a job in television celebrated for her liberated sense of self and for her realized friendships with three-dimensional (and equally funny) women, all of whom are ignored if not denigrated or disavowed in *30 Rock*.

To restate, postfeminist texts often echo and reinforce neoliberal culture. The characters of black Tracy Jordan, homosexual/queer Devon Banks and narcissistic Jenna Maroney are rendered excessive so that the two "legitimate" characters (Fey through her self-deprecation in postfeminist terms and Donaghy by his white heterosexual masculinity) who are less caricatured in their similar desires can binarize themselves

against abject others and remain comfortably ensconced as the unabashedly ambitious head of the company (Donaghy), the unquestionably talented show runner and head writer (Lemon), and as the two white protagonists of the series (Baldwin and Fey). Put simply, postfeminist and neoliberal culture tends to construct white, moneyed, masculine, heterosexual success as the norm (with attendant qualities such as more rational, smarter, more powerful, etc.), and pose as its defining opposite anyone who falls outside these particularly classed and racialized parameters. Thus the personae of Jordan, Banks and Maroney serve to naturalize Lemon and Donaghy in their white and middle/upper class heterosexuality in postfeminist terms as the unmarked state that legitimizes ambition and material success. Lemon and Donaghy's irrationalities, neuroses, and delusions of grandeur can be written off as added-value, life-affirming quirks of interesting, successful people whose professional and personal landscapes don't include the obstacles of navigating race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or sexuality, for example. Thus the two can stand as an acceptable American television duo of sitcom pseudo-parents. That Lemon and Donaghy succeed professionally and financially—despite their obvious self-destructive character flaws—is not grounds for discussion or debate in mainstream media. *30 Rock*'s primary wellspring of humor is the postfeminist failure of Liz Lemon especially (especially as juxtaposed with Donaghy's right to power and material success), and the exaggeration and deployment of American cultural stereotypes of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

In the popular comedy series, *Parks and Recreation*, racial/ethnic humor operates similarly as in *30 Rock*, though the show's setting outside the arena of New

York television production in rural Indiana lends it less room for class/racialized/ethnicized stratification and binarization. The show is set in the fictional town of Pawnee, an explicitly Native American name as the Pawnee are a recognized U.S. Native American tribe, yet the only recurring reference to actual Native Americans in *Parks and Recreation* are the murals of horrific violence painted in City Hall in which Native Americans are being tortured or the Pawnee are enacting gory violence on a pioneer. These murals are a running joke in the series as the main character, Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) insists on giving many visitors a tour of City Hall and pointing out the depictions without critical commentary, though at least one visitor, a new reporter, asked if people complain about the paintings. Knope replies somewhat mysteriously with a flat delivery of “all the time.”

Perhaps like most racialized/ethnicized and gendered/sexed humor in the postfeminist age, *Parks and Recreation* assumes a viewer who understands that there is an irony to the comedy in that we are laughing *at* the racism which is usually filtered through the naiveté of the character’s racist comments and actions. However, there is also a back-door quality to this type of humor that allows white people, for example, to find humor in the racist attitudes of certain characters with the attendant pass that the humor is derived from an antiquated, excessive or ignorant behavior of the fictional characters, and not derived from current racist beliefs. In other words, ironic humor creates a gray area that muddles the source (and perhaps the butt) of the joke which is based on race or any minoritized position in American culture. And while some of the sexist humor in *Parks and Recreation* may operate in a similar manner, sexist humor has different

histories and cultural valences and is often represented as acceptable in postfeminist culture. Often sexist jokes can be presented without ironic twist and often without the fear of critical or feminist blowback, as a powerful tenet of postfeminism for women is the “hip” quality of going along with the sexist jokes, lest they be deemed “feminazis” or feminists who “naturally” lack a sense of humor.⁴² With a few exceptions such as Geena Davis and Jennifer Seibel-Newsom⁴³, thoughtful and feminist critiques of popular culture are usually a discourse contained in or by academia and elite media.

To its credit, *Parks and Recreation* does portray racialized characters who fall outside the traditional parameters of racial/ethnic stereotypes in Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), the Indian American mid-level state government employee who identifies more with being a “redneck” from South Carolina than he does with his South Asian heritage, and in Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) who is an actress well known as the daughter of music industry icon and African American, Quincy Jones. However, the race of Ann Perkins’ character is never questioned nor even mentioned in the first season for that matter. Notably, Perkins has a white boyfriend with whom she lives, so the lack of racial commentary (especially given the attitude toward Native Americans in the series), is either one of blindness to certain racial heritages (in this case, African American) or—probably more likely—Jones’ ability to pass as white in mainstream media. Furthermore, the construction of the main character, white (blonde and blue-eyed no less), and middle classed, and heterosexual Leslie Knope is not dependent upon a binarization against racialized characteristics of Perkins or Haverford. In both Perkins’ and Haverford’s characters, it is their idiosyncratic personalities that emerge and evolve throughout the

series, and not their status as racialized others (unlike Tracy Jordan in *30 Rock*). Indeed one of the defining features of the show is Knope's developing friendship with Perkins, a three dimensional character often serving as Knope's superego, which is protective without challenging Knope's autonomy. In fact, the relationship between the two echoes the progressive potential of some postfeminist texts that centralize female friendships such as *Sex and the City* and *Girls*.

Certainly postfeminism is the driving force of gender construction in Fey and Poehler's films, *Mean Girls* and *Baby Mama*, as femininity in both texts is constructed through an othering of race and class. The backstory to *Mean Girls* is that a white, American-born, teenage girl Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan), spent her developmental years with her zoologist parents in Africa (in a common Western essentialist and trivializing move, the specific African country is never named) and has now returned to an American high school where she must deal with typical social cliques—and the typical plot lines of teenage movies involving peer pressure and heterosexual love interests. We see Cady's backstory in a couple of flashbacks in which her social naiveté in the inability to navigate an American high school is linked to and is a product of her upbringing in Africa, a continent codified in American media, often even in the contemporary moment, as peopled by naïfs and/or barbarians. Furthermore, the landscape of the American teenager in this film and many others in American postfeminist media is almost all white and upper middle class. Indeed the film opens to the sounds of tribal drumming and children singing, soundtrack that is reminiscent of another Western text essentializing African people, (and one that assumes an “innocent” spectator) Disney's *The Lion King*. In short

order, we meet the black principal, Mr. Duvall (Tim Meadows), who delivers a racially-based joke about African Americans naming children, and we understand throughout most of the film that Cady's two sidekicks, Janice and Damian, are both queer (near the end of the film, we find out that Janice may be heterosexual), thereby foregrounding Cady as the proper white heterosexual postfeminist protagonist in her desires. Tribal drumming is again employed at the climax of the film, in a school-wide girl fight, thereby neatly tethering the colonialist and Victorian constructions of irrationality of females with that of African natives unable to control their emotions. The film ends with a typically postfeminist romantic coupling of the two heterosexual white protagonists.

Baby Mama, on the other hand, trades on the vernacular of African Americans and on the slippage between racialized and class markers. In other words, *Baby Mama* evokes stereotypes of race and class as the primary source of the comedy in order to foreground the respectability and "inherent" rationality of its white, moneyed, female protagonist, Kate (Tina Fey) and thus her "natural right" to conceive and care for a child. The title of the film is a phrase common in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that is a patriarchal and racialized/ethnicized denotation of a woman who raises a child in an environment beyond the nuclear family model. The phrase, "baby mama" has been widely co-opted as a pejorative by dominant white culture in the U.S. and is usually employed for comedic purposes in order to denigrate either a racialized person and/or to class a woman of any race who raises a child outside the nuclear family mandate of (bourgeois white heterosexual) respectability. ("Baby Daddy" is also widely

used and co-opted in similar contexts and for similar purposes.) Thus from the titular outset, *Baby Mama*, has a vested interest in a racialized/ethnicized and classed othering.

Baby Mama is also solidly postfeminist in narrative and tone, as Tina Fey portrays Kate, a woman who is constructed to understand her lack of a husband and particularly her lack of a baby as a tragic personal failure. In fact, her “disability” (as it is valued by the film) is underscored by the fertility of her much older surrogacy representative, Chaffee Bicknell (Sigourney Weaver), who has one baby (conceived “naturally”) and is “naturally” pregnant with another, and maintains a false pity toward Kate, her client. Kate thus hires a woman from the working class, Angie (Amy Poehler), who needs the money to be her surrogate. From that point the narrative can proceed with wealthy Kate condescendingly educating the poorer Angie on proper maternity health and demeanor, and Angie can operate as the “magical negro” or more accurately the “magical white trash” that enlivens and liberates Kate from the stress of her wealthy lifestyle, and thus creates her ability to conceive a child the old-fashioned way with her blue-eyed, blonde beau, Rob (Greg Kinnear). *Baby Mama* is thus a postfeminist scripted fantasy that centralizes wealthy white people and assumes a spectatorship of sympathy with them, while simultaneously employing to this end postfeminist, racial and class stereotypes.

It is worth noting that the film teases spectators with the idea that the film could conclude with Kate and Angie partnering to raise the child, a scenario that would definitively break the postfeminist mold in a refreshing new imagining of social possibilities in that a female friendship could take the place of and work as well as the nuclear family model.⁴⁴ In fact, Angie does leave her verbally abusive husband (also

portrayed as slippage between intelligence and class), to raise their child on her own, but Kate has a romantic prospect outside their parenting duo and is pregnant by him at the very end, so this arrangement does not achieve the potential of progressive social transformation. As typifies postfeminist texts, the wealthy white protagonist is “rewarded” with wife and motherhood as a happy ending, especially as her “plight” is underscored and foregrounded by its juxtaposition with people without racialized and classed privilege—finally underscored by classed Angie becoming a single mother. Thus, even though it was Kate’s original desire to raise a baby on her own, she is “saved” from this fate coded as undesirable by the structures of a postfeminist narrative.

Conclusion

In *Sex and the City* and many of the works by Fey and Poehler, bringing “Others” into the frame merely serves as a stronger assertion of racialized/ethnicized and classed differences in order to deepen the pleasure of naturalized white privilege—versus what could have been an interesting interrogation of racialized/ethnicized and classed structures. As I described in the first chapter: in response to the frequent popular cultural counter that these texts are “just entertainment” and not designed to tackle social problems, I counter that popular culture is the arena in which political and social discourse can *most effectively* concretize its norms, in some part because it can evoke exactly this built-in ironic defense and also because these norms can be endlessly iterated and fused into American consciousness across media in such a wide variety of contexts: films, television shows, podcasts, microcelebrity venues (such as YouTube), online articles, advertising, blogs, video games, social media, further naturalizing

race/ethnicity/class norms. Furthermore, I would add that comedy and social critique are clearly not necessarily mutually exclusive modes of thought, even in a mainstream comedic television series, although we must travel back in time before the age of postfeminism to find such popular texts that concentrate most of their narrative efforts in this way, (e.g., *Good Times*, *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *M*A*S*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Sanford and Son*) To clarify, certainly there is an occasional social critique in popular texts (and aberrant socially conscious shows like *The Wire*), but these instances do not *characterize* the contemporary moment as a stance of social critique as was the case in popular 1970s American television. Postfeminism, neoliberalism and conservatism have collided and colluded to prevent a similar era thus far.

Though I've initially describes postfeminism through the comparison of texts at the foundational beginning and those that are contemporary, as I have demonstrated here postfeminism is not merely a series of generic representational strategies in romantic comedies and self-help literature. It is broad and pervasive, and it instructs us toward modes of being in the world, even if this instruction is centrally undirected. Postfeminism produces and reproduces ideas about gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality through a multiplicity of media; it is thus a circulation of ideas and positions that, as I will argue, are fairly static, conservative, and dependent upon binarized Others.

CHAPTER 2: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN POSTFEMINIST CULTURE

Using postfeminist critiques, star studies and theories of race/ethnicity, in this chapter I argue that the postfeminist construction of gendered/sexed identity in popular media maintains its unmarked status at the price of binarizing or absenting its others, typically—but not necessarily individually or exclusively— racialized/ethnicized and classed women. Postfeminist legibility thus depends on these often abject others and their visual and linguistic absence and/or specter of these categories of identity is often required to experience pleasure in the consumption of postfeminist texts. These constructs are reinforced—and occasionally challenged—through the iterative circulation of ideas and representations over time throughout the age of postfeminism.

In other words, postfeminist texts often inform and collude with dominant mainstream representations in their reinforcement of implicit decisions about gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, cultural lineage and history, among others. This implicitness is known as an unmarked status, often of whiteness and of heterosexuality, for example, and “unmarked-ness” can be further delineated in postfeminist and mainstream media as at least middle if not upper class—and, (usually applicable only to heterosexual women), also tacitly understood as striving for the creation and maintenance of a romantic life that supersedes all other aspirations and one that preferably leads to the creation of a nuclear family, an overriding postfeminist thematic mandate I described in the introduction.

Furthermore, the legibility of these categories or dominant identity statuses that remains unmarked in American mainstream cultures (such as whiteness, heterosexuality,

or masculine privilege), *requires* binarized others, whether those others are represented concretely as a contrasting character, for instance, or whether they compose a necessary structuring absence in the text such as the inclusion of unproblematized racially or ethnically coded cultural objects in a text that produces or assumes white subjectivities. To iterate, I use the term “binarization” somewhat paradoxically and counter-intuitively, not as a concrete either/or framework, but as a looser and more ambiguous oppositional structure through which ideas and/or identities are constructed in some form of “violent” contrast, whether that violence is abstractly, directly, historically or contemporarily enacted. Binarization refers to points on a matrix which can be consciously or inadvertently evoked to different degrees and toward various implicit and explicit social and political ends. (In its interrogative mode, this structure of thought also classifies a type of inquiry in contemporary academic feminist discourse known as intersectional analysis.)

For example, racial/ethnic binaries in texts can differ greatly depending on the specific race/ethnicities represented and the contexts in which they are (re)produced. Indeed, no representation of a person in a narrative work can avoid combining intersectional facets of identity. Though popular media often treats gender/sexuality this way, we are never merely male or female, for example; we also occupy certain positions in familial status, in community, nationalities, races/ethnicities, class positions, etc., and these identities and subjectivities inform and build upon one another. It is the business of postfeminist texts in their collusion with patriarchy and male privilege to subsume and dominate most other identity facets in to their unmarked status of white, Western, and

heterosexual. Thus my work here is to analyze those subsumed and deployed identities and subjectivities to better understand the structures of postfeminism and its potential deployments and receptions in American popular culture(s).

Though binarizing is common structure in cultural identifications, there is no genealogical system of binarization one could chart in American popular culture; on the contrary, a matrix of binaries is always textually produced, and therefore subject to change through production and reception. However, my point is that postfeminist texts are not capricious or idiosyncratic; rather, they tend to play upon and evoke recurrent and familiar themes in mainstream American culture. For example, a racialized/ethnicized character's queered¹ aspects may be foregrounded, even subtly, so that race/ethnicity and heteronormativity collide to more powerfully underscore the transgression of queer and the "correctness" and prominence of the (typical) heterosexual protagonist. In this hypothetical case, race/ethnicity aids a preferred gender/sexuality, but there are other scenarios of course in which a feminized identity can help to other one white, heterosexual male in order to normalize the masculinity of others, and so on. One can imagine various scenarios in which intersectionality provokes the stress on certain identity markers to discrete social and political ends. Furthermore, if we adhere to the idea that textual meaning is infinitely mutable, constructed as joint efforts between text makers, historical contexts, and text receivers, these sociopolitical ends may not be conscious intentions undertaken by any interested party and the potential postfeminist ramifications may not even be fully understood by the people who are involved in making, performing, or receiving a text.

To summarize, postfeminism in popular culture (re)produces themes and ideas about American-ness through various deployments of conventional and popular identity markers. In other words, constitutive postfeminist Othering—whether a comparison or an absencing—is often deployed in order to place identity construction at the service of American foundational identity mythology by eliding or erasing historical events, historical and current social conditions and the realities of material life. This erasure effectively essentializes certain identity modes and thus the moves of erasure and essentialization are constitutive components of postfeminist texts. Postfeminist culture is therefore implicated in the production of particular American hegemonic political and societal norms assiduously deployed through binarized/intersectional depictions of gender and sexuality norms. As a force in the mainstream construction of particularly gender and sexuality, postfeminism assumes an intersectional other to be culturally legible, or put another way: dynamic yet stock combinations of binarized others in popular culture reinforce postfeminist norms. Thus we find in even some of the most progressive texts within postfeminist culture, those that legitimize women's sexual desires and female friendships, for example, either an invisibility of minoritized people altogether or a construction of race, class, or sexuality (as examples), primarily as a source of comedy and subsequent othering that serves to preserve the hegemonic order.

I must note here that though I separate categories of Otherness for purposes of organization and concentrated discussion, each of these categories of othering are intersectional and thus they overlap and infuse one another with meaning in postfeminist texts. Therefore this work will also reflect this multi-strand approach. For example, the

section on the erasure of globalization in the final chapter is also an erasure of class, a problem that will be discussed in this chapter in the following section on raced and classed others. Furthermore, my work here points directly and emphatically toward the (perhaps urgent) need for more attention to reception studies in a rapidly demographically evolving American discursive landscape. While I'm able to analyze the uses of gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, etc., within a postfeminist text and apply it to certain themes in American mainstream culture, I'm certainly not able to speak for the consumers of such texts and how these texts inform, affirm, or contrast certain conceptions of identity and subjectivity and inflect various social imaginations. In other words, I cannot and do not claim to speak for others, but I can begin to describe some of the severe limitations of postfeminist discourse, particularly for those marked as "different."²

Postfeminism's Racialized/Ethnicized and Classed Others

Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that race in postfeminist contemporary culture, like gender, is commodified: "Contemporary ideology about race casts it as a style, an aesthetic, a hip way of being."³ Banet-Weiser further argues that postfeminist texts form a pseudo-progressive ideology that co-opts markers of empowerment for women (such as "girl power" slogans) and other minoritized identities including racialized/ethnicized people, for the purposes of late capitalism or neoliberalism. She concludes that these images of empowerment have come to replace actual concrete efforts toward empowerment for traditionally under-represented groups such as racialized/ethnicized women. Representations of progressive social potentials in the postfeminist age are

scarce, and even when they appear, what may seem to be progressive in popular culture is often undercut in the same text that simultaneously capitalizes on the circulation of empowerment as a commodity. Put another way, the theme and slogan of “girl power” is deployed by corporate hegemonic practice to market products and more importantly to neutralize feminist social potential for systemic challenge to neoliberal norms. Banet-Weiser posits that urban culture is co-opted by corporate marketing to assign the desirable aspect of “cool” or “hip” to its products, and thus effectively neutralizes the progressive potential of the objects, ideas, vernaculars, and practices to perhaps chart a new course of thought and social practice. She adds that corporate marketing strategies that feature racialized/ethnicized constructions of people and objects are also promoted with the expectation of ironic reception. Thus gendered and racialized/ethnicized advertising, for example, has an always already built-in mechanism to deny that its content perpetuates harmful stereotypes and social agendas. Indeed, Banet-Weiser builds on Angela McRobbie’s famous description of postfeminism as “feminism taken into account” and claims that we can just as easily see “diversity taken into account” in our contemporary postfeminist media.⁴

I would add to Banet-Weiser’s cogent analysis that tokenism, usually in the form of racialized/ethnicized secondary characters in postfeminist texts, also demonstrates the “taken into account” discursive maneuver. For example, Ashanti’s character, Heather, in the otherwise typical postfeminist text, *John Tucker Must Die* (2006), is the only racialized/ethnicized friend in the central group of high school girls. Heather’s difference is never mentioned, but her race/ethnicity is “diversity taken into account” as her

presence of difference is in part used to construct the group of white girls as “cool” and the films itself as “hip.”

I would also elaborate on Banet-Weiser’s ideas that casting race as a commodity is also a move to abstract it in order to corral race/ethnicity in the realm of popular culture where it can be safely contained in the familiar, traditional American mediated ways that reproduce and iterate the dominance of whiteness, thus supporting a cross-institutional hegemony that can be deployed in business, politics, etc. In other words, mainstream media generally assume a white subjectivity and neoliberal and postfeminist discourse both work to produce classless fantasies of potential individual material wealth. Race/ethnicity (and the attendant structural inequalities) is anathema to these fantasies and therefore must be produced as just another “different but equal” option in American life, a move that elides and eclipses any potential discussions of social inequalities that are largely based on racialized and ethnicized differences.

True to its constitutive valorization of a privileged lifestyle and isomorphic to race construction in the U.S., postfeminism claims a right to whiteness, or as Cheryl I. Harris deems it in the formation of American law and culture: “whiteness as property.”⁵ She notes: “Whiteness as property has taken on more subtle forms (than slavery or segregation), but retains its core characteristic—the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination.”⁶ Because American slave ownership was tethered to race at foundational moments of discursive economic, social, and political American nation-making, Harris argues that dominant white American discourse never

lost the sense that race/ethnicity is fused to nationalistic rights, or more pointedly that white race/ethnicity is tantamount to rights *as an American*, and thus racialized rights are now (and have always been) securely embedded in American legal and social discourse, deeply defined as the “American” right to own property, or the understood ability to and drive towards territorialization in both concrete and abstract worlds. Historically, the striving-to-be-white America’s most overt move to hegemony was the slavery of Africans and the long-term invasion of North America, the genocide of its inhabitants, and the seizure of Native American homeland—land which was then parceled out in a constructed legal framework only to white people. At its most insidious, the white American legal system instituted measures such as the “one-drop” rule as a condition for equal treatment based on the notion of racial purity.⁷ Thus, Harris argues that the inherited constitutive discourse in the U.S. to handle difference is one tied to privilege as a racialized right, and one that tends to mark any racial/ethnic difference as a black/white binary or, put another way, a marked/unmarked binary.

Postfeminism is implicated in these historicized discursive operations of race/ethnicity and rights because postfeminist textual agency (and perhaps the discursive contemporary agency of American women) is often translated as the power to purchase, to be a person of material means—if not a property-owner, and that property is a concept that Americans understand as always already racialized, a tautology infused through discourse in the intricate mesh between personal and national identity, as Harris’ analysis demonstrates. To be white is understood in American culture as a right, and it is a right that guarantees multitudes of other rights. Harris also explains that being white in the

U.S. also served historically to align whites across class divides, as being “free” meant, very specifically, not being a slave—a person who is categorically not-white.⁸ It is crucial to emphasize that this is the mode in which American culture understands and represents *difference*: whiteness is an unmarked, normative state as a guaranteed, legal right. Thus, in American culture difference often reads as “the white and the rest.” I argue that postfeminism *starts* from this point: privilege is a given in texts which celebrate the potential giddy excesses of being white and “free”—as well as enjoying upper or middle class, heterosexual and Western statuses. And, in addition to adhering to all white cast(e)s from middle/upper class backgrounds, postfeminist texts also maintain blithe assumptions of privilege in their carefree lack of range in social and material contexts.

In the first chapter, I attempted to demonstrate that construction of race/ethnicity in postfeminist texts focused on the stories of white Americans continues to trade on familiar binarizations between “the whites and the rest.” But is this assertion also true about popular texts which feature a racialized/ethnicized protagonist? As Cheryl I. Harris demonstrates in her work, the black-white binary in American culture is the lens through which many Americans understand the idea of race itself; therefore this next section of my work focuses exclusively on African American women in postfeminist popular culture. There remains such a paucity of texts with an African American female protagonist in mainstream discourse that systematic evaluation is difficult (as compared to the wealth of texts that describe white women’s lives in postfeminist terms). Though popular media is slowly changing in the numbers of representations of people of color (if not as many of the stereotyped portrayals as I’ll discuss momentarily), there is also yet a

notable absence of race/ethnicity in the American/Hollywood romantic comedy genre marketed to the mainstream, in which postfeminism is usually at its most transparent and operates at its most emphatic level.

In the relatively few instances in which African American women are represented as characters in an American mainstreamed text, they are often essentialized and stereotyped into a few familiar categories. As many racially and ethnically aware feminists and scholars of American race/ethnicity have argued over the past few decades, representations of African American women *in particular* often yet fall into similar stereotyped categories over the course of film history before and throughout the postfeminist age. In other words, postfeminist culture for the most part treats time-worn racialized/ethnicized stereotypes as natural categories of identity. Melissa V. Harris-Perry counters such moves to normalize African American women's identities in her extended argument citing the Mammy, Jezebel, the Sapphire or "angry black woman,"⁹ and the "welfare queen" figures¹⁰ commonly written into texts about white Americans as detrimental to the progress of African American women in their joint and individual pursuits as fully realized citizens of the United States.

Harris-Perry describes the enduring mammy figure as the black woman who is obsequious, uneducated, and the asexual maid/servant caring for white families, and especially their children, (a stereotype I will discuss later in this chapter as depicted in the recent postfeminist film, *The Help*). The "Jezebel" is the sexually promiscuous and devious temptress, or—more often—simply a prostitute, an African American sexualized female figure solidified in the American imagination through the contemporary kitsch

and fetishization of blaxploitation films from the 1970s that we can see (re)produced, for instance, in the highly popular contemporary work of white American male filmmaker, Quentin Tarantino, among other text makers. The “angry, black woman” is an epithet and characterization deployed to “keep black women in their place,” or to prevent African American women from threatening naturalized white or patriarchal claims to authority. And finally, the “welfare queen” is a toxic designation of black women by white American culture, one that extrapolates the race/ethnicity/class matrix to refer to a cultural construct in racialized extremes of lazy degenerates living off the state (understood in popular and popular political discourse not as means to basic subsistence but as white-provided excess).

These stereotypes persist against a backdrop of U.S. government statistics that don’t support them.¹¹ Thus the racial slur “welfare queen” is abjectly applied to women who are cast off by (mostly) white society specifically because of their combination of gender, race/ethnicity and class, categories of identity which in American discourse have become understood as always already fused and abject, or simply Othered, as Cheryl I. Harris partially demonstrates. Harris-Perry points to each of these categories not just as bleak and derogatory stereotypes, but as “misrecognitions”¹² of black women; in other words, analogous to the postfeminist age and the cultural constructions of heterosexual white women, these are the naturalized categories of identity actual African American women must navigate in popular and mainstream American discourse and in their public lives, especially in mixed or mostly white organizations and communities.

In his work on representations of African American women in popular culture, sociologist Shayne Lee offers an alternate lens through which to view black women and sexuality in popular culture: as taking ownership of and exaggerating their heterosexual allure and vocalizing their (hetero)sexual desires. Though he never mentions work on postfeminism as the contemporary discourse on women in popular culture, Lee's ideas are clearly informed by such ideas. Lee's argument is similar to feminist media scholars who defend shows like *Sex and the City* (such as Hilary Radner and Stéphanie Genz), for the space of empowerment to be claimed by women even within our American patriarchal, androcentric cultural systems of signification by women who are both forthright, unashamed of if not empowered by their sexuality and sexual desires. Indeed, these women may publicly craft a celebration of both. Lee argues throughout his work that celebrities such as Janet Jackson, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jill Scott reclaim agency through the performance of sexuality in their personae on and off the stage, and that African American female comedians, such as Wanda Sykes and Mo'Nique also claim a space of power in broaching their "raunchy" sexual topics and particularly in their ability to cast themselves as the subjects in sexual encounters, desirous and demanding of their sexual partners.¹³

Lee further asserts that some black women tend to over-correct in an American mainstream discourse on African American women that can so easily deploy the term "Jezebels" to contain their potential power and sexuality is referring to a denial of sexual desire and a refusal to participate in (hetero)sexual presentation or performance. Lee also sees a particular dearth in scholarship on black women's empowered performance of

sexuality. Although extremely (hetero)sexualized representations of African American women have been analyzed as “problematic” among noted feminist scholars of American black women and popular culture such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, et. al,¹⁴ “...black academics continue to show little interest in deploying sexuality as a strategy of power.”¹⁵

It is not difficult to understand their reluctance. First of all, women who have come to realize and value their acuity as their primary identifying feature might be loath to revisit the territory of sexually embodied Jezebel as a potential site of social transformation. African American women’s sexuality is yet overdetermined because the historical circumstances that constructed it have been largely erased from pre-college American history as is much of the history of women generally. While it is difficult to imagine a mode in which exaggerated female heterosexuality for the male gaze can be understood as mere performance for any race/ethnicity, one may have no faith that American mainstream culture in particular can comprehend black women as sexual subjects.¹⁶

In the first chapter I described such feminist stances as Lee’s that spaces for empowerment can exist in some postfeminist scenarios. Furthermore, these feminist media scholars are probably interested in any text that reveals women to be complex humans, or even just something more than, outside of, or beyond constructions as sexualized objects for the male heterosexual gaze. However, personae like Janet Jackson, Beyoncé and Samantha Jones (from *Sex and the City*), and perhaps even Hannah Horvath (from the series *Girls*), for example, are making the most out of an inherently oppressive

situation in that they are working very hard to maintain, even to celebrate, their sexual allure mostly within the standards of the male heterosexual gaze. I am not collapsing oppressions so much as I am noting similar strategies across American women's identities to overcome the condition of sexualization for women in American culture. To interrogate such strategies, what could some intelligent and motivated women achieve if they were not compelled and shamed by postfeminist culture to spend so much time, energy and money on their heterosexualized appearances? These are oppressions shared to different degrees by most heterosexual women.

A woman may certainly claim a space of power within structures of inequality, but if those "empowered" spaces are not working toward challenging the oppressive structures themselves, how empowering can they finally be for women generally (or for straight men or queers, for that matter, who may also feel oppressed by gender and sexuality cultural norming)? Note that I read Beyoncé's and Janet Jackson's celebrity personae like Shayne Lee does, not as their personal identities, but as constructed characters for American entertainment that operate similarly in American popular cultural discourse to the entirely fictional characters of Horvath and Jones in their respective television shows. Thus women of any race/ethnicity who spend their intellectual lives devoted to social change might adopt a similar position that hyper sexualization is not an effective long-term strategy to equality.

One might be tempted to cite as a counter to popular cultural derogatory stereotypes of African American women (even those marginally empowered sexual personae) with another possibility in American popular culture: the idea and image of the

strong black woman. This is a familiar formation of black American women's identity that would seem to overturn many postfeminist assertions of consumerist agency and capitulation to patriarchal and androcentric norms—and especially those assumptions of a trans-racial male heterosexual gaze. In American cultural discourse, the strong black woman is a superhuman: impervious to oppression, prejudice, discrimination, patriarchy, androcentrism, class inequalities, and even to individual wrongs. She is the backbone of African American churches and communities and one who is emotionally, if not financially supporting a number of relatives and friends.

We can see such portrayals of “strong, black women” occasionally in films that assume a black spectatorship (Tyler Perry's writing and directorial work, for example, many roles taken by actress, Angela Bassett, and as Melissa V. Harris-Perry points out some of the popular music of Mary J. Blige and Alicia Keys).¹⁷ Harris-Perry, however, denaturalizes the category of the “strong black woman” as one that is perhaps equally as detrimental to individual African American women as that of a “mammy” a “jezebel,” or a “welfare queen.” She renames the identity as “the strong black woman myth” and claims that it is yet another “misrecognition of African American women.”¹⁸ In her words, the strong black woman:

...defines the mantle that the nation, black communities, and black women themselves expect African American women to assume. The social construction of black women's citizenship and identity around the theme of self-sacrificial strength is a recurrent motif in black women's lives and politics. The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hard-working breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, rejection.¹⁹

Harris-Perry thus views the myth of the strong black woman as a particularly thorny issue for African American women because the type is often invoked to guard against the shaming qualities of the other stereotypes black women must discursively navigate. She argues that such a mythic scenario, however, denies black women the potential to believe they are worthy in simply being who they are versus their culturally constructed self-worth based on what they can do for others. And equally poignant, the strong black woman myth denies black women the room to fail and thus to openly develop and grow, to be self-preserving and self-focused at times, and to feel liberated and validated in experiencing the full gamut of human emotion instead of the steady American racialized/ethnicized expectation of stoicism.²⁰

There is another type of strong, black woman in American postfeminist discourse who Shayne Lee argues has been recuperated in popular culture in the form of what he brands the “power chick,” or the discourse on (particularly African American) female athletes, an argument that might be less problematic as an enactment of feminist potential.²¹ However, Lee’s argument yet suffers from the familiar normative view through the androcentric and patriarchal male heterosexual lens in that he assumes that the ability to postfeminize oneself outside the spectacle of sport equals a feminist transformation without consideration that such a postfeminization of self could enact yet another capitulation to the male heterosexual gaze in the overwhelmingly patriarchal and androcentric commodified culture of college and professional sports.²² Lee claims that postfeminist celebrity athletes began with the popularity of track and field star, Florence Griffith Joyner (affectionately known in American discourse as Flo-Jo), with her on-

camera charisma, famous fingernails and feminized persona. He draws a lineage to the advent of tennis champion, Serena Williams, who (on and off the court) develops her feminine persona in the shadow of herself as an elite athlete, muscular, powerful, and dominating and then links these sports figure's images to those of filmic superhero women such as Scarlett Johansson in *The Avengers*, Anne Hathaway and Halle Berry from *Batman* films.

However, female athletes use their bodies to enact and to embody power in a way that is non-sexual, i.e., sports, as opposed to female celebrities who train for action superhero roles and are costumed in catsuits and heels often with bulging cleavage, make-up, styled hair, etc. In contrast, Serena Williams looks like a superhero because we witness her superior genetics and athletic talent in her actual body trained to excel in physical competition—not because she's been wrangled, trained, professionally styled and technologically digitized into a fanboy fantasy of a “fighting fuck-toy.”²³ Lee thus makes the mistake of collapsing actual female athlete and faux celebrity female athlete, and celebrating the progressive potential of both equally.

Lee's argument, however, does point to the idea that participation in sports offer feminist potential that can counteract the worst aspects of postfeminist culture particularly for young women—but not for exactly the same reasons as does he. Sports for women, especially young women, may be a means for women to understand their bodies as powerful and pleasurable outside or beyond a sexual gaze, particularly a male heterosexual gaze, or the gaze that controls how we see most images of women in American culture. Any woman who plays or has played a sport knows that one cannot

win if one is worried about a postfeminist appearance while on the court or the field. Winning or even playing a sport well produces both a rewarding emotion and an expression of personal empowerment that does not have to be informed by or even attached to heterosexual allure—the discovery of which can serve as moments of epiphany for young girls consistently trained by American postfeminist culture and other American institutions to invest their self-esteem entirely in their sexual appeal to young men. But Lee does point to an important distinction between the female athlete's performance in the arena or on the court and her performance of femininity off the court. Lee claims that women, (and I have to assume that he means heterosexual women as he does not make a distinction which would require a separate discussion on lesbian sexual allure that he does not offer), also enjoy looking at women's athletic bodies as if this fact somehow erases the potential for these women to be treated as sex objects (e.g., particularly women's tennis players, Maria Sharapova, Ana Ivanovic, women's beach volleyball players, Kerri Walsh Jennings and Misty May-Treanor, NASCAR racer Danica Partick, etc).

Female athletes can certainly perform gender/sexuality off the court or field in various modes. Maria Sharapova's performance of femininity is more closely aligned with that of postfeminist celebrities as she often appears in designer dresses and heels at media events and in her personal life. And while Serena Williams also performs femininity this way, her history as black woman in an overwhelmingly white sport has perhaps engendered as much ridicule as acclaim for the presentation of her body on the court and off.²⁴ These postfeminist presentation of self is very different from that of

basketball star, Brittney Griner, for example, who models men's clothes for Nike and typically wears a tailored suit to formal events such as ESPY awards shows. Griner also made the headlines in 2013 for "coming out" as a lesbian, a declaration that has not marred her popularity or career, as it might a Hollywood starlet hoping to maintain an A-list career and celebrity persona. To apply Banet-Weiser's gender and race hypothesis to sports: while sports marketing campaigns and companies may yet deploy the equivalent of "girl power" slogans as empty promises of personal fulfillment through consumerism (such as the athletic apparel company, title nine,) actual sports can provide a powerful antidote to the potential harms of postfeminist culture to young women of any background because playing a sport offers women and girls the opportunity to interact with other women and girls (and perhaps boys and men) in ways that they may be otherwise socialized to resist in the age of postfeminism—such as direct competition. And, as I learn anecdotally from the students in my classes, the experience of team sports in particular may assist young women through difficult transitions into high school and college in bolstering a sense of self-confidence and providing a greater potential for camaraderie and belonging. Sports might be the anti-postfeminism in that it directly and explicitly encourages attitudes of confidence and potential for personal and collective achievement that postfeminist and neoliberal culture strenuously if tacitly discourage in order to keep women squarely in the space of constant and inevitable personal failure.

Romantic Comedies with a Racialized/Ethnicized Protagonist

There are some examples of contemporary texts which feature female protagonists in the postfeminized romantic comedy genre from non-dominant cultures or

classes, though these texts do not typically find their way into mainstream American discourse. These are texts which often do ground themselves in the social and material—and thus are perhaps marginally postfeminist because they also offer explicit critiques of postfeminist values.²⁵ Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai detail how the transference of the postfeminist narrative onto South Asian American women in popular fiction, or “chick lit,” initiates and propels an inherent interrogation into postfeminist values; indeed they argue that the inclusion of difference (especially race/ethnicity and class difference) into a postfeminist text often is itself a critical stance, and furthermore it is a stance that is often ignored in academic analyses of postfeminism and postfeminist texts.²⁶ Butler and Desai describe the critique on postfeminism of popular literature written for and marketed to African American and Latina readerships thusly:

Like mainstream, white-dominated chick lit, women of color subgenres such as Chica Lit and Sistah Lit tell stories about young women’s individual empowerment, but the characters’ engagements with femininity and gender are often articulated through questions of race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class.²⁷

These subgenres in particular critique the neoliberalist values that structure postfeminist texts, and Butler and Desai assert that these texts also expose the unmarked status of white dominant feminism—in mainstream postfeminist texts and in the academic criticism of such texts— as an exclusive scene of neoliberalist individualism and personal choice that reproduces a Western white ethnocentric subjective and solipsistic lens. In other words, Butler and Desai argue that these postfeminist subgenres are often misread by (mostly white) feminists and academics who seem blind to the inherent criticism of neoliberalist-created feminisms within the subgeneric texts.²⁸

Butler and Desai make clear, however, as cautioned by Inderpal Grewal in her work, *Transnational America*, that these inherent critiques of postfeminism in Chica-Lit or Sistah-Lit (and presumably other works which feature non-white protagonist) should not be confused with utopian desires²⁹ or the creation of a new feminism. In other words, a work that teases out of the structures of inequality in the otherwise standing structure of a romance narrative is not itself a new mode of thought (though I would argue that it could be the first move *toward* a new system of thought). Instead Butler and Desai claim to “highlight literary strategies...that identify and play on contradictions in the production of neoliberal feminine subjectivity, and thus reimagine the contradictory possibilities for subjectivity in the context of neoliberal capitalism and globalization.”³⁰ Particularly in the United States, there are a growing number of these postfeminist subgenre texts in literature, film, and television that may call postfeminisms into question on a limited basis, an industry of heteronormative “girlie” texts for African American women, Asian American women, American Latinas, etc., specifically marketed to the communities the texts seem to represent.

However, the fact that most of these titles remain fairly obscure in mainstream discourse suggests that the dominant regime of unmarked normative postfeminist identity in entertainment remains intact and largely unchallenged and hegemonic. Or, put another way, Chica-Lit and Sistah-Lit, and romantic comedies with mostly African American casts, have not displaced whiteness as the category of admission into mass appeal and mainstream discourse. To wit, white actresses who are famous primarily for their postfeminist romantic comedy work are regulars on the talk show circuit and online

celebrity news magazines: Jennifer Aniston, Kate Hudson, Sandra Bullock, Julia Roberts, etc., pointing to the fact that we rarely see Kimberly Elise, Sanaa Lathan, Meagan Good, or even Gabrielle Union as frequently on our screens promoting their new work. I would venture to say the latter are not household names across racial/ethnic divides in American households as are Aniston, Hudson, Bullock, and Roberts.³¹

While I'm cognizant of the theoretical traps in even a partial designation of feminist film based on the gender/sexuality of the filmmaker, the film, *Something New* (2006), is one that both demonstrates the awareness of postfeminist discourse, and also one that deploys race/ethnicity and class to interrogate postfeminist norms. Written by an African American woman, Kriss Turner (writer and producer for *The Bernie Mac Show*, *Everybody Hates Chris*, and *Living Single*) and directed by Moroccan Sanaa Hamri (director of *Just Wright* and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2*) among many other credits in television). In *Something New*, Sanaa Lathan is Kenya McQueen, a wealthy African American Los Angeles accountant who is waiting for her "ideal black man" to date (and to marry). The ideal black man must be handsome, wealthy, boasting "good teeth." And presumably he must want marriage since *Something New* is at least based on the standard postfeminist romantic comedy which assumes a woman has not achieved her destiny until she is properly heterosexually coupled and committed.

The film opens with a dream wedding scene with Kenya as the bride until a siren panics the wedding party which chaotically disperses and Kenya is left at the altar alone. She then wakes to her alarm (the siren) and the story begins and as Diane Negra would point out, Kenya is thus in the postfeminist "time crisis"³²—a cultural and familial alarm

is going off in her mind that she is in a race to get married, or in postfeminist terms, to be complete woman. Professionally successful Kenya (who is up for partner at her accounting firm) is initially characterized as boring and uptight with her list of “things she doesn’t do” including dogs and colors in her home, the latter of which her mother (Alfre Woodard) associates with “children and whores.” Indeed, Kenya’s accomplished and wealthy family also expects her to wait for her “ideal black man.” However, the ideal man for Kenya in this narrative turns out to be her white landscaper, Brian (Simon Baker), a magical white dude who frees Kenya from her anxious conventionality by taking her hiking, eating on the floor, painting her toenails red, introducing her to his dog, and inspiring her to decorate with “color,” a metaphor that of course also applies to interracial dating. Like the “magical negro” or the women characters in *I Think I Love My Wife*, however, Brian is a cipher with little character development who merely seems to exist to fulfill Kenya’s needs, develop her character, and move the comedy toward marriage. While feminists may applaud the centrality of Kenya’s character development and subjectivity to the narrative, I wonder if a reverse lack of parity in postfeminist cinema can assist the social imagination of gender equality.

However, the title, *Something New*, is a play on the common rhyme for brides (“something borrowed something blue”) and the film is actually the “something new” that Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai describe. In changing the typical race/ethnicity of the romantic comedy protagonist, we are always already in a space of postfeminist critique. That Kenya’s suitor is less wealthy than she is an additional concrete criticism of neoliberal postfeminist values, but one wonders if class isn’t always already at stake in

movies starring African American women as wealthy characters since African Americans have been, throughout American film history, much more often portrayed as economically white-dependent mammies or “welfare queens;” in other words, race/ethnicity/class can (and perhaps tends to) collapse in American popular cultural discourse. Hamri’s attention to class is echoed in the film’s mise-en-scène which juxtaposes the poorer sections of Los Angeles with the lush interiors and landscapes we are accustomed to seeing in postfeminist texts.

The script of *Something New* foregrounds Kenya’s and Brian’s differences as central to the narrative when they break up in the climactic scene. While they shop for the night’s dinner after work, Kenya describes how she pays the “black tax,” (a phrase used several times in the narrative), referring to how much harder she has to work as a black person in white corporate masculinist world. Brian looks wearied, and asks her for a night off from complaining about race/ethnicity. Kenya’s response is not culled from the postfeminist repertoire: she tells Brian that she never gets a night off from being black in a white world, and if he wants to be with her then it’s something he’ll have to endure. Rarely if ever do female characters make direct and concrete demands of their romantic partners in postfeminist texts, much less demands born from acute social critique. (Equally rare is the assertion of racial inequality.) This moment marks one of several in the film where Kenya is realizing her potential as an individual against cultural and familial expectations. Again, such self-realizations are uncommon in the postfeminist and neoliberal conservative age as they are an early formation of a potential threat to patriarchal and androcentric order.

In another move that challenges postfeminist texts with white protagonists, Kenya's character does not enter "retreat" mode or the expectation that she will give up her career or aspirations in order to fulfill her romantic desires. (Indeed when Kenya is promoted at the end of the film, she negotiates only one weekend a month off.) It is explicitly stated in the film that she makes more money than does Brian and it is implicitly understood that she will continue to do so after their marriage. It is a hallmark of postfeminist romantic comedies that they tend to allow male desires to drive the narrative, even when the protagonist is a woman character and the film superficially seems to focus upon narrating her desires. *Something New* makes no such standard postfeminist undercutting moves; indeed, the film focuses almost entirely on Kenya's character and desires and how (or if) she can overcome the obstacles in romancing a man cast as her inferior by race/ethnicity and occupation, by her friends and family. In this way, Kenya supplants Tyler Perry's wealthy Mr. Deeds as the central character who must see past class barriers, and in Kenya's case, also through racial and ethnical barriers to romantically partner. However, like Grewal, Butler, and Desai, I would hesitate to label this text as utopian. As Grewal instructs, such critiques within a postfeminist text cannot be considered, in and of themselves, as progressive moves. However, it may be equally wrong to dismiss them out of hand without noting their potential to spark the social imagination in some viewers.

There is a spate of recent films that tend toward a postfeminization of African American women. But, at least some of the most popular of these texts are problematic even through an intersectional feminist lens that takes race/ethnicity and class into

account—such as much of the work by African American male filmmakers, Tyler Perry³³ and recent romantic comedy films made by noted personalities and comedians, Steve Harvey and Chris Rock. Before I begin the brief analysis of their works in postfeminist terms, however, I must first note the exceptionality of Tyler Perry in his efforts to bring more African American women to the screen in recent years than perhaps any other mainstream American filmmaker in history—and for telling the occasional story that doesn't portray at least *all* black women as racialized/ethnicized stereotypes³⁴ or worse, mimicking American mainstream media which often treats black women in America as unimaginable emotional entities usually best left unrepresented altogether.

In much of Perry's film work, as well as Chris Rock's *I Think I Love my Wife* (2007) and Steve Harvey's *Think Like a Man* (2012), each of the filmmakers retain some of the least socially progressive aspects of white-washed postfeminist character construction and narratives in stories featuring African American women (even when African American women are the protagonists). These films feature heteronormative narratives with little interest in exploring the sexual desires of women characters, though sex itself is a primary narrative thread in many of them. In *Think Like a Man* sex is constructed in the gendered economy of virginity in that a woman's worth is tethered to her sexual "purity," or in modern terms: sleeping with man on the first date or just before she knows him well, or with a lack of an emotional component, or she sleeps with him simply for pleasure instead of commitment. In this thread, sex itself is referred to as "the cookie" that a woman must keep in her "cookie jar," an infantilized trivialization that serves to erase the potential for women as the subjects of heterosexual erotic experiences.

None of the films challenge received expectations and agendas about gender and sexuality in the postfeminist age. Indeed, *I Think I Love My Wife* is a strange film about a man (Chris Rock) in an unexplained troubled marriage who is tempted to cheat on his wife with a woman (Kerry Washington) who is inexplicably obsessed with him. Thus ideas of gender and sexuality are filtered through a heterosexual male subjectivity and there is little if any exploration into the motivations and desires of the two women in the film who seem to exist in the narrative solely to set up problems and jokes for the male protagonist.

**Rewriting African American History for the
White Postfeminist Protagonist: *The Help***

Jacqueline Bobo writes about Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*: "...it is one of 'sweetness and light' rather than of horror and evil."³⁵ This quote is instructive in describing the American production and reception of a film like *The Help*, which seeks to retell a portion of African American history through the point of view of a young, white plucky woman. Bobo continues in her essay to add that the comedy in Spielberg's adaption and his treatment of the text as a melodrama undercuts the traumas faced by the women and written as poignant in Walker's novel. As Bobo describes it, Spielberg's tone and message "neutralizes its (*The Color Purple*'s) moments of power."³⁶ I entered the initial viewings and the analysis of a film like *The Help* with Bobo's cautions, as *The Help* is as a film marketed as a comedic melodrama that purports to deal with painful American histories of segregation and Jim Crow laws.

Before an analysis of the film, however, it is important to iterate that there is a paucity of productions that dramatize the lives of African American women across eras and genres of American film productions. Therefore when a film gains wide popularity that features a significant storyline about African American women and thus a substantial black female cast—culminating in Oscar nominations and wins³⁷—it is an event that should be examined in any work that claims to be analyzing the constructions of femininities and feminisms. *The Help* (2011) is just such a film and Oscars event, based on the book published in 2009 and written by white, Mississippi-born and raised Kathryn Stockett, adapted into a screenplay and directed by a white man, Stockett's childhood friend, Mississippi-born and raised Tate Taylor. And though the stories and characters of *The Help* fall outside the historical boundaries of postfeminism as the diegetic time period is the early 1960s, both the book and the film were published and became widely popular squarely in the postfeminist age, between 2009 and 2011. No male characters in this text are developed, as none have more than few speaking lines at most. Thus, *The Help* is a story unambiguously about women, race, femininities, and feminisms.

Due to the historical and contemporary paucity of texts that centralize African American women as well as the timing of *The Help*'s rise to popularity in the mainstream, an analysis of intersectional gender and racial construction in *The Help* offers another lens through which we can view the production of racialized femininities in postfeminist culture. To that end, it is relevant to ask some historiographical questions: what postfeminist frameworks does *The Help* reinforce (or subvert) and thus how might we read the gendered and racialized constructions in *The Help*? Secondly, what is it

about the film in recreating the era of race relations in the 1960s south that garnered so much favorable popular and critical attention in this contemporary postfeminist moment? In other words, why revive and (re)tell this history now, at this time? And, if we understand the current construction of women to rely mostly on postfeminist norms, is *The Help* a postfeminist text in its re-visioning of a feminist past? I suggest that on the surface, one could read the film, *The Help*, as operating outside postfeminist norms, as a chronicle of the struggles for African American rights, particularly the struggles of African American women working as maids (or “the help”) to gain equal recognition, treatment, and agency in the rural south during the years of Jim Crow laws and during the initial groundswell of protests that would eventually become the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. One would have to believe that this is the dominant reading given the potent and widespread accolades for the film, even among the African American groups involved in cinematic awards.

However, set in such an overtly fraught era in U.S. racial politics, and in such defining years for American racial and political identities, (as well as a physical setting in the Mississippi south, a region and state even currently infamous for resistance to racial, gender, and sexual equality), the maids are portrayed only in their narrowly allowed professional statuses of maids for wealthier white families. In other words, *The Help* is what bell hooks calls a “fictive ethnography,”³⁸ or one that seems to relate a historical event and/or a kind of (usually minoritized) “authenticity.” My argument is that *The Help* rewrites both Civil Rights and feminist histories in its conflation of the fight for equal employment rights and social respect between middle class white women and middle

class white men with the fight for equal rights and fair treatment for people of color with white people. While both battles are certainly crucial to the formation of progressive politics and contemporary American identity, they are not the same battles, nor are they easily comparable or capable of being legibly collapsed. And as many feminist historians have chronicled, women's rights and civil rights have had a contentious relationship from at least the American Civil War forward.³⁹

Thus to conflate the two is blatant historical error, and one that overtly recentralizes whiteness, takes white credit for at least moving toward Civil Rights legislation, and portrays whites (through the constructed heroism of the main white character) on the historical winning side equally—as valiant as the African Americans who organized and led the protests and the movement. Thus Stockett and Taylor employ a common cinematic ethnocentric and hegemonic framework in their production: *The Help* is a fictional retelling of historical events by white writers⁴⁰ in which a white character/protagonist assumes a central, critical, and celebrated role in a social revolution that was—in historical fact—undertaken and executed by people of color for people of color. Note that I am not, of course, arguing that no white people were involved in or assisted in the struggle for racial equality or the Civil Rights Movement. My point is that contemporary texts in popular culture that purport to renarrate historical events can (and often do) alter the historiography so that what can look like a progressive topic or the benign (and “life-affirming”) chronicling of a historical moment instead operate as a bold and self-assured affirmation of long-standing, racialized, classed, gendered, and sexual norms that serve to support the current hegemonic order.⁴¹

Indeed, this is a standard hegemonic move throughout the history of Western cinema. In this way, one could compare *The Help* to *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), one of the most (in)famous examples of this textual maneuver that centralizes and valorizes white people as heroic in saving brown people. *Lawrence of Arabia*, though based on a true story, renarrates history in a typical Western way and is now Western-loved film, now considered a “classic,” in which the blonde and blue-eyed Lawrence (Peter O’Toole) leads an army of Arabs against the Turks in defense of territories. There are many such texts throughout film history which construct the nobility of whiteness against the background of brown people who are usually portrayed as a leaderless mass without individual leadership, subjectivity or agency. (A recent example is Steven Spielberg’s film, *Lincoln* (2012).) And thus in these types of ethnocentric texts, the white protagonist is poised to become hero—if not a savior⁴² and global hegemonic order is restored or maintained in Western discourse at least. Indeed, one wonders about the timing of the writing and production of *The Help* during the first term of the first black president of the United States—and also the first term of the first black First Lady.

In other words, if the successful culmination of the Civil Rights Movement could be perceived by some Americans to be the election of the first black president of the U.S., it seems suspicious that the film, *The Help* was written, produced, and gained such widespread popularity within the first black president’s first term in office. Is *The Help* a “help” to remind African Americans to “mind their place” by the white elite of the hegemonic, mediated and racist powers that be? In other words, does the film renarrate American history in its reinsertion of whiteness as the prerequisite for heroism that has

produced lauded social change? If so, the confinement of the narrative to the stories of women is “under the radar” of polarized politics in the easily dismissed twinned arenas of popular culture and those of women’s narrated lives in American mainstream discourse.

In *The Help*, the protagonist is a young white woman, Skeeter Phelan (Emma Stone, an up and coming postfeminist icon in her unthreatening mix of constructed (assumed white) innocence and girlish pluck, who has returned home after obtaining her undergraduate degree from Ole Miss. Skeeter records the stories of two black maids, Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) and Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), for a book for American national press. From the opening forward, the film wrongly equates Skeeter with Aibileen and Minny. Skeeter’s predicament as the white, privileged, singular and individualized young woman from a supportive family is that she’s pioneering a path toward professional success and personal satisfaction. In the films this is equated with the struggle of multitudes of African American women who have no career potential past servitude, who can only expect to live a life of deference to white people who treat them poorly at best, thus who do not have a privileged backgrounds or histories, and who do not have luxuries like maids to do their own housework and to love and raise their children for them. Indeed, what the two maids, Aibileen and Minny, in *The Help* are constructed to desire is to be treated as fully human by their employers who are relatively wealthy white women like Skeeter, and the lack of parity in such desires between Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny is never broached in the film. And while Aibileen and Minny are developed characters within the film, they are understood to be representatives of the masses in servitude, while Skeeter is understood to represent uniqueness as white:

insightful, profoundly empathetic, and singularly intellectual and talented. In other words, the film echoes *Sex and the City*'s "The Caste System" episode in which viewers are introduced to class and race/ethnicity as a tandem problem in a culture of white dominance, but as one that seems to be solved by its mere depiction in a popular cultural text, and especially in a narrative like *The Help* which celebrates the construction of (white) individualism and the nobility of whiteness in a single heroic character.

Early in the film Skeeter convinces Aibileen to tell her story about working as a maid in Jackson so that Skeeter can write (her first) book to be published in New York City and distributed nationwide as a tell-all about the racial inequality in the south. Aibileen is nervous because their actions, if discovered, could result in her termination at best and racially motivated violence at worst. (Skeeter, it is understood, risks minor social isolation within a group of people she plans to abandon anyway). Minny, who is also initially reluctant to participate, is soon persuaded to join in the interviews because of her own termination and the egregious treatment of other maids in town by their white women employers. Eventually when another maid is sent to jail for theft to help to pay for her sons' college educations, many more maids join in Skeeter's project. The book is written and published as *The Help*, "by Anonymous," and Aibileen speaks proudly of it as her writing, though Skeeter is the only "writer" in contact with New York City publishers and the only one who gets to leave Jackson as a noted successful writer, hired by the same publisher as a junior editor. Thus the white and singular Skeeter is able to use the group of interchangeable black maids as "the help" once again to achieve her career goals which are only available to the privileged whites in the first place. Indeed,

Aibileen loses her last job as a maid and a nanny as Skeeter gains her first, as a professional in the white collar market. The constructed individual success of female whiteness is only able to be foregrounded in *The Help* against a silhouetted background of othering blackness.

The depiction of and focus on (racialized) bodies is a central theme in *The Help*. First of all, pale white, red-haired Skeeter is “blackened” by the texture of her hair, as it is portrayed as similar to an African American woman’s natural hair; in other words Skeeter’s hair is deemed unsuitably curly and unruly for proper femininity which was (and perhaps is) coded as white. Skeeter’s mother (Allison Janney) exercises her capitalistic privilege to buy a remedy: a new technology, some sort of perming machine that will straighten, and thus whiten, Skeeter’s hair. It works and Skeeter is able to enter the town country club and meet the man who will become her boyfriend. And indeed our first glimpse into the home of Aibileen depicts her pinning down her natural hair to better wear the displayed wig that she dons to work in the homes of white women. Aibileen’s natural hair is also unsuitable in the presence of white company. Thus Skeeter’s *difference* from her white peers and community is her professional ambition as a young, single woman and that difference is visually and thematically linked through her unruly body (hair) to the struggles of African American women who suffer because of their “unruly bodies” (hair and skin color in this film)—an iteration which serves to authenticate and deepen only Skeeter’s plight. Skeeter also claims to emotionally identify more with the black maid who raised her, Constantine (Cicely Tyson), than with her own mother and family, (even though her own mother seems loyal, compassionate, and open-

minded toward her mildly rebellious daughter). In constructing Skeeter this way, *The Help* seems to be claiming that Skeeter can be classified as “closer to black” than her racist family and friends; and thus *The Help* problematically links genetic or bodily likeness as a necessary trait for social empathy and political progress, and disturbingly appropriates “blackness” as a metaphorical condition for whites who have (unracialized) life obstacles of the privileged to overcome to reach a pinnacle of individual achievement.

Furthermore, “difference” in white Skeeter (as linked to likeness to blackness) is represented as the source of Skeeter’s appeal and creativity, and eventually her professional success in the metropolitan north. Comparatively, Aibileen and Minny are, of course, unable to capitalize on their “difference” as a similar commodity that could be valued and traded. Indeed, it is Skeeter’s assumption of blackness that provides her singular path to personal success; in other words, it is Skeeter’s difference that makes her special and noteworthy to a northern publishing house as she must secretly hold her phone conversations, and she must secretly record the substance of her book in interviews with the maids. Additionally, by implicitly aligning Skeeter as part black, there is an erroneous assumption of likeness with egregious discursive ramifications as Skeeter has not suffered nor she will suffer the discriminations and denigrations that the African American maids suffer, even if all of them are implicated in writing and publishing the scandalous book. Skeeter is not marked as different like a racialized/ethnicized other, but as a postfeminist neoliberal success as an individual, unique by her singular ability to see through and past a racist community, and equally by her ability to abandon it, as she does

at the end of the film. Aibileen and Minny are allowed no such fluidity in their empathy (it hardly matters what they think or feel to most of their employers, to the larger white community, or to the trajectory of the film) and they have little or no chance for social mobility whether they choose to remain in Jackson, Mississippi or they choose to leave it. The film is constructed through Skeeter's white subjectivity and the collusion of postfeminist, neoliberal ideology and the mythology of American identity as a "self-made" success (a cruel irony since Skeeter has "help.")

There is another theme with bodily focus in *The Help*, one that deftly undermines the overt sentimentalization of noble black women dealing with racism in white southern homes, and that theme is— to be blunt—feces, perhaps the most universally understood substance of abjection. Whether or not the black maids should be allowed to use the bathrooms in the homes of their white employers is a central thematic concern in *The Help*; in fact, it is one that organizes the narrative and one that transparently evokes notions of Jim Crow and "separate but equal." The reigning housewife in the young Jackson elitist social circle is Hilly Holbrook (also red-haired to underscore the twinned opposite of Skeeter and Hilly), played by Bryce Dallas Howard, and she has installed a separate bathroom with an entrance outdoors for her maid, Minny. Hilly also has encouraged other Jackson women to do the same, and in short order, Elizabeth Leefolt (Ahna O'Reilly) has built an outdoor bathroom for her maid, Aibileen. While the average American viewer may be able to empathize with Aibileen and Minny in this particular bodily focus in the framework of representing the unfairness and cruelty of Jim Crow laws, *The Help* belabors the theme in a thematized and visualized reversal and denial of

just those progressive politics. To be perfectly clear, we do not often see people, and especially women, depicted on the toilet in our multiplex cinema experiences.⁴³ *The Help* is a film which on the surface claims its primary objective is to celebrate the respectability, the very humanity of African American women and their struggles for equality in a nation with profound racial/ethnic disparities. Yet *The Help* in fact depicts two of the most venerable African American actresses in scenes in which they are sitting on a toilet, a provocation at best—especially when no white actress in the film is asked to endure the same treatment.⁴⁴ Thus, though *The Help*'s storyline is one of American nationalistic self-congratulations on the passage of Civil Rights laws (even as it structures this effort as white-led) it is also guilty of the visual reinforcement of the abjection of the same African American women whose stories it claims to tell and whose characters it claims to revere. (Should I add that the potential deconstruction of the word “movement” in this context is horrifying?) (Do I need to add the scene of Minny and the pie?)

To be clear, I'm certainly not arguing that there cannot or should not be texts that humanely and thoughtfully contrast and compare racialized/ethnicized femininities. Western cultures could benefit from more of such texts; in fact any mainstream texts that explore thoughtfully gender and racial experiences would be a step toward deeper social change. But *The Help* valorizes white femininity in its conflation of moneyed white women who have professional prospects and abilities to participate as full citizens in capitalism with its portrayal of timid African American women who can only be urged to speak out by the likes of a white girl with moxie and an idiosyncratic urge to be “different.” Thus, in this misguided and perhaps pernicious maneuver, we can seem to be

transported to a place of potential gender and racial harmony, but we are instead squarely in the land of postfeminist (re) construction of femininity, feminist history and of postfeminism's vehement racial othering. *The Help* is both egregious and impressively succinct in its summation of postfeminist othering.

Postfeminist texts are implicated in valorizing whiteness, as whiteness has been the only racial status functioning as unmarked in Western discursive history. To summarize Harris' interventions, markers of identity must first pass the litmus test white or not-white, the former admitting entry, the latter guaranteeing exclusion, elision or, rarely, conditional admission (e.g., the racialized postfeminist protagonist issues discussed earlier) and these all apply to postfeminist texts. For example race/ethnicity, class markers, markers of nationality and subcultures, various sexualities and gender performances all assist in various arrangements and to different degrees in postfeminist texts in the reification of the proper postfeminist subject as white, at least middle class, Anglo in heritage, heterosexual, thin, standardly attractive, and of Judeo-Christian faiths. While texts popular among white people often co-opt black and/or working class masculinities for the slippage of authenticity those constructions offer. There is no corresponding black femininity, for example, that is co-opted in white culture. Postfeminist texts begin (and usually end) with normative constructions of identity, but whiteness is the primary prescription, one that supersedes others—or we might say one that forecloses other nodes of identity within it so that a Muslim or Arab-American woman, for example, is locked out of postfeminist representational potential, though the constructed idea of her oppression works for postfeminist fantasy. In other words, the

Muslim and/or Arab woman is racialized as being not-white, even though the signifier(s) of her “difference” may be an identity descriptor other than skin color, class presentation, or neighborhood affiliation—such as a veil. I’ll discuss such constructions in popular American film in the final chapter.

Oprah Winfrey and Postfeminist Culture

Oprah Winfrey remains as one of the if not the most successful female celebrity in the postfeminist age, a mainstream popularity and recognition that has reached global proportions.⁴⁵ At first postfeminist glance, Winfrey does not fit the paradigm of submission to patriarchy and androcentrism in her public personae of professional dominance, amassing wealth and fame seemingly single-handedly—especially in that no male figure of authority is responsible (at least in popular discourse) for her successes as a father, husband, agent, handler, etc. Winfrey is produced in the popular media, at least, as a self-made woman. She is also exceptional to postfeminist norms in her decades-long unmarried and childless status, and she is thus the subject of occasional rumors and jokes about her potential queerness. Winfrey is also exceptional in her nonconformity to the postfeminist standard of thinness and mainstream heterosexual appeal generally required to appear in front of a camera.

Winfrey’s background as described in the popular media is dramatic: suffering a neglectful mother, sexual abuse, many distant moves throughout childhood, and frequent castigation by her childhood peers for her abject poverty. In her adult success, however, Winfrey maintain mixed fan populations in various ages, race/ethnicities, classes, to some degree genders and sexualities and international recognition and success. Winfrey is now

famously and extraordinarily wealthy, a status that usually garners attention in celebrities as money in the American imagination defines a kind of life success that either displaces or trumps all other modes such as personal fulfillment, skill or artistic development, emotional awareness, or satisfying relationships.

Winfrey's persona has always been one that is in open competition with celebrities in dominant "white media;" indeed, she eventually took over the daytime talk show scene from pioneer and icon, Phil Donahue. Their two shows aired simultaneously for ten years until his retirement in 1996, and then Winfrey surpassed his success by far in creating a conglomerate enterprise around her persona. Winfrey's guest list over the course of her talk show is unprecedented and many of her interviews have become legendary in American popular cultural history and discourse: sitting President Barack Obama and First Lady, Michelle Obama, Tom Cruise, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and many others. Winfrey developed her famous book club, a charitable foundation (Oprah's Angel Network), founded her website and print magazine, "O" which features a photo of her on every cover, and now her television network, The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), a conspicuously capitalistic and neoliberal acronym, one that can be read as a transitive or intransitive personally triumphant verb or as a command to others, if not "Others."⁴⁶ At the height of her viewership for her talk show, Winfrey's popularity reached around 14 million viewers per day, 75% of which were American white women between the ages of 18-54 (notably the same demographic targeted by much of postfeminist media). Like Martha Stewart, Winfrey heads her own production company, Harpo Productions, and is "the first African-American to host a national talk

show, the first woman to own and produce her own program, and (sic) the richest woman in show business.”⁴⁷ Winfrey’s foundation is notable in itself and it has also undertaken several large-scale charity efforts in recent years, including helping victims of Hurricane Katrina and building schools globally. Through The Angel Network, Winfrey has established a portal for those interested in donating and volunteering and as a related news source for charity causes.⁴⁸

But Winfrey is yet best-known for her long-running daytime talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and its time span, and her rise to mega-celebrity persona dovetails with the onset and development of postfeminism. There is no question that the emblematic figure and myth of the strong black woman is enacted and embodied by the persona of Oprah Winfrey. She is singular in her persona, assertive in her opinions and actions, and obviously acute in her business pursuits. She developed a career in high end media which could not have been easy to navigate as black woman in corporate America which is often reluctant to break ranks to allow women or people of color to start.

The persona of Oprah Winfrey as a strong woman is also reinforced by her infrequent and selective choice of films roles: a film adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1985), for which she was nominated for an Oscar, and in a film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1998). Kylo-Patrick R. Hart and Metasebia Woldemariam analyze the film roles of Winfrey (*The Color Purple* and *Beloved*)⁴⁹ as standard melodramas that reinforce Winfrey’s appeal to women particularly, especially in the subcategory of maternal melodrama of *Beloved* as they see the strengths of masculinity as rerouted and thus made acceptable in American popular media as maternalized

strengths.⁵⁰ It is an aspect of Winfrey that also aligns with a Mammy reading of her persona—as a supreme maternal figure to the masses.

Although Winfrey's accomplishments are thus far unique in American culture given her gender, race/ethnicity, and initially her venue,⁵¹ her persona reinforces many postfeminist norms. Winfrey's celebrity persona is one that developed primarily through her talk show but extended out through her film roles, interviews, and now her magazine and television network. First, Winfrey has engaged in a public battle with her weight for decades: losing weight, gaining weight, trying new exercise and diet programs regularly. Weight is one of the primary facets of her fame. For many years these public "battles" with herself with which she was consistently failing were front-page tabloid material, a staple and reliable sight in many grocery store lines around the country in which Winfrey had gained or lost some significant (or even insignificant) amount of weight. To be clear, I mention the publicity surrounding Winfrey's weight first in this analysis of her persona because it is her personal performance of postfeminist failure, and failures, particularly constructed failures of women, were a central narrative thread in many episodes of her talk show. And indeed the segment "My 67 Lb. Weight Loss" from 1988 is Winfrey's number one choice of the most memorable moments from her show, show which ran five days a week for 25 years.⁵² In other words, Winfrey's appeal to audiences was partially her relatability to the average person,⁵³ particularly the average woman struggling to maintain a postfeminist standard of a thin body. This relatability was communicated through the shared acknowledgement of inevitable postfeminist failure that traveled out to the other topics of her show.

As P. David Marshall describes *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, this narrative of failure was central to each episode and each new problem raised by the show,⁵⁴ no matter its socio-historical origins and discursive political deployments, was recast as a personal failure that the guests could solve only by “working on themselves.”⁵⁵ Whether *The Oprah Winfrey Show* framed the problem as one between individuals such as a marriage and/or specific cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse or they framed it as broad-sweeping such as “racism in America,” the show follows a neoliberal (and postfeminist model) of self-blame and individualism to a fault. In this way, Winfrey also uses her persona her widely publicized history of abuse as a child as “evidence” that one can get past any type of emotional or physical obstacles if one is simply willing to work hard. This a position that also evokes the Gurley-Brown feminism I described in chapter two that Hilary Radner claims marks the true lineage of the postfeminist age.⁵⁶ In this consistent evocation of a personal, common-sense model toward social problems, Winfrey frequently enters a discursive double-bind as elaborated by Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg:

Oprah frequently frames a programme by posing a question which she clearly wishes to have nullified, for example, 'won't children be damaged by having gay parents?' Effectively, this means she is positioning her audience, herself and her guests inside the discourse. At the same time she lays the responsibility for the overthrow of the discourse at the feet of the very people who are disempowered, thus ironically locking the programme into the very common sense she is trying to challenge.⁵⁷

Furthermore this “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” “down-home” American “philosophy” central to an American mythological identity and central to the appeal of neoliberalism and postfeminism, is lent patriarchal and masculine authority by her frequent deployment of the “expert, “Dr. Phil” McGraw who Winfrey began working

with in 1996 (and who was a regular by 1998).⁵⁸ Note that it is not necessarily that the foremost “expert” on emotional life is male, so much as it is the type of male he represents: he underscores his masculine, patriarchal and Americanized, neoliberal authority with his deep Texas drawl. As Dr. Phil’s mentor and the reason for his launch into the public eye, Winfrey’s relationship with the “expert” and his patriarchal authority is contradictory. Like many of Winfrey’s guest “experts,” Dr. Phil has a Ph. D (his subject is psychology) and Dr. Phil’s script is one that typically shames mostly women and some men for their “poor choices” with little or no recognition of the social factors that place certain people at risk for destructive behaviors and seemingly little knowledge of the psychoanalytic concepts that help to explain our emotional lives and thus our relationships and decision-making capabilities and skills. In show after show, Dr. Phil lacks compassion in his feigned compassion or what he calls “tough love,” ostensibly a position of “common sense” solutions that blame the victim, sanctioned by Oprah and one she adopts herself at times in her talk shows. Thus Winfrey’s relationship with Dr. Phil is exemplary of the space of contradictions that runs throughout postfeminism: empowerment for women and African Americans is embodied by Winfrey at the helm of her show while at the same time conservative white masculinity can be invoked as patriarchal authority.

Several media analysts have noted that framing issues as results of poor personal choices and their remedies as grounded in self-improvement thusly is a move to depoliticize the often highly controversial topics on the show, an attitude which also

dovetails with neoliberal and postfeminist conservative norms and rhetoric. For example, in her close analysis of an episode on race, Janice Peck observes that:

... as a woman hosting a genre directed at a female audience, Winfrey is expected to frame the "topic" of racism in terms of its emotional, interpersonal dimensions, thereby reducing the potential for political conflict. Given the show's need to please its audience, maintain its "advertiser friendly" reputation, and not jeopardize Winfrey's mass appeal, the racism series must seek to bridge or erase divisions among viewers and participants even as it tackles a profoundly divisive issue in American society."⁵⁹

Epstein and Steinberg would likely agree as they describe *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as characterizing problems (such as unhappy marriages) as distinctly feminine. Thus even in shows that feature a heterosexual couple, the marital problems are often sourced as the woman's issue. The show consistently drives toward the idea that the woman in particular (no matter her personal circumstances, inequities or abuses) must change in some way for the betterment of herself, her husband, and her children. Thus we see here Winfrey's construction of the perfect neoliberal subject that demonstrates Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff claims that women steeped in postfeminist culture *are* the ideal neoliberal subjects.⁶⁰

In her analysis of an episode on racism, Janice Peck elaborates that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* espouses a "therapeutic discourse" and a "religious discourse" that work in tandem to produce rational, moral subjects. She writes:

Therapeutic discourse is centered on individual health; it defines racism as a problem of the psyche that creates psychological and interpersonal dysfunction. It diagnoses racism "unhealthy" and sees the solution in individual quests for personal recovery that will lead to a healthy society. Religious discourse, constructed around individual salvation, defines racism as a problem of the soul/heart that causes separation (from God, from others) and spiritual disharmony. It judges racism "wrong" and poses solutions in terms of individual changes of heart that will lead to a redeemed society. Because these discourses posit reason, perception, and morality as originating in the individual and society

as an extension /reflection of universal mental operations, behaviors, and interests, their understanding of racism is constrained within these discursive walls. Racism will be solved if individuals can be motivated to change their perceptions, feelings, and behavior.⁶¹

Thus Peck's point is that the discourse of individual rights in America overshadows or trumps systemic social problems such as racism and thus mires social change in the sentiment that "everyone is entitled to their opinion" and the invocation of the "American" tie to freedom of speech (no matter that the speech itself may deny others freedoms in dire and egregious ways.) In other words, through a lens of postfeminist critique, the persona of Oprah Winfrey as constructed through *The Oprah Winfrey Show* develops the idea that all problems and solutions reside within the individual self.⁶²

Epstein and Steinberg also read *The Oprah Winfrey Show* through the lens of kinship theory (and they later posit this is work constructed as feminine in American culture)⁶³ or the mediation of "the making, breaking and negotiating of familial and romantic relationships."⁶⁴ They suggest that the terms of therapy, such as "dysfunctional family" are central to the show's narrative each day and that the people on the show are thus hooked into "the fantasy of the 'functional family', a notion which has historically been defined as the conventional, nuclear family."⁶⁵ Winfrey upholds the postfeminist directive of the "proper" social unit as the nuclear family. Epstein and Steinberg further delineate this "proper" family as both white and middle class, and "in this context, a range of familial relationships are made Other."⁶⁶ Indeed they iterate that the "ideal family is constructed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as white."⁶⁷ Therefore I would argue that though Oprah Winfrey is herself a breakout star and unlikely maker of a corporate empire because of the combination of her gender/sex and her race/ethnicity; in her show

she firmly adheres to the dominance of whiteness and the prescription of submission to male authority in her constructions of ideal society, and her frequent deference to the “expertise” of condescendingly patriarchal, Dr. Phil.

However, Winfrey’s celebrity, cultural influence, international popularity, and nearly unmatched philanthropy certainly cannot be reduced to her relationship with Dr. Phil. Sujata Moorti’s work on Winfrey is instructive here as she defends the space of the “feminized” talk show for the very same reasons that some criticize it: because the show defines its arena as emotional instead of legal or concretely political. Moorti claims that this “giving voice to pain”⁶⁸ is a move toward a social transformation in that it at least has the ability to transform the social imagination. So while some may argue that Winfrey’s show depoliticizes the controversial issues it exposes (at worst for sensationalism and ratings) Moorti cogently defends Winfrey on the subjects of sexual violence perpetrated against women by men:

... the discussions of sexual violence draw our attention to the subjective pain of the women. By allowing women to speak about their experiences of pain and victimization, Oprah focuses on the unspeakable reality of pain and its investment in the individual body. Elaine Scarry has pointed out the difficulties involved in expressing physical pain and its resistance to objectification in language. Oprah, with its insistence on detailed descriptions of sexual assaults, transports the issue of individual, private pain into the area of shared public discourse. By narrating sexual violence the discussions on Oprah affirm a female experience that has often been repressed and rendered invisible. The debate engendered by these individual experiences transmutes the personal into the collective.⁶⁹

Moorti qualifies her defense of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as a construction of community that opens a space for transformation that it probably can’t deliver on for the reasons of neoliberal, individualistic, and postfeminist concerns detailed above. However, Moorti’s observations are important and well-taken. If we understand *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to

be a step toward social transformation and not the transformation itself, could we argue that centralizing emotion as the human condition and “giving voice to pain” are a motion toward social and political change?

CHAPTER 3: POSTFEMINIST HETERONORMATIVITY: QUEERED OTHERS

Queer potential has no limits. This is a defining feature of queer theory that renders it immensely productive and pleasurable to work with, and also renders it extremely difficult to develop into analytical categories. In a critique of postfeminist culture, however, queerness, like many other minoritized identities and subjectivities is most frequently deployed as a mechanism of reductive othering, which is a great disappointment to those of us who thought (hoped) that the cultural celebration of the sexual freedoms of show such as *Sex and the City* might translate or represent a shift to real transformations in American discourse on gender and sex. However, more frequently than not, what may initially seem like a transformative moment with progressive potential for women and queers often ends up rewriting the norms of conservative, neoliberal postfeminist productions.

To briefly iterate, postfeminist culture tends to maternalize and/or heteronormativize women against the backdrop of postfeminism, or the dearth of multiple, thriving feminisms. Thus the problem with postfeminism is that it is, in the United States at least, not only the reigning and singular popularly recognized means of reconciling femininity and feminism, but it is also the only “legitimate” means of performing femininity at all. Postfeminism seeks to claim the space of being a successful (as determined by material wealth and personal and/or professional status) woman in contemporary culture and, as I have attempted to prove throughout this work, most women will fail the test to even prequalify for postfeminist success, as postfeminism is often predicated on a conservative, neoliberal feminine performance. However, like many

of the created categories I explore in this work, there are exceptions in which queerness might push a text past the prescribed postfeminist limits and I'll cover some of those as well.

But before I begin the discussion in this section, I'd like to clarify some terminology. The common acronym, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer), usually describes the "everyone else" to unmarked heterosexuality in American cultural discourse. The "Q" can even apply to those who advocate for identity structures outside conventional systems (not just those of gender/sexuality) such as sadism and masochism participants and those who invest in body modifications to various performative and subjective ends. While some may argue for the collapse of the acronym to something more streamlined and inclusive, like "queer" which may seem to be more convenient and easier to say, others counter that "queer" blurs the distinctions between socio-politically hard-won markers of identity, markers which are meaningful to those who claim them as self and community descriptors. (From this standpoint the acronym may become even longer!)

Although I am cognizant of and sympathetic to the reductive risks, I am an advocate of collapsing the distinctions into "queer" for four reasons germane to this particular work: first because the term "queer" represents academic "queer theory" the very foundation of contemporary progressive thought on gender and sexuality¹ and second because "queer" adequately describes much of the social activism that focuses on gendered/sexed rights which often problematize the binarizations *within* LGBTQ communities. Third, unlike the defined categories of LGBTQ (so that being a "lesbian,"

for example, is somehow distinct from being “queer,”) the inclusivity of “queer” allows for an ambiguity of subjectivities, and for new subjectivities to arise—versus the established labels of identity one may have to wear even though the fit may not be quite right. For example, we may arrive at being “gay” or “lesbian” differently as individuals and we may perform or enact sex/gender individually differently from one another, not to mention the already established subsections of LGBTQ communities who cannot be adequately represented by the acronym. Further, a heterosexual supporter of queer rights may want to identify as queer themselves as a person who encourages a freedom of (from?) the static labeling of genders and sexualities. And lastly, the inclusivity of “queer” makes more sense for this work in describing the constitutive binarizations of postfeminism. Generally speaking about postfeminist texts, the broad and the fine distinctions between LGBTQ identities and subjectivities hardly matter. LGBTQ identities are *the Other*, regardless of how many letters appear in an acronym, and the acronym or the term “queer” is itself enough of a distinction to make legible, foreground, and to valorize postfeminist heteronormativity.² Therefore from here on out, I will not use the acronym LGBTQ. I will refer to the groups of people who complicate binaristic gender/sex as “queers,” both for the term’s sociopolitical resonance and for its inclusive potential, and I will refer to individuals or representations of individuals who claim a particular status as “lesbian,” “gay,” or “transgendered,” and so on.

As I write this week in July of 2013, there are two political events over the last couple of days that, together, paint an interesting picture of gender/sex political life and priorities in the U.S. in 2013. The first is the Supreme Court rulings that legalize gay

marriage, and the second is the state battle in Texas over abortion rights which many experts believe is leading rapidly to a Supreme Court challenge of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark case in 1973 that legalized abortions.³ Many young women who feel alienated by postfeminist culture because it strands choice and empowerment at the door of neoliberal, materialistic self-improvement to uphold patriarchal order and masculine privilege, are now lamenting that gay rights overshadows the rights of women (unless the women are gay and their chief concern is getting married, I suppose). As Ginia Bellafante reported, high school participants from all over the U.S. at the 2013 Feminist Camp in Manhattan complained, “To advocate for gay marriage is a fashionable thing to do; people are more afraid to be homophobic than they are to be sexist.”⁴ It is a curious feature of the current American political landscape that we seem to be choosing measures to preserve the social system and institution of marriage and the nuclear family at all costs (to typical conservatives at least) and we are simultaneously threatening to rescind a law that many women consider to be the cornerstone of their (gendered) liberty. *Roe v. Wade* is also certainly a foundational moment for feminism itself, which is often successfully produced as *the* major threat to the nuclear family, and thus to patriarchy and to masculine privilege. I wonder what the reactions will be in the coming months from those women who are (or feel) liberated by the ability to marry if the same court deems them legally unable to decide the fate of their own bodies primarily understood by American law as baby producers. My point is that postfeminist culture in the collusion with patriarchal culture has produced a historical moment in which the goal of “gay marriage” is cast in American culture as just another nuclear family model, arguably may

have been bought at the price of *all* women's freedoms –and whose potential lack of access to abortion could place any woman in dire straits of unwanted children, unwanted marriages, unwanted subpar medical procedures and, perhaps worst of all, the inability to be speaking subjects on the issues that mostly affect them.

In addition to raced and classed categories of identity and subjectivity, one of the constitutive others of postfeminism is most distinctly queered women and transgendered people who, like classed and racialized/ethnicized women (and as I demonstrate in the final chapter, women from the Global South), work in the background of both popular culture and in critical discourse in order to produce and foreground the performance of a “preferred” or “correct” femininity and the popular American prescription for the production of (post)femininity. The stereotype of the angry, anti-male lesbian, for example, is a common specter summoned by postfeminism to create the binaristic opposite against which postfeminist values are produced. This summoning operates as a postfeminist scare tactic and warning to heterosexualized women who may want to stray from the postfeminine order and into arenas of patriarchal power or masculine privilege as empowered individuals themselves. In other words, postfeminism reinforces and reproduces certain pejorative stereotypes of feminists against which it produces and voraciously guards traditional femininity and “girlie” femininity, and then redeploys heteronormative and “girlie” femininity as if it is an empowered choice on par with the historical activism of self-proclaimed feminist activists or presumably queer activists. Thus postfeminism colludes with the patriarchal order which typically shuns and degrades actual lesbians (even while enjoying lesbian pornography)⁵ as the “proper”

owners of a heterosexualized gaze in producing lesbians and queered people (especially queered women) as deviants, monsters, freaks, etc. In postfeminist logic, these are the very identity markers one must assiduously avoid if one wants to be desired by heterosexual males—with the attendant slippage between garnering the attention of a male heterosexual (by being the proper object of the heterosexual gaze) and the achievement of personal acclaim, success, love, and happiness.

The tacit and false assumption in such formulations is that lesbians and/or general man-haters initiated and ran Second Wave feminist activism and thus robbed heterosexual women of the ability to perform girlie femininity, or femininity for the male heterosexual gaze. Therefore, postfeminist femininity is often prescribed and deployed as women's liberation or "empowerment" instead of what it is more often constructed as: a set of binarized and exclusive standards that serve to uphold broad systems of masculine privilege, the nuclear family model, conservative religious and political agendas, and (patriarchal) late capitalism, or neoliberalism. These values and assumptions are communicated in and through popular film and television by the (re)production of familiar narratives in which a woman can be "relieved" of her career or other aspirations (especially if those careers place her in direct competition with a heterosexual white male) in postfeminist texts by her recuperation into a traditional heterosexual coupling, if not into a nuclear family maternal role where she can play out her "authentic" and preferred feminine self. We see such operations in texts such as the conclusion of the *Sex and the City* series, touted for its progressive (hetero) sexual exploits and adventures for women, yet each woman is coupled in the finale—two with children—thus symbolically

ending the progressive potential for non-standard or non-traditional sexual lives in the popular imagination of the primary female viewership who were famously so taken with the series. Many Hollywood romantic comedies end in a similar manner. Two recent examples are *No Strings Attached* (2011) and *Friends with Benefits* (2011). In both films after a sexual “transgression,” meaning sex without intention or desire for heterosexual coupling commitment, the female protagonist is “saved” by her acquiescence to a heterosexual coupling/patriarchal nuclear family role.

However, postfeminist texts do deploy queered women, although infrequently: in films like *Mean Girls* (2004) and *She’s the Man* (2006), female characters can be coded as a lesbian (Janis in *Mean Girls*), or as a cross-dresser, (Viola,⁶ in *She’s the Man*) until the films’ endings in which both gender/sexually transgressive characters can be recovered by “true love” with a heterosexual male, and their identities revealed to have been the “proper” heterosexual femininity all along. (And while *She’s the Man* is an obvious if loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Twelfth Night*, the film resonates in contemporary popular discourse as heteronormative.) One could imagine two different (and distinctly un-postfeminist) storylines for these films for young women: Janis actually is a lesbian who had an affair with the most popular girl in high school instead of being merely her ex-best friend,⁷ and Viola turns out to be transgender and still gets the guy! Or the girl! Or someone or something else! One could surmise that the paucity of such narratives on our shared landscape of American popular culture, particularly in texts that attempt to articulate femininity, suggests the cohesion of postfeminism, patriarchy, and late capitalism. Thus a condition of portraying potentially subversive

gender/sexualities in American popular media is that they usually must provide the background for proper heterosexual performance and mating.⁸

But what is most conspicuous in postfeminist texts, the texts that dominate our cultural discourse on gender/sexuality, is the absence of particularly lesbians, or queered women and transgendered people altogether, those who define themselves in terms other than the hegemonic and postfeminist heterosexual/homosexual binary. (Part of the media buzz surrounding the new Netflix series in 2013, *Orange is the New Black*, is the novel approach in the central positioning of women's sexual desires and the casting of a transgendered woman, Laverne Cox, as a transgendered woman in the show, Sophia Burset, and providing her equal time and backstory to the other characters.) While we see an occasional essentialized and stereotyped role for gay men in popular media (often as the best friend of the heterosexual postfeminist woman,)⁹ gay and queer women receive much less attention in narratives aimed for a general audience, essentialized or otherwise. For example, if a lesbian celebrity chooses to perform her gender/sex identity outside the prescription for postfeminist heteronormative appeal, she could easily lock herself out of contemporary representational potential in mainstream media altogether, and if she does persist, she sets herself up for criticism and ridicule on the grounds of preferred, binarized gender and sexuality.

There are a rare few exceptions who prove this rule, such as Portia de Rossi, who has managed to maintain something of an acting career after her public announcement of her romance and life with "out" lesbian, Ellen DeGeneres. However, unlike DeGeneres, known for her sartorial choices in choosing men's suits and shoes, De Rossi has chosen

to perform as a postfeminized woman in her paparazzi narrative, (what heterosexual culture refers to as a “lipstick lesbian,” a derogatory term to some that is a typical hegemonic, heterosexual reduction of the lives of others). Therefore, even though de Rossi is now an “out” lesbian in a high profile lesbian relationship, she performs as a typical Hollywood produced and postfeminized starlet in her physical presentation, she is still a hireable actress in postfeminized mainstream media.¹⁰ And while I would argue that a wide cultural understanding and acceptance of the nature of gender/sex performativity is an ideal state, the performance of heterosexuality for the male gaze is overdetermined in contemporary postfeminist culture as a naturalized category which renders such potential “performances” by lesbians as problematic reads.

Similar to most other minoritized groups, queers lack a range of mainstream narratives that explore the banalities and complicated nuances of queer lives and worldviews. However, even a casual observer of mainstream mass media—once attuned to it—would notice that in the last two decades or the age of postfeminism, the visibility of queered men (especially white gay, wealthy men) performing gender as male or female (even in their relative paucity to heterosexual performances) far surpasses the visibility of queered women and transgender people performing any kind of gendered societal roles. Though there are lesbian and bisexual characters in popular television shows and films occasionally,¹¹ (transgendered people are rarer in television),¹² there is no Drag King counterpart to RuPaul’s drag queen competition, *Drag Race* (2009-present), for example, and many average consumers of mainstream media would not be able to name a drag king. (Many aren’t aware of what exactly a drag king does.) There is also no featured

lesbian couple on any of the most popular mainstream television series, such as ABC's currently running *Modern Family* which portrays a gay (white and wealthy) male couple as a storyline that is given equal time and focus to the portrayals of the heterosexual couples.¹³ And certainly there is also no lesbian, bisexual or transgendered equivalent to the long-running comedy, *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), which narrativized a white, wealthy gay man's relationship with his heterosexual white and wealthy female roommate. (Indeed the reverse is difficult to imagine: a wildly successful mainstream television show about an out lesbian or transgendered person living with his/her straight male roommate. It doesn't seem possible just yet and certainly not in 1998 when the show premiered. Further, notice the lack of a classed and/or racialized/ethnicized Will/Grace duo reaching the mainstream. Transgendered people and lesbians are virtually absent from representation in mainstream media. Even the Logo Channel, a network available through cable packages that produces and showcases sitcoms, films, and reality shows mostly geared toward a white gay male and middle class audience and whose programming initially targeted LGBTQ communities was and is conspicuously light on the "L."¹⁴

Perhaps one reason for greater gay white male visibility is that postfeminist texts, in particular, can accommodate them without sacrificing postfeminist normalizations of identity. I would argue that at least part of the (relative) invisibility of queers outside and beyond the stereotyped gay (usually white) male is due, at least in part, to the patriarchal privilege that extends through and beyond declared sexualities, but their visibility may also be explained by the relative ease with which postfeminist texts are able to

incorporate dominant stereotypes of gay males. Films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), and the television series, *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) were each able to punish the female protagonists for her inability to secure a proper heterosexual mate and the presence of gay male best friend as the inferior displacement of desire served to reinforce this “lack.”

Steven Cohan reads this overexposure of the gay male best friend in postfeminist texts through the lens of neoliberalism. He observes that postfeminist texts “have...readily absorbed the impact of queer theory but left out the queerness.” In other words, Cohan elaborates that gay men and/or metrosexuals in particular are constructed as a “hip” accessory to the lush life in consumer culture for women.¹⁵ Further, metrosexuals are queered men—not necessarily because of their sexualities, but because of their male gender performances as a form of masculinity that is well groomed, coifed, and dressed. This queerness of metrosexuals is pronounced and easily collapsed to gay in particularly American culture, which tends to strictly align care of the self with femininity; and within that construction lies the facile slippage to male homosexuality. Metrosexuals are also, in some ways, the cultural equivalents of postfeminized women in that they are neoliberal subjects produced by consumer culture. In other words, like a successful postfeminists, metrosexuals’ success depends upon their classed ability to purchase the services and goods required for metrosexuality.

There are a handful of films featuring gay white (usually wealthy) males, and few films that feature queered women or transgendered people, or classed or racialized/ethnicized queers of any ilk. The occasional *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *The*

Birdcage (1996), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), or cult camp favorites, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), feature mostly gay or queered males, and again, there are no blockbuster lesbian counterparts, for example, to *Brokeback Mountain* or *The Birdcage*, though interestingly, every few years a transgender film will receive popular widespread acclaim if not Oscars attention: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Normal* (2003), *Transamerica* (2005) *Albert Nobbs* (2012). In these films, playing “down” or “queer” can be understood in mainstream culture as a performer exhibiting excellence at her or his craft, versus enduring a queer slippage onto the performer’s personal identity and celebrity persona. This structure of Othering reinforces the value of the celebrity to culture at the expense of constructing and reinforcing queers as deviants within the discourse of the same text. There are certainly many films both produced within the U.S. and around the world that focus on the lives of queers, (a brief search in Netflix alone will reveal a trove of such films) but these are subgenres, independent films, festival productions, etc., that do not achieve popularity or notability in mainstream American discourse—which is the far more massive discursive space I argue is produced and reproduced by the values and structures of postfeminism.

However three relatively popular films from the postfeminist era deal directly with the potentially mutable sexual identities of contemporary women in a romantic narrative arc: *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), *High Art* (1998), and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). In the first, *Kissing Jessica Stein*, written by the co-stars, Jennifer Westfeldt and Heather Juergensen, (and directed by Charles Herman Wurmfeld) the eponymous main

character is a standardly attractive protagonist in mainstream American media: white, blonde, heterosexual, and living in an enviable spacious loft in Manhattan that her salary as a copy editor for a minor publication (and like Carrie Bradshaw's in *Sex and the City*) could never afford her. Thus from the outset viewers are in the fantastical space of postfeminism's neoliberal promise of wealth as a normative state for heterosexualized, attractive white women. However, *Kissing Jessica Stein* initially seems to want to complicate postfeminist trends by creating a common postfeminist problem for Jessica but solving it with a non-postfeminist solution. Jessica cannot find a "good" man or even a good date with a man, as we are witness to a series of "bad" dates in which the men are represented as either mildly illiterate, slightly pornographic, parsimonious and exacting, or gay.

In a moment of frivolity, Jessica reads a personals ad that sounds perfect for her, only to discover later that it's an ad for women seeking women. Intrigued by the ad and also ashamed to be seen by her friends and co-workers as "queer," Jessica secretly responds and meets Helen, another standardly attractive white woman with a job in an art gallery (that also would not pay for her separate spacious Manhattan apartment.) The two embark upon a romantic relationship eventually, though Jessica must be coaxed along by Helen, especially to have sex with her. This is constructed much like the series of "bad" dates with men in the opening montage: Jessica repeatedly stopping the action during kissing and fondling, and eventually she works up her courage to "go all the way," an act which is not depicted in the film. It is eventually Jessica's lack of interest in sex with Helen that leads to confrontation and break-up, aided by Jessica's insistence that their

relationship remain a secret from her friends, co-workers, and family, even after she moves in with Helen. After the break-up in the epilogue, Helen and Jessica are restored to their “proper” postfeminist relationship of good friends and Jessica initiates a “proper” postfeminist heterosexual romance with a man. Indeed this is a romance with her former boss, thus reinstalling not just men, but perhaps patriarchal authority into her life.

Kissing Jessica Stein is a fantastical, playful foray into the possibility of lesbianism if following the rules of postfeminist culture just doesn’t work in “trapping” a husband. Thus the film reads less like a popular cultural exploration into queerness, but more as one, long extended joke on watching the discomfort of a standard, pretty middle class white girl struggle with being an “Other” herself, until she finally realizes, of course, (like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* among all the misfits) she was never an Other all along. And Jessica’s realization of her free pass into normative white heterosexual privilege is, of course, the primary reason for not showing viewers a sex scene between Jessica and Helen. If Jessica both loves Helen *and* enjoys sex with her, Jessica is potentially locked out of this postfeminist heterosexual privilege which is tantamount to tragedy in mainstream and postfeminist culture. Thus *Kissing Jessica Stein* employs a standard tactic of postfeminist texts in the deployment of Others in order to reinforce the normalization of hegemonic culture which is, in this case, heterosexuality.

Both written and directed or co-directed by Lisa Cholodenko *High Art* and *The Kids Are All Right* are two lesbian-centered dramas from the postfeminist era notable for their exceptionality of their focus on lesbian or queered women. *High Art* tells the story of Sid and Lucy¹⁶ (Radha Mitchell and Ally Sheedy), neighbors who meet haphazardly

living in the same New York City apartment building and strike up a queer romance. And though one character dies at the end of the film from a heroin overdose, the somber quality of this text is obfuscating. The visual and musical tones of the film are dark, occasionally shrill or jarring, and the film is entirely humorless. Interiors are generally under lit, shabbily furnished, and colors are washed out. Much of the dialogue is flat or elliptical. Each character seems depressed without explanation. In other words, these are certainly not the sunny, sexual protagonists who inhabit lush lives in postfeminist texts like *Sex and the City*. Furthermore, Cholodenko seems more interested in creating an ‘art-y’ film than she is in pioneering a filmic and fictional exploration into the lives of queered women. Put another way, Cholodenko seems more interested in the experiment of what she can communicate through mise-en-scène rather than through standard Hollywood movie plot development. In this way, *High Art* is quite an anomaly in the postfeminist age, especially considering the relatively substantial amount of media attention the film received, in that the main characters seem randomly queer. Cholodenko constructed a narrative in which queerness was not the focus, but on a tragic love story between two (depressed and confused) people who happen to be queer. That queered romances are structured throughout the film as perhaps inherently tragic, however, does perhaps undercut some of the progressive potential of the film.

The Kids Are All Right is vastly different in its visual style, overall tone, and level of directness about the plot. The film looks and sounds much more like a typical postfeminist film with its ample lighting and sunshine, well-appointed homes and professionally landscaped, cheerful gardens. Thus, like postfeminist texts, though the

narrative may move toward sadness and disillusionment at times, the lush spectacles of bright lighting and displays of wealthy privilege serve to alleviate these minor narrative discomforts. Also well in postfeminist line, Cholodenko cast two famously heterosexual A-list actresses, Julianne Moore and Annette Bening¹⁷ as Jules and Nic, a lesbian couple in a long-term relationship with two teenage children, Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and Laser (Josh Hutcherson), each of whom they conceived through artificial insemination from an anonymous sperm bank donation. The narrative conflict involves the disillusionment in their partnership, a conflict ratcheted up in intensity by the introduction of the sperm donor, Paul (Mark Ruffalo), as a rival for not only a bit of the children's affections, but for Jules' affections as she begins a sexual affair with him. As J. Jack Halberstam writes: "...*The Kids Are All Right* is a "soul-crushing depiction of long-term relationships, lesbian parenting, and midlife crisis."¹⁸ Several movie critics commented on the lack of chemistry between Moore and Bening, and furthermore since there are so few roles for actual queers, the film begs the question: why cast heterosexuals in these roles at all? Certainly Moore's and Bening's celebrity statuses could lend some credibility to the film and serve to "legitimate" queer relationships, however condescending to actual queers to be constructed as needing or wanting "legitimation" by heterosexuals.

Halberstam's analysis of the film is instructive to a critique of postfeminist heteronormativity. S/he¹⁹ claims that the heteronormative attitude of the film (even one that proposes to be about lesbians) is most clearly demonstrated through a comparison of the lesbian and heterosexual sex scenes. Jules and Nic's singular sex scene is almost entirely without passion, desire, or even a show of skin as they lie clothed in bed

watching gay male porn and Nic eventually (under the covers where viewers can't see), uses a vibrator with Jules. While this scene could be read as a means to reinforce the idea of marriage between any two people as deadening to passion, the force of that social commentary is overridden by the athletic, sweaty sex performed by Paul, first with the hostess of his restaurant, and then with Jules herself.²⁰ In other words, I would argue that Paul's sex is an act rendered through the postfeminist heteronormative lens of male sexual desire, and the failure of the first attempted Hollywood film about a lesbian "legitimate" or "married" couple is that there is no lens of equal weight applied to lesbians. Are lesbian desires (and sex) unrepresentable in mainstream postfeminist culture? As Halberstam notes, the initial passion of Jules and Nic when they first met would have added a layer to the film in a pictorialized backstory and thus complicated the male gaze that seems to structure the film's visuality.²¹ Another way to read this maneuver is that Cholodenko brings the male back into the sexual experience to render the film experience more comfortable for an audience trained in postfeminist cultural norms.

The Kids Are All Right also points to another problem for postfeminist culture and queerness (and one that *Kissing Jessica Stein* avoids by containing the narrative in singles culture): the potential threat to the heterosexual parenting dyad and traditional heterosexual mothering and fathering. Chris Straayer writes that "...maleness is potentially irrelevant to lesbianism, if not to lesbians"²² and that "(t)he primary threat of female bonding is the elimination of the male."²³ Again, Cholodenko open the opportunity to explore this inherent "threat" but retreats back into the heteronormative

myth of the virile male as the singular, exciting and enviable agent, master of his own domain. While the narrative of *The Kids Are All Right* does conclude in reuniting the lesbian dyad (with the children), the film's treatment of the shared life of Jules and Nic as a dour, unhappy lesbian couple having shrill arguments is overcome by the depiction of Paul's great life as a Lothario with plenty of money doing what he loves: riding his motorcycle, romancing women, cooking great food. As Halberstam observes: "This naturalization of his sexual power and the naturalization of the lack of charisma of the moms again stabilizes a grid of desire that always tips in favor of male heterosexuality and leaves lesbians stranded."²⁴ Thus even the rare few treatment of queered women suffer the entrance onto mainstream postfeminized culture.

Again, bodies outside the postfeminist prescription of male or female are rarely portrayed in mainstream media, but when they are, they are often depicted as defiant and unsettling, frightening, monstrous or freakish, or objects of heteronormative comedy and thus lesbians and transgendered people may not employ their bodies in performance for the male heterosexual gaze and are thus rarely visible in mainstream media. To this point, it is no accident that some of the most extreme and iconic villains in popular culture are constructed as confused about gender/sex, those in the horror genre: Norman Bates of *Psycho*, Jason Voorhees of *Friday the 13th*, and Michael Myers of *Halloween*. And though these films were produced before the age of postfeminism, they are films and characters yet circulated in contemporary American discourse. Perhaps the culmination of postfeminist and neoliberal othering of lesbianism and queer women is espoused in the mainstream success of the biopic *Monster* (2003), which narrates the story of Aileen

Wuornos, a Florida serial killer of men involved in a same-sex romance at the time of her incarceration. Due to the paucity of films about women in same sex relationships, the title of the film is itself telling, as is the choice to tell Wuornos' story at all, the tenth woman to be executed in United States history. While the film is somewhat sympathetic to Wuornos and her circumstances of prostitution for survival, and portrays most of the men she kills as violent toward her, the styling and costuming of noted A-list "beauty," Charlize Theron as overweight and ugly overshadows Wuornos' story.

Monster, of course, ends up becoming Theron's requisite "star vehicle" as an A-lister, in that she famously gained fifteen pounds and allowed herself to become unattractive for the role: fake brown teeth, messy hair, and mottled skin. And Theron was rewarded in American mainstream culture for her choices: she earned her first and yet only Best Actress Oscar in 2004 for the portrayal of Wuornos. And while it may be true that there is a current, rising sensationalistic interest in the news stories about transgendered people, with the occasional article on transgender children or famous adults (Chaz Bono, for example), these stories are presented in the spirit of a freak show for the assumed heterosexual masses. Thus this trend should not be confused with a compassionate, nuanced, intellectual swing in mainstream media, however, but as I see it, transgendered people are merely the next new sensationalistic category of people deemed "freaks" for the masses already trained by reality television that tends to enact the procedures of "othering" whatever persona, family, or community the omnivorous American digital media circus turns to.²⁵

Outside the horror genre when queerly defiant bodies do appear they are often either the butt of a postfeminist/heteronormative joke or they are produced as an object of sensationalistic othering for a heterosexualized, if not postfeminized, text—or some combination of both. For example, Tyler Perry has become famous in large part due to his frequent drag performance in multiple stage and film productions as the character Madea, through which he lampoons elderly black women as clamorous, strident, uneducated, volatile, and masculine if not asexual. Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence and Keenan Ivory and Shawn Wayans have capitalized on similar satirical portrayals of older and younger women, thus undercutting the progressive potential of drag generally as they deploy it specifically as a comedic mechanism to other women and to restore heterosexual order in their produced narratives.

The Wayan brothers are something of an exception, however, in their film *White Chicks* (2004), in which they expose and mock young, wealthy white women at their annual beach vacation in the Hamptons through *both* gender/sex and racial/ethnic drag. It is a curious choice for social critique in the postfeminist age. Again, postfeminist culture continually creates scenarios in which the American public can consume the failures of women as distractions from the real, tangible inequities and dire policies the nation undertakes. As Anna Watkins Fisher argues in “We Love This Trainwreck! Sacrificing Britney to Save America,”²⁶ fascination with female failure is a culturally constructed tool that serves to both conceal and to propel androcentric regimes of power.

Thus *White Chicks* begs the question: why must the women be constructed as the villains or the idiots and the physical and visual butts of the joke when the United States

it is yet a culture structured by masculine privilege and male-dominated governments and corporations which, together, control wealth and the means to attain wealth and thus are the perpetrators and cause of the current class inequities that we experience as a culture? I'm certainly not making the essentialized case that women aren't capable of being perpetrators of those same practices; I'm merely arguing that the policies and procedures that have historically produced racial, ethnical, gendered and classed inequities have been legislated, legalized, corporatized, and/or deregulated into the neoliberal economy we have today have been mostly enacted and executed by white heterosexual males in the seats of power in the United States. Therefore it seems, just as the incarceration of Martha Stewart could be argued to be a scapegoat for both the "war" on terror and the financial crisis, rich "white chicks" are the scapegoats for the economy that favors masculine privilege.

CHAPTER 4: POSTFEMINISM AND WOMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE

In chapter one I described the age of postfeminism and its constructions of “proper” femininity in popular American media, and in chapter two, I discussed the foundations of othering in American identity mythology that resonate with postfeminist discourse. I argued that standard constructions of racialized/ethnicized gender/sex and the often attendant class markers to race/ethnicity are the foundational understructure of postfeminist, neoliberal and American subjectivity. In this chapter, I analyze two aspects of age in postfeminist culture: the mainstreaming of cougars and MILF in American popular media and the anomalous success of Martha Stewart in the postfeminist age as one who began her career in the commodification of a domestic when she was already into her forties and achieved her most financially successful enterprises as a single, older woman. The constructions of cougar/MILF and Stewart are radically different from one another and yet each intersects with postfeminist culture in both predictable and surprising ways—ways that often reinforce postfeminist norms but occasionally create potential space for resistance to the conservative postfeminist constructions of older women in mainstream media.

Marian Wright Edelman famously said, “You can’t be what you can’t see,” an applicable observation about American media for women spectators. Like their male counterparts, women are usually the most successful in the workplace in their later years. And to be sure, there are some actual older women in powerful positions in contemporary America, though there remains a consistent over-presence of males in the highest paying and most prestigious positions.¹

In addition to a lack of parity for women in the workplace, the stories of older women who *are* successful are largely missing from our popular media landscape, as are stories about older women generally. There remains a lack of visibility of older women in popular media outside the bounds of the grotesque aging woman, which I'll discuss momentarily. Quoting Dr. Martha Lauzen's annual study (in its 16th year) on women on screen in a series—this year in 2013 expanded to include cable networks and Netflix original programming:

The majority of female characters (62%) were in their 20s and 30s. The majority of male characters (58%) were in their 30s and 40s. The percentage of female characters dropped precipitously from their 30s to their 40s. 34% of female characters were in their 30s but only 16% of female characters were in their 40s.²

Lauzen's findings thus point to a dearth of media that tell the stories of women at all, and an even larger absence of media on women over the age of 40.

Rob Schaap also argues in his work on the gendering in contemporary "conglomerate Hollywood," the absence of older women on screen is vastly disproportionate to the numbers of women over the age of forty who consume popular media. He elaborates, though women, older women in particular, hold "significant box-office power...it is not their preferences that drive consumption of Hollywood programming and merchandising in the home...inequities in the division of domestic labor distort domestic consumption..."³ Schaap's assertions lead toward an understanding of female pleasure in the consumption of media as something like a "reading against the grain." Indeed he states that "females go to see films that address them as male and older audiences go to see films that address them as youngsters...the quadrant most disadvantaged by the cruel logic of demography is the mature female..."⁴

Notably, Schaap's analysis does not break down consumption of media across races, ethnicities, classes, or sexualities.

As Vicki Woods writes for *Vogue* in an interview with Meryl Streep in 2011:

In 1989, she turned 40. "I remember turning to my husband and saying, 'Well, what should we do? Because it's over.'" The following year, she received three offers to play witches in different movies. She saw the subtext pretty clearly: "Once women passed childbearing age they could only be seen as grotesque on some level."⁵

It is tempting to read constructions of older women in postfeminist culture as unproblematic grotesques, so that the visibility of aging in women is always already an abject state. While there is certainly some validity to this claim, Anne Morey complicates this reading by suggesting that performing the grotesque for the older actress can display an act of skill (or a skill in acting), a "marker of success," or a path to power over the youth market that composes much of postfeminist media.⁶ Morey introduces the term "elegiac grotesque" to refer to the nature of such roles for older women as recognition that their powers should be waning as they slip out of the space of patriarchal recognition, or the mediatized male heterosexual gaze.⁷ She further describes the female grotesque in film thusly: "...female performers move in public perception from a conception of female celebrity that focuses on their appearance to one that focuses on their abilities."⁸ Morey adds that the grotesque performance by the aging female star could be read as a "feminist impulse," one that "acknowledges difficulty and discomfort" in aging and one that foregrounds the constructed nature of the female celebrity.⁹

Imelda Staehelin takes a different approach to aging women in postfeminist media. As she states, in contemporary popular media, "...there are no positive meanings that reconcile post-menopausal women to the body."¹⁰ Staehelin notes that this paradigm

has been in place since early film culture in the beginning of the twentieth century. However, in the postfeminist age, it is the widespread emphatic nature of ageism in popular culture that is different, coupled with the dearth of texts that construct a female spectator over the age of forty. Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, for example, may have performed the latter parts of their careers as grotesques, but at least they were performing and stories of older women were being told alongside those of their more youthful counterparts. As Whelehan notes, "...real ageing is constantly under erasure in Hollywood, and it becomes increasingly difficult for older female actors to avoid being typecast as moms, sexless crones or cougars,"¹¹ and I would add: if they are cast at all. I'd like to focus on Whelehan's latter category of cougars in the next section as little scholarly work has been undertaken in analysis of cougars and MILF.

Cougars and MILF

There is a group of older women constructed in postfeminist media whose identity is based on the combination of their age and their abilities to look youthful, be actively (hetero) sexual and perform for the younger male gaze: cougars and MILF. Much of postfeminist ideology works in tandem with American patriarchal and androcentric hegemony which typically deems a woman past her years of child-bearing as nearly unrepresentable in popular culture. Though medical technology is changing both how people age and the extension of the age at which women can bear children, the postfeminist age ideal remains intact as women in their 20s and 30s are 71% of women on television, for example—the medium in which women are most represented—while this same demographic makes up only 39 % of women in the U.S.,¹² and derogatory

stereotypes of senior women abound in American mass media.¹³ So deprived are we from seeing normal aging women on small or big screens that representations of senior or aging women are facile choices to convey abject horror in films such as *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), which accentuates the mottled skin, deep wrinkles, untamed gray hair, one milky glass eye, browned, crooked teeth, and various bodily fluids of its villain/victim,¹⁴ Mrs. Ganush (Lorna Raver). Mrs. Ganush is also a nearly homeless Romanian immigrant—statuses that tether her abject otherness to issues of race/ethnicity/foreignness and class. The “horror” of Mrs. Ganush’s exaggeratedly aged body is intensified by her juxtaposition with the young, white cherubic, blonde heroine, Christine (Alison Lohman) who has flawless skin, rosy cheeks, silky hair, clear eyes, straight white teeth, and no apparent sputum issues, or no abject bodily fluids.¹⁵ Mrs. Ganush is an extreme example, of course, because horror is generically extreme.

But even outside the genre of explicit horror, older women in postfeminist culture are often portrayed as haggish, ugly, mean, or crass and their bodies are often the site/sight of what we might call “postfeminist horror,” or a body which visibly ages. Those women who do show signs of visible aging on screen are often relegated in their representations to caricature or abjection, and also invariably are textually marginalized.¹⁶ In this strident postfeminist moment of American femininity as the (expensive) correct performance of standardized and homogenized youthful beauty, the specters of aging are powerful Othering forces in mainstream media for women who wish to remain visible in the postfeminist and patriarchal norm of the male heterosexual gaze. Whatever power

women can achieve, socially or politically, will be run through this patriarchal, androcentric gamut, as I described in the first chapter.

As Diane Negra points out, there is a new visibility of women who maintain the youthful postfeminist standard well into middle age and a few beyond that, exemplified in various “*Desperate Housewives*” franchises, and in Hollywood romantic comedies where the ages of the romantic female leads have occasionally crept into the forties,¹⁷ such as recent romantic comedies starring Diane Lane, Jennifer Aniston, and Sandra Bullock. But before we rush to interpret this trend as uncomplicated feminist progress, Negra warns us that:

Such celebrations have to be approached with caution, not only for the way they obfuscate the class and consumer power that facilitates ‘age transcendence’ on selective economic terms but also for the way they so often recast the pleasures/interests of adolescent boys as culturally universal, the defining barometer of mainstream taste and judgment.¹⁸

The questionable exceptions to the postfeminist age standard are, of course, “cougars” or “MILF,” the often pejorative monikers given to older women in the postfeminist era who romance or who sexually appeal to younger, heterosexual men.¹⁹ To clarify, a “cougar” is the vernacular term for an older, heterosexual woman who romances heterosexual younger men. The ages of both may vary by context but the male is usually at least at the age of legal consent—though a teenage male attraction to an older woman may be produced as the space of masculine conquest.²⁰ MILF (“mother I’d like to fuck,”) is an acronym widely popularized in the last decade or so, gaining wider recognition and use during Sarah Palin’s campaign for Vice President of the United States to describe Palin’s sexual appeal to some men. The term “mothers” in this use denotes a woman who is typically older than the postfeminist norm for male heterosexual

appeal, and one who has already married, had children, and has thus committed to a nuclear family model at some point. Her status as a wife (sometimes a former wife) and mother is thus one that perhaps deepens both her “transgression” in becoming or remaining a sexual object for younger men and perhaps also deepens the pleasures of the (young) male gaze. A MILF is a liminal space of sexual conquest as she is both forbidden to a young man by her age, which is outside postfeminist and patriarchal norms, but more so by the proximity to the oedipal status of his own mother; thus there is a potential (and thrilling) slippage between a MILF encounter and the threat of incest. In some texts, American androcentric culture masks this slippage through the emphatic –if not frantic— construction of MILF as just another territory for male heterosexual conquest, reversing the dynamic between powerful mother and powerless male child and transmuting it to female sex object of any age lacking subjectivity and her male predator of any age.

Lastly there is a rough difference in agency between a cougar and a MILF and what is stressed about their category in popular media. Cougars are typically constructed as predators on young men and thus occasionally can take (and sometimes) maintain a dominant position in the dyad, whereas MILFs are almost always constructed as objects for the male heterosexual gaze or for the actual sexual conquests undertaken by younger men. (Thus MILFs retain the traces of the categorical origins in pornography for the young, male heterosexual gaze.) When a MILF turns predatory she becomes a cougar, and vice versa a cougar can be labeled a MILF until she demonstrates power, agency, and/or subjectivity— especially if she displaces a male as the subject of a text or as the aggressor in the relationship. American masculinist culture tends to be merely suspicious

of MILF, as women who maintain a youthful appearance into middle age, as their maturity lends them a greater threat to turn dominant—or into a cougar, which is usually a pejorative term altogether and a clear threat to patriarchal and androcentric culture. Further, there seems to be uneven support for cougars among American women, as cougars more often remain in the space of caricatured immorality and transgression, frequently undefended if not openly castigated by their female peers.

Paradoxically, what social power or status cougars may claim—along with some MILF—is undercut as they are frequently shamed as predators on young men by popular media, and their “power” can also be neutralized through their representations as characters without agency in popular cultural texts. Films such as *Cougar Club* (2007), *MILF* (2010), and *Cougar Hunting* (2011) demonstrate Negra’s claim that MILF/cougars can be deployed as the heterosexualized territories of “adolescent boys” as the narratives follow college-aged men seeking a MILF and young adult men in the workforce “hunting for cougars.” (The narratives of the texts are similar in that a handful of young men decide that they want to pursue a sexual relationship with an older woman for temporal sexual or economic gratification.) Though the objects of desire are women older than the typical conquests in male heterosexual comedies, the women are yet constructed through the lens of male sexual gratification and thus cougar/MILF sex is portrayed in the style of soft porn with an assumed heterosexual male spectator. In other words (in these narratives at least), the women gleefully want what the straight, young males want them to want, and the represented sex acts seem to be culled entirely from pornography produced for the male heterosexual gaze.

Again, even though the popular derogatory constructions of real cougars often deem them predatory on young men, these films reverse the agency as the young men in all three films “hunt” the older women. Though the cougars/MILF in these films sometimes exhibit voracious sexual appetites, there is no effort or move toward constructing the bodies of men through a heterosexual female gaze. In fact, there are few shots of male physiques at all except those shots for comedic effect, especially compared to the prodigious shots of bare breasts and a few full frontals of women.²¹ Additionally, there is no gendered or sexual dialogue that assumes a female audience (for younger or older women) and the films feature no scenes in which the younger men work to please the women sexually. Strangely, there are also no scenes in which the cougar relationship operates as a tutorial for a young man in how to sexually gratify a woman—which would seem to be a natural mode of exploration for this dyadic construction, and one that might appeal to all ages, genders, and even to some various sexualities.

Androcentrism also extends to the economic realm in these films, particularly in *Cougar Club*, in which the young men, during their internships to prepare them for law school, explore their entrepreneurial skills in creating “Cougar Club.” They become wildly successful as both businessmen and cougar-conquest Lotharios by the film’s conclusion and simultaneously cuckold and professionally thwart their buffoonish, unethical, and cruel law firm bosses in their exploitative internships. Thus, the cougars and MILF in these films are not constructed as spaces of women’s liberations, but as explicit spaces of sexual and economic opportunities exclusively for young men. Indeed the refrain from the closing nondiegetic song booms over the young men enjoying the

nationwide success of their “Cougar Club:” “liberate me!” and the viewer understands that it is the young men who are economically liberated from their fathers and male bosses to establish their own means of patriarchal exploitation of younger men and women of all ages. Cougars and MILF, thusly constructed in these films, are without subjectivity altogether, as they are the mere means through which men communicate and compete with one another for social and economic dominance. The representations of cougars exist, as do representations of many younger women in popular culture, solely for the heterosexual male’s sexual pleasure and for his capitalistic use. I stress that cougar/MILF culture thus constructed leaves little if any space for women’s empowerment no matter the age of the woman.

However, part of the understood allure of the cougar in particular, but also the MILF in some cases, is that she is of independent means, often extravagantly wealthy, and can treat the young men to lavish lifestyles that they themselves cannot afford. As Rob Schaap points out: “If Hollywood does not yet address mature women in all their complexity and diversity, it does occasionally speak to their purchasing power.”²² While the cougar romance could be structured through the economy of prostitution, i.e., payment for services rendered, rendering the women in the position of power, in these films the men are the profiteers who “hunt” the women sometimes pointedly for financial gain. And even those young “cougar hunters” who don’t form a business are seeking to benefit from the largesse of older women as their “prey.” Wealth seems to be a precondition to be a cougar; there is a clear economic/class aspect to these constructions of cougars/MILF that is a prerequisite for cougar/MILF status, and one that is often

narrowly conceived in popular media to benefit the young men who are often poor, broke, jobless, or just starting out in their careers. One could view cougars as women wealthy enough to subvert the traditional expectations of wife and even perhaps motherhood, thus rendering husbands obsolete, but those who do not want to forsake the pleasure in sexual encounters or relationships with men of various ages (and/or other identity markers for that matter). Either way, cougars and MILF are by definition those women who can afford to fully participate in the neoliberal and postfeminist American cult of individual improvement toward a standardized, purchasable end of youthfulness, thinness, (and less purchasable—though no less commodified) whiteness, in strict adherence to the assumed universality of a male heterosexual gaze.

Some postfeminist texts encourage women of a certain age to police each other to these ends as well, either through “cattiness” (reality shows like *Desperate Housewives*), or through a veil of compassion and cooperation such as *What Not to Wear* which regularly shames women for not “playing up” their “assets,” and the hosts are referencing sections of a woman’s body, and not her talents, education, skills, or abilities. Again, a cougar or a MILF constructed thusly in postfeminist terms leaves little room for progressive feminist intervention. The postfeminist practice of fixating on women of any age as heterosexual objects (which many women internalize as the “correct” way to perform femininity) for the male heterosexual gaze is also a way to neutralize women’s social and political power, so that a cougar is always already in a contradictory space of dominance/submission. Postfeminist texts work with patriarchal and androcentric power structures to close ranks on women through the policing of “correctly” performed

femininity for the male heterosexual gaze. Furthermore, as Diane Negra articulated, in the postfeminist age the male heterosexual gaze is yet the standard for admission into the public arena, and how well postfemininity is performed is the first hurdle particularly for women hoping for a career in the public eye, as I described in chapter one.

Interestingly, *MILF* and *Cougar Hunting* each recuperate the transgressive sexual relationships between older women and younger men back into postfeminist line by concluding the story arc with romantic love in the consummated heterosexual dyad between two young people (in their twenties) as “proper” mates. It is a striking maneuver in the midst of such androcentric soft porn and crass, sophomoric humor (humor that is generally deployed to police gender and sexuality of heterosexuals), that both *MILF* and *Cougar Hunting* construct standard postfeminist love stories in which all problems seem to be solved when standardly attractive, white, heterosexual couples fall in love and enter monogamous, emotion-based relationships. The juxtaposition of the two serves to emphasize the “correctness” of the younger romantic dyad and to therefore heighten the transgressive pleasure in the cougar romances. Indeed, unlike the soft porn styled shots of the (prodigious) cougar and MILF sex scenes, the young couples are never framed in shots culled from hetero pornography; indeed, the young lovebirds are never even naked together. *Cougar Hunting* even features a sentimental montage of romantic film clichés as the couple runs through a field of flowers, pillow fights amid flying feathers, etc. Therefore, emphatically postfeminized older women who act on their sexual appetites are reductively constructed as pornographic deviants who can merely satisfy the temporarily bodily urges of horny and opportunistic young men. Furthermore, such constructions of

cougars/MILF as deviants (and men of any age as the “natural” sexual predators) are deployed to undermine the very subjectivities that the film titles promise to explore in a liberating fashion: romances without age limits, the thrill of sex for a younger man with a sexually knowledgeable woman, and sex lives outside and beyond a postfeminist dyad (a dyad that is often implicitly understood as mere preparation for the proper postfeminist creation of a nuclear family).²³

Cougar/MILF culture as constructed in popular media adheres to both postfeminist textual norms and thus to the order of patriarchy in popular culture: older women are reduced to non-subjects through sexualization if possible. If this is not possible, they are made invisible or portrayed as abject past their fertile years. In comparison, the long-standing Hollywood practice of coupling older men with younger women has not been interrogated by popular culture on comedic or dramatic terms, nor has the practice waned or achieved parity in the new millennium.

Note that the common moniker for the older man and younger woman dyad, the “May December romance,” is decidedly *not* pejorative as this title evokes a poetic, dreamy status that effectively cloaks masculine privilege and patriarchal hegemony as a hopeful fairy tale for (very) young women. (*Lolita*, for example, is often yet read as a tragic love story.) I want to make it clear that my argument is not that I nor anyone else should take issue with actual couples who have an age gap, nor even with their representation unilaterally. It is the comparative *lack* of cougar romances represented in popular media compared to those of May/Decembers and the distinct ways that they differ from one another, ways that tend to reinforce structural gender inequalities that

piques my interest. In fact, while I'm able to cover most (if not all) of the recent, popular films that center on cougars/MILF,²⁴ there are too many mainstream films to merely list here with a May December romance that is largely unproblematic. Some recent examples include *Lost in Translation* (2003) with Scarlett Johansson and Bill Murray, *An Education* (2009) with Carrie Mulligan and Peter Sarsgaard, *The Other Woman* (2011) with Natalie Portman and Scott Cohen, and *The Great Gatsby* (2012) with Carrie Mulligan and Leonardo DiCaprio.

Furthermore, as celebrities work with the paparazzi to construct their personal narratives, in 2013, Leonardo DiCaprio (age 39) and George Clooney (age 52) are able to migrate from young, (hetero)sexualized woman to young, (hetero)sexualized woman with little (if any) negative effect on their professional lives, their public esteem, or their economic potential. Indeed these potentials, in fact, may be increased by their dalliances with much younger women. There is no American cultural feminine equivalent to these revered "playboys" or "players," and their oft-played scenario in popular media reinforces postfeminist norms of masculine authority in economic realms which atomizes to the male dominance in social, dating, and emotional realms. In such postfeminist May December "fairly tales" men hold all the cards while women wait anxiously to be "chosen," a fleetingly temporal status frantically (and thus suspiciously) celebrated in American postfeminist texts, most emphatically in those of American postfeminist bridal culture. A paradox exists for women of all ages in neoliberal postfeminist and patriarchal culture: one must strive to be an individual to be recognized and chosen as the premiere object of the male heterosexual gaze— but if one is chosen there is a bargained destiny of

retreat into submission and invisibility into the category of wife, mother, or the abject category of former sexual exploit.

These fairy tale May-December texts that cast the older man as the deserving patriarch and the young woman as the fortunate chosen one are vastly different from the discursive constructions of “cougar” and “MILF” in the postfeminist age, which carry the pejorative connotations of transgression and desperation for the cougars/MILF who romance young men in precisely the same way as a May/December dyad, sexually and economically. Furthermore if a young woman claims any agency in seeking a May/December relationship, particularly with a wealthy older man (the equivalent of a cougar), the young woman risks the pejorative label: “gold-digger” which holds within it a slippage to “slut” or “whore,” or a young woman who will have sex with and/or marry an older man to live a more economically stable life, if not the lush life. “Gold-digger,” “slut,” “whore,” etc., are terms which have no masculine counterparts in American popular culture. Cougar hunters may wander freely without the fear of being shamed for their exploits; on the contrary, their pursuits are celebrated as laudable masculine conquests, especially if the relationship is sexually-based, economically beneficial to the men, and preferably short-lived. In other words, poor or middle class young women in particular are denigrated in American culture for using their (hetero) sexual allure to attract men who can financially provide for them. This disparagement is often unproblematically deployed, reproduced, and reinforced in postfeminist American mass media even though patriarchal culture mandates a strict adherence to codes of feminine performance that require submission to masculinity and patriarchy, a submission which

helps to place or maintain women in a social structure where they must be creative in order to survive—much less thrive—economically.

Further, one of the most powerful collusions of patriarchy and postfeminism is the requirement that the only legitimate means to marriage for women is through the constructed narrative of “genuine” romance and love in a proper heterosexual dyad. In the postfeminist age, a young woman’s calculation for a marital arrangement in material or economic terms that might preserve her own well-being and possibly the well-being of her children (if not delivering them into prosperity) is tantamount to character suicide in American culture. Such a woman is frequently portrayed as unintelligent (Anna Nicole Smith) and/or as morally lax (hip-hop video vixens). Neither the acuity nor the character of males courting such women is questioned in the media narrative; nor are the ethics of cougar hunters a common subject of popular discourse. The derogatory and reductive term of singular motivation “gold-digger” applies to any young woman who is assumed to be dating an older man “for his money,” no matter how much or how little money the man possesses, whereas a “cougar hunter” is understood to pursue women of means while retaining his agency, his social dominance, his integrity, his public access to respect, and thus his masculine and patriarchal privileges no matter how much money, time, and social status an older woman provides for him.

Unlike the sophomoric comedies such as *Cougar Hunting*, two recent films attempt to construct a cougar relationship generically as postfeminist romantic comedy: *Prime* (2005) and *The Rebound* (2009). In these films, the female protagonists “fall in love,”²⁵ with a younger man instead of one seeking out the other for brief sexual

encounters or temporary romances (or brief financial gain). Perhaps inspired by or modeled after the earlier film, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), these two millennial films are narratively similar texts which feature well-known female stars, Uma Thurman and Catherine Zeta-Jones, respectively. In *Prime*, Thurman is 37 year-old newly divorced, Rafi Gardet, a wealthy and successful fashion advertising executive in New York City who hesitantly begins to date 23 year-old soon-unemployed artist, David Bloomberg (Bryan Greenberg). The film follows a familiar romantic comedy story arc of a “meet-cute” and scenes of “falling in love” while the second act is devoted to presenting the obstacles to their romantic happiness, including their age and religious difference (as Rafi is not Jewish).

However, the film ends with Rafi’s decision to break up with David partially because she finds him immature at times, but mostly because she wants a child and believes him to be too young to take on such responsibility. In the epilogue, we discover that David has become a successful artist (able to support himself) with a plan to travel the world, and Rafi continues in her glamorous life without him, presumably unpartnered. Thus the relationship with an older woman serves as a catalyst for the young man to move forward in his life toward mature adulthood and to become professionally and economically successful. What David served for Rafi the film leaves open-ended: David did not represent a “rebound” for her as the story coded their relationship as “true love.” Rafi gushes several times during the film about having “never felt this way before.” Thus we can conclude that the film’s attitude toward long term cougar relationships is pessimistic, that they are short- term ventures in which the young men

fare better than the older women, and they are complicated by the (essentialized feminine) desires for children, a desire which represents a requisite stage of adult development in postfeminist culture specifically for women.

The Rebound follows a similar story arc but this time, contrary to its title, the couple ends up together in a generic romantic comedy happy ending. Catherine Zeta-Jones is 40 year-old Sandy, divorcing her husband, Frank (Sam Robards), and at the start of the film she leaves her life in the suburbs and moves into an apartment over coffee shop in New York City with her two small children. There she meets young barista, Aram Finkelstein, 25, who turns out to be so “naturally” adept at babysitting Sandy’s children that she asks him to become her full-time nanny. Sandy is meanwhile busy developing her sports broadcasting career for the first time because Frank would not allow her to work, a move that evokes Friedan-like Second Wave sentiments for white, middle class women. After an unsuccessful dating life, and an increasing intimacy and familiarity with Aram in her home, Sandy and Aram develop a romantic relationship. If *Prime* is unclear what a “hunky,” masculine young man like David (who can attract New York fashion models) could offer to Rafi, *The Rebound* has an answer in effeminate, nurturing Aram. Like Bryan, Aram also lives with his older relatives and is a lost young man searching for a career, but he finds his talents early in the narrative in caring for Sandy’s children. Aram’s character, unlike the fairly uncomplicated and overdetermined masculinity of Bryan in *Prime* is coded as different from the average androcentric, patriarchal male because Aram is overtly, if not crassly feminized. He is introduced in the film as interviewing to volunteer for his local “women’s center,” (against a Georgia

O’Keefe flower/vagina background) and we learn that he has taken several “women’s studies” courses in college. His volunteer work for the women’s center consists of wearing a ridiculously over-padded suit so women can practice punching and kicking him in self-defense classes, thus serving as the literal “punching bag” for women angry about their treatment by men. More pointedly, as a nanny, and like all housewives, Aram affords Sandy the time and space to develop herself outside the roles of parent and spouse, and together, they form a successful supportive nuclear family unit economically and emotionally. Aram again supports in Sandy assuring that she can move forward as their primary breadwinner. Unlike Rafi and David in *Prime*, it is Aram in *The Rebound* who assists Sandy in moving forward in her personal and professional life.

Though Sandy already has small children, which relieves the tension constructed for Rafi and David, Sandy discovers that she’s pregnant with Aram’s child and they are both cautiously happy until they are told it’s an ectopic pregnancy and Sandy, in a moment of intense emotion, breaks up with Aram. At this climax of the film, she sends Aram on his way as she’s confused and disappointed by the news (“It’s not your age,” the doctor informs them in an unsolicited answer), and she’s worried that Aram is simply too young for her. Aram, like David in *Prime*, then goes off to “see the world,” and, in a scenic montage vague on his actual pursuits, he seems to end up working with NGOs in the developing world. Five years later, he returns at age 30, single, with an adopted Indian son and a focus for his professional life. In the final scene, Aram accidentally runs into Sandy and her children, and the two rekindle their romance. In this film, unlike the

groping-for-answers *Prime*, *The Rebound* presents what seems on the surface to be a slightly more nuanced understanding of socially constructed gender roles.

However, I hesitate to describe Sandy and Aram's union as definitely and broadly optimistic about cougar romances or about women's feminist, career or self-actualization potential in relationships of unorthodox ages. Instead of a representation of romance against the odds, *The Rebound* (perhaps cynically) reverses the gendered dyad so that Sandy loves sports (coded as masculine in popular culture) and is able to parlay that interest into a lucrative and enviable career. With Aram as her nanny/wife and "mother" to her children, she fills the traditional masculine role of breadwinner and thus Aram's character is punished by the film in its crude feminization of his character. *The Rebound* suggests that cougar commitment requires an emasculating role reversal for Aram and thus codes his capitulation as the price of women working at the same level as men in the corporate sector, especially in exclusivist masculinist fields such as sports. What women endure in attempts to break into androcentric fields of employment is portrayed as supremely easy. All Sandy must do is exhibit the print-out of the charting system for a fantasy league she developed as a stay-at-home-mom to an ESPN-like executive and she's on her way to a prestigious job and national fame as a broadcaster. There is neither mention nor depiction of the regular, recurring and well-known workplace harassment that plagues women working in corporate America, particularly those trying to enter traditionally masculinist fields. Instead, *The Rebound* is far more concerned with Aram's atrophying masculinity as he occupies the traditionally feminine role of an empathetic, non-earning babysitter and housekeeper. As such, *The Rebound* does not challenge a

value system informed by binarized codes of masculinity and femininity though the narrative initially offered some potential for social re-imagining. Instead, through the cloak of generic romantic comedy, the film ignores the plight of professional women and laments the downfall of masculinity (and men) in such nontraditional arrangements.

As is common in Hollywood texts about white people in the postfeminist age, both *Prime* and *The Rebound* deploy race/ethnicity, and particularly the spectacle of blackness to communicate and undergird a space for their temporary generic transgression. There are few black characters with speaking lines in either film, as both feature a flat, secondary character who is a Magical Negro: Rafi's black doorman, Damien (Ato Essandoh), helps along her romance at a crucial point but has little character development otherwise, and Sandy's co-worker, Laura (Lynn Whitfield), is a mere catalyst toward Sandy's self-discovery as a corporate success. *Prime* opens with a roaming camera through the streets of an urban neighborhood coded as black to a jazzy hip-hop instrumental, genres of music also culturally coded as black. It's an odd opening as the rest of the film takes place in the conspicuously whitened decors of sunny, wealthy, and lush spaces of Manhattan, thus preparing us nondiegetically for a "transgressive" theme in the film. In a flashback, we see one of David's former girlfriends is black, but the scene is used to foreground the racism of his grandmother who would not accept her, and the girlfriend has neither a name nor a developed character. Furthermore, David paints portraits and his "subjects" are mostly African Americans with exaggerated ethnic features against backgrounds coded as black urban such as walls of graffiti and urban basketball courts. David's subject matter becomes

particularly noticeable when a wealthy, suited, white male art dealer comes to view his work and admires it, and thus David has now placed both older women and nameless people of color at his service to establish himself—the white young man—as the individual success.

In *The Rebound*, aside from Laura the Magical Negro, the film ignores race/ethnicity altogether (which is itself a notable feature for a film that takes New York City as its setting) until the epilogue. After the break-up with Sandy, young, white, wealthy Aram (with his startlingly blue eyes) is further reinforced as selfless and giving (and therefore the proper emasculated mate for a protagonist like Sandy who assumes the masculine role) as he is filmed through the lens of the white tourist gaze as a white individual centered amid groups of unidentified black children in what is coded as the Global South—though the countries he visits are not named. It is apparently unimportant to the film what he is actually doing with/for these groups of children because the viewer is never informed. In *The Rebound*, the point of filming Aram among nameless people of color (who he seems to be assisting in some vague way) is to reinforce the singularity of Aram's good (white) character. Aram also adopts a son while he is out saving the world of people of color, an Indian child, which is a curious choice. Is *The Rebound* declaring that all “people of color” are interchangeable in narratives about the goodness of white people, or is it suggesting that there is a distinctly informed racial difference between brown people and black people that construct brown children as more suitable for adoption by white people than are black children? Furthermore, in the logic of the film (which demonstrates zero interest in or regard for race or nationalities beyond American

until the epilogue), why must Aram adopt a child of color at all except to further undergird Aram as a savior of brown people and thus further imbue his character with the qualities of a generous, open-minded white person who might consider a committed relationship with a woman who is fifteen years older than is he? Thus *The Rebound* resembles *Prime* in that people of color are deployed as mere backgrounds to aid white male character development.

American viewers trained in the categories of American popular media spectatorship, might be confused by *Prime* and *The Rebound*. Who is the intended audience for such films? Certainly the understood generic appeal of a romantic comedy is culturally constructed as a “chick flick,” whether or not actual male viewers enjoy such a film. The terms “cougar” and “MILF” are not used at all in *Prime*, and only once in *The Rebound*,²⁶ so there is little in the way of a typical pejorative cougar construction to impede the romantic fantasies. Notably, there is an extended scene of sophomoric body humor in *The Rebound*, something usually employed in male-centered comedies, thus this scene is difficult to chart in what otherwise seems to be a romantic comedy or “chick flick” as these moments seem to be a generic nod to the college humor films *Cougar Club*, *MILF*, and *Cougar Hunting*. Certainly, Uma Thurman and Catherine Zeta-Jones are both “sex symbols,” (able to remain solidly postfeminists and thus within the male heterosexual gaze) as well as female celebrities in their forties who are frequently constructed by the media as postfeminist icons as much of their press is praising them for their lasting beauty past their “prime”. In both *Prime* and *The Rebound* these female superstars portray women in their late thirties or early forties in romantic relationships

with men in their early twenties and, interestingly, the male actors, Bryan Greenberg and Justin Bartha, are fairly unknown. The structured romances between female sexual icons and unknowns is an intertextual maneuver that undergirds and foregrounds a gendered and sexual power switch that (re)produces the uneasiness and potential for the failure of a cougar relationship, which *The Rebound* sheepishly attempts to alleviate through the reversal of static traditional gender roles. Both young men are Jewish, a node of identity both films treats emphatically. Psychotherapy also figures prominently in *Prime*, (thus tying the films themes more closely to oedipal urges) and psychotherapy is also linked to being Jewish, as Rafi's therapist is also David's mother, who is very concerned about both Rafi's age and particularly her gentile status. In *The Rebound*, psychotherapy is not mentioned, but Aram's parents are caricatures of wealthy, Jewish New Yorkers who are overly involved with their son, nagging him to make money. Thus, *Prime* and *The Rebound* are primarily informed by postfeminist romance narratives with homage to Freudian psychoanalysis and thus with a more explicit oedipal twist, and both with an indeterminate intended audience.

I would like to stress here that there is certainly progressive feminist potential in cougar or MILF scenarios for actual, individual, older women who frequent "cougar" bars and/or for women who engage in romantic relationships with younger men. However, a melancholic postfeminist question lingers over every mediatized photo of cougar couples: when will he trade her in for someone younger? In other words, when will she turn the inevitable corner from hot cougar to abject old woman? Or, when will the cougar love story turn into a postfeminist horror story? It's not as if cougar romances

as portrayed in the media are constructed between average looking older women and younger men (though the men in such a dyad may have a range of looks). Rarely since the cult classic *Harold and Maude* (1971), have we seen a woman who is visibly aged romancing a much younger man. Cougars are purely postfeminist creations as they are older women striving to maintain themselves as youthful-looking to remain within the parameters of the male heterosexual gaze. It is hard to imagine a popular text with a dyad featuring a typical American forty-something woman: size 16, with graying hair, and wrinkles. Furthermore, American mass media generally others even wealthy, older, cougars who can afford to maintain a youthful look by trivializing their romantic lives, and mainstream media typically shames them for their choices which are often coded as desperate, if not mildly pedophilic at times.

We can see this phenomenon in effect in the paparazzi narrative “reporting”²⁷ on stars’ lives such as the publicity about the romance, marriage, and divorce of celebrities, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher, in which Moore has almost always been portrayed by the mass media as both the initial aggressor and as the emotionally unstable partner who drove the marriage into divorce. Postfeminist ideology is often at its most emphatic in celebrity “reporting” which narrativizes the lives of strangers for public consumption and thus enters our popular discourse alongside other discursive texts such as films, television shows, articles, and online videos. Concurrent and perhaps tethered to Moore’s media portrayal is her strict adherence to the postfeminist prescription for appearing youthful which is coded as laudable (if portrayed as continually surprising), and is always already tinged with a panic of ephemerality because we know Moore’s age since she’s been in

the media spotlight for so many years as an icon of feminine (hetero)sexuality. Furthermore, Moore's efforts in her middle age to perform this (post)femininity correctly are narrativized by the media as following a typically reductive postfeminist storyline: the work to look youthful is in service of Moore's "desperate" attempts to "keep her man," a constructed scenario that neatly avoids the thornier questions that most celebrity publications strenuously avoid—such as the Hollywood mandate that women *must* look youthful to maintain active careers in front of the camera and the outrageously expensively manufactured beauty standard that these media (re)produce as standard and unproblematized for all women with incredibly force and velocity. When Kutcher left Moore, however, the media was far more narratively invested in its portrayal of Moore as the unhinged cougar than in Kutcher's viral hot tub partying photographs with groups of half-clad, younger women in a San Diego hotel. Kutcher's documented public actions, potentially threatening to any marriage, were generally left unquestioned by mass media as a possible source of the couple's problems because it was already overdetermined in the postfeminist media narrative that Moore, as the desperate aging cougar, had "failed to keep her man."

In 2009 ABC network premiered the show *Cougar Town* (later picked up by TBS), starring Courteney Cox as Jules Cobb, a forty-something, recently divorced woman who works in real estate in a mid-sized Florida town. The show is female-focused and within the first season it rapidly centers less upon the sexual conquests of Jules and more on her friendships with Ellie (Christa Miller), her more or less happily married next-door-neighbor who is an unsatisfied stay-at-home mom, and with Laurie (Busy

Phillips) a much younger, single woman who works for Jules in the real estate company and who is unapologetic about her active sexual life. In the first season, it's evident that the show initially intended to explore the trials and tribulations of a newly hatched cougar. Indeed, at the inception of the series Jules rapidly embarks on such a cougar relationship with Josh (Nick Zano) at the urging of her friends and seems to enjoy the sexually-focused romance for a couple of episodes. However, Josh falls in love with Jules and wants a fuller, more lasting relationship with her so she breaks up with him because cougars, as she understands the term and is attempting to perform it, don't have serious relationships with younger men.

This break-up is shortly followed by the developing romance between Jules and her recently divorced neighbor, Grayson (Josh Hopkins) who is her age. Interestingly there is an attempted narrative thread early in the series (before and during Jules' cougar romance) in which Jules regularly attempts to shame Grayson for the youth of his sexual exploits, women he frequently places in a taxi in the early mornings when Jules gets her paper. Jules teases Grayson for the youth of his overnight dates, and the series portrays Grayson as becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his bachelor life as he finds he has little to talk about with recent high school graduates in *Cougar Town's* derogatory construction of "dumb blondes." Thus Jules' exploits are (at least initially) celebrated and encouraged, while the practice of older men preying on younger women is mocked by the series, albeit at the expense of constructing younger, standardly attractive women as unintelligent.

The eventual coupling of Jules and Josh is overshadowed and eventually overrun by the highly caricatured cougar, Barb (notably played by Carolyn Hennesy, also the ultimate cougar in *Cougar Club*) who is never portrayed in any other circumstance than on the prowl for younger men (usually in a bar) or as undergoing painful procedures to maintain the appearance of youthfulness. Barb is the flattest of characters, one who merely waltzes through Jules' life with mildly degrading or obscene one-liners about having sex with younger men, thus serving as mostly a cautionary tale for potential cougars. Although Hennesy is only two years older than is Cox, she's styled as a solidly middle aged woman replete with overtones of a classic film of the female grotesque, *Sunset Boulevard*, in one episode in which she hires Jules' son to run errands for her while she heals from cosmetic surgery. Thus the show sets up the fates of the two cougars in play as overdetermined; the youthfully pretty and kind Jules will not become the grotesque, oversexed Barb and Jules will also "save" Grayson from his post-divorce binge on one-night stands with younger women. Jules and Grayson eventually get married in the series, and the show now features running jokes to the effect that the title of the show no longer reflects the content.

Interestingly, some women, those who followed *Sex and the City* in particular, are disappointed by *Cougar Town*'s portrayal and devaluation of cougars, as the title of the series was hopeful for those who admired the character Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) on *Sex and the City*. As Emily Nussbaum writes for *New York* magazine about Samantha:

(She) became a genuinely revolutionary figure, with her Mae West va-voom and gimlet-eyed resistance to women's-magazine cant... (She) embodied all the classic cougarish characteristics: She was vain, horny, lacquered, mouthy. She was in it

for her own orgasm—not a ring. She ogled men and ended up with a hot boy. In a wave of nineties chick lit, she was the anti-*Rules* girl, all about adventure.²⁸

But Nussbaum reads *Cougar Town* as disparaging of cougars, unlike *Sex and the City*'s celebration of Samantha, and laments that *Cougar Town* frantically reproduces the postfeminist anxiety and horror for older women who want to remain within the standards of a male heterosexual gaze, instead of embracing a *Sex and the City* love of self and sexual pleasure. She reads Jules' consistent self-policing for signs of aging as "shrieking so relentlessly about her body's disintegration you'd think the woman's face was falling off in chunks à la *Poltergeist*."²⁹ Clearly Nussbaum sees aging in popular culture as a site of postfeminist horror as well.

However, while Nussbaum makes a cogent argument that *Sex and the City* is a text more interested in exploring women's sexual lifestyles outside and beyond dyadic patriarchal romance narratives than is *Cougar Town* (at least throughout much of the series), the two shows do not exhibit the polarity that Nussbaum claims. Aging is a motivating factor for the women in *Sex and the City*, a fear that is articulated in the initial episodes and carried forward. For example, though Samantha changes her mind later in the series, she gives up younger men in the first season when one of her younger beaux tells her in bed that he likes her neck wrinkles, a statement which horrifies her. Perhaps a key difference is, in *Sex and the City*, the thirty-something women also openly discuss at times the lack of appeal of younger men in their relative poverty, living with roommates, untidy and unmannered. However, to be sure, the characters in *Sex and the City*, throughout the run of the series, are highly aware of and vocal about their performances

as heterosexual women, and the postfeminist time limit on their appeal to the heterosexual male gaze.

Similar conversations abound in *Cougar Town*, a show which begins in another age bracketed decade: women in their forties. Such scenes about the construction of feminine beauty past a certain age Nussbaum describes as “downright eerie” since Courteney Cox and Christa Miller are also forty-something actresses attempting to work in front of the camera as viable love interests and sexual partners for men.³⁰ But there is another reading of *Cougar Town*’s postfeminist-ly anxious women, and one that Nussbaum affords *Sex and the City*: there is feminist potential (if not queer potential) in popular culture when a text-makers decide to reveal the manufacture and performance of gender/sex. In other words, what Nussbaum reads as “eerie,” some viewers may find refreshing in that the impossible standards of Hollywood beauty, especially for women, are made to seem as painful, expensive, time-consuming, and degrading as they actually are for the celebrities who star in these series. For example, waxing and Botox injections are openly discussed, experienced, and represented on camera by Cox and Miller as Jules and Ellie. Furthermore, I think Nussbaum is wrong to summarily dismiss the feminist potential of any popular media whose main female character runs her own successful business which provides a generous life for her and her son, and she’s too hasty to dismiss a series whose focus is the friendships between women. *Cougar Town*, like *Sex and the City* (and *Girls* for that matter) is a rarity in the realm of contemporary American popular media both in its assumed female spectatorship and its refusal to shame women for their performance of femininity and their desire for active sexual lives.

Nussbaum, however, does argue convincingly that *Cougar Town* offers little more than a prudish nod toward *Sex and the City*'s much more liberating attitude toward heterosexual women and sex. Nussbaum observes a curious feature of millennial popular culture: through its popularity with women viewers, *Sex and the City* seemed poised to effect social change in the realm of gender and sex. Per the example of *Sex and the City*, women might be taking charge of their sexual lives and they might not have to succumb to patriarchal and androcentric shaming of female sexual desires. So why did millennial media backslide into even greater postfeminist anxiety (if not postfeminist horror) as evidenced by *Cougar Town*? Her answer is similar to Susan Faludi's response to rapid shutdown of the brief proliferation of feminist events in the early nineties: the surefire method to undo rising feminist potential is "to put a thong on it,"³¹ or to recast and reduce women broadly as visible sexual objects or invisible altogether, where they can be safely monitored and maintained, and with the proven guarantee that they will, in many cases, police themselves right out of the lineage of social and political power.

Martha Stewart

Like Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart does not initially seem to fit the postfeminist paradigm in the creation of her empire across media without androcentrism in their public personae of professional dominance, amassing wealth and fame seemingly single-handedly—especially in that no male figure of authority is responsible (at least in popular discourse) for their successes as their fathers, husbands, agents, handlers, etc. Each is produced in the popular media, at least, as self-made women. The two also share their decades-long unmarried statuses; only Stewart has children (one daughter, Alexis), and

both are subjects of occasional rumors and jokes about their potential queerness. They are both exceptional in their shared nonconformity to the postfeminist standard of thinness and mainstream heterosexual appeal generally required to appear in front of a camera (though Stewart did begin her media career as a model). And Winfrey has the marked racial/ethnic backgrounds of blackness and poverty.

However, though Stewart doesn't publicize her background in the way that Winfrey does, Stewart's family was also fairly poor: she was raised in a solidly middle/working class Polish Catholic family in Nutley, New Jersey as one of six children. Winfrey's background as described in the popular media is dramatically different: suffering a neglectful mother, sexual abuse, many distant moves throughout childhood, and frequent castigation by her childhood peers for her abject poverty. In their adult successes, however, both of these female celebrities maintain mixed fan populations in various ages, race/ethnicities, classes, to some degree genders and sexualities and to a different degree international recognition and success. Both stars are now famously and extraordinarily wealthy, a status that usually garners attention in celebrities as money in the American imagination defines a kind of life success that either displaces or trumps all other modes such as personal fulfillment, skill or artistic development, emotional awareness, or satisfying relationships. And finally, in a strange twist in the contemporary American experience, only the white woman went to jail.

Like Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart built her fame and fortune from relatively modest origins. As Emily Jane Cohen writes:

While other little girls bought fancy dresses, Martha learned to make her own; while her high school friends planned for the prom, Martha earned money for

college; while most mothers stayed home with baby, Martha hustled on Wall Street; while sisters hit the glass ceiling, she cut huge deals with Time Warner and became her own CEO (Oppenheimer).³²

Martha Stewart has crafted (pun intended) an expansive empire of multiple television shows, a magazine, a syndicated radio show and newspaper columns, product lines with major retailers, books, videos, websites, and even a line of houses she designed. Her company, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc., went public in 1999 making a Stewart a billionaire “on paper” instantaneously. In what might be the emblematic moment for postfeminism, Stewart famously celebrated this public offering by personally serving her (mostly white male) traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange fresh-squeezed orange juice and brioche on a silver tray.³³ In 2004, after weeks of government surveillance, Stewart was convicted of charges surrounding insider trading because the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission could produce no proof of insider trading. After serving her five month sentence in a West Virginia federal prison, Stewart began rebuilding her media empire, and by 2005, had resumed her position as America’s foremost expert on entertaining, cooking, decorating, and even building a new business as she published the book, *The Martha Rules* in 2005 on how to become a successful entrepreneur. It is an interesting title in light of postfeminism for which “the rules” is usually a reference on strategies to “trap” a husband. The title also lends a royal and triumphant connotation to Martha Stewart’s comeback after prison and to her persona of diligence and perfectionism.

Like Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart is a site of postfeminist contradictions through the lens of feminism and women’s empowerment. However, unlike Oprah Winfrey (for the most part), Martha Stewart is a polarizing figure in discourse on

American women's and feminist cultures.³⁴ As Cohen writes, "she has come to be the scourge of feminists and their detractors alike."³⁵ Here Cohen refers to her unlikely sets of fans and foes, those who sometimes admire and despise her for the same qualities. Some feminists could be persuaded, for instance, to overlook (and maybe even to enjoy) the fact that Stewart has become self-made billionaire commodifying the work of the housewife; in other words, Stewart turned what has always been "unpaid" labor into labor that pays very, very well (at least for her personally). (In this way, she also resembles Winfrey, commodifying what had been assumed in America to be free labor from women). On the other hand, Stewart may be glorifying a traditionally conservative role for women that some may find demeaning and anti-feminist; for example, those women who don't want to (or even see the point in) spending their time "crafting," and particularly those who find it demeaning to be judged by the detail or quality of their "holiday decorations." Cohen further asserts that there is a facile association between women's powers and witchery and that it's tempting for those whom she threatens to read her as a New England Gothic figure, or simply, a witch.³⁶ And even those who have no interest in the discursive movements of women and feminisms are often flummoxed by Stewart's (seeming) contradictions: the widely publicized bald ambition and often "chilly" television persona and the American mythological feminine associations of "warmth" with tasks coded as wifely and motherly such as gardening, cooking, and party-throwing. Stewart's relatively poor New Jersey Catholic upbringing also doesn't square with her tall, blonde New England WASP-y persona crafted through multiple

media. Stewart is ambiguous and liminal, consistently provoking the question: who *is* this woman?

Through a lens of postfeminist critique, Stewart is equally challenging. Her “domestic life” thus commodified, is not one tethered to the postfeminist mandate of self-sacrificial mothering, but one tied to the postfeminist neoliberal mandate of personal success and individual achievement. Stewart doesn’t (hetero)sexualize her appearance like some of her successors, Nigella Lawson, Giada De Laurentiis, Rachael Ray, et al; nor does she present herself as maternally rotund and nonthreatening such as Ina Garten, and thus Stewart locks herself out of the postfeminist spaces that (arguably) allow women to succeed without patriarchal recrimination. (And one wonders if this isn’t at least part of the reason she was targeted for a relatively minor crime³⁷ while people like Bernie Madoff were left alone until the recession of the early 2000s, and who knows how many others who weren’t investigated or charged in the housing market bust alone.) Stewart, even at the debut of her television show, *Martha Stewart Living*, was already in her early fifties, well past the age of public acknowledgement in postfeminist culture. So while Stewart’s visuality confines her to feminized, domestic spaces, she does not follow a model of postfeminist presentation of self, even though her rise to popularity falls squarely within the years of postfeminism’s takeover of gender/sex representation in American popular culture. Perhaps we could read Stewart’s self-made success, as I mentioned earlier as Radner’s neo-feminist or one whose lineage traces back to Helen Gurley-Brown and the “career girl.” But this is reading is also problematic because, again, Stewart has never presented herself as a “girl.” She is not part of “girl culture” or

“girlie culture” (as many postfeminist celebrities in their forties and beyond currently perform) nor does Stewart’s persona suit the ironic age of feminism as something that is duly “taken into account.”³⁸

What Martha Stewart does offer in the neoliberal age, however, is, as Michael J. Golec coins it, a “sparkling window” that allows viewers, and presumably admirers of Stewart, to occupy dual spectatorial positions on the lush life, pictorialized in the magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, as photos peering into the domestic sphere, and those peering out.³⁹ Golec further likens Stewart’s main messages particularly in her magazine to Emerson’s “notion of the home as a site of perfectionism.”⁴⁰ Thus Golec argues that it is the melding of “Martha” and the inviting, accomplished spaces she creates that draws in viewers steeped in postfeminist norms. A woman may not want to be “like” Martha Stewart so much as she may feel that she should be living like Martha Stewart seems to live in her magazine and television show (hence her “empire” title, *Martha Stewart Living*).

It is crucial here that we examine the postfeminist and neoliberal prescription for personal failure. Golec writes that some have complained that Stewart’s projects are “designed to fail” for the average person, thus setting herself up the “domestic diva.”⁴¹ He elaborates that Stewart adheres to a model of “taste” that visualizes the socioeconomic gap between herself and the majority of Americans. Golec says this is a common function of contemporary advertising, to inspire “shame” so that we will purchase toward feeling better—a hallmark of postfeminist media aimed at women.⁴² In

this way, Stewart's media and persona fit perfectly into the majority of the messages crafted for heterosexual women in the United States.

Representatives of masculine authority have certainly been threatened by Stewart, and again I am tempted to read the assault on her character, the unusually lengthy surveillance placed on her leading up to her arrest, her trial and sentence as a moratorium on non-sexualized, empowered, female businesswomen and billionaires by the American government as the mouthpiece for patriarchal authority. In other words, Stewart's media narrative resembles characterizations of Hilary Clinton, a woman openly despised for similar reasons as is Stewart and by similar factions of people (such as conservatives, for example).

Nancy Shaw does not mention Stewart's gender/sex, but she sees another reason for the unusual amount of federal attention placed on Stewart in 2003. Shaw presents the case of Martha Stewart's arrest and prosecution (at the time of the article publication, Stewart had not yet been convicted and sentenced) as White House scapegoating as President Bush wanted to divert attention away from the terrorist attacks on September 11 in New York City, the ensuing controversies about the war with Iraq, and the emerging "fiscal cliff" as the housing market bubble began to burst. In other words, Shaw argues that Stewart was an easy target, or she was constructed as an easy target, on which to perform an act of "justice" by the federal government of the United States.⁴³ It's ironic that the (in)famous imperative issued by the Bush White House after September to "keep shopping" would have been aided and abetted by the likes of Martha Stewart.

CHAPTER 5: THE POSTFEMINIST ERASURE OF GLOBALIZATION
AND DEPLOYMENTS OF GLOBAL OTHERS

American postfeminist culture is also informed by two new developments during the postfeminist era: widespread globalization under the new regime of neoliberalism and a renewed and invigorated Othering of Arab and Muslim peoples. First, I should briefly describe the economic neoliberal scene. Though the term “globalization” has various meanings depending upon one’s disciplinary perspective or industry (economics, women/gender studies, human geography, military, corporate, etc.), each area of interest defines it somewhat or very differently. I use the term in this work to refer to the broad ideological effects of late capitalism, specifically the (mostly American)¹ deregulation of industry which has resulted in an economic/Western corporate invasion of the Global South²: moving sites of the manufacturing of goods to countries where America’s fair labor laws and standards—including a minimum wage—and safety regulations do not apply. These practices vastly reduce the expense of wages and the costly upkeep of safety standards so that corporations can increase profits—profits which are retained mostly in the U.S. and the West and primarily by shareholders and upper management even in these locations.

The workers in such manufacturing facilities outside the U.S., Europe, Japan, and recently in South Korea, do not receive the benefits of their labor in time or money; many work twelve hour days at least six days a week, live in tiny, shared dormitory spaces often with strangers, and they often cannot afford to buy the very product that they assemble each day.³ Further these workers tend to be women worldwide⁴ and these

common practices of globalized companies are defended (in the rather rare instances when they are brought to light in American mainstream discourse) using neoliberal values such as stock “health,” individual profits, and “trickle-down” economics which is, albeit in a simplified definition, the prevailing notion that policies that enable the rich to get richer will eventually “trickle down” to benefit everyone else, though the theory continues to fail on a massive, global scale.⁵

Here I would like to delve a bit deeper into how postfeminism is informed and structured by neoliberalist values, specifically how postfeminist texts rely on the structuring absence of women in the Global South. As I described in the first chapter *Sex and the City* is an iconic text of postfeminism in its construction of femininity and in its popular production of a postfeminist subjectivity. This popularity is partially achieved by reveling in the tendencies of Western commodity fetishism and their attendant erasure of class markers as exemplified through televised series and particularly the second film from the franchise: *Sex and the City 2* (2010). Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff describe postfeminism and neoliberalism as ideologies that dovetail in at least three ways: the first is the emphasis on individualism as a right and as the solitary framework through which modern subjects can achieve “success,” however one may define the term. Second Gill and Scharff describe a shared neoliberal and postfeminist “sensibility,” that of the resemblance between the neoliberal “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject” and the postfeminist “active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject.” Finally, and most profoundly, Gill and Scharff argue that the neoliberal self is “*always already gendered*” (sic), as they elaborate, “...To a much greater extent than men, women are required to

work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen.”⁶ And I would argue that postfeminism also requires an imperative erasure of these processes and one that extends to an erasure of material culture and the workings of globalization that produce a neoliberal postfeminist subject. Thus the social conditions of most women are rarely represented or representable in postfeminist texts.

In postfeminist texts, we can easily see the operation of commodity fetishism which is also prefaced upon the erasure of the Global Southern, racialized/ethnicized woman who works in the factories to produce the goods of postfeminist life. Since the main function of commodity fetish is to elide potential references to the act of production, commodity fetishism is a particularly troubling development as it is brought to its emphatic limit in postfeminist culture, the consumption of materials most of which are made by these “invisible” Global Southern women. In other words, Sarah Jessica Parker’s Manolo Blahniks may not have been made by sweatshop labor, but many of the knock-offs that most women can afford are. The erasure of the woman in the Global South is crucial to the functioning of postfeminist signification in that a postfeminist celebration of the middle or upper middle class woman’s life is untenable in the frame with the oppression that makes her consumer-life possible. The specter of the Global South woman serves as “other” so that the postfeminist image can be foregrounded, and it is the Global Southern woman’s labor that provides the materials for commodity fetishism.

In fact, this visual economy mirrors late capitalism and film production: not only have Global Southern women been made necessary for transnational corporations to garner gargantuan profit in the manufacture of the goods in product placements, but the specter of the woman in the Global South is working to produce the postfeminist consumer, and the absence of her image sutures the viewer/consumer into a blithe consumerist fantasy. Thus, Global Southern women are working at least double duty for late capitalism and postfeminism, being paid next to nothing, frequently oppressed and abused, and unrepresentable in the culture that depends on their work for its existence and for the pleasure in its consumption.

Furthermore, these notions of race, class, Westernness, etc., often produce a particular, very specific absence in postfeminist texts—one who, broadly, lives outside the privileges and benefits of capitalism. As Jasbir K. Puar notes: “The market is a foil for the state, producing consumer subjects...that simulate (and experience simulated) affective modes of belonging to the state...Thus the nation-state maintains its homophobic and xenophobic stances while capitalizing on its untarnished image of inclusion, diversity, and tolerance.”⁷ Puar’s quote is instructive in elucidating the interoperations of capitalist culture and a capitalist state that produce something like postfeminism. In U.S. culture, at least, race/ethnicity and gender are the modes by which we understand difference. Other modes of subjectivity, such as religious identities and nationalities are, and one might say must be, understood through the prism of race and gender. Thus we find the four women in *Sex and the City 2* (written and directed by the same team that brought us the television show and the first film, 2010) in Abu Dhabi in

the United Arab Emirates in a deliberate and facile juxtaposition of these women who represent particularly women's sexual freedom in the U.S. with the specter of veiled women and their Western-constructed lack of freedom, particularly in the arena of sexuality.

The forced and overdetermined comparison reaches its apex of offensiveness when the women visit the public market, clad in their usual heterosexualized clothing and Samantha's purse bursts open spilling condoms everywhere amid the men in the market who are instantly enraged by the scene and who begin chasing them. The film then relies on a familiar synecdoche of Western cinematic Othering: the cultural others of "liberated" Americans are portrayed as the nameless horde of backward, angry natives. And this scene serves to reinforce at least two fronts of normative American postfeminist identity: that women must be heterosexualized for the male gaze, and that Arabs are backward partially because they won't sexualize women for the male gaze (at least not in the same way as do Americans).⁸

New American Postfeminism in the 2000s: Veiled Others

The constitutive features of postfeminisms are often argued to be a foreclosure of some of the salient issues that concern postcolonial and global feminisms: race/culture/ethnicity, class, labor, religion, nation, and so on, the various ways we describe multicultural identities and social subjects. (It is somewhat ironic that postfeminism in the singular is often described as a backlash movement to Second Wave feminism, when much of the criticism of the Second Wave was on identical grounds of elision.⁹) Postfeminisms and Global Southern women are, however, intimately linked

concepts, albeit asymmetrically, as the Global Southern woman provides the structuring absence for a postfeminist self who is conceived in and of Western commodity culture. The Global Southern woman is present in all postfeminist representations, including those with a “racialized” protagonist, acting under erasure, a specter that broadly defines privilege. Based on Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s partial list of Global Southern woman stereotypes, in the Western postfeminist social imaginary, the Global Southern woman is the victim of oppression and abuse that undergirds the Western woman’s autonomy, the bearer of antiquated religion and tradition that ensures the Western woman’s modernness and sophistication, the sweatshop factory worker and domestic helper that places Western women (rightfully—goes the logic) in white collar jobs, the abject background that allows the space for a near worry-free postfeminist capitalist entertainment.¹⁰

Since the events of September 11, 2001, most powerfully visually marked by the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and the Bush Administration’s focus on Homeland Security, increasingly the U.S. has developed its subtler Orientalism into full-blown racialized Others, an Orientalism that more closely resembles that of Europe, the primary recent colonizers in the Middle East and North Africa whose Orientalism was historically more direct.¹¹ President George W. Bush employed the sign of the veiled woman as a signifier of the backwardness of the Middle East (and Muslim countries generally) and the Bush Administration hailed freeing women from the oppressions of the Taliban as an excellent reason to go to war. The inference here is that Western women enjoy freedom on all fronts when in fact

Western women are strictly policed by heteronormative, patriarchal culture and the male sexual gaze as enforced by institutions such as schools, churches, business, and media.

Thus it was no surprise and it was no accident that the second *Sex and the City* feature film, released in 2010, spent the majority of the narrative in Abu Dhabi where the (in)famous characters of the show scandalized and horrified the Muslim men coded as traditional with the women's displays of overt sexuality. I mark this film as one of the moments that Arabs/Muslims/people from the Middle East and North Africa (a hallmark feature of Orientalism is the collapse of cultural identities into a simplified whole) became the new racial Other by which the U.S. currently defines itself as a nation.

Ian Baucom's reading of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work further develops and complicates the notion of the construction of First World discourse dependent upon constructions of a Third World other. He cites her use of the word "foreclosure" to indicate not just the absenting of the other to foreground the self, but that this act of foreclosure carries the other within itself, "hidden."¹² Spivak deconstructs major Western literature and philosophy from this perspective, demonstrating the "vanishing act" that both erases and internalizes, or rather, she discloses the processes by which the internalization of other achieves erasure.¹³ Thus the act of constructing postfeminist cultures mirrors that of wider Western discourse in that it "names a double and contradictory process of expelling from and secreting within."¹⁴ The postfeminist finds herself in this contradictory position in which the abject other/Global Southern woman is pushed out of the frame, yet the memory of her, her specter, her absence must be maintained as presence in order for the postfeminist to experience the particular pleasure

constitutive of postfeminism, a celebration of Western excess, luxury, privilege. The knowledge or memory of the Global Southern woman haunts postfeminist texts in Derridean fashion. We might think of this necessary present absence as the inherent threat of collapse that enables delight in postfeminisms as constructed, fantastical wholes.

Missing in most, if not all, discussions of difference in postfeminist culture are the new signifiers of difference against which Western-derived and performed postfeminism can easily binarize and valorize itself: veiled women whose coverings range from hijabs to niqabs to burqas. Though the veiled woman has had a certain resonance in Western culture that I'll briefly discuss below, these binarized images have increasingly multiplied since the terrorist actions on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The covering of the female form, the female body, is tantamount to Western postfeminist treason, as postfeminist heterosexualized media culture has omnivorously and successfully tethered women's willingness to display themselves objects for the male heterosexual gaze to women's empowerment and their ability to secure happiness and fulfillment. Many theorists analyzing representations of women and femininity across cultures have linked the recurring signifier of the veil in Western media to the male heterosexual gaze in Western visual culture. Feminist film theorists, in particular, have demonstrated a longstanding interest in the power associated with the act of looking itself, a power represented and thwarted by a veil. Indeed scopophilia carries sociopolitical valency: who has the right to look, for how long, and at what or who can connote clearly status and privilege which are contextually variable. Further, the term "scopophilia" as used by Freud denotes not just a "love of looking," but also that the act

of looking is an act of desire—specifically sexual desire for a fetishized object—such as an image of a woman, images which represent sexual pleasure. In the case of a veiled woman, the object of the veil is both a signifier for “woman” but the veil also stands for a disruption of the scopophilic gaze, and thus a disruption of the usual Western uninterrupted pleasure at looking at women’s bodies and faces, a pleasure enjoyed by heterosexual men, some queers, some Westerners, some white people, some non-Muslims, etc.

From Laura Mulvey’s breakthrough essay in 1975 on the male gaze and scopophilia, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” forward, one primary underpinning of feminist film criticism has been the notion of the assumed male gaze and what Mulvey termed the woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Of course, Mulvey’s grand ideas are no longer understood or used as a monolithic theory in part because of the post-structuralist turn; in other words, no theory can speak to every film (nor to every spectator), and Mulvey’s theory has been adequately problematized (most famously by Mulvey herself.) However, in the last three decades ample discussion about the male gaze among feminist media critics worked toward general consensus that many Western films yet follow a Mulveyesque feminist scopophilic paradigm, and we find even in contemporary film criticism feminist readings are often against the grain, or find themselves working around a structure with an assumed heterosexual male audience for a meaning for audiences who are not male heterosexuals. Indeed the love of looking and specifically looking at the female body in Western visual culture throughout the histories of photography and cinema into the present postfeminist moment in which the unbridled

visual access to the female body is emphatically reinforced is so naturalized as to seem transparent to an average Western spectator. Thus, the veil—as a concept, as an act, and as an event—often has been perceived as a direct and perhaps deliberate thwarting of Western white heterosexual male privilege, desire, and pleasure.

In his book, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, written sixteen years earlier than Mulvey's essay, Frantz Fanon ventured with prescience toward the idea of looking as possession when he specifically describes the situation of the veiled Algerian woman in a colonial society. He writes, "This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself."¹⁵ He goes on to say that in Algerian culture (at least in the 1960s), men simply do not see women (or, rather, they know to act as if they do not), and the veil demarcates the line of sexuality that cannot be publicly crossed. The Westerner, however, is frustrated by the veil, and Fanon argues that this frustration leads to aggression. As Laura Mulvey would detail years later about Western cinema, the Western colonials in Algeria, I argue, had already naturalized the act of looking as possession partially in the circulation of the visual popular arts (such as film). Further, based on the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss and one primary contemporary feminist critic of his work, Elizabeth Cowie, on kinship and exogamy, the act of possessing women in patriarchal societies is always a primary site of power.¹⁶ Thus the veil as a thwarting of imperial Western gaze in French-occupied Algeria itself became a resistance to imperial power, and the veil became discursively laden, heavy with significance, and taut with competing ideological tensions.

Fanon further complicates the issue by noting that as early as the 1930s the French colonials could galvanize Western identity as moral and progressive and simultaneously shame Algerians by instituting a discourse on the veiled woman as a slave of Algerian men. Fanon writes:

The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered...It described the immense possibilities of woman, unfortunately transformed by the Algerian man into an inert, demonetized, indeed dehumanized object. The behavior of the Algerian was very firmly denounced and described as medieval and barbaric...the occupier piled up a mass of judgments, appraisals, reasons, accumulated anecdotes and edifying examples, thus attempting to confine the Algerian within a circle of guilt.¹⁷

Fanon also notes early on in his essay “Algeria Unveiled,” that precisely because the colonizers placed such heavy significance upon the veil in their fight for ideological dominance, the veil thus became a powerful signifier of both nationalism and women for the Algerians. But the colonial perception of the veil was also of practical import to the Algerians, as Fanon describes the use of veiling and unveiling as sites for Algerian nationalism and revolutionary practice—such as women hiding weapons and money under their veils, and “passing” as European women without the veil in order to pass through checkpoints. As feminist writers (among others) have taken great pains to illuminate across disciplines, Western intellectualism rarely favors an egalitarian world view, thus this French characterization of the Algerian male at the site of the veil is at the very least disingenuous, as Fanon describes.

Additionally, though Fanon is certainly revelatory in terms of the French colonial discursive project on the veil, it is necessary to note that Fanon is himself mired in patriarchal and phallogocentric discourse. One becomes increasingly alarmed at the Freudian excesses and blind spots on gender and sexuality carried over into Fanon’s

work. I note this not to challenge the validity of Fanon's ideas. Instead, I want to accurately characterize Fanon's arguments to thoroughly describe the landscape of thought into which feminist and postfeminist media criticism enter. The power to determine the signification of the veil has been a kind of covert cultural war initially waged at the start of European colonization, and intensified during decolonization as a tool of the Western ideological arm mobilizing and deploying nationalism, the assumed superiority of Judeo-Christianity, and nascent Western feminisms as necessary to retain hegemony, and one countered by the colonized (including women and men as a revolutionary weapon and site of religious, nationalistic identity preservation. Thus, the French colonials, the Algerian male revolutionaries, and Fanon himself were all engaged in a discursive territorializing in which *women* (as signified by the veil) became their battlefield.¹⁸

We must now turn a lens to feminism in this initial discussion, as well, because Western feminists might seem to be the natural allies to these women in veiling cultures, women at the site of such contested signification. However, Western feminism is too often mired in a colonial worldview itself to parse out the cultural issues at stake in non-Western veiling communities. As Nawar Al-Hassan Golley argues, frequently feminism itself is perceived to be a province of Western thought, a distinct entity that can be brought to Arab cultures by beneficent white women. In other words, feminism is not perceived as an ideology that could have organically arisen among Arab women influenced by both Arab and colonial cultures. Golley notes that some Western feminists heavily influenced at times by the male discourses on women and veiling, suspect that

Arab women are incapable of a feminist positioning. If Arab women argue anything other than a Westernized version of feminism, “they are accused of being ‘pawns of Arab men.’”¹⁹ Leila Ahmed states strongly, “...white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic convictions, and feminism came together in harmonious and actually entirely logical accord in the service of the imperial idea.”²⁰ Ironically, unlike the masculine overburdened signifier, Western feminism *fails to see* the veil, looking through it to an essentialized Arab woman who is in a perpetual state of victimhood.²¹ Additionally, scholars such as Alison Donnell argue that the veil has become a “tool of political distraction,”²² once again in the act of veiling the actual women disappear and discursive war is waged in their signification.

While postfeminism/postfeminist texts may offer a (limited) means of reimagining the lives of (mostly) white, Judeo-Christian/secular, middle-class, heterosexual women in North America and Europe, a reinvigoration of feminism may require postcolonial/global feminist sensibility to transform the discourse as these texts frequently demonstrate how we might negotiate both performing femininity *and* the social conditions that produce us subjects. The consistent elision of material conditions in postfeminist texts ignores most of the people we call “women” and most of the problems women face. The next section explores one aspect important to both postfeminism and postcolonial texts: the sartorial as a discursive space of women’s agency. Conspicuous consumption of clothing is a constitutive feature of postfeminism as well as the “freedom” to dress in a way that reveals and/or accentuates the female body as heteronormatively sexual. In turn, sartorial constructions of woman tend to serve as the

work behind the scenes, so to speak, that iterates masculinist gender order. Counter to this, working as its defining other, is the notion of the veiled woman who, in Western discourse and visual regimes, is oppressed in her inability to show her body; thus the veil has come to symbolize primitive social conditions which thereby justifies the interference of the dominant West who can then present themselves as deliverers of “freedom” and modernity.

We see such discursive maneuvers in the films, *The Kingdom* (2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and the popular television show in the United States, *Homeland* (2011—). Another mode of postfeminism is the visuality of the lush life in Anglo and American media as a distractingly lovely curtain drawn over a world of violent, bloody wars perpetrated by the United States and its allies in now several Middle Eastern countries²³ and the dire inequities that continue to structure our worlds, as demonstrated in the film *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2011). Each of these three texts showcase an intertextual postfeminist icon: Jennifer Garner, Claire Danes, and Jessica Chastain respectively: white, thin, heterosexual and wealthy women who perform their celebrity regularly for the American public through the paparazzi—often including their personal romances and weddings (Garner, Danes, Chastain), pregnancies (Garner, Danes) and motherhoods (Garner and Danes). Each is photographed regularly on red carpets in designer clothes and professional styling around the world promoting their media and shilling for their sponsors. Note that there is no rising Arab-American or Muslim-American celebrity alongside these standard, white, postfeminized American women, even though the settings for some of their most critically lauded works take place in the Middle East and

should involve Arabs and Muslims in the texts. The “war on terror” in popular media is a backdrop or a structure onto which are reinforcements of hegemonic, neoliberal, postfeminist cultural norms.

**The Hero Myth in Postfeminist Texts: *The Kingdom*,
Zero Dark Thirty, and *Homeland***

The title of the film, *The Kingdom*, is itself a dominant Western overdetermined masculine signifier connoting imperialistic ambitions displaced onto Saudi Arabia. The film follows four FBI agents (three men and one woman played by Garner) who travel to Saudi Arabia to investigate/avenge the death of Americans and their FBI comrade from a terrorist bombing of a U.S. compound in Riyadh. The danger to the Americans in Saudi Arabia is emphatically foregrounded and stressed in the film, tacitly echoing the vulnerability of “innocent” Americans to Arabs on September 11, with the attendant erasure of history that produces such “innocence.” The film opens with an unabashedly Western-centric vilification of Arabs/Muslims/Saudis/Wahabis, nodes of identity truncated and conflated on an actualized diachronic timeline superimposed over a desert scene, reifying the “history lesson” with reality effects such as PBS-sounding narration and documentary footage. Thus this politically constructed “reality” is the backdrop for what is essentially a dominant Western cinema theme of individual Western male action heroes trouncing large groups of vilified “others” with relative ease and assurance.²⁴ The cowboy, indeed, rides again.

Contemporary action movies such as *The Kingdom* increasingly feature a postfeminist secondary character rife with ambivalences: weak and strong, warrior-like

and emotional, womanly and childlike, tough and soft, etc. While some argue that these ambivalences are the space of young, white, Western, heterosexual negotiations of being a contemporary woman, one could also read such ambivalences as either neutralizations of women's power, or as failures of women to achieve power which, in turn, reproduces the overdetermined equation of virility with power. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note that "postfeminism already incorporates a negotiation with hegemonic forces in simultaneously assuming the achievement and desirability of gender equality on the one hand while repeatedly associating such equality with loss on the other."²⁵ This kind of neutralization or denial can only happen, and one might argue *tends to happen*, if there is an elision of the social. Thus, Jennifer Garner's character in *The Kingdom* performs an elaborate action sequence, but nowhere in the text is there a reference to the gender inequality we know to exist in police work. Issues of social import (gender or otherwise) are elided, erased, or neutralized in order to foreground and support the masculinist heroic myth.

Certainly the casting of Garner in this regard is notable. She first achieved celebrity as an action heroine in the TV series, *Alias*, in which, like Buffy, et.al, she strives to maintain a "normal" identity—which means hiding her skills and her life of intrigue from most of her friends and family.²⁶ With her dimples, diminutive voice, and tight, (hetero)sexualized clothing, Garner exemplifies the ambivalences of the postfeminist heroine, both little girl and woman, (hetero)sexualized and physically strong. Garner went on to make romantic comedies, a notoriously postfeminist genre, and the text explicitly about "girling femininity," *13 Going On 30*.²⁷ Intertextually and

interestingly, she is also known in the popular press as the girl-next-door type who “saved” Ben Affleck from his romance with Jennifer Lopez—deemed too “ethnic” (achieved through an exaggerated class slippage in the media), for a white male lead in real life.

In *The Kingdom*, like most action films, characters are reduced to a few traits, and Garner’s quirk is sucking on lollipops; thus, the female heroine is neutralized by a girlie/pedophilic sexualization. Though Garner’s character is portrayed as tough—she trades one-liners with her male colleagues and is the primary rescuer of one who is kidnapped, she also serves as the element of vulnerability and fragility of the American team in “hostile”²⁸ Saudi territory. Though Saudi soldiers/police are shot, beaten, tortured, etc., the film spends as much or more time and emotional energy on how loud gunfire hurt her ear. One could argue that the Jason Bateman character is portrayed as the weakest—the jokester buddy that frequents this genre—as he is the one captured by the terrorist cell, but Bateman’s character is weak only to the point that he is feminized. Thus, these portrayals challenge little about gender norms, and are instead relying on familiar Western binarisms to undergird and reproduce masculine power myth. Note that it is not just that Western discursive gender depends on some preset binarisms such as weak/strong—particular modes of representations of femininity effectively neutralize women’s power such as the “girling” of grown women, or the rejection of the woman of her skills and career ambitions to be a wife and raise children—as Garner does, by the way, in the *Alias* finale, a frequent discursive operation in postfeminist texts coined as “retreatism” by Tasker and Negra.²⁹

Garner's character wears fatigues in *The Kingdom*, thus her sartorial choices do not reflect the same consumerist agency of characters such as Carrie Bradshaw or Bridget Jones. However, Western women's "freedom" to reveal and dress heteronormatively sexually is addressed when she prepares to meet the Saudi prince, and the U.S. State Department representative encourages her to "dial down the boobies." Thus sartorial agency for both Western women and Muslim women is neatly collapsed to a one-liner to serve masculinist discourse—and is also the kind of discourse aided and abetted by postfeminist texts celebrating women as (hetero)sexualized. Garner's character is given a veil which she wraps around her shoulders, leaving her hair uncovered. Whether this was the film's attempt at compromise or if it is reflective of mere cultural ignorance, it is one of several small moments in the film that subtly juxtapose Western women's "freedoms" with the assumed oppression of Muslim women symbolized, as usual, by the veil.

There is a brief moment in the film, however, in which the dominant Western notions of the sartorial, agency, and oppression coalesce. When the FBI team enters the neighborhood of the Saudi terrorist cell, they are warned away by a woman in a burqa who looks at Chris Cooper's character and slightly shakes her head as a warning to turn back. I was first struck by the unlikelihood of such an event—why would a woman coded as an observant Saudi Muslim choose to stare dead-on at a male in a Saudi police van? The image lasts no more than a few seconds, but we understand much about the Western discourse on the veil and the working tropes of colonialism and neocolonialism from this brief shot: the most dangerous parts of Muslim societies to Westerners are also the most oppressive communities to women; winning a war in the Middle East (however that may

be determined) is touted as liberating Muslim women; Muslim women wait patiently for Western saviors to deliver them into the Western democratic egalitarian society that all Western women enjoy; Muslim/Arab women will be complicit with Westerners in attempts to subvert their culture and community; and, of course, their only acts of potential agency are passive and hidden.

Zero Dark Thirty and *Homeland* are similar texts to one another in that they produce a woman in the central protagonist space usually reserved for the stereotype of a masculine presence in such roles. Written by Mark Boal and directed by Kathryn Bigelow (also the writer and director of *The Hurt Locker* in 2008) *Zero Dark Thirty* is reportedly based on the true story of the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden, reputedly the former head of the terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, and the organizer of the operation that took down the World Trade Center, the attack of the Pentagon and another airplane on September 11, 2001, though bin Laden's level of involvement in the actual attack is yet murky.³⁰ However involved he was with the specific mission, however, bin Laden took credit for it and the American people largely seem to be satisfied in fingering one brown man for the attack. The CIA mission to find bin Laden and to kill him is largely unproblematized in the fictional film which "documents" the unlikely dogged and canny pursuer and leader of the team turns out to be young, diminutive, and pale white Maya, played by Jessica Chastain, a rising postfeminist celebrity developing an extensive paparazzi narrative in the last two or three years in the American mainstream media.

And while there is much more to say about this film especially from a lens critical of American jingoism which this film venerates,³¹ my interest in *Zero Dark Thirty* in the

light of a critique of postfeminism is the character, Maya, and how she is constructed.

Maya's character is difficult to ascertain in a film about a highly political event that treats it like an uncomplicated police procedural. In other words, similar to a typical American cop show, the innocence or guilt of the suspects occupies very little screen time or emotional space in the production which is far more invested in the means of investigation to some typically ambiguous and reductive idea of "justice." And, in order to put a woman in a man's place, as Boal and Bigelow do in this film, by Hollywood terms, they limit severely the amount of information we know about Maya: she has no back story except that she was recruited out of high school (for a reason we are not told). There is no reference to anything or anyone in her life outside working for the CIA and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. By avoiding back story altogether Boal and Bigelow can also avoid the thornier problems of gender and sex in the global arena of Western terrorist creation and pursuit, even as the juxtapositions between women's freedoms in the West and the construction of women's lack of freedom in the Middle East became part of the justification to declare war on Iraq. Maya is alone, the singular genius and hero that finds and killed the bad guy as is a typical Western as well as an American western genre narrative.

There is thus nothing overtly or standardly postfeminist about *Zero Dark Thirty* as a text except that, like most American texts, it produces an American spectator (in this case one who is also sympathetic to American nationalism.) Because Bigelow speaks to viewers through documentary effects to produce the story as "truth," Maya's surroundings, styling and costuming are largely unremarkable (except for her

professionally styled hair through the film). Only a handful of times is her gender even alluded to, and she is portrayed as vacant of sexual desires. (In one scene, she answers a female colleague's question about romance: "I'm not the girl that fucks; it's unbecoming.") But Maya is an interesting female heroine in that she is not heterosexualized for the male gaze; we see very little skin and Maya is not costumed to accentuate her body parts. She is also portrayed as rough-talking, angry, demanding, belligerent, and strong-willed, all characteristics difficult to portray in a Hollywood blockbuster attempt, and certainly not standard of the postfeminist repertoire. One might be tempted to characterize the film as challenging gender/sex; however, as Fawzia Afzal-Khan points out in her definition of progressive, inclusive feminism:

This character is not an example of feminist heroism, because she stands alone, even in the film. The one other woman campadre she gets to know, another field-operative, asks her at one point, "do you even have any friends"? Feminism is about forging bonds with other women—and men, and others—across national, racial, class, religious, gender and sexual barriers and borders. Feminism is about imagining—and then building a world based on peace and justice and equality—not war and violence and revenge. It is, in fact, about disavowing privilege in all forms, including the privilege of "belonging" to any one nation, class or creed.³²

Thus, while Maya may perform a type of femininity outside postfeminist limits, with its vacancy, its lack of context and resonance with other women and men, Maya stands as a mere placeholder for what would be a male character in most other police procedurals. This also helps to explain her lack of character development and back story. And while portraying a woman in a high level job usually reserved for men may seem like a progressive step, Maya's character is reduced to her job (of highly questionable ethics). Further, one could read the film as a critique of soulless yet genius CIA agents in need of a conscience, but that reading does not impact the question: why cast a woman in the

role, and one who has no back story? Before I offer a tentative answer, however, it is pertinent to discuss *Homeland* and its main character, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes).

The popular television show set in the United States, *Homeland*, is of the same the police procedural genre as *Zero Dark Thirty* and trades in many of the same themes and motifs, but the main character, Carrie Mathison is far more developed. And also like *Zero Dark Thirty*, there is much to say about politics and nation-states (and even how gender/sex informs these arenas) but my problem here is postfeminism and how Carrie Mathison's portrayal inflects the popular American understanding of femininity in mainstream discourse. Like Maya, Carrie is the single woman among mostly older men, but she is often smarter than everyone else around her (including her male superiors), able to count on her instincts of singular genius and she is as dogged as Maya in pursuing leads. Like Maya, Carrie seems to have no friends outside work, nor does she seem to have a life outside work. She also suffers from bipolar disorder, and must get her medication secretly from her sister who is a physician lest she lose her security clearance. However, Carrie unravels throughout the first season of the show, disobeying her superiors in ordering surveillance on a suspect, falling in love and sleeping with the man she suspects is a terrorist, abusing alcohol, and the season finale finds her exposed for her illness and undergoing shock treatments. Carrie leads a frantic, joyless life without friendships, without much family contact, and mostly without emotional support. While these qualities make for an interestingly troubled character, can this isolated, troubled genius work as a spark for a new social imagination?

Does Carrie Mathison challenge postfeminist norms? What is the intention in casting women in these kinds of roles if their gender/sex does so little toward moving the American political and social imagination? I argue that both Maya and Carrie are written to have “Messiah complexes,” or the delusional belief that they were born or put on earth to save humanity. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, in trying to convince another CIA operative to join Maya in her quest which amounted to a hunch, he asks why Maya’s so determined to pursue this lead. She responds with utter conviction, “A lot of my friends have died trying to do this. I believe I was spared so I could finish the job.” This belief: that she is the chosen, the savior, is another piece of the puzzle to Maya’s lack of character development. Saviors don’t need personalities beyond their sacrifices. Carrie makes a similar comment in *Homeland* that has become part of the opening credits of the show: “I missed something once before...” In other words, Carrie blames herself alone for September 11, and thus believes she is the sole preventative to another attack.

In Carrie’s case, this kind of grandiose thinking could be a logical offshoot of her bipolar disorder. However, I argue that in both texts, the women’s Messiah complexes serve a different discursive goal: the allusion to Messiah is a reference to Jesus Christ who is constructed in particularly contemporary Western media as oppositional to Allah, or the supreme being of Islam, as the two religions are increasingly being understood in the United States as binary opposites. Thus these texts in pursuit of Islamic “bad guys” employ women in the positions of “saviors” merely as a means of obfuscation, in that in patriarchal culture, the Supreme Being cannot be feminine. In other words, the main character is a woman in each film as an attempt to mask “the chosen one” as an oblique

Christ reference of masculinity or maleness, and thus one at odds with the equally masculine constructed Allah, and the primary religion of Islam in these countries now constructed by or for Americans as “hostile.” Thus, though these are texts in the postfeminist age that construct women partially outside the heterosexual gaze, they are instead lightly masked constructs of the patriarchal androcentric structures of American war-mongering and global economic and military domination with Christianity as the reinforcing subtext prefaced upon masculine territorialization, aggressive competition, and war. And thus any potential Maya and Carrie bring toward feminist social transformation is vastly undercut by the globally detrimental contexts necessary to the complexity of their characters.

A Postfeminist Love Story in the Globalized New

Millennia: *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*

Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is a far more typical postfeminist narrative, but it is new in the sense that it employs the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as its abject background. Though the text is a British film set in London and Morocco (as Yemen) and employs British stars, Emily Blunt and Ewan McGregor, it received much press and acclaim in the American media and Blunt and McGregor are also two well-circulated celebrities in American paparazzi culture, having starred in many blockbuster American films previous to this film. Similar to *The Help*, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* was first a popular novel written by a white British man, Paul Torday, adapted into a screenplay by Torday and white British Simon Beaufoy, and directed by white Swedish director, Lasse Hallström (a director of many romance films including the recent *Dear John* adapted

from the Nicholas Sparks novel of the same name, the romance, *Chocolat*, in 2000). It seems to merit iteration here that I'm not arguing that white Americans, Brits, or even Swedes could not make a nuanced film about Yemeni people, or Arabs generally (or vice versa for that matter), I'm merely pointing out that this film is simplistic, reductive, and overdetermined as Eurocentric and Anglophilic, and thus it seems relevant that it was all conceived and executed by white Westerners.

The narrative of *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* begins somewhere in the first years of the American and British wars with Afghanistan and Iraq and finds high end financial investment consultant, Harriet Chetwode-Talbot (Emily Blunt) working on a billionaire's portfolio, a Yemeni sheik, Sheik Muhammed (Amr Waked), who would like to introduce salmon and thus salmon fishing into the Yemen River and into his culture as a pastime. In short order we meet the British governmental scientist, Dr. Alfred "Fred" Jones (Ewan McGregor) who is strong-armed by the press officer to the Prime Minister, Patricia Maxwell (Kristin Scott Thomas), into leading the research into the project because England needs a "good news" story from the Middle East. The complication in the love story (and as I will argue the political story) is that Harriet has just fallen for British soldier, Captain Robert Mayers (Tom Mison) who is sent off to fight ("in a sandy place") shortly after their brief initial romance, while Fred's passionless marriage is slowly grinding to a halt. Robert's absence without contact allows plenty of room and time for Harriet and Fred to become acquainted, charmed, and to fall in love. The film concludes with Fred leaving his wife and Mayers returning from a deadly combat mission in which most of his team dies, and Harriet choosing to stay with Fred.

Thus we have our postfeminist comedy typical happily coupled ending. (Neither war is mentioned again.) In addition to the standard mating narrative in the postfeminist era, the mise-en-scène of *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* is solidly the stuff of American and Western postfeminist fantasy: sunny lighting, wealthy London interiors and exteriors, lush countryside estates, beautiful people in beautiful clothes. And for a neoliberal consumerist bonus: there are wide vistas of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco (intended to represent the countryside of Yemen in the film) all structured through the lens of the Western tourist gaze as the standardly lovely white actors sit together gazing romantically at the mountains over which are two bloody wars perpetuated by their own government with countless civilian deaths.

Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is germane to this project on postfeminist America since the recent historical backdrop in the film is the wars in/with Afghanistan (and Iraq), primarily perpetrated by the United States government and eventually with British support when much of the rest of Europe protested Western military invasions. Thus the choice to set a love story between two wealthy, white Brits (partially famous for their former roles in postfeminist films) constructed against such a post-September 11 background, even in a British setting, can (must?) be read as a comment on the results of primarily American political and military actions. Firstly, the war itself is never shown so that (like the actual experiences of most American and Brits) war is safely contained in reporting language, and even then, the wars are rarely mentioned in the film except in regard to Mayers' deployment and his brief MIA status. The lack of dialogue or war visuality is egregiously wrong, especially considering that Harriet is constructed as

character who can easily (and cheerfully) navigate both British and Western investment worlds and the worlds of Arab and Muslim power players without any ethical bother. This may be the new space of postfeminism in the millennia: a cursory nod to global injustice and inequities and rapidly on to the important neoliberal, economic business of pushing class and gender norms that uphold the Western, patriarchal, androcentric, and hegemonic status quo.

The attention to names is an interesting facet of *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. That Harriet and Fred refer to each other throughout most of the film as Ms. Chetwode-Talbot and Dr. Jones is certainly an attempt at Hollywood comedic nostalgia, lamenting and revering the days gone by of good (perhaps English) manners and the nostalgic invention of the time in which all doctors were men and “good” names were a class distinction to celebrate especially against those impossible-to-say Arab names. Harriet voices the sheik’s full name only once and for comedic effect; it is improbably long and no popular film database has attempted to recreate it, referring to him only as “the sheik” or “Sheik Muhammed.” Thus Amr Waked’s character is relegated to the vast trove of Eurocentric constructions of wealthy Arab men as a collapsed nomenclature of “the sheik” as if the name and the person represent a biological classification among humans.

This lack of naming of Arabs versus the acute attention to the names of white Brits becomes especially problematic in the sheik’s³³ mention of his “many wives.” These nameless women are introduced offhandedly in a nightcap conversation in the sheik’s Scotland palace (“his favorite estate,” Harriet tells Fred in their helicopter landing, reinforcing the Anglophilia that structures this text). In front of the fireplace with

Harriet and Fred, the sheik is worried about Harriet, who doesn't seem her usual cheerful self because she has recently learned that her new boyfriend fighting in an undisclosed location in the Middle East is MIA. The sheik remarks that he can read Harriet's unhappiness though she has said nothing, but that she is unlike his "many wives" who are much more vocal in their discontentment. Harriet, ever the British stereotype, has no response except a pleasant expression, and thus this cinematic textual tactic impressively manages to Other an entire range of actors: the sheik, his wives, and women generally who would have at least something of a response to such a comment besides a vapid smile, though I am making no claim on what that response should or might be. In other words, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* deploys Arabs as uncomplicated Others to assumed superior Western culture. This Othering is partially communicated by the sheik's polygamy, the voiceless, nameless women who construct the category of Arab and Muslim women/wives. Thus, like the treatments of the wars, the film hovers around and deploys Arabs and their treatments of women as the structuring absences for a romance between two white people, and thus does not confront a single facet of the political and social debate on wars or feminisms across cultures.

As in many postfeminist texts, Harriet's youth and beauty override her professional success in that she seems to be as blithely carefree as a child, infantilized yet cast as a major player in international finances. To most problems brought before her, she merely smiles sweetly. The postfeminist naturalized goodness of Harriet's uncomplicated character and complicity with Westernized masculinity and androcentrism is bolstered by the portrayals of the other, older professional wives in the text, Fred's wife, Mary, and

the Prime Minister's press officer, Patricia Maxwell. Mary and Maxwell (as they are referred to in the text) are the two older career women who have forsaken it all ("it all" meaning their understanding of themselves as primarily mothers and wives with careers) to achieve their professional goals.

Maxwell is clumsily constructed as a mother of three young children who is constantly on the phone as the Prime Minister's press officer fielding calls and averting national emergencies. Thus her children mostly ignore her and there is no visualized relationship with her husband with whom she never has a conversation in the film. Mary, likewise, is a character constructed as selfish in her quest to direct large governmental projects abroad and who in moments of preoccupation with preparing to travel for work, doesn't hear Fred's singular request to have children. Though the marriage has become stale, the film lays the blame at feet of the career woman who leaves Fred for the six weeks it takes for him to fall in love with another woman while Mary runs a project in Geneva. Even though Mary asks Fred to come back, she has already made the dire postfeminist error of briefly choosing her career before her marriage and her man, and thus Mary will be punished by spousal abandonment in the text. It is unclear where Harriet's high profile career will stand in the wake of such extremely negative treatments of women's professional success.

The men hardly fare better in their facile categories of historical Eurocentric reductive identities. Dr. Jones represents science as a Western invention, and thus Dr. Jones represents science itself in the Western canon, while the sheik counters with "faith" though the film does not articulate any nuance of religious teaching. Thus the sheik

represents mysticism (and hope) which protects the Anglophilic film from the thornier questions fueling the chasm of difference between Western Christianity and Arab Islam, as well as the two wars. The sheik appears to be a deviant or a mystical savant who is safely countered by “Western” science and the trope of the endearing male genius (like Einstein) who is brilliant, merely requiring other people’s money and a woman’s organizational skills to manage his life and projects.

After what they believe is the colossal failure of the salmon project, Dr. Jones muses about what went wrong and decides that next time they need to involve “the locals.” Here the film trades in colonialist narrative structure in which the singular white man is the bearer of both scientific knowledge and the “mad” genius that poises him to become the savior of brown people. In other words, why wouldn’t the sheik have known how to approach his fellow countrymen? Note that in the binaristic economy of antiquated Enlightenment construction of reason versus emotion/faith (and all other forms of knowing), Harriet has no place at all, consistently indicated by her vacant smile when problems arise.

Indeed, Harriet’s vapidness is problematic for another reason besides her lack of complexity, skill, and knowledge compared to the male characters. Harriet’s job in the elite of Western investment in a film produced in the time of Western and thus global financial crisis, the modern industrial interior of Harriet’s office and job never problematized as part of the global economic problem but as one of mere fancy like the chairs in the lobby are too weirdly modern for the likes of good, brick-house owning Dr. Jones. But the real neoliberal coup of the film is the representation of the neoliberal

economy as one perpetrated and represented by beautiful young women who “only want the best” for their billionaire investors, ones who may be in effect “widowed” by the unfortunate goings-on in Afghanistan, and ones thus deserve “true love” and the avoidance of the political messiness that they themselves heartily profit from.

CONCLUSION

The central danger I see in the largely unchallenged proliferation of postfeminist texts in the mainstream is that we may be allowing them to mark the terrain of feminism(s) for us. While it is certainly valuable to map the contours of any popular movement or social phenomenon, we cannot bracket off young, heterosexual, Judeo/Christian or secular, white, middle-class women in a constructed vacuum, repeating the errors of earlier versions of feminisms. As I have demonstrated throughout these chapters, these postfeminist texts and representations require “Others” to make any sense to us at all. Therefore, when we bracket the postfeminist we are always already in the realm of race, class, culture, religion, sexualities, and privilege. The most dangerous part in not acknowledging this is the potential for reproduction of a colonial or neocolonial mindset in which we allow ourselves to “buy in” to Western tropes of individualism and autonomy conveniently forgetting the others that call them into being, and thus rendering these postfeminist images as free, autonomous with the affect of pure pleasure in their consumption. Had we not built Western cultural discourse and policies on dichotomous logic, gender et. al, perhaps this kind of occasional bracketing would be benign. As it stands now, in the history of asymmetrical power between the dominant West and the colonized and neocolonized world, it seems at best ethically suspect to allow ourselves to non-reflexively pontificate on such important ideas that shape human lives as identity, subjectivity, and agency as though they were conceived and owned by dominant Western culture, even in our “entertainment” venues. We are also at a point best expressed by Jürgen Habermas, quoted by Nancy Fraser as “the exhaustion of

(leftwing) Utopian energies,”¹ a problem exacerbated by the postmodern urge to eschew “totalizing” narratives.”² While we can easily see how such totalizing narratives have served the hegemonic discourse of colonial and neocolonial oppression and terrorism, surely, Fraser argues, there must be a way that we can come to consensus about social justice (which naturally includes gender justice, of course) on something other than hegemonic terms. And even if we can’t, what does it mean to say that is not our goal?

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NOTES

Introduction

1. The terms “gender” and “sexuality” are contested in ones in academic theories. Judith Butler concludes that they are the same thing, or that they amount to the same thing. Many others believe that they are disparate descriptive terms that illuminate separate concepts. My work is not charged with debating this issue, and it is useful for me to separate gender and sexuality. In this work “gender” denotes the constructions and performances of masculinity and femininity by cisgenders, trans people and queers, and “sexuality” refers to cultural constructions of romantic and parenting partnerships.

2. Here I borrow Robyn Wiegman’s term from her book, *Object Lessons*, as she aptly notes that describing a group of people as a minority is constitutive and essentialist, while the term “minoritized” highlights the “social processes” that create inequalities.

3. Jess Butler, “For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion,” *Feminist Formations*, Volume 25, Issue 1, Spring 2013, 37.

4. This is a term I’ll discuss in depth throughout the work. Suffice it here to say “empowerment” can be an empty signifier as deployed through postfeminist rhetoric.

5. Simone de Beauvoir, “The Second Sex,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, Accessed Nov. 10, 2013 7:28pm, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Medical technology is currently changing this; in de Beauvoir’s era it was indisputable.

9. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction,” *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.

10. This term was inspired by the comments of Marina Peterson.

11. Jacques Derrida, “Interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.

12. Ibid.

13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 89.
14. Black Hawk Hancock, "Put a Little Color on That!" *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter 2008), 789.
15. Rob Schaap's essay, "No Country for Old Women: Gendering Cinema in Conglomerate Hollywood" in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, (eds. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer, analyzes such trends in contemporary popular American media producers.
16. Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 2.
17. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005) 17.
18. Ibid.
19. Barbara Creed, *Media Matrix: Sexing the New Reality*, (Crow's Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 10.
20. In his new book, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music and the Conquest of Culture*, (2012), Timothy D. Taylor argues that the fusion of advertising, music and popular culture is a central force in the creation of contemporary consumerist subjects. Future studies on postfeminism might benefit from considering popular music as another facet of gender identity construction in contemporary America.
21. Rosalind Gill's *Gender and the Media* is a recent wide-reaching text in which she argues the ubiquity of the postfeminist lens through advertising, journalism, talk shows, magazines, as well as movies and television.
22. See the work of Angela McRobbie, Sarah Projansky, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, Imelda Whelehan, Hilary Radner, et. al.
23. Stéphanie Genz, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 5.
24. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 1.
25. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 2-3.
26. Because I teach classes that are not majority white, it is interesting to note the issues in a women's studies class that resonate across identities and backgrounds. The hypersexualization of women in media is one area that typically unites the class.

27. Misha Kavka, "Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is the "Post" in Postfeminism?" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), 31.
28. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 1.
29. Ibid, 11.
30. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000), xxiv.
31. Amber E. Kinsner, "Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism," *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), 131.
32. Many of my Women's and Gender Studies students find a personal resonance with the inclusiveness and the expansion of the Third Wave.
33. Many scholars have dealt with these particular texts. See Tasker and Negra, Genz and Brabon, Radner, et al.
34. Brenda R. Weber's book, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, details this phenomenon in purest form of reality television.
35. Kay Young, "Hollywood, 1934: 'Inventing' Romantic Comedy," *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, Studies in Humor and Gender, Vol. 1, Ed. Gaily Finney. (Amsterdam: OPA, 1994) p. 257-261.
36. Paul Haggis, *Miss Representation*. Film. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. New York City: Virgil Films and Entertainment, LLC, 2012.
37. For a short list of theorists who take this position see the work of Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, Hilary Radner, Rosalind Gill, Christina Scharff, Stéphanie Genz, Sarah Projansky, and Imelda Whelehan.
38. Princess and bridal narratives certainly have been circulated for centuries at least in Western textual production. However, it is the intense proliferation, the emphatic nature of the texts in postfeminist texts that brackets the era. It is outside the scope of this project, but in future work on postfeminism a historical evaluation of the social deployments of potential for postfeminist failure and postfeminist guilt in princess and bridal media may provide rich material for analysis.
39. "Creepy Girl in Closet Android Phone Commercial," YouTube video, 0:30, posted by screammoviereview, Uploaded August, 10, 2011, accessed May 21, 2013, 4:38pm, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvwS27TIYhU>.
40. Resistant readings are certainly possible, but to claim a text as feminist, or as I

call it, productively feminist, our first move should not have to be reading against the grain.

41. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1991), xi.

42. "Laddism" is the term in Great Britain to describe the male counterpart in postfeminism; there is no analogous term in U.S. postfeminist discourse, further underscoring the normalization of postfeminism's prescriptive gender and sexual roles in the U.S.

43. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, 1-15.

44. Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, 5-11.

45. "According to the Bureau of the Census, 75% of the seven million Americans who provide informal unpaid care are women." Judy Root Aulette and Judith Wittner. *Gendered Worlds*, Sec ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 236.

46. Maureen Dowd "Pompom Girl for Feminism," *The New York Times*, Feb 23, 2013, accessed Mar 13, 2013 at 8:15am, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/opinion/sunday/dowd-pompom-girl-for-feminism.html?_r=0.

47. Nanette Fondas, "Marissa Mayer's Potentially Revolutionary Paternity Leave Policy," *theatlantic.com*, May 1, 2013, accessed May 20, 2013 at 6:57pm, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/05/marissa-mayers-potentially-revolutionary-paternity-leave-policy/275468/>. Yahoo CEO's Marissa Mayer has garnered less press for her career and motherhood balance since it was revealed that she built a private, personal nursery next to her corporate office, though she is attempting a groundbreaking paternal leave policy.

48. Slaughter, Anne-Marie, "The 'Having It All' Debate Convinced Me to Stop Saying 'Having It All,'" *theatlantic.com*, July 2, 2012, Accessed May 9, 2013 8:39am, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-having-it-all-debate-convinced-me-to-stop-saying-having-it-all/259284/>

49. Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism*, (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 2000), 3.

50. *Ibid*, 12-13.

51. *Ibid*, 11.

52. *Ibid*, 4.

53. Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6-25.

54. Ibid, 7.

55. Ibid.

56. See the work of Stéphanie Genz, particularly *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*.

57. *The Change-Up* (2011) is a recent example.

58. Stéphanie Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 17-18.

59. Gill and Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, 4.

60. I use the term “Anglo feminisms” to refer to English-speaking countries, as McRobbie is British and speaks simultaneously about both British and American postfeminist cultures. Most, of not all, postfeminist analysis is based on mainstream Anglo culture, particularly the U.S. and Great Britain. I want to distinguish this fact as I will carry out an analysis of feminism in global media in the third chapter.

61. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009) 1.

62. Ibid, 12-15.

63. Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, xiv-xv.

64. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 7.

65. Ibid, 7.

66. Though I am intrigued and buoyed by Occupy Wall Street movements begun in 2011, we are still waiting to see if they have gained momentum and will have lasting impact. Also, they did not seem to have an element challenging gender norms.

67. These ideas are explored in depth in Rosalind and Christina Scharff’s edited collection of essays: *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*.

68. Gwyneth Paltrow, “Home” *goop*, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://goop.com/about/whats-goop>.

69. Of course the recent Occupy Wall Street movements could potentially test this

theory, but they seem to have dissolved, and we are still waiting to assess their impact, if any, on legislators and the marketplace.

70. Though it is outside the parameters of this project, an engagement with reception studies would be of value to the scholarly debate on postfeminism.

71. While many use the term “difference” to refer mostly to race/ethnicity constructions, I use it here more broadly as encompassing the various Othering identities that work to create the postfeminist subject.

72. It must be noted here that though many feminists still remark on the troubling comparison Friedan made, we still find such metaphors in feminist media criticism such as in the work of postfeminist critic, Stéphanie Genz, who titles a chapter of her book, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, “The Problem that Has a Name: The Feminine Concentration Camp.”

73. Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Second Wave Feminism in the United States (Summer, 2002).

74. Some young women do identify as Third Wave feminists, such as outlined in the Book, *Manifesta*, by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, but even that term lacks momentum and is not often used nor well understood in the mainstream media.

75. A recent example of issue-based feminism is the self-declared feminist criticism of Rush Limbaugh’s virulent reaction to Sandra Fluke’s congressional testimony insisting that state-funded Catholic hospitals should pay for contraceptives.

76. I’ll discuss the movement for the legalization of gay marriage in the second chapter.

77. There is also a corresponding discourse in the UK referred to as “laddism,” but there is no analogous term or discourse in US culture, underscoring the naturalization of androcentrism and patriarchy as the preferred state particularly in American culture.

78. *Miss Representation*. Dir. Jennifer Siebel Newsom. 2011. Film.

79. For a culled list of statistics on women in the media and myths about women in the media see: <http://seejane.org/research/>.

80. Paraphrased from interview with Paul Haggis. *Miss Representation*. Dir. Jennifer Siebel Newsom. 2011. Film.

81. Again, I use the term “feminist” loosely as a marker for the desire to imagine a world where gender does not matter.

82. As I described earlier in the introduction, I'm speaking of films with large followings, those that are widely shared as American popular cultural space.

83. I'll discuss the exceptions of "cougars" and "MILFs" in the third chapter.

84. My student, Samantha Cox, refers to these outfits as "SuperThongs."

85. One may read Vasquez as an "alien" herself in a combination of Hispanic and queer, and thus she, too, must die in the narrative.

86. Madeleine Albright was the first woman to hold this position and with Hilary Clinton following her in this position, she achieved the highest level of government any woman has attained in U.S. history.

87. *Miss Representation*.

88. *Miss Representation*.

89. Certainly Oprah Winfrey is the exception who proves the rule, but it is notable that she has *not* started a national women's movement to succeed in corporate America. I will discuss her persona in the third chapter.

90. Gay partnership and parenting in white, middle class male homes is perhaps a limited exception in popular television shows such as *Modern Family*. I'll discuss the problematic Hollywood lesbian film, *The Kids Are All Right*, in the third chapter.

Chapter 1

1. Later I will discuss fat shaming in the postfeminist era and the cycle of transgression, confession, and public humiliation that earns especially formerly famous women another chance in the limelight.

2. The celebrity press' reluctance to give up the narrative of Jennifer Aniston's continually failing romantic life over the past eight years is exemplary of this postfeminist phenomenon.

3. Outside the genre of comedy, gaining and losing weight for roles is often attributed to an actor's dedication to their craft. Note Charlize Theron's Oscar-winning performance as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003) for which she famously, and given the Oscar, one could argue, successfully, put on weight.

4. Though the author of the books is British and the setting is Great Britain, *Bridget Jones's Diary* can be classified as an American film (as much as any film can claim a nationality) due to both its casting of the main character, and its distribution and

reception record.

5. *Sex and the City* is an exception of sorts in this regard and I'll cover it in more detail later in this chapter. However even this series ends in the films with three of the four women in marriage, two with children.

6. Jessica Reaves' article in *Time Magazine*, "I'm a Feminist—and I Love Bridget Jones's Diary" sums up this perspective instructively. Accessed April 22, 2013 6:21pm, <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,106224,00.html>.

7. One might note the lack of parity in this distinction. When has a heterosexual male comedy been lauded as one that appeals to women?

8. For example, Mary Pols from TIME magazine online describes the film as a potential "turning point for feminism and comedy" and "a shrewd examination of female insecurity," in her article, "Bridesmaids: Kristen Wiig's Merry Band of Party Poopers" published on May 11, 2011 <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/05/11/bridesmaids-kristin-wiig-review/> Accessed May 9, 2013 8:00am.

9. Another reading of this text might consider the episode in the bridal shop through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's "grotesque body" or one that simultaneously works to degrade and to renew or affirm life in the human body. Certainly if *Bridesmaids* proves to be a source of inspiration for further "gross-out" comedy enacted by feminine bodies, this lens would be crucial.

10. See *Kicking and Screaming*, *Dodgeball*, *The Forty Year-Old Virgin*, *Cyrus*, *Role Models*, *Knocked Up*, *The Hangover*, *Step Brothers*, *Elf*, among many, many more from the past decade.

11. "Cringe humor" is a term used to denote the representational style of characters and situations in a mode that is challenging to bourgeois norms.

12. Class privilege and postfeminism is covered in depth in the second chapter.

13. Jenna Marbles, "Drunk Makeup Tutorial," YouTube video, 7:35, posted by Jenna Marbles, April 18, 2012, accessed November 21, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXzwAXzUwwE>.

14. It's important to note that the series aired on a cable network which, at the launch of the series, was less censored in its sexual content.

15. This episode also highlights the consumerist quality that *Sex and the City* developed; in this case, the show colludes with a sex toy industry in mainstreaming its products for a wider public consumption.

16. A rare exception is a film like *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998),

starring Angela Bassett in the lead role as a middle aged woman who take son a younger man first as a lover and then as a partner. However, I'll cover exceptionalities in African American cinema that assumes a female audience in the postfeminist era the second chapter.

17. Star was also the writer for many episodes of earlier shows that often famously denigrate women including *90210* and *Melrose Place*.

18. University of Southern California School for Communication and Journalism. <http://annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/130513SmithStudy.aspx>. No author. Accessed May 17, 2013 7:09 pm.

19. For example, *Bridesmaids* was directed by a man, Paul Feig, and was produced by Judd Apatow. Apatow was also on the creative team of the series, *Girls*. Gary Winick directed *Bride Wars*, *13 Going On 30*, *Letters to Juliet*, while Will Gluck directed *Friends with Benefits* and *Easy A*, among many, many others.

20. "University of Southern California School for Communication and Journalism," May 13, 2013, accessed May 17 2013, <http://annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/130513SmithStudy.aspx>.

21. "Bechdel Test Movie List," accessed November 21, 2013, <http://bechdeltest.com/>.

22. *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011) and *Did You Hear About the Morgans?* (2009) are the two most recent examples.

23. Andrew Goldman, "The Fogies of 'South Park,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2011, Accessed April 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/magazine/talk-trey-parker-and-matt-stone-of-south-park.html?_r=0

24. One might thus ponder the lack of media that celebrate women outside the gaze of sexualization.

25. *Cosmopolitan* is a magazine founded by Helen Gurley Brown, author of *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), an iconic text that encouraged women to have careers and be single, but to always perform as heterosexually alluring in order to achieve their goals.

26. *Miss Representation*.

27. Daniel Engber writes in his "Guys on Girls" column for *Slate* magazine that "...the whole thing left me baffled and uncomfortable. Why are these people having sex, when they are so clearly mismatched—in style, in looks, in manners, in age, in everything?" accessed 10/20/13 6:46pm,

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/tv_club/features/2013/girls_season_2/week_5/girls_on_hbo_one_man_s_trash_episode_5_of_season_2_reviewed_by_guys.html.

28. There is, of course, a loose reference to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, but beyond a notion of general sexual transgression, the resemblance ends there.

29. This character also follows the postfeminist script as serving as the catalyst for the male protagonist to move forward in his life as his subjectivity is constructed as central.

30. Notably, young women around the world have begun to organize "SlutWalks," a protest in which they dress provocatively and attempt to reclaim the power attached to the idea of a slut. Many feminists support these young women on the grounds that they are creatively organizing around an important topic in way that they find meaningful. Others criticize U.S. SlutWalks for racial insensitivity as groups of women in the U.S. have different sexual histories, and for reaffirming androcentric and patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality.

31. Though Molly Shannon was a popular member of the SNL cast for a time, her career did not find traction in the postfeminist era.

32. Another potentially productive line of inquiry about postfeminist texts is their relationship to the reflexive nature of contemporary television (and some film) comedy.

33. Kohen, Yael. *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy, A Very Oral History*, (New York: NY, Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012.) 260.

34. *Ibid*, 259-60.

35. *Miss Representation*.

36. The name of Lemon's show was originally *The Girlie Show*, starring Jane Krakowski's Jenna Maroney before they hired Tracy Morgan's Tracy Jordan as the star and it became TGS, the name retaining a trace of its origins as a production targeted to women.

37. This analysis is based entirely on the first season of *Parks and Recreation*.

38. Linda Mizejewski, "Feminism, Postfeminism, and Liz Lemon." *Genders*, Issue 25, Spring, 2012, accessed August 23, 2013, http://www.genders.org/g55/g55_mizejewski.html.

39. I'll discuss Jenna Maroney and gender momentarily.

40. For example, see almost any comedy involving Adam Sandler, Judd Apatow,

Seth Rogen, or Jack Black.

41. A cross-dresser or transvestite is a person of various sexualities whose everyday gender performances are deliberate and mutable. A drag queen is a man, usually a gay male, who performs a show as a woman while exaggerating the construction of gender.

42. Could elaborate with Negra, Tasker here...

43. Geena Davis founded the organization seejane.org that focuses on gender stereotyping of young women and men in popular media. Seibel-Newsom produced and directed the documentary *Miss Representation* which focuses on the intersection of sexualizing women in the media and women's achievements as equal players in media and politics.

44. An unusual film that evolves female friendship like a postfeminist romantic comedy is *For a Good Time Call* (2012).

Chapter 2

1. I discuss the term "queer" at length in the third chapter.

2. It is outside the parameters of this work to discuss the ramifications of a rapidly evolving mediascape in which we should pose questions about the method of delivery of media and the cultural valences associated with these methods.

3. Sarah Banet-Weiser, "What's Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 205.

4. Ibid, 205-8.

5. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June, 1993): 1709.

6. Ibid, 1715.

7. Ibid, 1737.

8. Ibid, 1741.

9. Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 32-34. Harris-Perry notes that within some black communities, the "angry black woman" may also be used by black men against black women whom they characterize as domineering or "gold-

digging.”

10. Ibid.

11. Paul Waldman's for *The American Prospect* offering a brief primer to welfare in the United States as of 2012: <http://prospect.org/article/truth-about-welfare>. He says, “According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in 2009 the TANF rolls were 31.2 percent white, 33.3 percent black, and 28.8 percent Hispanic. Yet the primary image of a "welfare recipient" in most people's mind is a black woman. This has been demonstrated in study after study by political scientists, psychologists, and communication scholars.” Accessed 10/27/13 6:50pm.

12. Misrecognition is an ambiguous term across disciplines. Harris-Perry uses it here to describe the conditions of being misrepresented in American media and politics.

13. Ibid, multiple pages.

14. Ibid, xiii.

15. Ibid, xi.

16. Certainly there are theorists who deal with race/ethnicity and sexuality in American culture, but Lee's is one of the few, thus far, that addresses these issues through an understanding of the extreme heterosexualization of the postfeminist era.

17. Harris-Perry, 184.

18. Harris-Perry, 21.

19. Ibid, 28-221.

20. Ibid, 183-188.

21. Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010), 69.

22. One must not forget that we still live in the same postfeminist culture whose premier sports magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, provides the ever more pornographically styled swimsuit edition each year. One could hardly mark that as a demonstration of feminist progressive potential in sports.

23. *Miss Representation*.

24. Janell Hobson's essay, “The Batty Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” is an excellent analysis of the reception and construction of black bodies in Western discourses. *Hypatia*, Volume 18, Number 4, Fall/Winter 2003, pp. 87-105.

25. There are also texts which initially seem to subvert dominant postfeminist prescriptions, but end up reinforcing stereotypical cultural designations of identity, and I will describe them in depth later in this chapter. Further, the final chapter will delineate global texts that operate similarly.

26. Butler, Pamela and Jigna Desai, "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2008, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1–31.

27. Ibid, p. 4.

28. Ibid, 6-9.

29. Ibid, 9.

30. Ibid.

31. I'm interested in how *The Mindy Project* fits into this argument, but I haven't seen enough to discuss yet. Episodes are on their way...I suspect Mindy is the first character in the postfeminist age who is openly postfeminist, like Tina Fey, and whose racial/ethnic difference does not naturally produce a critique of postfeminism, but I can't yet be sure. I may add this text in later if need be.

32. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47-85.

33. I'll discuss Perry/Murphy/Lawrence, etc. lampooning senior African American women in chapter three.

34. Many have criticized his caricature of a dominant African American senior, Madea, as a cross-dressing lampoon of older black women.

35. Jacqueline Bobo, "Reading through the Text: The Black Woman as Audience," *Black American Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 283.

36. Ibid, 284.

37. In the 2012 film awards season, *The Help* garnered a best picture nomination, a best actress nomination and two nominations for best supporting actress. Octavia Spencer won Best Supporting Actress against her (white) co-star, Jessica Chastain. The film and its cast gained accolades on the major and minor awards circuit, including awards reserved for African American media such as the BET Awards and the African American Films Critics Association.

38. hooks, bell. *Reel to Real* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 5.

39. See Hester Eisenstein for a cursory primer on this history in *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*.

40. I want to add the identity marker of “southern” here as well: if it’s appropriate to identify race as a potential blinder to otherness, isn’t a regional marker also employable to the same end? Note that I’m not suggesting that we adopt an essentialist position on either front, but that we take into account factors of identity that mark dominant voices in culture, especially as those voices structure race and gender in popular culture.

41. This textual maneuver is employed throughout Western culture to reify various hegemonies: cultural, racial, gendered, sexual, classed, etc.

42. A related theme in Western cinema is the “magical negro,” or the use of a black character to help the centralized white character achieve some goal of his/her own. A recent example of the “magical negro” is the relationships between a white man and his black caretaker in the widely praised French film across Western cultures, *The Intouchables* (2011).

43. The only other one in recent history that comes to mind is Cate Blanchett in *Notes on a Scandal* (2006).

44. Furthermore, the comeuppance for Hilly’s character is structured as one of reverse abjection—Minnie bakes Hilly chocolate pie infused with Minny’s feces and she tells Hilly this after Hilly has eaten two slices.

45. I’m not suggesting that there are no other examples, such as Madonna, or Beyoncé, but these personae fall well within postfeminist limitations of a heterosexualized self-construction and often play within those very norms. Even their occasional attempts to challenge such norms (such as Madonna’s staged kiss with Britney Spears at the 2003 Video Music Awards) do not challenge the inherent capitulation of postfeminism to androcentric norms, but instead ratchet up the performativity of such norms which may be unrecognizable to a culture already steeped in the postfeminist presentation of women as the objects of a male heterosexual gaze.

46. Winfrey’s deliberate invocation of capitalism and American identity is particularly interesting in light of Cheryl I. Harris’ analyses of race and the legal development of ownership that I described in chapter two.

47. Janice Peck, “Talk about Racism: Framing a Popular Discourse of Race on Oprah Winfrey,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 27 (Spring, 1994), pp. 89-126, p. 90.

48. Oprah Winfrey, “The Angel network,” *Oprah*, accessed August 21, 2013, http://www.oprah.com/angel_network.html. Accessed 8/21/2013.

49. Recently Winfrey starred in Lee Daniels’ latest film, *The Butler* (2013).

50. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, Metasebia Woldemariam, "Oprah Winfrey as Melodramatic Actress: Contributions of Winfrey's Feature-Film Performances to the Authenticity of Her Star Persona." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 25: 183–195, 2008.
51. Before Oprah Winfrey, talk show hosts did not command large salaries; nor do many of them go on to build a corporate empire.
52. Oprah Winfrey, "Oprah's Top 20 Moments," *Oprah*, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Oprahs-Top-20-Moments/1>. 7:27pm.
53. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, Metasebia Woldemariam, "Oprah Winfrey as Melodramatic Actress: Contributions of Winfrey's Feature-Film Performances to the Authenticity of Her Star Persona." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 25: 183–195, 2008, 183.
54. P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 132-33.
55. Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "All Het up! Rescuing Heterosexuality on the "Oprah Winfrey Show," *Feminist Review*, No. 54, Contesting Feminine Orthodoxies (Autumn, 1996), pp. 88-115, 9. Epstein and Steinberg, 10.
56. See Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*.
57. Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "All Het up! Rescuing Heterosexuality on the "Oprah Winfrey Show," 9.
58. "Dr. Phil McGraw, Biography," *bio. true story*, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.biography.com/people/dr-phil-mcgraw-9542524>.
59. Peck, 91.
60. Rosalind Gill and Christian Scharff, *Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 7.
61. Peck, 108.
62. This idea points to the need for an analysis of the advertising during *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and how the message of personal improvement may be reinforced through the neoliberal postfeminist practice of consumerism.
63. Epstein and Steinberg, 9
64. *Ibid*, 9.

65. Ibid, 8.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid, 9.

68. Sujata Moorti, "Cathartic Confessions or Emancipatory Texts? RAPE NARRATIVES ON THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW," *Social Text* 57, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 1998. Duke University Press, 83.

69. Ibid, 89.

Chapter 3

1. Queer theory has more or less upended feminist theories as it tends to explode comfortable, binarized distinctions of *any* identity markers, but especially those that lay claim to a definitive gendered/sexualized world order. However, postfeminism is the cultural force that restores the familiar gendered and sexualized dichotomies of mediatized American identities.

2. As I write today, June 26, 2013, the Supreme Court has overturned two landmark decisions in "gay rights" as they're called in the mainstream media. One gives states the power to recognize the marriages of two people who identify as the same gender/sex; the second involves the legal rights of those who have lived together as legally unrecognized spouses. Clearly the social and political landscape is changing and I look forward to charting these changes in American discourse. For the purposes of describing postfeminist discourse, however, the intricacies of marriage laws and rights are beyond my scope. However, queer theorist and activist, J. Jack Halberstam, offers a primer in her/his book, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal*, on the arguments for and against "gay marriage" within queer communities. For example, s/he notes that there are factions of queer communities who argue against the efficacy of such activist efforts in the legalization of marriage as these activists see the nuclear model of family and community life as merely symptomatic of larger and more damaging social structures and systems.

3. Diane Rehm, "State laws on Abortion," *The Diane Rehm Show*, July 2, 2013, accessed July 2, 2013, <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2013-07-02/state-laws-abortion>.

4. Ginia Bellafante, "Camping for Feminism," *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 30, 2013, Metropolitan section, 8.

5. "Lesbian" pornography is a subgenre for the male heterosexual gaze. Comparatively, there is very little pornography for actual lesbians and I'll discuss the

practice of lesbians watching gay male porn later as dramatized in the film *The Kids Are All Right*.

6. The film is obviously based on Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night*, but is now re-scripted for both modern American audiences and for consumption by American audiences steeped in postfeminism.

7. Certainly one could argue for that reading against the grain.

8. There are always exceptions that prove the rule such as female/queer characters from *The Wire* and *Orange is the New Black*, for example.

9. I'll reflect more on the gay best friend in postfeminism momentarily.

10. de Rossi portrayed a lesbian character, Olivia Lord, in Season 5 of FX's series, *Nip/Tuck*, in a brief love affair with the (mostly heterosexualized) main character, Julia McNamara (Joely Richardson).

11. Some of these are queered cult favorites from the start such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Others are anomalies in the postfeminist age: *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Wire*, etc., in their exceptional portrayals of lesbian characters, for example. And though there was a recurring lesbian couple on the very popular show, *Friends*, the couple was deployed to underscore the failure of a male character's performance of masculine heterosexuality. As such, the lesbians were never developed characters, serving more as one-line jokes for the policing of heterosexuality.

12. Aside from the aforementioned Sophia on *Orange is the New Black*, There are some notable exceptions such as small roles on the television series, *Friends*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Bones*, for example, but again, these characters are not developed but are instead to foreground a failure at masculinity (*Friends*), or as a comic device to tease heterosexual men (*Ally McBeal*), or as a one episode case with transgender serving as the sensationalistic twist (*Bones*).

13. The HBO series, *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), was the first popular mainstream show that appealed to a wide heterosexual audience that involved an interracial romantic relationship between two men.

14. They did air *The L Word* after Showtime dropped it, a dramatic series about the lives of several lesbians and transgendered people living in West Hollywood in the early 2000s.

15. Cohan, Steven. "Queer Eye for the Straight Guise: Camp, Postfeminism, and the Fab Five's Makeovers of Masculinity," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 177.

16. This is obviously a nod to the ill-fated romance of Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols and Nancy Spungen, his girlfriend. In fact, Sid in *High Art* asks several times to book a room at “The Chelsea” where Nancy died (and perhaps Sid killed her).

17. Annette Bening’s part-time claim to fame is that she took iconic wealthy, white, male bachelor, Warren Beatty, “off the market,” or she married him and had four children with him.

18. J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. (Boston: Beacon Press), 2012, 54.

19. Halberstam is currently self-identified by either masculine or feminine pronouns.

20. Halberstam, 54-56.

21. Ibid, 56.

22. Chris Straayer, “The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine in Narrative Feature Film,” *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, Minneapolis: MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 344.

23. Ibid, 351.

24. Halberstam, 56.

25. Indeed, the network AMC saw the connection between reality television and carnival freak shows as well, since they debuted a series this year entitled *Freakshow*, which showcases different bodies and extreme body art, thus the show operates like a carnival, placing certain people on display as objectified bodies of difference for mass consumption.

26. Anna Watkins Fisher, “We Love This Trainwreck! Sacrificing Britney to Save America,” *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 303-332.

Chapter 4

1. According to recent data from Center for American Women and Politics, women make up just 18.3% of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 20% of the Senate, which is the highest percentage for either branch in U.S. history. According to catalyst.org, women hold 4.2% of Fortune 500 CEO positions in 2013. Three of nine Supreme Court Justices are women in 2013, and according to a 2011 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article women are underrepresented as professors (making up only 33% at

doctoral universities), and over-represented in non-tenure track positions such as adjunct positions and lectureships. <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Pyramid-Problem/126614/>.

2. Martha Lauzen, "Boxed In: Employment of Behind-the-Scenes and On-Screen Women in 2012-13 Prime-time Television," *Boxed In*, San Diego State University, 2013, accessed Nov. 9, 2013, http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2012-13_Boxed_In_Report.pdf.

3. Rob Schaap, "No Country for Old Women: Gendering Cinema," 155.

4. Ibid, 157.

5. Vicki Woods, "Meryl Streep: Force of Nature," *Vogue*, December 12, 2011, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/meryl-streep-force-of-nature/#1>.

6. Anne Morey, "Grotesquerie as Marker of Success in Aging Female Stars," *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, eds. Su Holmes and Diane Negra. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

7. Ibid, 105.

8. Ibid, 104.

9. Ibid, 108.

10. Imelda Staehelin, "Ageing Appropriately: Postfeminist Discourses of Ageing in Contemporary Hollywood," *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 101.

11. Ibid, 103.

12. *Miss Representation*.

13. This postfeminist age standard seems to work slightly differently in women from British acting and culture, as there is more than one older woman who has achieved an active career in front of the camera well into (and some past) her middle-aged years without allegiance to the consumerist ideal of youth (plastic, surgery, Botox, etc.): Judi Dench, Helen Mirren, Tilda Swinton, Emma Thompson, for example.

14. Though one could certainly read Mrs. Ganush as the victim in the film, and writer/director, George Romero has substantiated such a reading in interviews, postfeminist and Hollywood narrative training offer a more accessible and preferred reading that Mrs. Ganush is an evil force and Christine is our heroine.

15. For the sake of accuracy, in her descent to hell, Christine does cough up a fly—though this is due to the proximity to and curse of Mrs. Ganush.

16. While it is not germane to this discussion, there are many types of derogatory portrayals and stereotypes of particularly older women in American media: the hostile mother-in-law, the daft but kind sexless older woman, the malicious crone, the abject hag, the masculine “ball-buster,” etc.

17. Negra, Diane. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, (London: Routledge) 2009, 70-5.

18. Ibid, 72.

19. I do, however, use the terms cougar and MILF throughout my work for the purposes of description and reclamation.

20. See: *American Pie* (1999).

21. To underscore my point, *Cougar Club*'s closing credit montage is a summary of all the bare breasts shown the film with the addition of those from the editing room floor.

22. Rob Schaap, “No Country for Old Women: Gendering Cinema,” 157.

23. The film, *Chéri* (2009), is a kind of anomaly in the postfeminist age in that the narrative centralizes a mature woman, Michelle Pfeiffer, in the lead role as a former courtesan who has a romance with a younger man. The film is a period piece depicting the Belle Époque and is also based on the novel by the same name published in 1820 by Colette, herself a controversial figure in French literature for her fluid sexuality and for her sexual exploits. While the novel is primarily concerned with recasting the woman as the dominant in the relationship, the film is ambiguous in making this same distinction; however, the cougar relationship is portrayed as a love affair and not as a mere variant of exploit for a young man.

24. Certainly there are more media which feature cougars, but the texts I discuss are some of the only ones which feature cougars as primary themes or characters.

25. I put this term in quotes because it is a reliable flag in postfeminist texts for the reinforcement of neoliberal, patriarchal and androcentric norms.

26. Aram's friend and fellow barista whispers “MILF” to him the first time they see Sandy in a moment coded to characterize the friend as sexist, which neatly provides the opportunity for an early characterization of Aram as critical of sexist and ageist attitudes.

27. I hesitate to call what the paparazzi do to celebrities as “reporting” not on

ethical grounds but for the sake of accuracy.

28. Nussbaum, Emily. "The Cougar Moment: The Best (Samantha Jones) and Worst (*Cougar Town*) of the Species," *New York*, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/61733/>.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Emily Jane Cohen, "Kitschen Witches: Martha Stewart: Gothic Housewife, Corporate CEO." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2005, 669.

33. <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/people/shows/stewart/profile.html>. Accessed 8-21-13 8:42pm.

34. One might ask why Winfrey has not been a site for feminist debate.

35. Emily Jane Cohen, "Kitschen Witches: Martha Stewart: Gothic Housewife, Corporate CEO," 651.

36. Ibid, 655.

37. Nancy Shaw writes that the amount of money for which Stewart was charged with obtaining illegally was \$228,000. "Cloning Scapegoats: Martha Stewart Does Insider Trading." *Social Text* 77, Vol 21, No. 4, Winter 2003, 56.

38. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, (Los Angeles, Sage, 2009), 1.

39. Michael J. Golec, "Martha Stewart Living and the Marketing of Emersonian Perfection." *Home Cultures*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 2006, 9.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid, 11.

42. Ibid, 12.

43. Nancy Shaw, "Cloning Scapegoats: Martha Stewart Does Insider Trading." *Social Text* 77, Vol 21, No. 4, Winter 2003, 55.

Chapter 5

1. The vast majority of global corporations are headquartered in the United States. There are a few in Europe and a few in South Korea.

2. I use the term “Global South” instead of third world or developing world so as not to reinforce hegemony through nomenclature.

3. Much work has been conducted in the effects of globalization on international workers. Two of these which are pertinent to women’s rights are the edited volume of essays, *The Gender of Globalization: Women Navigating Cultural and Economic Marginalities*, eds. Nandini Gunewardena and Ann Kingsolver, and Leslie T. Chang’s ethnography of young Chinese women workers, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*.

4. Some researchers have noted that the sites of manufacture prefer women for their assumed docility over male workers who might be more inclined to defy authority, to protest and/or to organize.

5. Certainly globalization, even in my limited use of the term, does not describe every instance in every culture. *The New York Times* editorial writer, Nicholas Kristof, has defended the practices of locating manufacturing overseas as beneficial particularly to women in China in several of his columns as providing jobs and income they would not have had otherwise, no matter how little they are paid. And there are several essays in the collection edited by Nandini Gunewardena and Ann Kingsolver, *The Gender of Globalization: Women Navigating Cultural and Economic Marginalities*, which problematize the processes of globalization for various populations of women around the world, specifically stressing that the deleterious effects of globalization on women’s populations in the Global South is not tantamount to a removal of women’s agency, though the bulk of this work details the hardships and increased poverty levels incurred by women internationally because of the forces of globalization. However, my concern here is less with the intricacies of globalization, and more with its specter in postfeminist texts.

6. Gill, Rosalind and Christina Scharf, eds. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

7. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 26.

8. One could argue that requiring women to cover themselves is just another form of sexualization in that a woman’s primary signification is still not “human” but “sexual desire.”

9. Many debates about postfeminism have focused on its reactionary status toward Second Wave feminism. One concise yet thorough discussion of this debate is in the

opening chapters of Stephanie Genz's *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*.

10. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 22.

11. Edward Said, "Edward Said On Orientalism," YouTube video, 40:31, posted by Palestine Diary, October 28, 2012, accessed November 21, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g.

12. Ian Baucom, "Cryptic, Withheld, Singular," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 2 (2000): 422.

13. Ibid, 418.

14. Ibid, 422.

15. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 44.

16. See Cowie's essay, "Woman as Sign," from *Feminism and Film*.

17. Fanon, 38.

18. For a psychoanalytic interpretation of this battle, see Jeffrey Louis Decker's "Terrorism (Un)Veiled: Frantz Fanon and the Women of Algiers."

19. Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" *Third World Quarterly*, 25, no. 4 (2004): 522.

20. Leila Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil," *Veil: Veiling Representation and Contemporary Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 43.

21. Golley's essay, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" explores more fully the tensions between Western and Arab feminism, and several essays from the book, *Veil: Veiling Representation and Contemporary Art* deal with the cultural tensions of veil signification. Specifically, Alison Donnell's essay from this book, "Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September" details the Western circumscribed victimhood of Afghan women by the U.S. government and media in a move eerily reminiscent of Fanon's characterization of the French colonial's similar characterization of Algerian women.

22. Alison Donnell, "Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September," *Veil: Veiling Representation and Contemporary Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 127.

23. As I write this in September of 2013, President Obama is calling for special counsel with Congress to decide on military action toward Syria.

24. It should be noted that the film makes an effort to humanize two Saudi police officers befriended by the FBI agents. However, these officers are treated equally in exact proportion to their demonstration of Westernness. Thus we do not see them performing Islam; they adopt Western modes of behavior with Jennifer Garner, including touching her, etc. The film relinquishes their cultural identities to Westernize them and thus render them palatable subjects for equal textual treatment. Of course, the only main character to die in the film is one of these officers, much like the racialized buddy dies in Westerns.

25. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction to In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter, 2005): 108.

26. Stephanie Genz discusses this facet of postfeminism at length in the "Fighting It: the Supergirl" chapter in her book, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*.

27. Tasker and Negra, "Introduction to In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," 109.

28. Since the United States has maintained prickly relations with Saudi Arabia for decades, "hostile territory" would be difficult to define when Americans force a military presence into such a scenario.

29. Tasker and Negra, "Introduction to In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," 108.

30. bin Laden was not offered a trial by the U.S. government.

31. Fawzia Afzal-Khan covers this aspect of the film well in "The Heart of Darkness in Zero Dark Thirty," on [counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org).
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/12/14/the-heart-of-darkness-in-zero-dark-thirty/>, accessed September 1, 2013.

32. Ibid.

33. What am I to do but reproduce the film's naming?

Conclusion

1. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist Condition'* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

2. Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 4.



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