

Getting Even: Feminist Agency and Postfeminist Containment in Girl Power Narratives

By Caryn Murphy

Warner Bros. released *What a Girl Wants* in late March of 2003, just as American troops were invading Iraq. The two events would seemingly be unrelated, as the sixteen-year-old star of the film, Amanda Bynes (from the WB's hit comedy *What I Like About You*) was not a political activist or advocate for social change. However, as America went to war and Bynes' movie marched on theaters, Warner Bros. decided to alter the print ad campaign for the film, worried that it would otherwise be interpreted as a political statement. Print ads and posters showed Bynes posed in front of two British Royal guards, wearing a form-fitting tank top with a U.S. flag on it. She held one hand on her hip, and the other hand struck an assertive peace sign. The studio altered the ads at the last minute, digitally removing the peace sign and placing Bynes' offending hand in a "more neutral pose" (Smith E3). It is significant that the studio worried about the potential influence that the image might hold within and outside of their target teen girl demographic. A spokeswoman from the studio explained that this was a marketing decision, and that "the movie, a teen comedy about a girl who travels to London to find her long-lost father, isn't war-related or even political" (qtd. in Smith E3). The studio's willingness to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to alter the existing print ad campaign signals their desire to effectively target teenage girls, but also their concern about the potential influence of teen girl protagonists.

It is impossible to measure the impact of the changes in the film's media campaign, but *What a Girl Wants* became a modest hit, cementing the star status of Bynes at Warner Bros. Although major combat in Iraq had ceased before the film made its way to video and DVD, the digitally-altered image of Bynes also became the cover art for these formats. Throughout the campaign's changes, the film's tagline remained prominently displayed on the poster: "Trying to fit in. Born to stand out." This slogan epitomizes the underlying thematic paradox of contemporary girls' popular culture. Girls' media promotes conformity while simultaneously flattering the teen girl demographic with messages about the importance of their individuality.

The film *What a Girl Wants* and the star persona of Amanda Bynes can both be understood as part of the popular discourse of "Girl Power" that emerged in the 1990s. As a series of statements about young women's social and cultural empowerment, the discourse proclaims that young women should reject passive feminine behavior; it associates girlhood with confidence, fun, and, often, beauty. Girl Power emerged in mainstream consciousness through a boom in girls' culture products that began in the 1990s and continues to a lesser extent today. Although some argue that the discourse has been largely consumerist, it has also clearly circulated as a cultural trend influenced by feminist gains. Girl Power, derived from grassroots feminism, is an articulation of the strength and authority of young women.¹ Although many representations of Girl Power offer very limited visions for the scope of this authority, the multitude of representations provided and the media industries' reliance on the teen girl market in the 1990s

combined to open up a range of aspirational possibilities for young women during this time.

In the discussion which follows, I argue that recent depictions of Girl Power in print media and Hollywood films constitute a “backlash” against the feminist potential of the concept. My intent is to explore how cultural responses to Girl Power try to contain, deny, or erase the emerging agency of young women.

Girl Power in a Postfeminist Context

In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi's 1991 book, the author argues that during the 1980s there was a backlash against the gains of second wave feminism in American popular culture. Faludi documents the ways that print media, television, and movies depicted the “damaging” effects of women's liberation. Mainstream news outlets reported on how feminism had “failed” women and hit films including *Fatal Attraction* depicted single career women as a social problem. These representations offered a two-pronged vision of women's position in society. First, Faludi argues, media coverage of women became overwhelmingly postfeminist, stating that equality had been won, and feminism was over. Second, these representations (often simultaneously) depicted women as unhappy with the gains of feminism, arguing that “equality” had made women's lives more stressful and difficult. Women's gains in the professions, for example, were muted by the fact that career women were (supposedly) less likely to marry and have children than non-professionals. Faludi argued that this backlash was symptomatic of the typical ebb and flow cycle of feminist activity in which historically time periods that have

produced feminist gains have been followed by time periods characterized by backsliding and reactionary politics.

Faludi's concept of backlash has been productively utilized by cultural studies scholars including Mary Douglas Vavrus and Diane Negra.² In her 2001 book, *Watching Rape*, Sarah Projansky expands upon the concept by meticulously examining articulations of postfeminism in the media. She argues that "backlash" is one of five major types of postfeminist statements that seek to contain or curtail the social and cultural equality of women (67-68). Projansky analyzes representations of adult women and sexual violence in film and television, arguing that postfeminist depictions "illustrate the adaptability and pervasiveness of the assumption in popular culture that feminism existed, was wholeheartedly absorbed by the mainstream, and therefore is no longer needed" (68). My intent is to use the concept of backlash to analyze mediated discussions and film representations of young women's empowerment to demonstrate a similar cultural response to the discourse of Girl Power. I am terming the phenomenon that I document a backlash against the feminist *potential* of Girl Power, in order to acknowledge the limitations of the discourse in seeking social, political, and economic gender equality.

Although attempts to contain Girl Power are multi-faceted, I focus on two major types of statements of the backlash against second wave feminism: discussions in the media of how girls are better than equal and film depictions of young women's collective empowerment as a threat that needs to be repressed or controlled. These statements

function as responses to Girl Power, demonstrating that girls are already empowered and that girls' empowerment represents a social problem.

Better than Equal: Girls and Educational Attainment

"Feminism has become a dirty word," decreed the Spice Girls, a globally successful British pop group, in 1997 (qtd. in Douglas 21). They positioned Girl Power as its new and improved successor, designed to capitalize on the achievements of second wave feminism without weighing young women down with concerns about continuing gender oppression. Girl Power was celebrated in national news magazines as evidence of young women's economic privilege, physical strength, and growing sense of confidence. In her study of female celebrity culture, Susan Hopkins positions Girl Power as a linear result of feminism when she writes, "Girl Power is a postfeminist movement, in the sense of coming after and perhaps overcoming feminism" (2). She denies the relevance of the discourse to continuing discussions of gender equality, a trend which has also been mirrored in popular press coverage.

In June of 1998, *Time* magazine published a now-infamous cover story headlined, "Is Feminism Dead?" The cover shot featured three renowned feminist leaders in black and white alongside a full-color shot of fictional television character Ally McBeal. The design of the cover encouraged readers to answer "yes" to the question posed by urging a mental comparison between political activists from feminism's past and the neurotic and insecure TV heroine of the day. Inside the magazine, Ginia Bellafante's story was titled, "Feminism: It's All About Me!" and it returned to the theme that

feminism was “over.” Bellafante argued that not only were women uninterested in struggles for social, political, and economic equality, but that the overriding concerns of women were individual, rather than collective (54-60). This article appeared alongside a piece called “Girl Power!” by Nadya Labi which focused on the attention that media industries were currently lavishing on this target market. Labi chronicled trends including “seriously empowered heroines” (61) in Hollywood films and a rise in young women’s participation in athletics. Although she made nods to the crass commercialization of girl-powered culture and a rising tide of young women reporting body image dissatisfaction, she countered these criticisms with a discussion of the diversity present in teen girls’ magazines (61-62). These new entrants to the market distinguished themselves from the old guard by focusing on more than just boys and fashion, and by featuring (or claiming to feature) models of a wide range of body types, as well as racial and ethnic backgrounds.³ The juxtaposition of these two articles clearly positioned Girl Power as postfeminist; it provided a new focus on women’s empowerment, following the “death” of feminism.

Girl Power initially resonated with the wider culture in part because it coincided with a significant amount of popular press analysis on the “problem” of teenage girls and cultural fears surrounding young women’s self-esteem, educational attainment, and opportunities (or lack thereof) for the future. In 1994, Peggy Orenstein’s *Schoolgirls* and Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* were bestselling books that detailed crises in girls’ self-esteem that the authors related to a number of problems including: a lack of educational achievement; depression, and self-destructive behaviors ranging from self-mutilation to

suicide. In these popular texts, journalists and psychologists argued that girls' crises in adolescence were often significant, and could be traced to continuing inequities in gendered social roles. This trend was followed by a drastic shift, however; by the late 1990s, popular press articles and books argued that girls had become particularly empowered in terms of self-esteem and educational ability, at least in part as a natural result of the attention focused on them. The new rhetoric asserted that there was no need for Girl Power, and the focus on the position of young women in society that came along with its barrage of mass media representations. In fact, a number of authors claimed, the attention and resources that had been focused on empowering young women had resulted in a generation of disempowered young men. The need for Girl Power had passed, not only because young women were already empowered, but in actuality, their privileged status had the negative effect of diverting attention from the real "crisis" in young boys' self-esteem, educational attainment, and future outlook.

The shift from a cultural acknowledgement of girls' crises in self-esteem to a focus on boys' development can be examined through the ongoing discussion of gender and education that originated in the early 1990s. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) published "How Schools Shortchange Girls" in 1992, based on research from David and Myra Sadker. The report indicated that public education favored a masculine style of teaching and learning, and in more direct terms, that boys were directly favored over girls in the classroom.⁴ The AAUW report was widely publicized, and linked to classroom initiatives to correct the gender imbalance, particularly in the fields of math and science. By the late 1990s, the Sadkers' research

methods had come under fire, and the popular press had begun reporting on how boys suffered as a result of Girl Power initiatives. The headline, “How Boys Lost Out to Girl Power” ran in the *New York Times* in December 1998. The attention-grabbing title actually misrepresents the content of the article, in which Tamar Lewin reports that race and class are more serious sources of inequity in the classroom than gender. Although Lewin quotes several academic researchers on the seriousness of an achievement gap between black and white students, she mutes the implications of the combined effects of race and gender with rhetoric such as, “By all kinds of measures, though, girls rule in school” (3). The conclusion that Lewin supports is that boys have suffered at the hands of girls’ empowerment, and that non-white boys have suffered the most.

The achievement gap between boys and girls captured media attention (both in favor of and against Girl Power) by presenting girls’ and boys’ social and economic status as a zero-sum game, in which gains for either group meant losses for the other. Postfeminist author Christina Hoff Sommers capitalized on the attention given to the issue in 2000 with her book, *The War Against Boys*. The revealing subtitle, “How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men” demonstrates the author’s position on who has waged the “war” in question. Hoff Sommers argues that by the mid-1990s, feminist interest groups had successfully infiltrated public school curricula to the point where they dictated teachers’ priorities and the dynamics of the classroom environment. One of the main points of evidence put forth by Hoff Sommers as an effect of the “war” waged against young men was declining college enrollment by this group in the late 1990s. In December of 1998, another article from Tamar Lewin made the front page of the *New*

York Times with the headline, “American Colleges Begin to Ask, Where Have All the Men Gone?” Lewin cited United States Department of Education statistics indicating that by 1996, 8.4 million women were enrolled in college, as compared to 6.7 million men (WK1). Several reasons for this gap are suggested in the article, including boys’ lack of interest in education, a strong economy that offered appealing job opportunities (particularly in computer-related fields) to high school graduates, and girls’ increasing levels of success in high school. Lewin spoke with administrative officials at several college campuses who were employing consultants to help them appeal to boys with their recruitment materials. Lopsided enrollments that favored young women were discussed in the article as a problem to be solved, rather than as a mark of how far women have come.

Hoff Sommers used the gender gap in college enrollment as still more evidence that the educational system favors girls over boys, and by extension that Girl Power is unnecessary and destructive. She cited Brendan Koerner’s article “Where the Boys Aren’t” from *U.S. News and World Report* in early 1999, and U.S. Department of Education statistics that indicated women had by far outpaced men in college enrollment nationwide (30),⁵ but dismissed the provocative conclusions that Koerner made from the statistics. The reporters who worked on the article supported the idea that male college enrollment was low because in a time of economic growth, solid job opportunities were available to young men graduating from high school. Koerner argued that this trend could wind up being worse for women than for men, citing Judith Sturnick from the American Council on Education: “She says higher education could become

devalued because of its increasing feminization—the same phenomenon that has occurred with elementary school teachers—and that earning a bachelor's degree will someday be considered a foolhardy economic decision" (54). In other words, the trend towards highly-educated females does not necessarily indicate a trend towards highly-paid females, or gender equity as a whole. Hoff Sommers and other conservative voices in the popular press ignored these implications in favor of reporting on how girls' achievement had supposedly negated boys' potential for success. As this trend has continued, major newspapers have continued to report on the gender gap that favors girls in terms of high school graduation and college enrollment; they continue to attribute this gap to Girl Power, and to construe it as a "problem" for young men.⁶

Hoff Sommers reserved special vitriol for the government-sponsored "Girl Power!" program that launched in 1996 as an effort to support girls' self-esteem and educational achievement, and help them to avoid adolescent pitfalls including substance abuse and depression. In 2002, the conservative *Weekly Standard* published her article, "Girl Power! and Other Federal Idiocy," in which she argued that the Department of Health and Human Services program distributed "feminist propaganda" training girls to believe that they are better than boys. Hoff Sommers initially claimed that there is no evidence that "Girl Power!" is succeeding in its mission, but she credited it with teaching girls to view boys "as a hostile rival tribe with whom they are competing" (20). One of her criticisms was that the program was designed solely for girls, with no similar initiative launched for at-risk boys; she argues that the parallel program planned for 2002, "Boy Talk," seeks to eliminate young men's "natural" masculinity by encouraging them to

communicate more openly about their problems. She accused the planners behind “Girl Power!” and “Boy Talk” of valorizing femininity to the point where they have attempted to erase gender differences in favor of making boys into girls. Her main contention was that “Girl Power!” has detracted from a more necessary focus on social problems related to boys; in her view, the resources dedicated to this program dictated that no resources should be directed towards programs related to boys.

Hoff Sommers is not the only prolific opponent of Girl Power. Her sentiments are echoed in other popular press books including Lionel Tiger’s *The Decline of Males: The First Look at an Unexpected New World for Men and Women* (2000) and Richard T. Hise’s *The War Against Men* (2004). Susan Faludi examines similar subject matter in her cultural history, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male* (2000). Faludi does not relate the phenomenon of low self-esteem in boys to Girl Power, but instead argues that the cultural value associated with masculinity has been declining over a long period of time, culminating in a generation of young men who do not clearly see their roles in society, or possibilities for their futures.

The key point to note about the multiple participants in the popular press debate regarding educational achievement is that no substantive attention has been given to the most obvious disparity, the white/non-white achievement gap. Although many of these authors report that minority males are far less likely to attend college than white males or females, or minority females, the focus of their arguments is always on perceived gender inequity. The focus of their claims is that Girl Power is unnecessary

because girls are already privileged. Further, the argument implies that all girls are already more privileged than all boys, and all girls are responsible for boys' educational disempowerment. Girl Power is unnecessary, they argue, because girls already have more than enough authority. Girls' gains, however, are not in the service of gender equity; instead they wield their power at the expense of boys.

Sisterhood is Dangerous: The Perils of Girls' Friendships

The pleasures and dangers of teen girl sisterhood have been extensively represented on film over the past fifteen years. These representations are not uniform; in some films teen girls' friendships are presented as bonds that are stronger and more affirming than familial ties, while in others teen girls are presented as incapable of truly being friends with one another. The surprise success of the high school comedy *Clueless* in 1995 led to a revival of teen films in the late 1990s that were designed to capitalize on the growth of the teenage demographic. Films with teen girl protagonists appeared in multiple genres including horror (*Scream*, 1996), romantic comedy (*She's All That*, 1999)⁷, suspense (*Wild Things*, 1998), and melodrama (*Here on Earth*, 2000). Films about girls' friendships proliferated within the overall boom of teen films, a trend which is somewhat unusual given the fact that the majority of Hollywood films feature male protagonists. Backlash representations focus on the possible negative (sometimes catastrophic) impact of female community and collective action. Backlash films depict Girl Power, but emphasize that although female friendships are potent, they are also laden with treachery and deceit, and ultimately harmful. This message asserts that Girl Power might be positive for the individual, but when empowered girls get together (forming a

collective) trouble ensues. Often, girls' friendship films demonstrate that Girl Power threatens the normative order in boy-girl relations, alienating young women from young men. In backlash representations, young women's empowerment ultimately results in their unhappiness.

Although girls' friendship films do not constitute a formal genre, the films that I include in this discussion all share common traits. All of these films include teenage girls as main characters, their main subject matter centers around concerns related to adolescence, and they have all been discussed in the popular press as participants in the discourse of Girl Power.

The spate of Girl Power films has produced some unabashedly positive representations of female friendship groups. Two independent features from Jim McKay, *Girls' Town* (1996) and *Our Song* (2001), present female friendship groups as urban tribes. In *Girls' Town*, the friendship between four teenage girls (two white, two African-American) is tested when one of the girls commits suicide. The three surviving friends discover that the suicide was predicated by a sexual assault, and they question why their friend never told them about it. The girls bond together to address their experiences of gender inequality within their immediate environment. They create a "wall of shame" in the girls' bathroom at school, listing the names of students and adults who have sexually harassed and assaulted female students (under the heading, "Subvert the Patriarchy"). One of the girls is a single mother, and they steal from the baby's father to buy clothes and food to support the child. Eventually, the girls approach the man who sexually

assaulted their deceased friend and they physically assault him on a public street. The film deals realistically with the living and working conditions of the inner city, and consistently reaffirms the girls' friendship as the only support on which any of them can depend.

The friendship between the three teenage protagonists in *Our Song* is similarly framed, although the story centers on the imminent separation of the girls, whose inner city school is closing due to hazardous building materials. The film deals realistically with the choices available to African American and Latina girls from lower-income families; one girl plans to finish high school and attend college, one girl is pregnant and decides to raise her baby by herself (with help from her mother), and one girl leaves high school prior to graduation in favor of a low-wage job. The girls experience a number of traumatic events together, including the (unplanned) pregnancy and other serious health concerns. The film places a central emphasis on the nurturing and supportive nature of the girls' friendship, although it makes clear at the end that their future paths will diverge.

McKay's films were low-budget independent features, with limited release in theaters and on video/DVD. *Our Song* was initially screened at film festivals, but never shown in the multiplex. Although these films are about teenage girls, their distribution made them more accessible to the older demographic targeted by art house theaters than to mainstream youth audiences. However, positive representations of female friendships are also present in widely-distributed Hollywood fare from the Girl Power era.

Crossroads (2002) was directed by Tamra Davis and promoted as a vehicle for pop star Britney Spears; the film focuses on three former friends who revive their childhood bonds as they graduate from high school. The girls impulsively decide to take a cross-country road trip together, mostly because it suits each of their individual goals. During the course of the journey, they rediscover the importance of their childhood friendship, and they begin to trust and rely on one another again. Mimi, a white working-class pregnant teen, is intent on traveling to Los Angeles to enter a singing contest. Kit, is African American, beautiful, and one of the most popular girls in school. She wants to get to L.A. to visit her fiancé, who is in college. In a highly improbable turn of events, Kit discovers that her fiancé is actually the father of Mimi's baby. Kit chooses her friend (who suffers a miscarriage) over her fiancé; at the close of the film, they plan to return to their hometown together. Lucy, the brainy valedictorian played by Spears, initially travels with the girls in hopes of reuniting with her estranged mother. Her plan fails, but reconnecting with her friends helps her to develop new plans for her future. The film stresses that although all three of the girls are from different race, class, and familial backgrounds, they can work together to overcome obstacles that any of them faces as an individual. The film closes with the line, "Right now we have each other," stressing the importance of the friendship for each of the girls.

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (2005) provides a similar example. Based on the first in a series of popular novels for young adults, the film follows the separate summer adventures of four sixteen-year-old girls who are lifelong friends, and who share custody

of a pair of jeans. Like the girl group in *Crossroads*, the young women in the *Sisterhood* are multiethnic, from different types of family backgrounds, and they overcome individual problems with the collective power of friendship. Although the characters make a point of acknowledging their differences, the film affirms that their friendship bonds are stronger than any other forces that they encounter, and they are literally more present and supportive for each other than are any members of their actual families. The film's central theme, that friendship transcends difference, is conveyed metaphorically by the jeans that they share, which "magically" flatter each of them, although the girls vary significantly in terms of height, weight, and body type. *Crossroads* and *Sisterhood* are two examples of mainstream Girl Power films that showcase the strengths rather than the limitations of female friendships.

Athletics/competition films form a sub-type of Girl Power films, capitalizing on Generation Y's high level of participation and interest in sports. In 1998, Nadya Labi reported that 2.5 million girls were involved in competitive high school athletics, more than eight times as many as were recorded just twenty-five years earlier (62). Films within the sub-type devoted to girls' participation in athletics typically focus on traditionally feminine forms of engagement with sports: cheerleading, gymnastics, and volleyball. *Bring it On* (2000), a teen comedy about cheerleading, spawned multiple sequels and several imitations. In the original, cheer captain Torrance discovers that her team's choreographer has been stealing their winning routines from a squad of African-American girls whose school can't afford to help them travel to competitions. Although Torrance forms a strong friendship bond with a new member of her own squad,

members of the rest of the team are portrayed as deceitful and disloyal. The other two films in the series follow this formula: the success of the team depends on the heroine's plucky individualism and her ability to overcome their shortcomings as a group, rather than the team's ability to work together. *Stick It* (2006) places the pattern established by *Bring it On* in the realm of gymnastics, with the heroine working to regain her status as an Olympic hopeful. She trains with a group of girls who do not respect her, and, interestingly, although they are a team, they are portrayed as viciously competitive with each other, as well as with her. *All You've Got* (2006) again follows the formula by portraying the importance of individualism and self-reliance in a team sport, volleyball. *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999), a mockumentary, centers on girls' participation in beauty pageants, rather than athletic competition. Although the scenario is presented satirically and played for laughs, the plot involves a contestant who is so desperate to win the local competition that she murders the other frontrunners.

The athletics/competition films are notable because they provide a semi-realistic backdrop for competition and in-fighting among young women. The majority of these films are about team sports, but nonetheless they assert the primacy of the individual and depict the problems of communal effort and inter-reliance. While these films don't necessarily present Girl Power in a negative light, they do work to present it as an individual, rather than collective asset. In these films, the heroine can depend on herself (and may have one close female friend) but problems ensue when she attempts to rely on the dynamics of her group or team as an entity.

Although athletics/competition films hint at the problems that can arise from girls' social authority, backlash representations of Girl Power present the problems associated with girl group dynamics in an excessively negative light, as in *The Craft* (1996), a horror film about the disastrous effects of four girls using witchcraft to improve their positions within their high school's social hierarchy.⁸ Sarah, the protagonist, is a new student having difficulty adjusting to the rigid divisions between cliques at her high school. She begins to spend time with three social outcasts who casually dabble in witchcraft. Prior to Sarah's introduction to the group, the girls' attempts at spells have had no effect; they are shown in the opening scene chanting, "Now is the time, now is the hour; ours is the magic, ours is the power" but when they are introduced at school, it is obvious that no one takes their "power" seriously. On Sarah's first day at school, she points the girls out to Chris, a popular boy who is flirting with her. He explains that she should avoid them because Nancy is a "slut," Bonnie has "burn scars," and he does not even acknowledge the third girl, Rochelle, who is African American.

After Chris rejects her, Sarah joins forces with the outcasts and provides the key ingredient ("natural" ability) to turn their loose coalition into an actual coven; soon, the girls are working real magic. Initially, they use spells to address the conditions of their disempowerment. Bonnie uses witchcraft to remove the debilitating scars that cover most of her body and sap her self-confidence; when they disappear, her self-esteem visibly improves. Before the spell she dresses carefully to cover her scars, carries herself awkwardly, and has difficulty making eye contact during conversation. When her scars disappear, she wears revealing clothing, stands up straight, and aggressively flirts

with a boy she passes on the street, calling, “Don’t be shy honey – nice ass!” Nancy casts a spell to access the all-powerful spirit that governs the universe; in the short-term, she uses it to improve her family’s financial situation, allowing her to escape the conditions of poverty that make her a target for her peers’ disdain. Rochelle casts a spell for revenge against a racist girl who has been humiliating her at school. Rochelle specifically seeks to destroy the popular girl’s looks by making her hair fall out, because she sees this as the source of her enemy’s high self-esteem and self-confidence. Sarah casts a spell to make Chris, who called her “pathetic” and publicly humiliated her, become attracted to her.

Although their powers work to their advantage at first, things soon start to go wrong as the girls’ spells spiral out of control. Their group is beset by jealousy and struggles for control between Sarah and Nancy, and soon they are unable to work constructively together. Nancy is so jealous of Sarah that she uses a spell to seduce Chris, and then she kills him. Nancy then leads Rochelle and Bonnie in turning on Sarah (who wants to leave the group), and they try to kill her. Sarah eventually triumphs after accessing her internal power (she hears an otherworldly message telling her “reach inside yourself”) and engages in a physical struggle with Nancy. At the close of the film, Rochelle and Bonnie discover that they no longer possess any powers. Nancy has been committed to an insane asylum, where she is not only locked up, but confined to a bed with physical restraints. Only Sarah remains powerful; she is the only member of the group who understands the dangers associated with her abilities. When the girls operated as a collective, they quickly became corrupt and their power became a destructive force that

literally killed men. The separation of the girls at the end of the film signifies that on an individual level, each is somehow prevented from exercising a dangerous degree of power. *The Craft* provides the earliest clear example of what media scholar Karen Hollinger terms the “manipulative female friendship film” in her typology of the genre. Although Hollinger focuses her analysis on films about adult women, her description of this type of film as representing “women’s friendships as plagued by jealousy, envy, and competition for men” (207) accurately describes backlash representations within Girl Power films. Hollinger argues that manipulative female friendship films “teach women to beware of and fear one another,” (207) and in a number of Girl Power films, girls’ friendships beget real physical violence.

In contrast to *The Craft*, *Jawbreaker* (1999) is a backlash representation that focuses on the most popular group of girls in school, and the film is sympathetic to their privileged perspective. The plot is set in motion when three girls plan a surprise birthday event for the head of their clique, and they accidentally kill her as they are attempting to kidnap her from her bedroom. They cover up the murder, but find they have to take a social outcast, Fran, under their wing when she discovers what they have done. The popular girls give Fran a makeover and reintroduce her to the social scene; their efforts are mostly successful, but their plan comes apart at the seams when they are unable to work together. The film is dark comedy that depicts the girls’ social authority (based upon their appearance and their wealth) as an out-of-control force that needs to be stopped. The popular girls are completely aware of the power that they wield, and as a

result they are not only unable to form real friendship bonds, but they have no respect for human life.

Another dark comedy, *Sugar & Spice* (2001), also presents the dark side of empowered young women working together. This time, the girls in question are five cheerleaders who band together when Diane, their team captain, gets pregnant. Although Diane and her boyfriend Jack have decided to stay together and raise the baby, they lack the financial support to get their family started. Jack naively thinks that he can support them by working at a low-wage job. Diane and her girlfriends see the financial realities, and decide to address the problem by robbing a bank. The film comically plays upon the fact that the girls are so attractive, sweet, and ditzy that they make highly unlikely criminals. The story unfolds as it is told from the perspective of Lisa, a social outcast who is jealous of the authority wielded by the popular girls. In the end, Lisa declines to accuse the girls of criminal activity in favor of joining their cheerleading squad. The film closes with epilogues for each main character, indicating that they were never tried and convicted for their crime; it is implied that they managed to get away with it because no one could believe that these young women could simultaneously be social successes and outlaws. The criminal heroines used their powers (beauty, athleticism, intellect, and social connections) to commit a felony and avoid punishment. Within the narrative, their friendship bonds create a social authority that places them above the law.

One of the most successful backlash representations of Girl Power is the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, starring Lindsay Lohan, who became something of a Girl Power icon in the

early 2000s. The film stars Lohan as Cady, a new student at a suburban high school who is out of her element because she has been raised in South Africa and home-schooled by her parents. Cady is quickly introduced to the typical high school clique system by two of her peers, Damian and Janis. Damian is gay, and Janis has been ostracized by the popular girls' clique, the Plastics, who have spread rumors that she is a lesbian. Damian and Janis observe their classmates from the perspective of outsiders, a standpoint that is informed by their separation from heteronormativity. Cady's lack of experience with public education similarly sets her apart, and she easily becomes friends with Damian and Janis. When Janis sees that the Plastics have an interest in befriending Cady, she encourages the new girl to infiltrate their group for the purpose of bringing them down from within. However, once Cady is accepted by the clique, she is quickly corrupted by the power it brings her, and she begins to abuse her position of authority. Cady initially sets out to prevent the popular girls from wielding their social authority unfairly, but her goal becomes clouded when she seeks personal revenge against Regina, the group's leader.

Regina eventually turns on Cady and distributes a "slam book" (a collection of insults and hate messages against a number of girls, a few boys, and at least one teacher) that she attributes to Cady. The distribution of the slam book results in all-out war at the school, with physical fights breaking out between girls in classrooms and hallways. The chaos results in an all-girl group therapy session at school, led by Ms. Norbury, a teacher who rejects low self-esteem as the explanation for the girls' bad behavior. "I think they're all pretty pleased with themselves," she tells the principal. Ms. Norbury

leads the girls through some exercises to help them find healthier ways to express themselves. In order to serve her own interests, Janis turns on Cady and reveals the entire plot against Regina during this therapy session. At the end of the film, Cady redeems herself by winning the prom queen tiara and breaking it into pieces, “sharing” it with all of the other girls in the class. This rings hollow, though, because by this point all of the friendship bonds between girls in the story have proven to be superficial and unreliable, as well as outright physically dangerous. The film offers summations of what happens to each character in the immediate aftermath; each member of the Plastics (including Cady) has gone her own separate way, apparently abandoning their “friendship” with ease.

Mean Girls claims an interesting pedigree, as screenwriter (and co-star) Tina Fey used the non-fiction parenting advice book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* as source material for her script. The book argues that clique organization and membership plays a crucial role in teenage girls’ self-esteem, and offers tips for parents on how to recognize whether their own child is a “mean girl” or an “outcast” and what to do about these situations. Like the film, the book focuses on the negative aspects of teenage girls’ empowerment, arguing that girls do not know how to handle social authority, which is why they wield it unfairly over their less socially-fortunate peers. There is no discussion of how boys handle social authority, or how they use or abuse the power of popularity. Both the book and the film treat social cliques and infighting as the problematic domain of girls. Boys do not participate in the wild backstabbing and deceitful machinations of the Plastics; instead, when Cady and Regina fight over a boy, he seems almost

oblivious to the power struggle going on, and he openly disapproves of the aspects of which he is aware. Boys are positioned as morally superior, above the kind of social climbing and status obsession that girls are “naturally” suited to participate in.

The success of *Mean Girls* kicked off a media obsession with girl-fighting that ranged from documenting the activities of “mean girl” socialites Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie (whose disputes with each other and other young women were extensively covered by the tabloid press⁹ and captured on film in their reality series *The Simple Life*¹⁰) to a rise in girl-on-girl violence in public schools.¹¹ A trend of physical fights between girls that were captured on cell phone camera video and then posted on the popular video-sharing website YouTube arose in 2005, leading to media speculation on the origins of the phenomenon and its social implications (Hamilton 2). While Jack Shafer of Slate.com has denounced these reports as “bogus trend” stories, they have contributed to a larger discussion in the mass media about the ways that young women display aggressive behavior formerly associated with young men.¹² These mass media reports imply that girls have become more violent as a result of social empowerment that affords them the ability to reject feminine passivity and behave more like boys. In the introduction to their edited collection, *Girls' Violence: Myths and Realities*, authors Christine Alder and Anne Worrall argue that girls' physical aggression has not become significantly more common of late, and they argue that the phenomenon must be understood in terms of the context of gendered inequalities that structure young women's lives, rather than as a result of young women's empowerment (16-17). In contrast, backlash representations in Girl Power films avoid the acknowledgement of

continuing gender imbalances through their emphasis on girl's popularity and the social authority that it affords.

Although far less popular than *Mean Girls*, the 2005 film *John Tucker Must Die* offers a similarly-themed interpretation of the downside of Girl Power. Kate, who describes herself as "invisible," is befriended by three girls who get to know each other in detention after they engage in a physical fight over the title character. The three girls are from different social groups, but each believed that she was dating John, the wealthy and attractive captain of the basketball team, exclusively. In order to win vegan Beth's affections, John pretended to be interested in animal rights. To woo head cheerleader Heather, he used their shared experience of popularity and interest in basketball.¹³ He impressed Carrie with his interest in her intellect and multiple extracurricular activities. Each girl responds to the news of her betrayal by lashing out jealously at John's other paramours; it takes the outsider's perspective, in the form of Kate, to convince them that the true target of their rage is John himself, and that they should "get even" (the film was marketed with the tagline, "Don't Get Mad. Get Even").

The girls begin to work together, not unlike the coven of *The Craft*, but their attempts to retaliate against John initially only succeed in making him more popular. In one of their most memorable stunts, Heather spikes John's protein formula with estrogen and encourages him to "double up" doses. This culminates when John experiences an emotional breakdown during a basketball game. He takes a break from the game to steal a chocolate bar from one of his teammates and then asks, "Do my thighs look fat

in these shorts?” Returning to the court, he misses a key shot. When his coach approaches to berate him John responds, “I’m anxious and bloated and my nipples hurt!” He then breaks down crying and wails, “You’re always yelling at me, but you never listen to me. What about my feelings?” The sequence is designed to be viewed as comedy: hyper-masculine John is suddenly saddled with feminine concerns related to his appearance, the physical discomfort of premenstrual syndrome, and emotional volatility. Although John is apparently experiencing Christina Hoff Sommers’ nightmare of Girl Power, in which feminists (in this case, girls who want to “get even”) attempt to turn boys into girls, his outburst receives a positive response, netting him renewed flirtatious attention from girls at school. One girl approaches John to tell him, “That’s the most courageous thing I’ve ever seen any man do,” and another sidles up to say, “A real man knows how to feel. I want to feel a real man.” John is so attractive and charismatic that he manages to overcome each of the humiliations that the girls design for him.

The girls eventually plot together to get back at John by using Kate as bait to attract him, and then destroy him. Their plan is to turn his manipulative tactics back on him, and reveal his true character to the entire school. While they succeed to an extent, Kate decides to leave the group and their plan when she becomes sympathetic to John. The girls, who have become a tightly-knit collective through their efforts to get revenge, immediately turn on Kate. Carrie tells her, “He didn’t fall for you – he fell for what we made you. Who were you before you met us?” and Heather chimes in, “No one.” Kate’s decision to stop participating is firm; not only does she believe that John has real

feelings for her, but other people who know of the plan (her mother and John's brother) take the moral high ground with her. John's brother tells Kate, "Everybody knows how he can be, he is John Tucker. And yet still every girl in school lines up to date him." Kate comes to believe that it is acceptable for John to become involved with girls that he has no real feelings for, because it is the girls' responsibility to know better. She determines that the girls' plan to retaliate is misguided because it will inflict pain intentionally, which is differentiated within the narrative from the pain that John has caused the girls. In backlash narratives, girls are punished for questioning the social order through scheming and manipulation; the position of privilege that boys maintain is never seriously threatened.

In the end, Kate confesses her role in the scam in front of a crowd of hundreds at John's birthday party. A boy in the crowd accuses Kate of ruining the party, and then throws a drink on her. In a show of solidarity, the other three girls join her, and also get doused with drinks. John interrupts to offer a confession of his own: "We all do it. I lie. I pretend I'm whoever I want to get girl...what I'm trying to say is, it's wrong." A boy in the crowd immediately interjects, "Ain't nothin' wrong with hooking up with the finest girls in school!" and then a chorus of supportive chanting begins. The girls end up looking foolish because they have "unfairly" targeted and manipulated John, and no one else agrees that he has behaved badly. The moment is broken when Kate instigates a food fight that breaks the tension and apparently dissipates the heartache and pain that has caused the girls to plot against John in the first place. At the close of the film, he keeps his promise to reform; he still dates multiple girls, but he tells each girl that he dates that

she is not the only one. Kate and the three girls from different cliques seem set to remain unlikely friends.

These backlash representations raise questions about the advisability of Girl Power. While they acknowledge that girls have access to essentially unlimited social authority, they question the ability of girls to use this power wisely. In each depiction, the girls' power spins out of control, partially because of the role of group dynamics and girls' inability to get along with each other. These representations thus reassert the primacy of the individual; an individual heroine may be essentially rational, but led to behave badly (with disastrous consequences) by the influence of other girls. They denigrate girl collectives by demonstrating how quickly girls' authority becomes corrupted and abused in a group context. Ultimately, these representations demonstrate that sisterhood is dangerous by depicting how collective authority becomes corrosive to the necessary social structure when girls decide to utilize it. The power that is exercised through girls' collectives is depicted as corrupt, and it is partially delineated as such by the way that it works to alienate young women from young men. As powerful, popular girls lose their perspective about right and wrong, boys serve in the narratives as moral arbiters (and sometimes collateral damage) that demonstrate how far astray girls' experiences of power have led them.

Conclusion

In April 2007, a front-page article in the *New York Times* declared that teenage girls are burned out from exhaustion due to unrealistic expectations about their capabilities (Rimer). The article profiles young women who excel in academics, extra-curricular activities, volunteer work, and athletics. The over-stressed and over-scheduled young women in the article are quoted regarding their desire to live up to expectations that they should be confident, capable, high-achievers. Journalist Sara Rimer wonders about the long-term implications of this trend and the new, unrealistic expectations of gender that it seems to demonstrate (A1). In other words, the article poses the question of how Girl Power became so bad for girls.¹⁴

Over time, statements about Girl Power have been overtaken by postfeminist responses to the discourse. Statements about girls' assertive femininity and social authority have been replaced by the circulation of cultural fears regarding girls' empowerment. Stories about girls' aggression in the news media and in popular trade press books present the "trend" of girl-on-girl violence as a natural result of girls' equality. The liberation of young women's bodies from the social bonds of passivity has met a response in increasing fears about young women's sexuality and sexual aggression. A rising conservative movement has sought to limit sex education in public schools and advocated a return to "traditional" values, including a high premium associated with female virginity.

Backlash representations of Girl Power reveal these fears and cultural preoccupations, and consistently demonstrate concerns about what girls' empowerment means for the social authority of boys. Attempts to mitigate or negate a cultural emphasis on young

women's empowerment are evident in depictions of girls' friendships in Hollywood films, but also appear in more serious discussions of adolescence, self-esteem and education in which girls' academic achievements have been reframed as a threat to boys' educational progress. Backlash representations create a hegemonic response to the legitimate feminist potential to which Girl Power has given voice. These responses to Girl Power position young women's empowerment as a foregone conclusion, and thus work to deny the continuing realities of young women's lived experiences of gender inequality.

Notes

¹ See for example the discussions of Girl Power in Taft, "Girl Power Politics: Pop-Culture Barriers and Organizational Resistance," and Meltzer, *Girl Power: The Nineties Revolution in Music*.

² See Vavrus, "Putting Ally on Trial: Contesting Postfeminism in Popular Culture," and Negra, "Quality Postfeminism?: Sex and the Single Girl on HBO."

³ Labi quotes Christina Ferrari, managing editor of *Teen People*, on the magazine's mission to combat unrealistic body ideals (62).

⁴ The American Association of University Women released a report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls," in February of 1992. See "The Educational System is Not Meeting Girls' Needs."

⁵ See Koerner, et al. "Where the Boys Aren't."

⁶ See Simon and Pasciak, "Gender Gap Among Grads Favors the Girls" and Vaishnav, "Lopsided at the Top."

⁷ *Clueless*, the film that revitalized Hollywood's interest in teen films, utilized Jane Austen's *Emma* as source material. The cycle of teen romantic comedies that stemmed from the success of *Clueless* often followed this lead; for example, *She's All That* is based in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *10 Things I Hate About You* is a re-telling of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

⁸ A number of these representations show the clear influence of Daniel Water's 1989 cult film *Heathers*, in which a member of the most popular girls' clique in school (Veronica) joins forces with a loner (aptly named J.D.) to revolt against the power hierarchy in the school's social structure. Veronica initially participates (albeit somewhat unwittingly) in J.D.'s plan to destroy the school's clique system by murdering the popular students who wield their authority over others, and then making their deaths appear to be suicides. As J.D. grows even more radical, Veronica rejects him. When she discovers his plot to blow up the school with explosives during a pep rally, making it appear to be a mass suicide, Veronica engages with him in a fight to the death. J.D. attempts to convince her that his mass suicide plan will send a larger message that high school society is a microcosm of society as a whole, and it cannot be maintained. Veronica remains unconvinced that the high school social structure is beyond repair, and she manages to subdue J.D. Instead of using his explosive device on the school, he wires it to himself. Before his time runs out, however, he tells Veronica that he underestimated her, saying, "You've got power. Power I didn't think you had." As the film closes, Veronica makes a "date" to hang out with an unpopular, overweight wheelchair-bound girl during the prom. The slightly optimistic ending implies that Veronica has decided to wield her "power" to subvert the hierarchical structure of high school cliques from within.

⁹ The public rivalry between Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie in 2004, but became an official rift by April 2005 (with both parties commenting on it to the press); their rivalry was regularly reported in *People* and *Us Weekly*, and also by then-emerging bloggers including Perez Hilton (www.perezhilton.com) and TMZ (www.tMZ.com).

¹⁰ The show aired on the Fox network from 2003-2005, and eventually moved to the cable network E! for its final two seasons (2006-2007). During season four (airing on E! in 2006), Paris and Nicole were filmed separately because the former best friends were no longer on speaking terms.

¹¹ See Rowe, "Violence Among Girls on the Rise."

¹² See for example Sweet, "The Claws Come Out on the T: Teen Catfights on the Rise."

¹³ Although Heather is played by pop star Ashanti, who is African American, the film makes no mention of race or her interracial relationship with John.

¹⁴ Similar concerns have been taken up in popular press books. See for example Hinshaw, *The Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures*.

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