Hegemonic Female Spaces: An Analysis of the Covert Meanings within Ladies Home Journal and Ebony Magazines’ Advertisements

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Introduction

Methodologically, this study is simply examining women’s bodies in advertisements, but the purpose of our analysis goes much deeper. We use a historical cross-cultural content analysis of women’s magazines as a vehicle for understanding the permeation of hegemonic standards by an outlet claiming to provide African American audiences with a distinct space to redefine African American beauty standards. The juxtaposition of a mainstream media outlet (Ladies’ Home Journal) to a minority-targeted media outlet (Ebony) illustrates the power relationship between two seemingly separate cultural products. More specifically, it shows the implicit ability of mainstream culture to determine the extent to which alternative cultural messages can deviate from hegemonic standards. We therefore look at the ways in which Ebony presents the female body, and how it reflects, or deviates from, the Eurocentric beauty displayed in Ladies Home Journal.

Women’s magazines are infamous for picturing models with physical features and body sizes that are unattainable for most readers (Allan, 1993; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Falconer, 2000; St. Jean and Feagin, 1998; Griffith, 2004; Parker, Nichter, Nichter, and Vuckovic, 1995), which then in turn, creates
unrealistic standards of beauty. These standards are particularly harsh and unattainable for women of color. An unfortunate matter of being a woman of African descent in the United States (or of any non-European descent for that matter) is that western standards of beauty have always been exclusionary (Beaubeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Collins, 2004; Gray-White, 1999).

The social construction of race includes the construction of beauty standards for both the minority and the majority. Contemporary standards of beauty can be traced back to the Victorian era, where porcelain skin, long silky hair, thin lips, and blushed cheeks were ideal. In the latter half of the 20th century, these standards also came to include a slender body and narrow hips (Peiss 1998). These ideals are based in whiteness. As such, although it is difficult for any woman to live up to the ideal version of beauty, it is impossible for women of color, whose darkened skin, dark kinky hair, and shapely figures are implicitly and, at times explicitly devalued in the productions of popular culture (Farrington 2003).

Spates (2007) analyzed the bodies in the advertisements of Ebony magazine, an African-American targeted publication over a 60-year period. She looked at the ways in which advertisements conformed to or diverged from white western standards. She found divergence from those standards over the years in all areas accept for body size (models in Ebony remained slender over the 60-year period) (Spates 2007). We seek to expand upon these findings by combining
them with the analysis of advertisements over the same time period in a “mainstream” magazine (*Ladies’ Home Journal*). We will compare and contrast the trends in both magazines over time. More importantly, we will look at the ways in which the trends in a mainstream magazine may permeate into ethnic-oriented magazines, potentially creating constraints upon the extent to which an ethnic magazine can diverge away from white culture and standards.

Many studies have shown the direct impact that unrealistic images have had upon readers. These include low self-esteem, negative body image, and even an impetus for disordered eating (Bessenoff, 2006; Gurari, Hetts, & Strube, 2006). We look now at the extent to which the reinforcement of western beauty standards has permeated into media intended for a non-white audience.

We have established that mainstream depictions of beauty are historically rooted in whiteness. We now explore how this phenomenon has affected model selections for the largest and oldest African-American owned and operated magazine publisher, *Ebony* magazine. Furthermore, how has the reinforcement of Eurocentric beauty standards in *Ladies’ Home Journal* (a mainstream media outlet) impacted the progression towards beauty standards in a “minority space?”

This paper is an analysis of the portrayal of women’s body images and beauty standards within *Ebony* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* during the years 1946, 1976, and 2006. The basis of this paper is centered on a few particular points. The first
is that Johnson’s publishing company deliberately sought to provide *Ebony* readers with what authors’ Miller, Brennan, and Edgerton-Webster refer to as an *alternate space*. This space represents a physical place in which African American readers could turn to find realistic representations of self. In illustration, the authors’ claim:

> Upon evaluation we find that Ebony… challenges the hegemonic process with the incorporation of cultural artifacts that call upon collective memory to form reader association…also members of a patriarchal society, are offered media messages that may help them to negotiate the dominant ideological position and help them to resist stereotypes and internalized norms. In some cases the magazines actually construct oppositional messages, challenging the dominant hegemony that audience members may embrace as resistant readings (Johnson Publishing Company 2006).

The second point central to our analysis is the *Ebony’s* audience. Despite *Ebony’s* attempt to relate to diverse groups of African-Americans, Myers and Margavio (1963) argue that the focus on “achievement, recognition, and respectability clearly reflects a middle-class value system” (Meyers and Margavio 1963). With that in mind, Falconer and Neville (2000) theorize that class differences, along with the amount of exposure to the dominant culture, are likely to influence women’s body image perceptions. For that reason, middle- and upper-class African-Americans are more likely to have internalized white standards of beauty.
Third, we look at the corresponding trends in a magazine catered toward predominantly white women (*Ladies’ Home Journal*). We know that such trends can have an explicit impact upon its own readers (see, Monro & Huon; 2005, Halliwell; 2005). We look now at the more implicit impacts such reinforcement can have upon a culture as a whole. That is, how the dominant culture may find its way into even those avenues attempting to deviate from it.

Finally, we examine the role of white privilege. This is the privilege awarded to whites, simply on the basis of their “whiteness.” White privilege allows majority group members the opportunity to take race for granted (Tatum, 1997; McIntosh 2010). Peggy McIntosh (2010) explores what she references as the notion of “unpacking the invisible knapsack of white privilege.” In this analysis, she examines the many unearned assets that she can rely on day after day. Although she references many, a component of white privilege that goes commonly unnoticed is in the advertising industry. To illustrate, McIntosh states, “I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my own race” (p. 174).

Advertisements, particularly those catered toward women, serve as a medium passing beauty standard messages to women worldwide. Therefore, this study will illustrate not only the bizarre role that advertisements play in encouraging white women to maintain strict adherence to ideal European beauty standards,
but we focus on messages targeted toward African-American women that thereby encourage them to consider progressively more extreme measures as an attempt to live up to undeniably unobtainable standards. In comparing and contrasting the two magazines, the issue of white privilege will become abundantly clear.

Literature Review

Womanhood

*Womanhood* is a fairly complex term. Furthermore, in order to gain a full understanding of the notion of African-American womanhood, it is important to first discuss the construction of womanhood in America. The construction of womanhood in the United States is fundamentally centered on the perception of the Cult of Womanhood. The Cult of true Womanhood was established during the mid-19th century (Welter 1966). Characteristics of true womanhood were instituted to provide the woman along with her husband, her community, and, more importantly, society with principles with which to measure her womanhood. The principles came to be known as the four cardinal virtues. The virtues were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This imagery was heavily circulated within the mass media, ranging from magazine articles to religious manuals. And, as one might imagine, there were women that exceeded society’s
image of what a woman should be just as there were women who fell short (Welter 1966).

During this era, the only women that measured up to society’s standards of “true womanhood” were white middle-upper class women. As a result, African-American women were immediately excluded from any classifications of “womanhood.” Around the same time that notions of “true womanhood” were constructed, a conflicting ideology that applied exclusively to African-American women was also emerging. Images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the jezebel, all sought to control African-American women through the process of “othering” (Collins 2000). Therefore, white women were encouraged to live up to the standards of “true womanhood” while African-American women were encouraged to live up to their own physical (i.e. lighter skin, resilient, with a “nice” grade of hair) and psychological standards of what Townsend-Gilkes (2001) refers to as “deviant womanhood.” As white women have had to contend assumptions of their passivity and weakness, African American women have had to challenge myths surrounding the strong black woman.

The disproportionate failure of non-white women to live up to the standard of “true womanhood” reifies the issue of “othering.” Furthermore, the inability to live up to the majority standards for physical beauty becomes yet another mechanism for categorizing minorities into a low socioeconomic status position.
Not only are the socially constructed beauty standards divergent for white and African-American women, but so is the propensity towards obesity (and so away from the current western standard) (Law, Power, Graham and Merrick, 2007). In high-income countries, such as the United States, there is a positive relationship between poverty and obesity (Law, Power, Graham, and Merrick 2007). Rates of obesity are higher for African-American women than for Caucasian women (Saxena, Ambler, Cole, and Majeed 2004).

Many argue that persons of color in the United States continue to face the brunt of discriminatory acts and prejudiced attitudes; however, obesity itself is increasingly being coupled with its own negative connotations. Scientific evidence has shown us that it is clear that bias towards the obese begets unequal treatment. For example, unequal treatment towards overweight individuals has been exposed within employment, medical and health care, and educational settings (Brownell 2001). As a result, women of color, particularly overweight women of color, will likely fall short to society’s standards of beauty every time.

**Standards of Beauty**

Standards of beauty, prior to the 20th century, favored what western beauty standards of today might consider “plump” (Hesse-Biber 1996). In the present day, a more slender, less curvaceous shape seems to be the preference. Growing technological influences of television, radio, magazines, and, of course,
the internet have resulted in virtually limitless distributions of ideal beauty standards worldwide.

Just as the notions of whiteness and African-Americanness are opposite, it is important to remember that within binary thinking it is impractical to consider the blue-eyed, blond, slender white woman beautiful without the other. Accordingly, Collins states (Collins 2000)

White women and Black women as collectivities represent two opposing poles, with Latinas, Asian-American women, and Native American women jockeying positions in between. Judging white women, by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their white skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them in a system that elevates whiteness over Blackness In contrast, African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty –standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and most painfully, one another Collins (p. 89-90).

In addition to physical characteristics, culture has also played a significant role in constructing the ideal appearance for African-American women. The idea that “African-American is beautiful” is a primary demonstration of this. Prior to the civil rights era, darker skinned African-Americans were practically ignored in advertising or placed in inferior positions to fairer-skinned African-Americans. Often times, even in magazines published for an African-American audience
(such as *Ebony* or *Essence*) darker-skinned women were advertised as maids or other roles that perpetuated negative stereotypes. During the 1960’s, African-Americans took it upon themselves to reinvent the notion of African-Americanness. As a result, Michelle Leslie (1995) claims that the African-American consciousness movement resulted in a surge in African-Americans present in the media and a reduction of negative stereotyping.

**Body Image Disparities**

Body Image disparities within the media have been widely studied. Bessenoff (2006) did a study of the impacts of the thin ideal in the media upon young women. One hundred and twelve undergraduate women were exposed to advertisements either featuring a thin woman (constituting a “thin ideal”) or not featuring thin women. It was found that exposure to advertisements containing a “thin ideal” correlated positively with body dissatisfaction in these women (Bessenoff 2006). Similarly, Gurari, Hetts, and Strube (2006) found that when exposed to advertisements in beauty magazines (as compared with a control group not exposed to advertisements in beauty magazines), women may engage in social comparisons which negatively impact self-esteem. Monro and Huon’s (2005) study showed that idealized images in the media negatively impact body image in women. They discuss, however, that this impact is to be understood as occurring in varying degrees depending upon an individuals’ psychological susceptibility to the magazine advertisements (Monro and Huon 2005).
Body image studies among African-American women are not as plentiful as those done with white women. However, studies that have been conducted allude to the fact that African-American women typically have a more positive body image than white women. These results have been replicated numerous times. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2003) claims that this phenomenon may be due to cultural variations in ideal physical attractiveness. Most African-American women prefer to be somewhat “thick” rather than “thin.” The author also argues that a huge part of African-American women’s size preference may be strongly correlated to African-American men’s preference (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003). Similar findings were seen in a study conducted by Falconer and Neville (2000). Contrary to their white counterparts, the young African-American women in the study appeared to be very confident despite their physical body size. They spoke about “making what you got work for you” and directed more of their attention toward the idea of “looking good” overall (Falconer and Neville 2000).

According to Falconer and Neville (2000), the one exception to the rule, is likely to occur among middle- and upper-class African-American women. African-American women with higher social status tend to be affected more by mainstream media images of beauty and health, thereby increasing their pressures to be thin (Falconer and Neville 2000). In addition, some believe that the racial gap in body dissatisfaction is not as great as is commonly perceived. Grabe and Hyde (2006) challenge this notion of a wide racial gap in body
satisfaction, finding that, while Caucasian girls did have greater body dissatisfaction than African-American girls, the difference was quite small.

As mentioned above, there is more work to be done with studying African-American body image. Another place the literature has yet to go (a place which we here wish to address) is the ways in which images in mainstream media correlate with media images in non-Eurocentric spaces.

**Methods**

As established early on, a primary objective of *Ebony* was to provide African-American readers with sources to counter oppressive images. This “alternate space” was created to empower African-American readers while simultaneously providing them with an accurate basis to create a new self identity.

This process, however, does not take place in isolation. Rather, *Ebony* is produced, distributed, and consumed within larger culture that preferences whiteness and the physical features of white women. This larger culture, and its’ mainstream cultural productions; therefore have the potential to impact how far an “alternative” depiction of beauty can deviate from the hegemonic norm. We therefore look at the ways in which African-Americans have progressed (or not progressed) away from hegemonic standards of beauty in mainstream society and toward a place of sovereignty most likely to be found within a “minority space.” More importantly, we look at this within the context of reinforcement of white standards in mainstream media (as represented by *Ladies Home Journal*).
Why Ebony and Ladies’ Home Journal?

*Ebony*’s attempt to provide America with a more accurate depiction of the African-American community has always been respected. Started by an African-American, by the name of John H. Johnson in 1942, *Ebony* has stood the test of time. *Ebony* was the first magazine that catered to needs of African-Americans and it continues to be run by one of the only African-American-owned and operated publishing companies. Still in a league of its own, *Ebony* has surpassed all other African-American-owned publishing companies and has paved the way for many more to come (Johnson Publishing Company 2006). Its readers tend to be relatively high in socio-economic status, highly educated, and women (Digby-Junger 2005).

*Ladies’ Home Journal* began publication in 1843 (Scanlong 1995). It was selected mainly in relation to *Ebony* magazine. Both cater to audiences of a similar socio-economic status, gender, and age (Scanlong 1995). Such similarities, along with each magazine’s enduring presence make them optimal for viewing trends and connections.

This research compares samples of African-American women from an African-American target magazine (*Ebony*) and white women from a mainstream magazine (*Ladies’ Home Journal*) in advertisements over the course of three time periods: 1946, 1976, and 2006. 1946 was chosen particularly for one of two
reasons: the first being that it was well before the civil rights era yet during the apartheid; the second being that 1946 allowed Johnson publishers, the editor’s of Ebony magazine the opportunity to find their way in an unfamiliar market. 1976 was especially noteworthy because it provides us with a snapshot of the mass media trends a year or so following the African-American Power movement and women’s movements. The prominent years of African-American Power era ranged from the late 60’s to the early 70’s. This was an era of liberation for African-Americans and women in general. Therefore, 1976 represents a time of transition with these liberation movements directly after their climax. Finally, 2006 was chosen to give us the opportunity to look at more recent body image advertisements. These three time periods should provide an accurate depiction of beauty trend standards dating back over 60 years.

Using the three previous years, we purposefully selected 6 ads out the twelve issues published for the year for both Ebony and Ladies’ Home Journal totaling 36 advertisements. The criteria used for ad selection was based on race, gender, and status. Advertisements were chosen of African-American women in Ebony magazine, and white women in Ladies’ Home Journal. For both magazines, we chose ads with models that were not well-known characters of the time. The rationale behind this decision was to gather a representative sample of the types of bodies that Ebony and Ladies’ Home Journal deemed significant enough to advertise during these years.
Category Construction of Body Image Variables for Ebony

Category construction of body image variables for Ebony advertisements were evaluated based on the following criteria: body size, skin color, hair texture, and the underlying message of the ads. According to societal standards, one of the most important aspects to evaluating individual attractiveness tends to be body size. However, it is important to note that the African-American community’s description of attractiveness differs drastically from those of whites. According to authors’ Allan, Mayo, and Michel (1993), African-American women’s basis for rating attractiveness entails shapeliness, the fit of clothing, some hips and femininity. The authors also maintain that middle-class African-Americans beauty standards more than likely coincide with whites ideals of thinness (Allan, Mayo, and Michel 1993).

Skin color and hair type, particularly among African-Americans, were selected in part because these features tend to be ethnic specific. Historically, the United States constructed racial categories based on phenotypic characteristics; therefore, skin color and hair type became significant factors in the construction of race. Additionally, according to Miller et al. (1998) further research is needed using body image variables relevant to specific racial groups to assess body satisfaction.

Ladies’ Home Journal
Ladies’ Home Journal advertisements were analyzed for body size, hair color, and hair texture. These physical attributes were looked at in comparison with what is considered to be the western ideal (thin body, blonde, straight hair). Hair color was simply designated as either blonde or brunette. Hair texture was designated as either curly/wavy or straight.

Body Size

Body size was determined using body silhouettes from the Canadian Dietetic Associations (CDA) scale of Body Mass Index (BMI) as cited in Peterson, Ellenberg and Crossan (2003). This scale contains 4 body silhouettes representing a BMI that would be considered underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. Based on these silhouettes, bodies in the advertisements were classified as either Afrocentric or Eurocentric. The social construction of beauty standards for white women is that of a slender build, while the Afrocentric beauty standard is that of a more curvaceous body. This in mind, Afrocentric bodies were coded as anything above the “normal” body size, while Eurocentric bodies were anything at or below “normal”.

Two coders separately coded each advertisement and then results were compared. A kappa statistic was used in dealing with reliability. This statistic measures agreement between two coders in categorizing individual subjects into the same category (Chuang 2001). It is an index which “compares the agreement against that which might be expected by chance” (Chuang 2001). Scores run
from -1 (no agreement) to +1 (perfect agreement). A score of 0 indicates no agreement beyond the expected (Chuang 2001). We had Kappa score of .66 (this is .66 above what would be expected by chance), with an agreement of .98. This is considered “almost perfect” agreement (Chuang 2001).

*Messages Portrayed in Ebony*

Messages portrayed in *Ebony* were revealed by combining an analysis of body images along with the underlying message of the advertisement. This approach allows the authors to offer a more comprehensive breakdown of the advertisement. In doing so, the ad’s message will be separated into two categories. The first category will speak to the advertisements that adhere to the mainstream (i.e. European) standards of beauty. And the second category will consist of advertisements that promote African-American standards of beauty. As you will see in the upcoming section, some messages may indirectly encourage women to alter their natural characteristics to achieve a mainstream standard of beauty. Likewise, there are also ads that encourage women to love their bodies and express confidence with African-Americaness, because “African-American is beautiful.”

*Messages Portrayed in Ladies’ Home Journal*

Messages portrayed in *Ladies’ Home Journal* could not be analyzed in the same way that ads were analyzed in *Ebony*. Therefore, rather than categorizing messages, we looked at each time period for general themes. Thus, in the
context of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, we looked rather at messages about womanhood and feminism in general.

**Findings**

We first looked at trends found in *Ebony* for skin, hair, and body size and message intent. We looked at how closely models reflect either Euro-centric beauty standards or instead recreate and promote their own ethnic specific standards of beauty. Also, we looked at the message intent of advertisements, differentiating between messages that either promote mainstream standards of beauty or promote African-Ameri
canneess. This analysis is depicted in table 1 (tables available at the end of the document).

Each value is seen as a percent. For skin, hair and body size, this number represents the percentage of advertisements which coincide with differing beauty standard (as opposed to the Eurocentric beauty standard). For **skin**, the westernized standards of beauty include lighter-skinned rather than dark-skinned. **Straight hair** is seen as adhering to the Euro-centric standards, while kinky or curly hair is seen as promoting and recreating an ethnic specific standard of beauty. Lastly, slender body size is seen as Euro-centric, while a thicker or curvier **body size** is seen as Afro-centric. For message intent, the number represents the percentage of advertisements which promote a new
standard of beauty. These types of messages give the impression that they are seeking to detach from homogeneous standards of beauty to instead celebrate or recreate their own.

In addition, we looked at the types of products advertised over the years (see table 2). These allowed us some insight into the purpose behind message intent and model choice. Combining the physical appearance of the body in the ad, with the intent of the message, and the product being advertised helps us develop a fuller understanding of the themes and trends.

Table 2 illustrates two important points. The first is the trend of acceptance concerning African-American beauty standards over time. We can see in all categories that 1946 represents a time of the greatest conformity to white western standards. All models in the sample have straight hair, light skin, and slender bodies. No advertisements in Ebony magazine during 1946 presented an environment that attempted to recreate positive notions of the common African-American female body. On the contrary, the ads upheld mainstream beauty standards except for the fact that they included African-American women.

In the Unites States, 1976 was the peak for embracing African-American culture. For all categories, 1976 has the highest percentage of ads which are conducive to recreating African-American standards of beauty. This is the only year in which a model is displayed who deviates from the western slender body size.
Furthermore, 83 percent of messages in 1976 are promoting appreciation for African-American beauty rather than mainstream beauty standards. Finally, 2006 represents somewhat of middle ground. Acceptance and promotion of African-American culture is less than it was in 1976, but exceeds that of 1946.

The second point is that throughout all 3 years, body shape remains virtually unchanged (and conforms to a slender white standard). Out of all of the advertisements, only a single one portrays a model with an Afrocentric body style (this is in 1976). In two of the three years, there are no models that deviate from the slender white body standard.

We looked next to why this particular characteristic (body shape) has remained static, while others (hair, skin, message etc.) have been dynamic over the 60-year period. In examining this, we looked at the trends of bodies in advertisements in *Ladies Home Journal*. We sought to examine the relationship between these trends seen in *Ebony* and the trends in a more mainstream publication.

*Reinforcement of Eurocentric Beauty Standards*

Reinforcement of Eurocentric beauty standards, illustrated above by means of skin and hair have progressed (to some degree) in *Ebony* magazine from a Eurocentric standard towards an Afrocentric standard (darker skin, kinky hair).
We will look now at if (and how) these Eurocentric standards are being reinforced in mainstream magazines.

Straight, blonde hair is the Eurocentric standard of beauty. The advertisements in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, however, are not consistent with this standard. That is, white models are seen with as much with blonde straight hair as they are with dark curly hair (see table 3). This does not change much through the years. Overall, 50 percent of the models have curly or wavy hair and 50 percent have straight hair. Furthermore, 65 percent of the models are brunettes. These advertisements, then, are not reinforcing the Eurocentric standard of beauty as much as in other categories. We can connect this back to see that the models in *Ebony* have been able to progress away from these particular Eurocentric standards. This is the case particularly for *Ebony* in 1976.

The Eurocentric standard of beauty designates a thin body as an attractive body. The importance here of this particular beauty standard is that body size is the one place *Ebony* magazine has never able to diverge from Eurocentric standards. While models in *Ebony* magazine have progressed into a more Afrocentric beauty standard with darker skin and textured hair, the body size of models has remained slender (consistent with the Euro-centric standard).

Table 4 shows the body sizes portrayed in advertisements of *Ladies’ Home Journal* for 1946, 1976, and 2006. Perhaps the greatest observation here is the
lack of any change over the past 60 years. Consistently, the models in *Ladies’ Home Journal* have been adhering to the slim standard. Not shown in the table, but of significance, is that while there are no overweight models over this 60-year period, 12 percent of models in 1946, and 12 percent of models in 1976 are classified as underweight. This is a clear demonstration of the reinforcement of Eurocentric ideals. Perhaps, this reinforcement is part of the barrier for progression in body size towards an Afrocentric standard.

*Messages, products, and white privilege*

Messages, products, and white privilege differences among the two magazines do not allow us to compare the messages in *Ladies’ Home Journal* with those in *Ebony*. In analyzing messages for *Ladies’ Home Journal*, it is impossible to directly compare the findings to those from *Ebony*. Our inability to compare messages between the two magazines is an important finding in itself. Advertisements in *Ebony* are analyzed by their rejection or promotion of Eurocentric (i.e. mainstream) beauty standards. In *Ladies’ Home Journal*, there is no mention of race, let alone messages which reject or promote whiteness. Here, we have an issue of white privilege. That is that the privileges received by the majority race only for being of the majority race (Tatum 1997). More importantly, white privilege means not having to take race into account. Whiteness is a privilege because it is a taken for granted state (Tatum 1997).
Moreover, white privilege is seen in the designation of *Ebony* as an African-American oriented magazine. *Ladies’ Home Journal* need not emphasize (nor even mention) the race of its readers. Because of white privilege, race is not a salient aspect of *Ladies’ Home Journal*. *Ladies’ Home Journal* is simply a home journal for *Ladies*. On the contrary, race is so salient in *Ebony* magazine that they must go as far as to name the magazine after the skin color of its targeted readers.

Because we cannot compare products and messages directly, we have rather laid out corresponding trends between time, products, and messages. Products advertised are conducive with the trends in *Ebony* magazine. We can see in *Ebony* that 1946 holds the heaviest Eurocentric promotion, followed by the heaviest liberation in 1976 and somewhat of a middle ground in 2006. While advertisements in *Ladies’ Home Journal* do not speak to race in this same way, they do show similar trends for oppression and liberation for women in general.

In 1946, advertisements are heavily geared towards family work, care for others, and personal beautification. For example, a woman is shown saying “I did a very smart thing today” with a picture of silverware that she purchased. Another advertisement (for rayon fabric) shows a woman wearing a blouse and wondering how it will look after it has been washed.
In 1976, advertisements move away from traditional mothering roles and emphasize independence, strength, and self care. One advertisement for deodorant shows a woman who is nervous about going back to work after 12 years of being a stay at home mom. Another advertisement for tampons tells the reader to “trust yourself.” Along with the trend of 1976 being the height of women’s liberation, it is the only year with no advertisements for diet products.

2006 advertisements are for personal care and family care. The culmination of the two types of messages can be seen in one advertisement with a (covered) naked woman holding a baby, promoting a skin soap that is gentle enough for a baby’s skin, but used on an adults.

Conclusion

_Ebony_ magazine designates itself as an alternative space for African-American women. It has been, at certain points, successful in providing this space through the promotion of Afro-centric beauty for skin and hair (particularly in 1976). The one place where _Ebony_ has never left the Euro-centric beauty standard is in the area of body size.

These issues can be seen as being reinforced by the mainstream media. While _Ladies’ Home Journal_ does little to reinforce the standard of blonde straight hair, they consistently display models of a slender body size. There may then be a connection between the reinforcement in mainstream media of Eurocentric
beauty standards and the ability for ethnic oriented media to diverge from this standard.

In connecting the two types of magazines, the issue of white privilege becomes very prominent. While *Ladies’ Home Journal* acts as the standard, *Ebony* is portraying the “other.” It is because of *Ebony’s* “otherness” that race must be such a salient aspect of the magazine. Furthermore, it is this idea of “otherness” and white privilege that prohibits researchers from making certain direct comparisons between the two magazines.

**Table 1**
Percentage of Ebony Ads Promoting African-Americanness and the Afro-centric Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>skin</th>
<th>Hair</th>
<th>Body Size</th>
<th>Message intent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**
Analysis of Products Advertised
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair Straighter</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin Bleacher</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Hygiene</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>Small Business</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Ads</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Ladies Home Journal Ads Classified by Hair Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Blonde</th>
<th>Brunette</th>
<th>Straight</th>
<th>Curly/Wavy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Ads</td>
<td>7 (n)</td>
<td>13 (n)</td>
<td>10 (n)</td>
<td>10 (n)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The number of advertisements exceeds 18 due to multiple bodies in a single ad.
Table 4

Ladies’ Home Journal Classified by Body Size*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Euro-centric</th>
<th>Afro-centric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Ads</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number of advertisements exceeds 18 due to multiple bodies in a single ad.
Works Referenced


Perceptions: Reliability of A BMI-Based Silhouette Matching Test."


Townsend-Gilkes, Cheryl. 2001. *If it wasn't for the women...: Black women's experience and womanist culture in church and community.* Maryknoll: Orbis.
"I Can’t Get Excited for a Child, Ritsuka": Intersections of Gender, Identity, and Audience Ambiguity in Yun Kôga’s Loveless

By T.A. Noonan

In December 2007, ICv2, a leading consulting firm and information source on North American pop-culture commodities, held its first conference on Japanese anime (animation) and manga (comics) in domestic markets (“ICv2 Conference”). The conference’s subtitle, “Inside the Otaku Generation,” underscores a distinct change in the language and visibility of Japanese pop-culture fandom, one that has been underway for several years. The word otaku, an honorific originally used to refer to someone else’s house or family, became associated with a distinctly unsavory brand of fan in the 1980s, due largely to “The Otaku Murderer,” a high-profile Japanese serial killer whose home was, according to media reports, overflowing with comics and videos. As demonstrated by ICv2, however, it has been reclaimed and (mostly) stripped of its negative connotations.¹ It wasn’t long ago when North American otaku had to go to extraordinary lengths to obtain the materials of their obsession. Distant conventions, nth-generation bootlegs, and overseas shipping were part of Japanese pop-culture fandom. Simply put, otaku had to work hard at being otaku—which is exactly what made them the kind of unsavory fans the term otaku once referred to.

Now such fans need only look as far as their local Best Buy or online Barnes & Noble. The explosive success of imports such as Sailor Moon, Dragon Ball Z, Pokémon, Naruto, and Bleach² has opened a veritable floodgate of Japanese pop-culture materials, and buyers have eagerly snatched them up. In 2004, Rob Walker reported in The New York Times that “the [2003] manga market in the United States and Canada
added up to something between $90 million…and $110 million [USD] last year, an increase of nearly 50 percent over 2002” (“Comics Trip”). Since then, manga sales numbers have exploded. Wired states that in 2006, manga sales made up approximately two-thirds of all comic and graphic novel sales, with Viz Entertainment’s manga serial *Shonen Jump* boasting double the subscription numbers of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Thompson 226). Manga’s high profile has, in turn, boosted the sales of all graphic novels in America. In six years, the comic and graphic novel industry’s revenue jumped from $75 to $330 million (225).

Although manga has been a tremendous part of the Japanese reading culture since World War II, its overwhelming presence in the US market is a recent phenomenon. One of the key figures of manga’s rise in America is Stuart Levy, CEO of Tokyopop. A worldwide leader in manga distribution, Tokyopop (originally called Mixx) first began publishing manga stateside in 1997 with *MixxZine*, a “motionless picture entertainment” serial that offered popular titles such as *Sailor Moon* alongside relatively unknown titles like *Parasyte*. However, the images were reversed to correspond with English left-to-right reading order, an industry practice known as “flopping,” and some translations left much to be desired.³ It wasn’t until 2002 that Levy, prompted by licensors, distribution chains, and the success of Viz Entertainment’s unflopped release of the *Dragon Ball Z* manga, changed Tokyopop’s publication strategy to offer what he termed “100% Authentic Manga”: volumes that preserved right-to-left print format, Japanese systems of onomatopoeia, and other artistic, linguistic, and cultural differences (227). This less-is-more approach lowered production costs, allowed the company to undercut the
competition, and quickly brought huge returns on their investments.

Today, Tokyopop’s approach to manga marketing and publishing is considered by many to be the industry standard, and the number of titles they release is a testament to their success. As in Japan, America has manga titles that cater to every age group, interest area, and stylistic preference, so Tokyopop instituted a ratings system in order to help buyers make informed purchasing decisions. According to a company-produced white paper, there are five ratings for their titles: A (All Ages), Y (Youth, ages 10+), T (Teen, ages 13+), OT (Older Teen, ages 16+), and M (Mature, ages 18+) (“The Librarian’s Guide” 14). The guide clarifies its ratings with short descriptions, noting that titles for older audiences may feature content that may not be suitable for young children. Unfortunately, these ratings are reductive at best and do not address the disconnect between intended and actual audience.

Some of these questions of intent can be answered by noting that the Japanese have different ideas about what is objectionable to, and inappropriate for, young readers. As “The Librarian’s Guide” points out, “It is important to understand that manga is very much an East Asian import, filled with diverse themes and situations” (3). Therefore, manga’s social and cultural conventions do not always correspond to those of North America. The Tokyopop ratings system was designed and implemented to educate adults unfamiliar with the genre, not to assist children in choosing their own titles. What purpose these ratings actually serve, however, is up for debate, as manga purchases are often unrestricted. Although some publishers shrink-wrap adult titles and some
sellers request proof of age before purchase, such practices are non-compulsory and only acknowledge general content. They do not, and cannot, address more specific aspects such as theme, character, or plot—nor do they recognize the possibility of an ambiguous audience or work that falls beyond rating limitations.

Among the many titles that demonstrate this problem of ambiguity is *Loveless*, a fantasy manga by established female *mangaka* (manga artist/author) Yun Kôga. *Loveless* is rated “OT” by Tokyopop, which means that it is “appropriate for ages 16 and up” and “[m]ay contain profanity and strong language, moderate violence and gore, moderate sexual themes and sexual violence, nudity, moderate fanservice [an industry term meaning gratuitous pandering to the audience], and alcohol and illegal drug use” (“The Librarian’s Guide” 14). *Loveless* does, in fact, meet many of the aforementioned criteria, but its content goes beyond simple, categorical reductions. Kôga’s story draws upon a legacy of romantic, often explicit, manga titles to create a nuanced tale of love, identity, self-discovery, and the power of language. Additionally, the North American release of *Loveless* is preceded by a Japanese release history that suggests a much older audience.

Yet the performance of gender, sexuality, and identity within the manga speaks directly to an audience too young and/or malleable to have made any lasting judgments about its own physical, social, and sexual identity. It is impossible, as Tokyopop attempts with its ratings system, to reduce *Loveless* to an easy series of evaluative standards. However, by examining historical precedents, release history, and thematic issues, it is
possible to analyze the text’s strategies for navigating the boundaries between children’s literature and adult literature. Through its use of gender ambiguity and outward representations of sexual identity, *Loveless* negotiates a threefold audience of pre-adolescent, adolescent, and adult women, touching on themes and concepts designed to interest a large body of readers.

*Loveless* is the story of Ritsuka Aoyagi, a 12-year-old boy tormented by amnesia, an abusive mother, and the murder of his older brother, Seimei. Two years prior to the manga’s events, Ritsuka underwent a dramatic personality shift; he went from being a popular-but-average student to an aloof-but-outstanding student. This change was the impetus behind his mother, Misaki’s, abuse. With the loss of Seimei, the only person who defended him, Ritsuka grew increasingly distant. The manga opens with his first day at a new school, where Soubi Agatsuma, a mysterious 20-year-old art student who claims to have been sent by Seimei, confronts Ritsuka. When they are attacked by a pair of middle-school students referring to themselves as “Breathless,” Soubi reveals that he is a “Fighter,” a magician who attacks using specialized linguistic spells, and that Ritsuka is a “Sacrifice,” one who assumes all damage in a spell battle. Together, the two form the team “Loveless,” and Ritsuka is initiated into a world of magic and intrigue. Over the course of the manga, Ritsuka works to discover what really happened to Seimei and forges a deep bond with Soubi based on mutual trust, desire, and submission.

Currently, *Loveless* runs in Ichijinsha’s *Monthly Comic Zero-Sum* and has been
compiled into nine volumes (“Japanese Comic Ranking”), eight of which have been translated into English by Tokyopop (“Loveless [Manga]”). Although Tokyopop categorizes the title as fantasy, *Loveless* falls neatly into a much larger category genre known as *josei*, or “ladies’ comics,” manga written specifically for adult women. As long-running translation and review group Aqua House points out, josei is often confused or conflated with *shôjo* (girls’ comics) because both genres address female audiences, but josei tends to feature male leads instead of female leads, as in *shôjo* (“[faq]: Manga Publishing Houses”). Another distinguishing characteristic of josei is its lack of *furigana*, small *hiragana* and *katakana* glosses to help readers with comprehension and pronunciation. Furigana, notes Aqua House, is most prevalent in manga for younger audiences who need furigana to work through complex *kanji* within the text (“[faq]: Glossary of Terms”). Generally, *Loveless* lacks furigana except to clarify name pronunciations, since most kanji have multiple readings (“Loveless 6, page 18”; “Loveless 6, page 111”). Their exclusion is a strong indication that Kôga’s intended audience was one with the educational background required to effectively read and comprehend her language.

Because josei is marketed to women, it is not surprising that women write the majority of its titles. What is surprising about josei and *shôjo* is that a subgenre known as “boys’ love,” manga that explores male/male romance, is also written by women. Boys’ love emerged in the early 1970s, just as female mangaka were beginning to overtake men in the *shôjo* world (Welker 841). Its titles run the gamut of explicitness—from innocent expressions of platonic love to outright pornography—and are characterized by the
presence of one or more androgynous male characters. As James Welker illustrates, these*bishônen*(roughly translated as “beautiful boys”) are considered stand-ins for women. “[The] beautiful boy,” he says, “is visually and psychically neither male nor female” (842) and is designed to be the character that females most identify with.

At first, female identification with bishônen appears backwards; such figures take their visual and romantic cues from women, not the other way around. However, manga critic Yukari Fujimoto suggests that during the formative years of the boys’ love genre, female readers could not “positively accept their own sexuality as women” (qtd. in Welker 842). During the 1970s “neither same-sex desire nor schoolgirl interest in sexuality was considered appropriate,” and Welker indicates that these women required texts that “transgressively [offered]…new models of masculinity and romance” (842-3). Boys’ love introduced female readers to visual representations of a subversive, yet safe, brand of sexuality. Also, because boys’ love titles appealed to a broad spectrum of Japanese women, the division between shôjo and josei blurred further, with several titles appealing to female readers across a variety of ages and lifestyles—a movement that has continued as boys’ love has grown in popularity and social attitudes have changed.

Kôga is no stranger to the history and conventions of boys’ love. One of her previous works, the acclaimed manga series*Earthian,* is a classic of the genre. In the case of*Loveless,* Ritsuka and Soubi are her primary bishônen. Ritsuka’s pre-adolescent body has the slender build of a petite woman, but it lacks the standard female markers of delineated hips and breasts. Additionally, because he has not yet reached puberty, he
cannot be identified (literally or visually) as a man. Soubi’s body is also willowy and feminine, and his long hair appears to signify womanhood; the only outward representation of his masculinity, other than clothing, is his height. In fact, most of the males in Loveless, with their androgynous figures and longer-than-usual hair, conform to the bishônen stereotype.

Despite their “maleness,” Kôga inscribes her characters’ bodies with qualities that suggest femaleness without resorting to its traditional imagery. Still, as Judith Butler writes in Gender Trouble:

The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of “the body” that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This “body” often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as “external” to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body, however,…ought to question “the body” as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse. (129)

Questioning the sex/gender distinction of these supposedly male bodies opens up the possibility that Loveless is an examination of gender performance. Boys’ love has experimented with gender roles from the beginning, crossing the divisions between male and female in a fantastic, non-heteronormative space where sex is not presupposed by the body.
The concept of such spaces is nothing new to Japan. Despite the Japanese people’s stereotypical reputation for sexual oppressiveness, Welker reminds us that “[g]ender as performance has long been an integral part of Japanese theater” (842). As in English theater, women were barred from the Japanese stage for centuries, and men, real-life bishônen in their own right, played all female roles. This fact, combined with the contemporary success of the all-female Takarazuka Revue Company (an all-female theater that became extremely popular during the 1970s for its gender-bending performance of the shôjo classic *Rose of Versailles*) demonstrates Japan’s tradition of gender performativity in art. In this regard, *Loveless* is no different than men masquerading as idealized females or women playing men in “trouser roles” (Welker 847). Ritsuka’s youth and Soubi’s fashion allow them to be both female and male, thus casting their unusual love affair into both orthodox heterosexual and subversive homosexual contexts.

Still, it is not accurate to call the Ritsuka/Soubi dynamic a disguised heterosexual relationship, nor is it safe to suggest that it is merely a thinly veiled homosexual relationship. Both characters swap between traditional masculine and feminine roles. Soubi, a master Fighter, is Ritsuka’s entrance into and information source on the Fighter-Sacrifice world. He is the keeper of worldly knowledge and reveals it only when he chooses to. Ritsuka submits because he views himself as Soubi’s Sacrifice in the most literal sense, as well as his physical, mental, and social inferior. Yet, because Fighters are at the command of their Sacrifices, Soubi acquiesces to Ritsuka’s will
whenever Ritsuka chooses to exert it. He is at the boy’s beck and call, even going so far as to purchase Ritsuka a cell phone so he can call at any hour (Kôga 1: 145). Perhaps one of Loveless’s most illustrative moments is during Volume One, when Soubi borrows an ear-piercing gun and forces Ritsuka to pierce his ears. With this act, Soubi both dominates Ritsuka into performing a sadistic act and submits to the creation of scars, a physical reminder of his masochistic surrender (1: 169-73).

If one accepts the convention of masculinity as “dominant” and femininity as “submissive,” this early scene allows readers to interpret the Ritsuka/Soubi dynamic in multiple ways. The assertive Fighter defends his passive Sacrifice, yet it is the Sacrifice who commands him. Soubi is older, more forceful and persuasive in his language, yet he allows a child to rule him. Ritsuka, an innocent and social inferior, commands the elder’s body and life. Ritsuka does not conform to the traditional image of masculine dominance, but his exerted influence allows him to be read in such a way. Conversely, Soubi’s age, height, and experience grant him physical and social power, yet he allows himself to be commanded by his smaller, weaker partner. They continuously exchange authority within their relationship, complicating the standard divisions between masculinity and femininity, dominance and submission.

Although this early scene begins to articulate the complex connections between dominance, sadomasochism, and sexual identity within the manga, later volumes make these themes palpable. Fighters cast all damaging spells, but their Sacrifices assume the damage. The visual imagery of spell battles, and the damage taken while engaging
in them, suggests bondage; instead of being wounded, the Sacrifice is painfully restrained in chains, cuffs, and collars. Kôga pushes the imagery even further by representing Ritsuka and Soubi in promotional art wearing outfits that resemble the bondage paraphernalia of the Fighter-Sacrifice battles. Ritsuka in particular is often illustrated with piercings and clothes covered in straps and laces, none of which he ever wears during the course of the manga. The actual physical wounds Ritsuka suffers from Misaki contrast these costumes. There is hardly a single panel that does not show him wearing a bandage of some sort. Ritsuka tolerates the pain because “[a]s long as Mother is at home with me, I’m happy with that” (Kôga 5: 126). Ritsuka’s admission that he’s “fine with the way she treats [him]” prompts Soubi to wonder if the boy is “a masochist…or an angel” (5: 127). Recall Soubi’s demand for ear piercings: upon completing them, Ritsuka asks, “Soubi, do you like pain? People like that are called masochists” (Kôga 1: 173). The act of giving and receiving pain becomes impossibly tied up in gender performativity and desire.

Butler posits another way for readers to consider Ritsuka’s relationships with Seimei, Misaki, and Soubi:

Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire….The identifications consequent to melancholia are modes of preserving
unresolved object relations, and in the case of same-sexed gender identification, the unresolved object relations are invariably homosexual. Indeed, the stricter and more stable the gender affinity, the less resolved the original loss, so that rigid gender boundaries inevitably work to conceal the loss of an original love that, unacknowledged, fails to be resolved. (63)

Ritsuka’s melancholia over the loss of Seimei, his father substitute, is unresolved throughout Loveless. Even when it is revealed in Volume Five that Seimei is alive, Ritsuka still cannot cope with his brother’s loss. Coupled with the revelation that their relationship bordered on incest (Kōga 5: 49-50), the impact on Ritsuka’s psyche becomes obvious. Soubi, the man closest to his brother, becomes a Seimei substitute and love interest. Ritsuka’s involvement in the Fighter-Sacrifice battles brings him closer to understanding the world his brother inhabited. Conversely, Misaki, as Ritsuka’s remaining parent, comes to embody everything destructive about his relationship with Seimei. Ritsuka accepts her abuse because he sees it as punishment; each wound he suffers is both penance for the sin of loving his own brother and reminder that his brother lives within him, Misaki, and the Fighter-Sacrifice world.

All of these themes gesture toward an intended adult audience capable of responding to these nuances, yet the manga’s most distinguishing characteristic may be the reason behind its popularity among—and Tokyopop’s decision to market it to—teen readers. In the Loveless universe, all people are born with a cat’s tail and a pair of cat’s ears. The presence of these nekomimi (literally “cat-ears”) lends a certain childish fantasy to the
story. Yet even this lends itself to mature themes. In Loveless, a person’s nekomimi disappear whenever he or she “becomes an adult,” a euphemism for sexual initiation. This fact points to the mixed history of nekomimi characters in Japanese culture. Just as the Western figure of the Playboy Bunny juxtaposes the vulnerability of a baby animal with unbridled female sexuality, the nekomimi clothes fetish objects in the garb of innocence. Loveless’s anthropomorphism, like shôjo manga’s use of the schoolgirl uniform to symbolize the apex of girlhood and burgeoning adolescence, is at once a call to childhood and adulthood.

Kôga’s choice to inscribe her characters with a physical trait representing their sexual initiation is a calculated one, but the exact process of sexual initiation is unclear. She never directly identifies which non-penetrative and/or penetrative acts result in nekomimi loss. For this reason, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly causes Loveless characters to lose their ears and tail. The manga offers some clues. Heterosexual coitus is, of course, one method, but it is definitely not the only one. A flashback reveals that Soubi’s male teacher “took” his nekomimi at a young age (Kôga 8: 20-23). Lesbians Kouya Sakagami and Yamato Nakano, the female Fighter-Sacrifice team known as “Zero,” are involved in a committed relationship and lack nekomimi (Kôga 3: 183-90). Meanwhile, acts like kissing, hugging, touching, and non-genital massage do not appear to cause nekomimi loss. Despite these and other depictions, the manga remains surprisingly ambiguous on the topic of sexual initiation.

Of course, this move allows Kôga to identify certain characters as “innocent,” but it also
blurs the definition of adulthood. This is clearly demonstrated when Hitomi Shinonome, Ritsuka’s female teacher, is threatened by Youji and Natsuo Sagan, the male Fighter-Sacrifice team known as “Zero.” They identify her as an “adult” in terms of her age, but because Hitomi retains her nekomimi, she is teased and mocked. In fact, they resolve to take her virginity and complete her transformation into “adulthood” (Kôga 2: 139-144). Neither Youji nor Natsuo manages to rape her; Soubi ultimately saves the day. However, this moment helps draw a stark division between “adulthood,” as defined by sexual initiation, and maturity, as defined by adult-like actions and thoughts.

Because the world of Loveless features an outward representation of one’s sexual initiation, its social dynamics are strikingly different from our own. Ritsuka immediately recognizes Soubi as an adult by his lack of nekomimi, and he treats Soubi as such. During their first meeting, Ritsuka says that he had no idea his brother “had an adult friend,” prompting Soubi to respond, “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything to you” (Kôga 1: 33). This brief exchange is followed by a kiss, causing Ritsuka to wonder at the true nature of Soubi and Seimei’s relationship. Because Seimei still had his ears and tail before (and after) his disappearance, his relationship with Soubi could not have been a consummated love affair, yet the intimacy Soubi shared with Seimei (and seeks to share with Ritsuka) indicates a mature connection. Of course, a sexual relationship between the two would be inappropriate; in fact, Ritsuka says in Volume One, “My mom would flip if I lost my ears at my age” (1: 38). Despite several instances of kissing and heavy petting by both Soubi and Seimei, Ritsuka retains his nekomimi. Still, his concern over their possible loss clearly demonstrates the social expectations of his peers.
Other characters also deal with the social ramifications of the presence, or loss, of their nekomimi. Hitomi retains hers, despite being older than Soubi. Because of this, her co-workers consider her immature, “a bit meek” (Kôga 1: 13), and not completely adult. Additionally, she clashes with Soubi, who treats her as an inferior. In an attempt to displace this difference, Hitomi refers to him as “Agatsuma-kun,” his surname combined with an honorific used to address a younger male. His merciless teasing causes her to, at first, resent him. After a while, however, she affirms her decision to preserve her virginity and becomes more confident in herself, essentially becoming the “adult” that she truly is, in spite of her nekomimi. On the opposite end of the spectrum are Yamato and Kouya. Interestingly, Yamato proudly flaunts her “adulthood” in public and among her friends, while her lover and partner, Kouya, wears false ears and tail. It is only in each other’s presence that they are both sexually honest (Kôga 3: 183-90). These gestures, along with Hitomi’s interactions with Soubi, reveal that possession or lack of one’s ears and tail reflects a certain status.

These motions allow Kôga to avoid the obvious issue of pedophilia concerning Ritsuka’s sexual initiation.11 After all, several characters, including Soubi’s friend Kio Kaidou, tell Soubi that his relationship with Ritsuka is perverse and strange. While Soubi doesn’t feel this way, Ritsuka occasionally does. Over time, he becomes more comfortable with his relationship, even going as far as ordering Soubi to strip in a public place to determine whether or not Seimei had physically abused him (Kôga 7: 23-9). Still, because there is no representation of inappropriate physical relations between Soubi
and Ritsuka, their love remains intimate but unconsummated. In giving her characters an outward sign of their sexual experience, Kôga makes concessions to a younger audience. By allowing Ritsuka to retain his virginity, despite his knowledge of sex and desire, she courts an audience of young-adult females that can read Ritsuka and Soubi’s relationship as sexually and heteronormatively “safe.” Alongside Hitomi, a woman who refuses to submit to social pressures, Ritsuka becomes a model for chastity in the face of overwhelming temptation to have sex and become an adult. This allows readers to avoid interpreting Loveless’ gender performativity as a deliberate challenge to societal and heteropatriarchal norms, keeping the manga firmly in the realm of fantasy.

Another aspect of the text that suggests a plural audience is its use of duality. Much of the action in Loveless takes place within two major spheres: the social realm, which consists mainly of home and school, and the hidden world of Fighters and Sacrifices. There is a great deal of crossover between these two spheres. Fighter-Sacrifice teams often invade the social realm because of the dual lives they lead; most maintain ordinary existences, and their battles overlap with day-to-day activities within homes, schools, and public areas. On several occasions, Soubi enters Ritsuka’s home unbidden, but he is careful to avoid detection by and maintain distance between Misaki and himself. This is, in part, due of her instability, but Soubi also recognizes that Ritsuka wants to keep “Ritsuka” distinct from his “Loveless” identity. This issue of dual identities plays out in multiple arenas. Ritsuka’s personality shift and amnesia suggests that before he ever discovered his “true name,” he was already divided. Even his best friend
Yuiko Hawatari comments upon first meeting him, “You’re so weird. Like you live a double life!” (Kôga 1:22). This statement angers Ritsuka, but he knows deep down that she is right. The child that is Ritsuka coexists with the near-adult Loveless.

Nevertheless, the one place where the text speaks most directly to a younger audience is in Ritsuka’s junior-high school, where he deals with average pre-adolescent issues. Within its walls, he struggles to make friends and cope with the social dynamics of his fellow classmates—activities kept distinct and separate from his life as a Sacrifice. Among his fellow students, he is an outsider. His brother’s murder, outward signs of abuse, and friendship with the goodhearted Yuiko make him a target of gossip and intimidation. Bullying is a common trope in manga due to its underground proliferation in Japanese schools, but in Loveless, Ritsuka responds with precocious maturity. Rather than allow his tormentors to alienate him further, he stands up to them. When a group of girls ruin a jar of homemade strawberry jam Yuiko brings to share with Ritsuka, for example, he confronts them, declaring, “It’s inhuman….You hurt Yuiko. People who hurt others break the real rules, the rules that matter” (2:28-9). Kôga uses moments like these to speak to younger readers who identify with Ritsuka’s daily trials.

Below the surface, however, an attention to burgeoning sexuality remains. When Hitomi takes Yuiko aside to comfort her after the jam incident, Yuiko says, “From his first day, I thought [Ritsuka] was cool. And I wanted to be his best friend. And today I liked him even more….He supported [and] protected me. I’d do anything for [him]…even die” (Kôga 2: 33). Hitomi is shocked and thinks, “She doesn’t know that this is love. She can
feel it, but she can’t name it. To say you’re willing to die…I envy that” (2: 33-4). Yuiko’s youthful naïveté does not enable her to name what she feels toward Ritsuka, yet she is one of the only characters whose emotions are not checked by social conventions. It’s no accident that Kôga represents Yuiko as innocent (retaining her nekomimi) yet fully developed (tall, with full breasts and hips). Because she looks more “adult” than her classmates, she is able to give voice, if not name, to adolescent sexual awakening.

*Loveless* has issues and themes that speak to readers across multiple demographics, yet despite Kôga’s experienced storyteller’s hand, many North American fans continue to misread the manga as “adult.” Certainly the series is a deeply ambiguous text that does not provide its readers with easy answers to questions of intended audience. However, the North American readership of *Loveless*, if current fan attitudes can be accepted as “proof” of anything, considers the work to be something much more explicit than what it is actually printed. Some of this confusion stems from the fervent devotion of female fans to a subgenre known as *yaoi*. An acronym for the Japanese phrase “yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi” (roughly, “no climax, no point, no meaning”), *yaoi* is primarily used by English-speaking fans to refer to manga and *dôjinshi* (fan comics) that feature sexually explicit relationships between male characters. Although they are distinct terms, non-Japanese fans nonetheless conflate *yaoi* and boys’ love, and this conflation gets young readers into trouble.

As Eliza Strickland reports in her examination of the *yaoi* subculture, “Underage fans put the genre as a whole at risk….The proliferation of young fans has already led the
shutdown of a few beloved yaoi Web sites when outraged parents figured out what their kids were looking at” (“Drawn Together”). She goes on to note that in 2006, Loveless was number five on IGv2’s list of manga best-sellers, yet she also tells of underage girls scrambling to get their hands on yaoi and boys’ love titles. Their desire to read yaoi and boys’ love can be traced to the formation of personal literacies. Contemporary adolescent readers, who are well versed in the techniques of reading multimodal texts, respond to Loveless quite positively. Kate Allen and John E. Ingulsrud point out in “Reading Manga”:

School literacy as prescribed by the curriculum is represented by classroom textbooks and library books. These texts tend to reflect the values of those in power....On the other hand, personal literacy is determined by the readers themselves. For many young people, part of the pleasure of this kind of literacy is knowing that it is frowned on in school, hence the enjoyment of secretly reading forbidden [emphasis mine] texts. (265)

As these pre-adolescent and adolescent girls come to terms with their own sexual and social power, they reach out to texts that allow them to challenge authority and vent their frustrations. Boys’ love is the perfect outlet. Through its bishônen characters, they explore alternate modes of love, gender, and sexuality—allowing them to construct a space where they can formulate and answer questions about their own identity. Loveless, with its complex explorations of adult themes in a young-adult world, functions as both a critique of adult society and a proposal for society's future adults.
Regardless of its popularity among younger readers, much of the content and release history for *Loveless* suggest that it was never meant for underage consumption. Its 2005 Japanese television adaptation ran in a post-midnight timeslot, well after bedtime for most children. Even Tokyopop’s release embraces a more sophisticated, literary audience. Each volume concludes with a short critical essay; some respond directly to the plot, some touch on characterization, and others explore deeper issues that permeate the series. Not surprisingly, none of the essays address the sexual dimensions of and gender performances within the text. Surprising, though, are those that deal with topics including duality, language as magic, and pain as education. These topics, while of great interest to adult readers able to understand Kôga’s explorations, are likely over the heads of younger readers. Their inclusion illustrates that Tokyopop is well aware of *Loveless*’ crossover appeal.

The most telling of these essays is Lillian Diaz-Przybyl’s “Speak Like a Child: The Inner Thoughts of Children in *Loveless*” at the end of Volume Four. On the subject of Kôga’s characterization of Ritsuka, Diaz-Przybyl writes, “It’s surprisingly difficult for a writer to capture the inner mind of a child. Characters either end up seeming younger than their years, or just like miniature adults, and kids are far more complex than we grown-ups usually give them credit for” (197). Her use of the word “we” immediately divulges the audience for whom she believes she is writing—adults reading an adult story. Underage readers are not in her scope, except, perhaps, in her abstract. However, she also recognizes the complexity of the child and concedes that adults underestimate
children’s abilities. Though children may not be reading the essays at the end of *Loveless* volumes, Diaz-Przybyl acknowledges that some of them likely are.

Perhaps, then, *Loveless* is the perfect title for these “complex” children—pre-adolescent and adolescent girls coming to terms with, and making decisions about, their sexual and social agency. Kôga’s intended audience may have been one of adult women seeking an escapist fantasy populated by half-veiled women in trouser roles, but she has also attracted a new audience. Thanks to Tokyopop, North American pre-teens and teens seeking critique of and proposal for their national sexual culture can turn to the revolutionary space Kôga has created within her manga. Young women on the cusp of, or fully embracing, their emerging sexual identities can abandon traditional notions of gender, identity, and love. Still, *Loveless*, built on ideas once so revolutionary to an entire generation of Japanese females, is incomplete. Ritsuka has more discoveries ahead of him in coming chapters and volumes, and it is likely that, as Kôga further develops this universe, she will continue to court the ambiguous audience most in need of her vision. To these readers, the roses, butterflies, and bishônen of boys’ love are more than just romantic symbols; they are the promise of sexual freedom.
Notes

1. For more information on the history of *otaku* as both a derogatory and complimentary term, see Lawrence Eng’s “The Politics of Otaku,” Volker Grassmuck’s “‘I’m alone, but not lonely’: Japanese Otaku-Kids Colonize the Realm of Information and Media; A Tale of Sex and Crime from a Faraway Place,” and Thomas Lamarre’s “An Introduction to the Otaku Movement.”

2. All provided titles of anime and manga are those under which they were released in America.

3. I refer specifically to the controversy surrounding *Sailor Moon*. The anime was already very popular by the time Tokyopop/Mixx began publishing the manga version in *MixxZine*. In an attempt to avoid conflicts with the anime’s translation and storyline, certain liberties were taken with the manga’s translation. Additionally, per industry practice at the time, the images were flopped. This outraged fans that were already disgusted by the American release of *Sailor Moon*, which was heavily edited for syndication. However, unlike many of Tokyopop’s early titles, *Sailor Moon* has never been, and is unlikely to be, re-released under the “100% Authentic Manga” line due to complicated licensing issues.

4. Tokyopop later instituted a symbolic code to identify a title’s genre (a stylized unicorn head for “Fantasy,” an alien head for “Sci-Fi,” etc.). Early titles in the “100% Authentic Manga” line do not feature these glyphs printed on the covers.

5. Surnames are first in Japanese name order, but for the purposes of this paper, I have reversed it to correspond with traditional English name order.

6. All names featuring the double-O vowel sound—generally represented as “ô”—are
spelled with “ou” in Tokyopop’s English rendition of *Loveless*. I have retained this feature, despite my use of “ô” elsewhere.

7. The boys’ love genre is also known as “*shônen ai*,” a Japanese term which translates to “boy-love.” The term *shônen ai* has fallen out of favor in Japan, as it is too often associated with pederasty. However, it is still popular among North American fans and used interchangeably with “boys’ love.”

8. There is some controversy as to whether boys’ love titles that feature explicit sex should be considered a separate subgenre. Because there is no explicit sex present in *Loveless*, I refer to it as a boys’ love title, despite insistence by some readers that it should be categorized elsewhere.

9. Soubi’s careful dispensation of knowledge is largely the work of Seimei, Soubi’s previous Sacrifice, who ordered Soubi not to reveal too much to Ritsuka.

10. As of Volume Eight, there are two teams known as “Zero”: one all-female and one all-male.

11. As noted in 8, boys’ love does not indicate relationships between pre-adolescent boys and older men. There are manga genres dedicated to such relationships, but they are very specific and not germane to my discussion.

12. When purchasing *Loveless* at my local bookseller, I asked the clerk how the issue was selling. She replied that it was “very popular” and had already sold many copies—some to girls “no older than thirteen” but “mostly girls between sixteen and twenty-two.” Upon further inquiry, she admitted that she had not asked a single buyer for proof of age.
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Subverting the Myth of the Bearded Lady: Jennifer Miller and Circus Amok

By Shayda Kafai

“I live in a very liminal place. Liminal means: an ‘inbetween place.’ It means ‘in a doorway, dawn or dusky.’ It’s a lovely place. In the theater, it’s when the lights go out and before the performance begins.” —Jennifer Miller from Juggling Gender

Bodies possess narratives, stories both told and hidden. When anomalies mark the body with difference, the visual stories it offers viewers become dichotomous and electric. Such was the draw of the freak shows of the 19th and 20th centuries, a simultaneous mixture of awe and dread. The body of physical difference became spectacle, labeled as Other, a deviant subject which actively drew the normative gaze. The lineage of framing bodies of difference as freaks, exposing them to the voyeuristic gaze of hegemony, is lengthy. While authors like cultural historian Robert Bogdan and cultural critic Leslie Fiedler examine the social and cultural connotations of freak shows before and during the P.T. Barnum era, it is also vital to examine contemporary applications of freakery. Through such unpacking, we can begin to unravel the culturally sedimented applications of the word freak; we can understand and then undermine its potential to marginalize.

This paper will discuss the work and life of Jennifer Miller, a multidisciplinary artist, clown, and self-identified woman with a beard. Through her daily life and her
performances in Circus Amok, a circus she founded in 1989 and currently directs, Miller challenges the historical connotations of freak shows; hers is a project of resistance. Though she functions within the trope of the circus as spectacle, Miller inverts the mythic image of the bearded lady and, by extension, the genealogies of essential femininity and the normative image of womanhood.

When Miller's beard started to grow, she was seventeen. Initially, the beard became the center of discomfort for her, a stigmatic presence she did not voice to her friends. Miller quickly realized how difficult it was to get a job as a woman who was intentionally transgressing feminine norms. Seeking to remedy the situation, upon her grandmother's insistence, Miller shaved her beard and tried electrolysis. In Juggling Gender, a documentary about Miller's life and art, she declares that the act of removing hair from her face “felt like mutilation, a losing battle” (Juggling Gender). The consequent decision to maintain her beard positioned Miller as a non-normative woman. As a result, she was forced to negotiate the multifaceted aspects of hair: its transformative powers and, simultaneously, its problematic, cultural connotations.

Hair's ability to marginalize the subject points to the power of transgressive hair, what Susan Schnur, editor of Jewish feminist magazine Lilith, defines as “hair on a female that grows on male-staked territory (mustaches, underarm hair, hairy legs)--[that] unsettles [male/female] categories” (8). Culture constructs these spaces as male-staked. Just as a skirt is not inherently female, facial hair (mustache/beard) is not
inherently male. Rather, hegemony uses the mustache/beard, underarm hair, and hairy legs as signifiers for maleness. In this way, hair is power. Its socially coded myth is a vital part of the bearded lady’s, and by extension, Jennifer Miller’s, subjectivity. The possession of transgressive hair creates what Miller refers to as “beard anxiety” (Juggling Gender), an essential aspect of what originally created interest in the bearded ladies of the 19th and 20th centuries. Miller is met with a similarly cautious bewilderment as she walks in her home New York City.

When Miller speaks, the clash of a feminine voice and a masculine sexual signifier creates confusion; Miller’s body becomes a space for the viewers’ disorientation. Spaces hegemony socially codes as female, such as women’s clothing sections in department stores or women’s restrooms, become particularly hostile spaces for Miller. “It’s hard, the bathroom scene,” Miller reveals. “I’ve been stopped. I’ve had to say, Yes, I’m a woman” (Smith C3). During public encounters in bathrooms and dressing rooms, Miller’s body immediately becomes spectacle. She represents a middle ground where hegemonic standards and transgressions collide. In order to fully understand why Miller’s beard prompts revulsion and why we should view Miller’s keeping of her beard as a subversive act, we first need to examine the genealogy of the bearded lady, the ways in which freak shows historically framed her.

The female and male sexual signifiers that marked the bearded lady of the 19th and 20th centuries framed her in a visual contradiction. On account of the imbalance, it
became crucial for showmen to locate the archetypal bearded lady in the context of essential femininity; we can also read this as the desire to control the Other. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, author of Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, makes reference to this desire stating that “Bodies that are disabled [or viewed as physically different] can also seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control” (37). Hegemony consequently viewed the bearded lady as problematic, as out of control, because she negotiated male sexual signifiers upon her female body. For this reason, her physical difference was seen as a threat to hegemony’s artificial rigidity.

One way in which hegemony renegotiated the bearded lady’s physical difference was through the use of highly staged photographs called cabinet cards. These small photo cards, sold as souvenirs in the 1860’s, often depicted the bearded lady in traditional Victorian dresses, her long hair, a status of her femininity, combed at her shoulders (Bogdan). Robert Bogdan author of Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit, states that bearded ladies “typically appeared in straightforward status-enhancing motifs—except for the beards, these women represented the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood” (224). Annie Jones, a bearded lady who performed in P.T. Barnum’s traveling sideshows, was often photographed under the directed gaze of American photographer Charles Eisenmann (Nickell 151). Eisenmann photographed and posed Jones, along with other bearded ladies, an act which speaks to the rigidity of the cabinet cards. The photographs served as a heavily
regulated space, one where hegemony’s hand could enter and manipulate. However, the cabinet cards ultimately did not present the women as “the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood.” The cabinet cards created a visual juxtaposition between the women’s beards and the dresses they wore, rendering the bearded lady as the antithesis of femininity. While the bearded lady looked like a traditional Victorian woman in her dress, her beard was made all the more visible as a stigmatic mark, one which reaffirmed her marginal status. Rather than attesting to her femininity, the gender ambiguity portrayed in the cabinet cards evoked terror. The juxtaposition struck an even deeper apprehension because the bearded lady represented, in every other respect, normative femininity.

The cabinet cards also contextualized the bearded lady as the hyper-feminine wife (Bogdan). The majority of these photos presented bearded ladies positioned next to their husbands. Subsequently, the bearded ladies were also presented as mothers, another marker of essential femininity (Bogdan). Bogdan introduces Madam Clofullia, a bearded lady, who before she began performing was examined by a doctor who stated that “her breasts [were] … large and fair, and strictly characteristic of the female” (226). Such authorial confirmation points to the inherent power structure that arises when hegemony subjects bodies to medical verification, when they are forcefully placed under the scrutiny of the normative, medical gaze. For instance, when Madam Clofullia gave birth in 1851, her manager wanted the doctor to “provide an affidavit of the birth and a statement that the child was indeed hers and that she had a genuine ‘abundant beard’”
Such an act points to the weight and the need of the scientific, medical, and male voice to confirm the legitimacy of a physical anomaly. There was a need for confirmation that Madam Clofullia was able to perform the essentially feminine act of giving birth despite possessing a beard.

The need to define difference and aberrancy as evidenced by the cabinet cards of the 1860s still shadows Miller as she walks through the streets of New York City. It is a liminal positioning that renders her body at a threshold, an in-between space fraught with constant negotiation. Miller’s encounter with strangers on the street is closely related to the dichotomous relationship Andrea Stulman Dennett states would historically occur between audience members and bearded ladies:

Sometimes patrons were allowed to touch the limbs of Fat Ladies or pull the whiskers of Bearded Ladies. It was deeply arousing to Victorians to touch a strange woman in a legitimate, respectable setting, and it was a tantalizing and disturbing sight for other spectators, especially adolescents. A wondrously titillating dialectic emerged, in which performers were alluring as well as repulsive. (323)

We can understand this pull towards bodily difference as a way for onlookers to validate their own normalcy; the bearded lady served as a point of contrast (Garland-Thomson 65). The attraction to the beard, in such a situation, is complex. People can be drawn to it simply for its difference, for its acute misplacement on a female face. On the other hand, the allure of witnessing the Other is also enticing. Within this interaction, bodily difference itself becomes public. Miller’s beard, similar to the pregnant stomach, becomes a space accessible for public touch without personal consent. For example, as Miller is interviewed in the documentary Juggling Gender, a man suddenly walks up to Miller and rubs his face to hers. He wants to know “if [the beard is] real” (Juggling Gender). Such a moment is reminiscent of the Victorians’ fascination towards the
bearded lady; both the Victorians and the onlookers in New York want to know if the beard is real. They want to touch it and they are in awe of the dichotomy. It is the normative subject’s power to control the gaze which situates the bearded lady in passivity; she is at the mercy of the normative voyeur.

Miller, however, subverts the passive, entrapped position of the mythic bearded lady. When people on the street confront her and ask, “What is it that you are?” (Juggling Gender) Miller says that she engages people, asking them to discern for themselves what they are seeing. In this way, Miller intervenes in the historicized interaction between normative culture and the Other. Even questioning the position of the Other as oddity is a subversive act, one which immediately unsettles the once sedimented power structure between bearded ladies and their onlookers. The power of the onlooker is dislocated and lessened once Miller forces them to answer their own question. This action removes Miller from passivity, allowing her to diverge from the docile position freak shows and hegemony typically used to restrict bearded ladies.

Even a century after the end of the Victorian era, the connotations of the bearded lady, her social stigmas and the discourse of freakery that surrounded her, are still present. “The Thief of Womanhood: Women’s Experience of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome,” a study published in 2002, points to such a presence. The study interviews thirty women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a condition which, among other symptoms, causes the growth of excess body hair. What is unique about Kitzinger and Willmott’s
study is their application of a feminist lens in recording the experiences of these women. Specifically, Kitzinger and Willmott examine “how women with PCOS negotiate their identities as women” (350). However, the language that the interviewees use to describe themselves suggests that the myth of the bearded lady is still being perpetuated. According to Kitzinger and Willmott, many of the women use “freak” or “freakishness” as self-identifying words:

This was a repeated theme throughout virtually every interview, with ‘freakishness’ consistently represented as a failure to conform to the norms of ‘proper’ womanhood or femininity. From the range of different symptoms these women discussed, the most distressing emerged as body and facial hair, menstrual irregularity, and infertility—it was these three symptoms above all others which were consistently associated with ‘freakishness.’ (352)

The presence and recurrent use of the words “freak” and “freakishness” suggests that the social perception of people with physical anomalies is still heavily linked to the stigma and discourse of freak shows. Within the context of this study, a sign which marks gender as ambiguous positions itself as freakery. More specifically, the rhetoric used in Kitzinger and Willmott’s study exemplifies the way in which normative culture privileges women who align themselves with the mandates of essential femininity. Within this social restriction, not being able to bear children and/or possessing excessive body and facial hair marks a woman as having an anomalous, aberrant body. As a 21st century depiction of the bearded lady’s mythology, while the women in this study do not overtly subvert the myth of Otherness and deviancy, Kitzinger and Willmott did identify that “There was some muted and inconsistent resistance to the socially construct[ed] notion of ‘normal’ women” (359). Their study points to how the notion of “freakishness” “poses a fundamental challenge to the social construction of
‘womanhood' and to the notions of ‘femininity’” (Kitzinger and Willmott 359). As we shall soon see, it is here where Miller and Circus Amok’s queer tactics enter as active protest. They enter into a rooted binary logic, offering a more inclusive way of existing; they challenge the rigid boundaries of man and woman.

Before beginning her process of subversion, Miller briefly worked within the context of a traditional freak show, though she actively complicated the role. Before co-founding Circus Amok, Miller performed at the Coney Island Sideshow in Brooklyn, New York as Zenobia, a fire-eating and juggling bearded lady (Juggling Gender). In that role, she kept the traditional freak show moniker of “bearded lady.” When asked about her experiences directly engaging with the freak show archetype, Miller offers that “it gives you a context in which to look at how the bearded lady was contextualized as a performer” (Juggling Gender). Miller’s opinion about working at the Coney Island sideshow, however, is complex as she identifies the sideshow as a place where she could find work without being forced to shave her beard. The line between maintaining personhood and being spectacle, then, becomes very blurred, a truly marginal space of give and take.

The fact that Miller sought employment at the Coney Island Sideshow because of a lack of work in a traditional social setting is an innate part of the bearded lady’s mythology. Work in the freak shows served as a central source of income that people with physical differences were forced to accept (Bogdan). However, Miller’s participation at Coney
Island differs from that of the bearded lady’s. When referencing her tenure at the sideshow, performance studies scholar and artist Mark Sussman reveals that Miller “takes firm control of the content of her act. Her beard is never simply an object of display” (264). By determining the parameters of her own performance, Miller rewrites the passive position of the bearded lady. By extension, she also undoes the control of the showman. By performing in the sideshow, Miller interacts with social constructions of Otherness, with a location that gives normative culture the power to gaze. However, Miller’s specific use of language is central in understanding how she self-identifies with, and how she differs from, the bearded lady’s narrative.

The moment Miller challenges the linguistic lineage of the bearded lady is when she identifies herself as a woman with a beard. Rephrasing the moniker “bearded lady” returns agency to Miller’s body. She is no longer objectified or defined by a monolithic name, one which carries stigmatic connotations. By reversing the order of the phrase, Miller finds new entry points into the mythology of the bearded lady. She dislocates a form of identification which is primarily based on sexual signifiers. As a woman with a beard, the beard as signifier becomes secondary to the subject “woman.” Miller’s revision creates a space that vocalizes linguistic subversions; here, she challenges the historical connotations of the bearded lady. With this inversion, Miller engages with Judith Butler’s assertion that while it may be impossible to exist outside of power relations, subversions can occur; they can, indeed, effect change (42). In continuation of Kitzinger and Willmott’s study, Miller interrogates hegemony’s construction of the
labels “bearded lady,” “freak,” and “freakishness.” Thus, “Woman with a beard” serves as an embattled voice, one which reappropriates the negative, social connotations associated with transgressive hair.

To further understand the potency of this rhetorical gesture, we need to examine the symbolic relevance of hair. In The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society, Anthony Synnott argues that “Hair is one of our most powerful symbols [...] powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because although personal it is also public, rather than private” (103). Continuing to examine the hegemonically dictated impulses surrounding hair, its symbolism and power, Synnott states that “What is beautiful for one gender is ugly for the opposite sex—the young man’s glory is a woman’s shame” (111). The conventional notion that sexual signifiers such as short hair and facial hair are associated with men, while long hair and a smooth face are associated with women, demands gender conformity. Anyone who transgresses the binaries of normative culture is viewed as deviant. Hair transgressions are seen as doubly problematic if they occur on the face, rather than on the scalp. Synnott suggests that the face, in particular, “symbolizes the self, and signifies different facets of the self” (73). The fact that Miller intentionally uses her face to perpetuate gender hybridity is a powerful tactic, one which re-writes the authority of compulsive normality, the hegemonically determined image of “woman.” Miller has a choice: she can remove her beard with a battery of expensive and uncomfortable hair removal options, or she can keep it. Her choice to keep the beard despite the socially
constructed norms of transgressive hair and the public element of shame is extremely compelling. In the face of the bearded lady's well-documented mythology, Miller empowers the body of physical difference. She advocates for an alternative to accepting the dictates of normative culture. By embracing her entire body, regardless of the social disciplining that accompanies transgressive hair, Miller dissolves restrictive boundaries. She creates a space where bodies can exist without regressive standards.

Once Miller left the Coney Island Sideshow and founded Circus Amok in 1989 (Sussman), she reinstated her autonomy as a performer and as a woman with a beard. As a director and performer in Circus Amok, Miller’s actions create a location which allows her to reinstate agency in a body with physical difference. Circus Amok is a free of charge, alternative, outdoor circus without animals that is “comprised of seven ring-performers, [and] a [seven] member live band” (www.circusamok.org). In addition to these factors, the name Circus Amok also strategically points to the subversive landscape Miller’s circus seeks to create. Among the many definitions of amok, one will find aspects of confusion, frenzy, and tremendous activity. It can be argued that in order for new ideas to emerge, one must first be confused about one’s old ideas: confusion permits questioning. When we combine the notion of confusion with frenzy and tremendous activity, we can see how the name Circus Amok is very fitting. Traditionally, freak shows were meant to expose the margins to the center, serving as a space where the dominant, hegemonic gaze witnessed the Other. The normative subject was to pass judgement, to affirm their own normality in contrast to the bodies of physical difference.
Circus Amok, however, reverses this dichotomy, creating a space of frenzied transgressions. Specifically, Circus Amok dismantles the tenets of essential femininity, and masculinity, as it normalizes transgressive hair. Miller startles audiences as she presents visual contradictions. By creating an alternate space, she frames the divergence from normativity as possible. Circus Amok becomes a place which allows for frenzied re-growth: the interrogation and repositioning of the images of gender, hair, and power.

Miller continues to further reposition the image of the bearded lady in the ways in which she subverts traditional manifestations of power. In 1994, Miller began to take the circus into parks and community spaces, performing for a wider and more diverse audience (Sussman 265), a gesture which signals her control over the often patriarchal trope of the circus. By being in charge of the circus, by creating it and maintaining it, Miller's role as a woman with a beard diverges from the narrative which fixed the bearded lady in restrictions. During the P.T. Barnum era, the bearded lady was dependent on her showman (Bogdan). Miller, however, is her own showman. Circus Amok affords Miller with the freedom and agency to re-inscribe the myth of the bearded lady, and her image, with rebellious independence.

Speaking to Circus Amok's defiant nature, community arts professional Susan Monagan defines Circus Amok as having a “lesbian, feminist, circus image” (n.p.), an assignment that most traditional circuses, particularly freak shows, did not and do not have. Further,
Mark Sussman, a performance studies theorist, names Circus Amok a queer circus. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of queer can serve as an effective guidepost here, especially when navigating the labels afforded to Circus Amok. For Kosofsky Sedgwick, “queer” is a space which disrupts hegemonic and linear interpretations of gender, a central foundation of both Circus Amok and Miller’s project. Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies queer as, “The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlays, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). Miller’s decision to keep her beard can be read as her attempt to fracture the monolithic image of essential femininity. For Miller, her gender and sexuality exist in a middle ground, a space which allows for the existence of multiple voices and experiences. She carefully agitates hegemony’s image of femininity, creating what Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as gaps, an “open mesh of possibilities” (8).

Circus Amok’s costumes, in particular, also identify the inherent dissonance that exists in the artificial monoliths of essential femininity and masculinity. On stage, men enter wearing dresses, bras, and wigs while Miller usually wears a dress and reveals her beard openly and freely. During some skits, she will insert a balled sock into her pants, harnessing the energy associated with the phallus. Such an act challenges the viewers’ expectations as she presents an additional, displaced sexual signifier for negotiation and consumption. There is undeniably an element of humor attached to the act as each item being used—wig, bra, dress, phallus—is a powerful signifier that Miller intentionally
misplaces. Such reversals serve to challenge the normative positions of each item. Perhaps what is most transgressive in this reversal is that Miller, and by extension Circus Amok, suggests that these sexual signifiers can detach: they are not fixed. Within the circus, dress does not belong to the feminine and phallus does not belong to the masculine. It is through the use of costumes that gender is manipulated and altered demonstrating its innate performativity and artificially (Butler).

Miller’s choice to take the stage wearing a dress with her beard exposed further embodies the visual fragmentations of the feminine ideal. While it may appear upon first glance that Miller is affirming her femininity similar to how showmen presented bearded ladies in cabinet cards and during freak shows, this is not the case. Miller makes a strategic choice in wearing dresses publicly. Although she wears a culturally sanctioned marker of femininity, Miller preforms contrary to the mythic bearded lady, an act which at once shatters the passivity and restrictiveness the dress imposed upon women like Jones and Madam Clofullia. Here, Miller’s use of the dress acts in defiance of essential femininity. She demands the viewer re-negotiates their expectations of what constitutes the image of a woman. Not only does such an act create disparities for viewers, but it simultaneously “normalizes” difference (Monagan n.p.). Circus Amok embraces the marginalized body, plays with it, and presents it to audiences in parks. Such an act makes the body of physical difference familiar, bringing what is hegemonically deemed “freakery” into a public sphere. Circus Amok’s desire to portray difference reverses Garland-Thomson’s assertion that public viewings of the Other affirm one’s own
normality. Miller’s circus destabilizes the existence of a sterile, normative environment, creating a place where viewers can experience, and become familiar with, difference. The hope is that such exposure will foster a greater acceptance of the non-normative body, thus challenging hegemony’s outright rejection and labeling of the Other.

While Circus Amok engages in the trope of the circus, Miller expands its traditional image, connecting the circus with political and social dimensions; Miller sutures activism to her productions. According to the Circus Amok homepage, an assemblage of both elements, social justice and performance, is prevalent in each act: “the knife-throwers are reciting statistics of the AIDS crisis, the stilts are dancing through the minefields of gentrification, the women are lifting the men into the final amok pyramid, and audiences are laughing and thinking” (www.circusamok.org). Learning while being entertained can be a strategic way to induce social consciousness. Rather than serving a dry recitation of facts, Circus Amok creates an interactive way for the public body to learn about hegemonically marginalized issues. Circus Amok enters directly and unabashedly into a public space to engage with, and challenge, normative culture.

Some may argue that Circus Amok does not challenge the myth and image of the bearded lady because it is replicating the elements of spectacle and performance so linked with freak shows. Miller and the members of her circus do, for example, perform in costume as the bearded lady did. While it is unclear how all the audiences of Circus Amok react to the performance, whether or not they view the acts and those performing
as oddities or freaks, the Circus Amok mission statement stresses that “After the show, as we pack up we talk some more with the crowds. The kids who earlier had questioned the who, where, and why of us are now helping us pack” (www.circusamok.org). This act of voluntary inclusion speaks to Circus Amok’s ability to sever the trope of gazing established at most 19th and 20th century freak shows: come, gawk, and leave. While they may attend to witness the Other out of curiosity, the fact that audience members end their attendance with action serves as a powerful gesture. Voluntary audience involvement at Circus Amok’s shows speaks to the opening of dialogue and interaction, collaborative indications that were absent during the freak shows. Further, it establishes that the power inherent in the gaze, in the act of seeing, is multidirectional.

Such a re-reading of power also extends to Circus Amok’s treatment of spectacle. While Miller and the circus are spectacles as they appear on stage, in the middle of a park, the reactions noted on their homepage speak to a more complex reading of spectacle. The spectacle is invoked for the purpose of igniting questions. Too often, freak shows have used the physical difference of performers as spectacle to dehumanize the Other and to satisfy the gaze of the normative subject. The natural impulse to look upon difference has always drawn audiences to freak shows, and while there is nothing wrong with this impulse, those controlling the gaze can pervert the desire to look, turning the act of gazing into one which seeks to assert hierarchical divides. Miller calls upon this proclivity to look; however, she repositions the use of the spectacle to humanize the audience, rather than dehumanize the freak.
Miller’s work with Circus Amok and the ways in which her body performs non-normativity unsettle the original connotations that the beard, as a misplaced sexual signifier, possesses. It is her engagement with gender and performance which most forcefully disrupts the liminal positionality that hegemony affords the non-normative body. Miller’s treatment of the beard creates a space which transgresses regulatory borders. She was once told that perhaps high progesterone was the cause of her abnormal hair growth. However, in response to the appearance of dark brown hair on her chin, Miller offered, “I don’t think of it as a problem, so I’m not looking for a cause” (Smith C3). In such a repossessed space, Miller positions the beard as natural, as that which does not inherently belong to one sex or the other. Such a gesture disrupts hegemony’s grasp on what constitutes appropriate femininity. With the naturalization of the beard, femininity, as a monolith, loses its stability.

By fracturing the hegemonic position of the beard, Miller also reveals the ways in which the beard, as a displaced sexual signifier, is used as a policing tool. In order to maintain the borders of essential femininity, Madame Clofullia and the bearded ladies of the P.T. Barnum era, were rendered to the margins. Hegemony marked these women as deviant, to serve as a contrast to the normative female body. By marking the beard as transgressive and toxic to essential femininity, dominant culture policed the bodies of women who possessed facial hair. However, by not removing her beard, by renouncing the dominant image of woman, Miller refuses to be policed by the constructions of
transgressive hair. Here rests her amendment to the bearded lady’s mythology: the opportunity for a woman once manipulated by hegemony to create a narrative of her own making.
Works Cited


Circus Amok last performed in 2008. Although their website does not specify why they have not performed, a lack of funding is one plausible reason for their absence.
The Visible Female: Rape Culture and Horror in Starcraft and Warcraft

By Jolie Mandelbaum

Increasingly, the dialogue in computer games produced by Blizzard Entertainment are using the epithet “bitch” with regard to their female character.” The term has most recently been applied to Sylvanas Windrunner from World of Warcraft—the offending phrase was added in their Cataclysm expansion, launched December 7, 2010, and was used in the Starcraft: Wings of Liberty expansion, released July 27, 2010, to refer to Sarah Kerrigan. Both women have a long history in Blizzard games (with Kerrigan appearing in the original Starcraft, released in March of 1998, and Sylvanas making her first appearance as Banshee Queen in Warcraft III). These characters also have large and somewhat vocal fan bases.

There was immediately a blog firestorm in response to the use of the epithet. Female, queer and minority players were already shocked when Blizzard mentioned that users would have to publish their full, real name on their forums (that plan has now been scrapped and in no small part to the above mentioned groups insistence that they were not disposable people) and were sent further reeling when scenes from the upcoming Cataclysm expansion were released with Garrosh Hellscream (a male orc) referring to Sylvanas as a bitch. The exact quote is “Watch your clever mouth, bitch.” Sylvanas is again referred to as a bitch at the end of a quest chain that leads players into Shadowfang Keep, as
castle beset by ghouls and ruled over by Lord Godfrey. Both quest lines occur at a low level, so it is possible for characters of maximum level to miss them, but newer players questing in the Silverpine region of the famous MMO cannot miss these references. Indeed, the word “bitch” opens and closes the entire story of Silverpine and Sylvanas; Garrosh calls her a bitch at the very first quest and Godfrey is final boss/concluding episode of the area. Both of these scenes went live in the Cataclysm expansion. Three days after videos of the finished Warcraft animations hit the blogs, Starcraft: Wings of Liberty (Starcraft II) was released. About an hour into Starcraft: Wings of Liberty, after Kerrigan had exactly forty-five seconds of screen time, one of our heroes refers to her as “that bitch” and then intones that “with a woman like that, there’s only one thing you can do,” as he puts his cigar out onto a picture of her. At the end of Starcraft: Wings of Liberty she gets the slur leveled at her again, this time from Archturus Mengsk, who is arguably the “bad guy” of the Starcraft universe.

I think it’s germane to this discussion to note that this kind of language was not present in any of their previous expansions, and both World of Warcraft: Cataclysm and Starcraft: Wings of Liberty were released in 2010. Feminist blogs have given the issue the most amount of coverage, due in part to a blog’s innate ability to enter a discourse immediately, and they have made great points on both sides of the discussion. Those in favor have noted that the word is being used by characters that are unlikable to begin with and their use of the term is

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1 While citing them would be difficult, I feel like I should at very least give credit to the fantastic WoW_Ladies livejournal community for being the most vocal about these issues.
Blizzard’s way of further vilifying and by extension, showing what kind of people use gendered slurs. On the other side is the fact that Blizzard’s development team is overwhelmingly male and what we have is a group of men deciding where, how, and who gets to use a slur directed specifically at women.

I, however, am more curious as to why these are the two women, specifically and now, having the term used against them. There are quite a few women with quite a few enemies in the Warcraft universe and Sylvanas and Kerrigan are so far the only two to be branded as bitches. I propose that their particular horror has very little to do with their acts or their personalities, but more to do with being a visual representation of the inflicted horror of a rape culture.

Putting video games under the microscope of academia is a relatively new concept; in general video games are an area of culture widely ignored by traditional studies. As Schleinner states in her analyses of the Tomb Raider games, “the lack of research in the field of...games can be attributed to two factors, the first being that notion that games are merely toys for children...and that computer games are violent and unhealthy forms of entertainment and therefore do not merit as much exploration as potentially utopian technologies such a virtual reality” (Schleiner, 221). However, it’s possible that video games suffer from a level of genre confusion not present in other art forms. Is this a film? Is this interactive media? Self guided? Clearly someone wrote these games; are they a work of literature? Perhaps they fall under the category of graphic novels?
What about the player and the level of creation and involvement given to the user? Can these be taken apart by social critics when the action happens in a world that simultaneously exists and doesn’t exist at the same time?

This article will examine these games using the same language used to interrogate literature and feminist theory, so it is not an exhaustive analysis. However, this analysis will begin to bring to the forefront some of the issues present in the conception and then launch of female villains and especially the significant amount of language centered on their bodies.

Firstly, it’s important to situate these two women in their narratives, which, unlike self contained films or literary works, are fragmented over a number of years and take part parallel to hundreds, if not thousands, of other stories. Both women have strikingly similar back stories. Sylvanas was, in life, the ranger general of the Elven capital, Silvermoon, and a very nondescript elf, albeit a military genius. After falling in battle to a rather nasty character named Arthas (who is the focus of the Wrath of the Lich King expansion), he yanked her soul out of her body and turn her into a mindless banshee who could only serve him. Arthas then puppeteered her into attacking her beloved homeland. After his control on her and other undead beings began to weaken, she broke free, found her old body and re-inhabited it. She then gathered an army of zombie-like creatures who were also regaining control of their own minds, staged a military coup, and installed herself as queen of this new, sentient undead race and branded them
as the Forsaken. She currently rules the Forsaken from her home in the Undercity (which is the destroyed kingdom of Loarderon where Arthas was crown prince previous to his fall) and her honorific is The Banshee Queen. Sylvanas spends her time waging wars and, arguably, developing a new plague to wipe out the living and raise them as Forsaken as she searches for a way to spend her energy after Arthas’s destruction.

Kerrigan, in her first life, was a ghost operative and telepath who eventually joined up with a rebel alliance lead by Archturus Mengsk. In an effort to overthrow the ruling federation, Mengsk sent Kerrigan down to a planet with a beacon that would attract hostile, hivemind-controlled alien beings called the Zerg. He then betrayed Kerrigan, pulled his ship off the planet, and left her there with the beacon to be devoured by those very Zerg. Instead of killing Kerrigan, however, they infested her and enslaved her to the hivemind; when the hivenind’s control began to weaken, Kerrigan broke free, and manipulated the situation in order to take control of the Zerg swarms. Her honorific is The Queen of Blades. Kerrigan spends her time terrorizing the universe and devouring planets as she searches for a way to destroy Mengsk.

To date, there is little scholarship done in the realm of Blizzard Entertainment and their massively popular games, and virtually none about Sylvanas or Kerrigan. It is therefore necessary to draw parallels between more common subjects of analysis. What research has been done is done predominantly with
static game series (games with a set world and plotline, usually console games) and there is an extraordinary amount dealing with Lara Croft, the idealized female protagonist of the Tomb Raider series. In her paper, “Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons?” Schliener discussed Lara Croft as a “monstrous offspring of science; idealized, eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze” (222), One could argue that Lara Croft (and subsequently any hyper-idealized video game heroine) is not monstrous; perhaps uncanny in the way that only a marionette can be. One could say that Lara’s idealized female body is as unnatural as is a Barbie doll’s. However, Lara Croft is built to be infinitely desirable, sexually available and non-threatening to the player character who is, as it were, wearing Lara’s clothes. Lara is not in the same utterly confused category as Sylvanas and Kerrigan, however, the Lara Syndrome might, in fact, explain why two other powerful, troublesome female characters are not labeled with the term “bitch.”

Neither Tyrande Whisperwind, Alexstraza, nor Jaina Proudmoore, other major females in the Warcraft universe², have the term “bitch” directed at them, even though all three are powerful and troublesome women. While they are not directly “villains,” technically neither is Sylvanas due to the choices that players can make in regards to where they will put their allegiance. If a villain is defined by

² It seems valuable to note, by the way, how few women leaders actually exist. Sylvanas and Tyrande are the only two faction leaders out of twelve; the other ten are men. Jaina and Alexstraza are not faction leaders, though they are major players in the world and extraordinarily powerful entities. The player fueled Trade Princess movement, in which a large segment of the playerbase flooded the forums with requests to make the newly added goblin faction leader a female character, ended in vain with the Cataclysm release. For the time being, the goblin leader is also male.
his/her ability to “elicit feelings of fear and loathing” (Nelson 1), a player who has chosen to make a Forsaken character would see Sylvanas as an entity to worship since she has saved countless from the fate of being the mindless undead. Kerrigan’s status as a villain is also shaky; she’s usually read in the role of a victim who is now working with what she’s been given.

Alexstraza, Jaina and Tyrande, however, are visually attractive and nothing about their physical bodies attempts to disrupt or alter the male line of vision. Tyrande and Jaina are unproblematic mirrors for the male characters and players and, like Lara Croft, offer over a femininity without complexity, personality, or reality attached. In fact, Tyrande, Jaina, and Alexstraza, while exceptionally powerful, are all presented as heteronormative mirrors, with unproblematic, available sexualities. Tyrande was the love interest of the brothers Malfurion and Illidan Stormrage. Currently heterosexually partnered with Malfurion, it is widely regarded that Illidan (the final encounter in the Burning Crusade expansion) went mad because Tyrande refused to love him and consequently played upon his love for her in order to protect or advance the Night Elf faction. Jaina was romantically linked to Arthas previous to his reign as Lich King and began to rekindle her relationship with him just previous to the invasion which would turn him forever. She indeed spent the majority of the Lich King expansion mourning her relationship with him. Alexstraza, not being a humanoid character, is more difficult to pinpoint, however, she is known as the “The Life Binder;” her job, specifically, is the biological
creation of life. She is also linked to Korialstrasz, who is her current prime consort (they are drawn and animated as female and male respectively). None of these three characters offer any form of complicated sexuality; they conform completely to normative gender and sexual preference standards.

While it would be easiest to assume that Sylvanas and Kerrigan offer to the games a threatening sexuality, what is actually so disturbing about them is that they offer no sexuality at all. They are, in fact, taken out of the realm of the sexually dangerous woman and very quickly. These characters are intended to be attractive to the viewer. Indeed, most women in video games are. Smith (2005) concluded that women in video games, when present at all, were hypersexualized, however, I propose that Sylvanas and Kerrigan do not hold onto that “murderous female sexuality” that is so prevalent in media featuring deadly or villainous women, where the women are dangerous because “it is their wish to castrate man” (Delyto 6). Sylvanas and Kerrigan are so horrific, so beyond human, as to be past the realm of sexual desirability. This is not to say that they don’t conform to gender norms or beauty standards; both are humanoid and symmetrically beautiful, but they are, without fail, horrors and abominations. This is also not to say that they could not be found sexually attractive, but for the majority of people, corpses and roaches would not be selected as sexual partners. Perhaps if they were sexually available in the ways that Tyrande or Jaina are, their locus of horror would be around the Freudian idea of castration,
but one cannot not ignore the fact that Sylvanas and Kerrigan are not participants in the sexual economy any longer.

Sylvanas’s coin in the game’s Dalaran fountain (a city site where users can fish for various coins thrown in by Non-Player Characters) states, “I hope my sisters and I can grow up and get married together”\(^3\); a very clear signifier of her desire to participate in the heterosexual economy. However, the flavor text written underneath her wish is “This coin appears to be very old.” Only Sylvanas’s coin bears the designation of very old, which is significant in itself. After all, plenty of the coins in the fountain are old or have some other special quality about them. The writers of the game have both deliberately chosen a heteronormative wish and then designated just how far removed Sylvanas’s ability to participate in a sexual economy actually is from the reality of the rotted Sylvanas we know today. Her exchange with Garrosh where we first hear the term “bitch” used in game is, appropriately enough, about the Forsaken, and by extension, Sylvanas, being unable to reproduce. Sylvanas does not have a sexuality to speak of, and while that might be striking, it does not seem to be enough to render her as a threat to the male gaze. In fact, presenting her as neutered might make her less threatening, as she cannot people the world with zombies on her own, much the way Alexstraza can.

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\(^3\) For contrast, Jaina’s coin states “Arthas, my love, come back to me.”
Kerrigan’s heteronormative speaking position is also far removed from her current position. Our first introduction to Kerrigan in the original Starcraft has her calling Raynor “You pig!” after she reads his mind. Right away she takes herself out of the sexual economy, and then proceeds further away from any identity that could be construed as castrating or sexually dangerous. However, the fact remains that Kerrigan and Sylvanas are dangerous. If they were not dangerous in some way, no one would be calling them a bitch. The question remains only as to why these two women and why now. This author would like to posit that it is their disruption of the female body as a blank text to be read that makes these two women troublesome enough to be designated bitches.

What strikes me most about those two stories is the similar level of violation and their immediate call to the tradition of rape narratives. The imagery of Sylvanas’ turning has her strapped to an altar while she screams and Arthas looks down on her while he manipulates her soul out of her body. This is a horrific image on its own; when coupled with the idea of bodily violation it becomes even more significant.

Kerrigan’s story is similar, and while the player does not see what happens to her in Starcraft until she appears later, she is then referred to as Infested Kerrigan. In fact, players never see her infestation and when it happens in a flashback in Starcraft: Wings of Liberty, which doesn’t shy away from showing bodily violence, she drops her gun, falls to her knees, and is then swarmed as the scene fades in
a common fade-to-black movie trope. However, by being referred to as “infested,” the player is given a clear picture of what they are looking at; her boundaries are disintegrated, there are creatures taking up residence in her body that she does not want there and there is not a singular thing she can do about that. Kerrigan is also enslaved to the hivemind, forced to launch attacks she does not want to launch, destroy things she does not want to destroy, and have her body used in any way the swarm sees fit.

Kerrigan and Sylvanas must be named as bitches because of their literal bodies; as they are now a representation, inescapable and inevitable, of a rape narrative that is usually invisible to the eyes. Imagine a second, what it would be like to physically see evidence of bodily violations on everyone woman who had ever suffered one. Assaults and rapes are understood in a statistical way; it is understood that over the course of a lifetime at least 25% of women will suffer some kind of sexual assault, domestic violence, or combination of the two. This is a removed statistic; after the fact there is no way to ascertain whether one is viewing a member of that 25%. One must be told that an individual has suffered this violence.

Sylvanas and Kerrigan disrupt this discourse; they render this speech unnecessary. This is not to say that sexual and domestic assaults never leave scars and bruises, because they certainly do, but what if these events were readable on every inch of the body, providing visible proof of the frequency and
pervasiveness of this kind of gendered violence. If a woman’s body truly became a readable text, what kind of horror would that call into being? How disruptive is this forced knowledge to the ignorance afforded by male privilege?

Sylvanas and Kerrigan are both monsters. Admittedly, they are somewhat conventionally attractive, humanoid monsters, but they are monsters none the less. Kerrigan is twisted almost past recognition, with bone, muscle, and carapace clearly visible all over her body. Her skin is green and pocked and her hair resembles segmented insect legs. There is no way to make her the object of one’s gaze and ignore every horror inflicted on her during her infestation. The same goes for Sylvanas, now one of the walking dead; her skin is blue and gray, her bones are visible in some places and the pieces of her that are not blue and gray are very clearly rotting away from her.

If a woman is meant to be an unproblematic mirror for a man, as Woolf so well puts it in A Room of One’s Own, “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size,” then what horror is then transferred back to the male when they look at a woman and don’t see a simple, flattering reflection of themselves. Instead they are given a vision of the horror they are capable of and encouraged to inflict. Furthermore, if the horror of the Uncanny is intimately connected to “the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes,” then these women are absolutely horrific figures (Freud 7). They rob the male of their expected visions.
Men are confronted with horrible reflections where they expect to see a differentiation or a simple screen that they can project upon (Felman 5). They are simultaneously shown versions of themselves in the faces of the monsters and are also cut off from their own line of expected vision. If the truly grotesque “keeps us aware of the connections between the alien world and our own” perhaps that is where the monstrousness of Kerrigan and Sylvanas is situated (Steig 266).

Sylvanas’s re-inhabited body, forcibly taken back from her tormentor, sounds very much like a rape or abuse survivor story. The idea of being “uncomfortable in your own skin” is not unfamiliar to women who have been the victim of bodily atrocity and Sylvanas is no different. She has her body back, but it’s a twisted version, somewhat like what she used to have but very different. However, unlike in reality, her body is not only different to her, but different to everyone around her. No one can look at her and see anything unproblematically, let alone at twice its natural size. The same for Kerrigan, with her jutting carapaces and infested body; her horror is centered in the visual representation of her victimhood.

Even at the end of Starcraft: Wings of Liberty, when narrative hero Raynor finally saves the girl (to note, the idea of the hero saving the poor woman from her torment is not a construct without its issues, but that’s outside the scope of this writing) and un-infests her, the Kerrigan that remains is naked, unscarred and
human—except for her hair, which is still the segmented, vaguely insect like protrusions from her skull. There is a note of sadness in Kerrigan’s salvation; Kerrigan has come through her suffering and yet at the end things are still not the same as they were. No one can look at her and see anything but the inflicted pain, and those of us situated in the real world can see nothing but the remnants of a rape narrative. She cannot even be seen as an uncomplicated redemption for Raynor, who lives haunted by what he failed to prevent, due to the pervasive and painful reminder that is her hair.

There is no escape, not from their personalities, but from the reality of what, exactly, was visited upon them as victims. While men in positions of power are afforded the privilege of ignoring the existence of a rape culture, Sylvanas and Kerrigan ruin that for everyone.

The player does even need to hear them speak. Simply looking gives the viewer access to every horror visited upon their bodies by someone else, someone who didn’t bother to ask if this was okay. Sylvanas and Kerrigan, then, center the locus of their horror purely in the visual realm and by doing so, they disrupt, merely by existing, the male privilege of being unaware, generally, of the horrific things that happen to women and minorities.

Just looking at them is a slap in the face to privilege, the radical removal of an incredibly comfortable set of blinders, a set of blinders that relegates abused women to the realm of “Surely, no one I know.”
That is why they are bitches. That loss of privilege (and of ignorance) calls into question that entire notion of a masculine state of being. The question remains, of course, whether any of that is deliberate on the part of Blizzard and, sadly, I think not. But I think in a company staffed by men, it’s incredibly telling that the two worst monsters they could think up were ones who destroyed the idea of the silent and invisible victim.
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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. 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. 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), 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), 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 homeschooled 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 press\(^9\) 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. 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 feel 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


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).


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 unconvincing 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.*
Works Cited


The Good Wives: Infidelity and the Political Wife

By Julie Still

The New York Times describes the television show “The Good Wife,” as follows: “Julianna Marguiles plays Alicia Florrick, another nice-looking woman in a good suit and pearls whose life blows up when her husband is caught on tape in a sexually and ethically compromising position” (Stanley). For a new series, “The Good Wife” has done well and Marguiles won a Best Actress Golden Globe for her performance in the series in January 2010 (Harris 2).

The public view of the state of a marriage after one spouse’s infidelity is what makes the situation newsworthy and meaty enough to anchor a television drama. Many marriages encounter sexual affairs and infidelity is usually considered a private matter that concerns only the parties involved even those in celebrity occupations can find some privacy either by request or by fleeing the areas they usually inhabit, and business magnates can often afford to have the marriage repair or divorce proceedings take place behind closed doors. There is one group of wives, however, that find they must often, if not always, handle this personal crisis in the glare of the cameras, all too frequently literally and not just figuratively.

Those in public office in contemporary America have very little privacy. The intense public debate over what kind of dog the Obamas should get when they moved into the White House or the deconstruction of Sarah Palin’s wardrobe are just a few examples of the kind of hyper-attention paid to the denizens of the political sphere. While these are
personal matters they are not as personal as marital infidelity. In recent years, a number of American male politicians have faced the public exposure of their sexual affairs. *Politico*, an online publication focusing on national politics, found that women in elected office are far less likely to be named in sex scandals than men. In part this is because there are far more men than women in public office (Mason). As women move more into the public political realm they, too, are falling prey to public exposure of marital lapses. In 1998 an Idaho Republican Congresswoman, Helen Chenoweth, admitted a decade old affair she had had with her married business partner. The affair was made public after she aired a political ad mentioning then President Bill Clinton’s infidelity. (Kurtz D1). Very recently Nikki Haley, the newly elected Republican Governor of South Carolina has been accused of having an extramarital affair (Sacks), though, at the time of this writing there has not yet been any real evidence of this and she has denied it. Another incoming governor, Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, is alleged to have had an affair with a state trooper when she was lieutenant governor (Mason). Even so, this small number of highly publicized political women conducting, or being accused of conducting, extramarital affairs is eclipsed by the much larger number of men caught in adulterous relationships while in office. In only the past few years Congressmen Mark Souder and Mark Foley, and Senators Larry Craig, David Vitter, and John Ensign have made the news for inappropriate sexual activity.

In American politics a straying male usually makes a public apology for his indiscretion, asks forgiveness and pledges to do better. Most often this speech is made with his wife.
by his side, as a sign of support. Two recent examples of the iconic pose are Silda Spitzer, wife of former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, and Dina Matos McGreevey, former wife of former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey. This public exposure of a wronged spouse has been criticized by feminists (Pollitt 14; Belkin 9) because a public wife must stand alone and exposed, her betrayed body on display for critique and review, while her husband, standing behind a podium or microphone, tells assembled media and the viewing audience at large, of his indiscretions. The script for a public wife in this circumstance is to gaze at her husband, never acknowledging the attendant press, and, if not smile, at least show little emotion, and no negative emotion. The gist of the image is that if a politician’s wife can forgive an elected man’s adultery, surely the voters can as well. Jim McGreevey gave his wife explicit instructions on how she was to look and behave the press conference where he will announce that he is being blackmailed by a gay lover and resigning from the governorship:

As we were in the car leaving Drumthwacket, Jim told me again that I had to be Jackie Kennedy. "You have to smile," he said.

I just looked at him.

"And if reporters ask you why you're here, you should tell them, "I'm here because he's my husband and I love him," he said.

I didn't answer.

"And if the reporters ask you why what you think of gay marriage, you should say, 'I'm sensitive to the issue.'" (McGreevey 214)
This behavior recalls Arlie Hochschild’s work on the commercialization of human feeling in *The Managed Heart*, wherein she defines emotional labor to be “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild 7) and later states, “We are brought back to the question of what the social carpet actually consists of and what it requires of those who are supposed to keep it beautiful” (Hochschild, 9). The silent, forgiving, adoring wife is doing the emotional labor of the electorate.

Most of these public wives keep their thoughts about the ordeal private, but a few in recent years have chosen to write about their side of the story. This review examines four titles, three books and one book chapter, written by public wives, “good wives,” if you will. Three are or were married to Democrats, one to a Republican. Two were married to Governors, one to a President, and the other to a former Senator and Presidential hopeful. Three of the men had affairs with one or more women; one of the husbands was sexually involved with another man.

Hillary Clinton currently the Secretary of State, formerly Senator from New York, and prior to that First Lady of the United States while her husband Bill Clinton was President, writes in her autobiography, *Living History*, of his infidelity with a White House intern. During the public outing of then President Clinton, Mrs. Clinton believed her husband’s initial denials of the affair and adamantly defended her husband. The Clintons have remained married. Elizabeth Edwards, whose husband John Edwards served in the
Senate before running for Vice President in 2004 and, briefly, president in 2008, devotes one chapter of her book *Resilience* to how she dealt with her husband's infidelities with a woman who had worked on his presidential campaign. They were separated at the time of her death in 2010. John Edwards was not in office or campaigning when his affair was announced in the media and made his public confession in a television interview that did not involve Elizabeth. Jenny Sanford was the First Lady of South Carolina when her husband Mark Sanford began an affair with an Argentine woman. Her book, *Staying True*, focuses on the marriage from her viewpoint; the Sanfords have since divorced. Jenny Sanford broke new ground by not appearing with her husband at the 2009 press conference where he publicly confessed his affair. Dina Matos McGreevey was married to Jim McGreevey, then the Governor of New Jersey when he resigned in 2004 after being blackmailed by a man with whom he had had a sexual relationship. The McGreeveys went through a public and acrimonious divorce. Her somewhat dazed expression and smile are often referred to in discussions of wives being at press conferences when their political husbands confess and indiscretion. Like Sanford, Matos McGreevey's book, *Silent Partner*, focuses on her marriage.

The McGreevey marriage differs from that of Clinton, Edwards, and Sanford for reasons other than the gender of her husband’s paramour. While the other three had been married for decades before their husband’s infidelity/ies became public, and had been activity engaged in raising one or more children for many years, Matos McGreevey had
only been married a few years before her marriage dissolved. Her daughter was a toddler during the public examination of the affair, while the other women had older children. Interestingly enough, Matos McGreevey and Hilary Clinton share one factor—both went into marriage knowing they would be political wives; Matos McGreevey’s husband already held elected office and Clinton’s had just lost an election but was likely to remain involved in politics. The other women married before their husbands went into politics, though it may have been considered as a possibility at the time of the marriage. Thus, all of Matos McGreevey’s marriage had been lived in the public eye, whereas the other three women’s marriages had at least started as private unions (Hillary Clinton’s husband was not in office when they married). However, all of the women played an active role in their husband’s campaigns.Jenny Sanford managed her husband’s campaigns and Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Edwards, and Dina Matos McGreevey all were involved and active campaigners. In fact, Hillary Clinton continued to be involved in her husband’s legal defense, at least from a consulting angle, during his impeachment trial. Mark Sanford continued to ask for his wife’s advice and approval during the publicity firestorm after his return from meeting his mistress in Argentina. After the press conference at which Mark Sanford confessed the affair and referred to his mistress as his soul mate, he called his wife and asked “How’d I do?” (Sanford xviii).

Silda Spitzer, wife of former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, and the inspiration for television’s “The Good Wife,” publically took the blame for her husband’s indiscretions. In a book on her husband she is quoted as saying, ”The wife is supposed to take care of
the sex. This is my failing; I wasn't adequate" (Masters). In contrast, none of these good wives assumed the blame for, or took ownership of, their husband's actions. In fact, all took pains to point out that their husband's behaviors belong to the men themselves. Elizabeth Edwards said:

This is not about his indiscretion. He has his own battle to rediscover himself and realign his life. This is about my looking around me one day and finding, first, an ugly crack in the foundation of my life, and then finding out in time that the crack was deeper than I had first thought (Edwards 169).

She does, however mention feeling humiliated, especially by the public knowledge of her husband's behavior (Edwards 191). Hillary Clinton wrote, “Why he felt he had to deceive me and others is his own story, and he needs to tell it in his own way” (Clinton 441). Sanford starts out her book with this statement: “I see now that June 24, 2009, was a day that changed forever the trajectory of my life, but it did not change me” (Sanford ix). She also wrote of feeling publicly humiliated. Dina Matos McGreevey said she felt she was “being humiliated in front of the whole world” (Matos McGreevey 229).

All of the women wrote in their memoirs of their reliance on the comfort and support of family and friends while adjusting to the knowledge of their husbands' infidelity. They worried about how their children will respond and what affect this will have on them. For Edwards there are additional fears. At the time she wrote she knew she had a terminal illness and worried that after her death she would be erased from the lives of her
children and family (Edwards 190). When Bill Clinton finally told Hillary that he was unfaithful one of her first thoughts is that they will have to tell their teenage daughter (Clinton 466). Jenny Sanford cited the need to have her children view her with respect and integrity as a reason why she separated from her husband (Sanford xx). She did not want them to find out about their father’s affair from the media (Sanford 196).

Another commonality in all four stories, and one that all mentioned as being particularly painful, is that their husbands told them as little as possible and only escalated the amount of information when it became clear that it would be made public. None of the men “ripped the bandaid off” in one fell swoop; all pulled it off a bit at a time. Bill Clinton initially told his wife only that his words and behavior towards a young woman might be misconstrued (Clinton 440). Hillary believed him and publicly denied rumors of infidelity. Some months later he confessed that he had engaged in sexual conduct with a young intern (Clinton 467). Sanford found copies of correspondence between her husband and another woman. He told her he would end the affair and that there had not been any other affairs (Sanford 169-170). Neither proved true; he continued the affair, and even went so far as to ask her permission to see his mistress (Sanford 179, 188) and later admitted that he had “crossed the line” with other women (Sanford 202). Jenny Sanford also had the luxury of finding out in private without an impending public announcement; she had time to adjust before the world found out. Initially Jim McGreevey told his wife he might not run for reelection because he no longer enjoyed politics, with the never-ending crises and scandals (Matos McGreevey 183). A month later he told her he was
being blackmailed by a male staffer with whom he had had a physical relationship and within days he resigned (Matos McGreevey 196-7). Initially John Edwards told Elizabeth Edwards that he had only had one encounter but a year later confessed that there had been others (Edwards 175).

Some of the couples spoke openly about issues of fidelity before their marriages. Elizabeth Edwards had told her husband that she needed fidelity, “Leave me, if you must, but be faithful to me if you are with me” (Edwards, 179). Hillary Clinton did not address this in particular but does say that she wanted her marriage to last and because of her worries and fears about commitment refused Bill Clinton’s initial proposals. She wrote “I thought of him as a force of nature and wondered whether I’d be up to the task of living through his seasons” (Clinton 61). Mark Sanford requested that the promise to be faithful taken out of the wedding vows because he was not sure he could keep that promise. At the time she thought he said this out of “pre-wedding cold feet” and told him she had faith in him (Sanford 29).

A third commonality is that all four women were or had been employed in their own right before becoming political wives, and therefore had some confidence in their ability to earn a living. All but one had lived independently before marriage. Dina Matos McGreevey cited her Portuguese Catholic heritage as a reason why she continued to live in her parent’s house before her marriage (Matos McGreevey 11). This, along with
financial concerns, may have been one reason why Matos McGreevey found setting up her own household so stressful; finding and buying a house is a great concern in the later chapters of her book, as her husband’s resignation gave her limited time to find housing and the financing to afford it. Hillary Clinton chose to stay in her marriage and therefore did not have to find her own housing. While Jenny Sanford’s husband was in office she moved herself and her four children to a privately owned family residence. Elizabeth Edwards, presumably, stayed in the house she had been living in and her husband moved out. All these women spoke of their intention to work in some way after their separation. Elizabeth Edwards, who stopped practicing law after the death of her sixteen-year-old son in 1996, started a furniture store. “I wanted something that was mine,” she wrote (Edwards 203). Hillary Clinton decided to run for a New York Senate seat, was elected. She later ran for President in the 2008 primary and is currently serving as Secretary of State. Jenny Sanford was a vice president at an investment banking firm before her marriage (Sanford 19) and told her sons not to worry when she and her husband separated, that she could provide for them (Sanford 195). Dina Matos McGreevey was employed throughout her marriage and while her husband lost his job (as governor) she kept hers. In fact one of the first things her husband told her after the announcement of his resignation is that she would have to get health insurance for herself and their daughter through her job as they would not be on the state plan any longer (Matos McGreevey 222).
Three of the women write about their sexual history before marriage, which is highly unusual for women in public life, especially those who might be better known as someone’s wife than for their own accomplishments. Hillary Clinton is forthright about the fact that she and Bill lived together in college (Clinton 55) and alludes to them doing so at other times before their marriage some four years later. Jenny Sanford notes that her husband abstained from alcohol and sex during college but that she “had gotten a few things out of my system” and she questioned if his abstinence led him to wonder in later years if he had missed something (Sanford 171). Matos McGreevey is forthright about having a sexual relationship with Jim McGreevey before their marriage and implies that she had other “serious boyfriends” (serious boyfriend possibly being code for “sexual partner”) before that (Matos McGreevey 11). Given that her husband declared himself a gay American when resigning from office she felt the need to state explicitly of their intimate relationship, “so let me say outright that on this occasion, as on many others, the sex was good” (Matos McGreevey 12). Edwards does not go into that level of detail in *Resilience* but does imply that she and her husband continued a sexual relationship, or at least that he “looks at me as if I am the most beautiful woman he has ever seen” (Edwards 200). She discussed their courtship in general terms in a previous book, *Saving Graces*.

Infidelity is not the only private matter that political campaigns make public. Divorce used to be a social defect that would prevent someone from running for office. Ronald Reagan broke the divorce barrier on the Presidential level and it is now considered as
commonplace in political candidates as it is among the population at large. None of the four women whose books are examined in this review had been married before but, Dina Matos McGreevy married a man who had been divorced. Before she realized that her husband was seeing another man, she wondered if he was in love with another woman – his first wife. After the revelations about his sexuality she realized that Jim McGreevey’s purpose in keeping the two women from meeting was not because he still harbored romantic feelings for his ex-wife but because he was afraid the two would compare notes or that his first wife would say something to her regarding his sexuality (Matos McGreevey 130, 169). However, the details of a divorce are still used for political fodder. Connie Schultz, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who is married to Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, wrote a book on her husband’s initial senate campaign. In it she describes her feelings when the campaign prepared for a potential ad from her husband’s opponent capitalizing on a restraining order requested by ex-wife Brown’s during their divorce. In part due to her status as a working journalist, Schultz had not appeared in her husband’s campaign materials. In her book, Shultz recalls a conversation she had with the campaign staff about an ad they were proposing that would feature Brown’s former wife. “Isn’t there a role I should be playing in this? Do we really want the only wifely image in Sherrod’s race to be that of his former wife,” she said at the time (Schultz 187). The ad was filmed featuring the former wife and Schultz, along with all of the children in their blended family, but it was never aired as the expected attack did not materialize. As with infidelity, political wives can expect that the details of their husband’s prior marriages will be made public, and that their husband’s prior wives will be appearing in newspapers and in political ads. Most women who
Marry divorced men don’t expect that their husband’s work will to require them to discuss the details of their husband’s divorce or to appear in public or on television with the former wife.

The appearance of books and other writings by political wives discussing marital problems can be taken as a sign of several things. One is the general decline of privacy in a Facebook, cell phone camera age with a 24/7 media cycle. Another is that women are no longer as willing to be the “good wife” who stands by quietly and stoically while her husband’s infidelity is discussed in public, and to continue the marriage as if nothing happened. The women, knowing from experience that they can support themselves and their children, and feeling some sense of their own personal power, chose to tell their side of the story, even if they have stayed in the marriage. For better or worse we have moved away from a time when someone in public office can engage in extramarital dalliances knowing that a collusion of the media and a circle of personal confidants will remain quiet. We have also, hopefully, passed a time when political wives are required to literally stand by her man when he faced the cameras and described an affair. Certainly the works of Clinton, Edwards, Matos McGreevey, and Sanford, give us a glimpse of what it is like to be a “good wife.”
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*Book Review*

*By Katie Elson Anderson*

A May 2009 presentation from The Pew Research Center (PewInternet.org), which is a nonpartisan public opinion research organization, reports that over 65% of teens have an online profile and more girls (86%) aged 15-17 had online profiles than boys (69%) of the same age range (Pew Internet, 2009). The Pew Research Center tracks trends, attitudes and the impact of the internet on American and world demographics and populations. Given more recent reports from this organization that show increased use of internet and social media by teens and young adults (Pew Internet, 2010) it is a safe assumption that these numbers have risen. With so many teens, especially girls, creating and maintaining online profiles, Morrison’s exploration of teenage girls and their avatars within social online communication is timely and relevant. The book explores the notion of avatars and autobiography through both theoretical and practical approaches, bringing together the voices of current experts and the words of ten Canadian teenage (ages 13-17) girls. The author is inspired to explore teenage identity and avatar creation through a combination of informal personal observations and more formal professional interests. As the mother of a teenage daughter, she observes her own daughter creating avatars for social media use. As a researcher, Morrison’s interests in youth culture, identity, and avatar creation are theoretical and pedagogical. The tone of the book varies from informal to formal, combining practical information on
the nature of her study and the participants along with thoroughly researched discussions and academic analysis. These changes in approach and tone from chapter to chapter can be slightly disruptive to the flow of the book, but it does show the author’s familiarity and ease with the language used by teens in social online communication and the language of academia.

Morrison’s intention in this book is to focus on identity and autobiography and she makes it very clear that she is discussing the creation of avatars within social communication sites, rather than avatars created in gaming environments. While the creation of avatars is still a fairly new research topic, the focus of most available research has been within gaming environments where avatars are used to create representations of characters that are not necessarily autobiographical. This is an important distinction for the reader to make, a distinction that also makes this monograph a unique contribution to current research on the subject of avatars.

Readers unfamiliar with the concept of avatars and social media will find that the author has taken this into consideration and provides sufficient details, context, and history. The details of the study are thoroughly explained in simple, practical language. The teenagers were recruited via the social networking site Facebook and were asked to create an avatar and then discuss their choices with the author and with each other. The teens were given several different websites on which to create their avatars, but they all chose the same one. The author’s description of the website used for the avatar creation (weeworld.com) is so detailed, it is not even necessary for the reader to login to the site. Morrison has clearly spent much time on the site, exploring and analyzing the
options and even contacting the creators of the site to share what she observed during her own research regarding the choices or lack of choices in avatar creation.

Morrison acknowledges that much of what she observes in her study is limited to the choices and views of the ten girls along with the limitations of the one website. She does not claim their views and experiences represent those of all teenage girls. Rather, she uses this study as an opportunity to begin the discussion and exploration of self-identity and avatar creation. The book provides pictures of the selected avatars along with exact quotes from the teenagers regarding their selections and other relevant discussions that took place after creating the avatars. The inclusion of the teenagers’ words enhances the analysis and allows the reader to become familiar with the girls in the study. Morrison gives the teenagers credit for asking new questions, providing observations, and opening up further avenues of exploration.

The girls in the study are from both rural and urban areas in Canada. Their ethnicity is only revealed through the black and white pictures of their avatars, which appear to be predominately white, but this is not entirely possible to discern. Only one girl complains that she was unable to match her skin tone. Many of the girls are athletic and identify themselves with their involvement in figure skating and other sports. The physical attributes of the girls in the study are not discussed in detail, but rather inferred by their avatar selection and their comments during the discussions between themselves and the author. The questions and observations from both the girls and the author involve those that occur in many discussions of visual representation and self-identity. These discussions include physical appearance such as skin color, body type, and clothing.
and accessory selection. The girls struggle with being able to represent themselves with the limited options available and at times must make difficult choices as to how best to project their virtual images in similar ways to how they make choices on their physical appearance. The author proposes that an exercise in creating an avatar provides students with a learning experience for further discourse on these topics. Morrison provides suggestions on how to use avatar creation in the classroom to promote learning and open dialogue. Her argument for using avatar creation in education is backed by her extensive research review as well as her experience in the study.

The author states that the goal of the book is “to contribute to and participate in academic discourse in new literacies, critical media, youth pedagogy, girlhood identity and autobiography, particularly in its visual form” (Morrison, 2010: 7). Morrison achieves this goal by successfully combining academic discourse with the views and language of the teenagers in the study in order to appeal to a large and varied audience. In this book, important questions about visual representation and self-identity are aligned with the most current research and theories on the topic. By providing the reader with the actual pictures and comments of the teenagers, the author provides a way for the reader to connect with the girls as they are challenged to create their avatars. Adding to this is the availability of the actual language of the teenagers during the discussions. The reader is able to experience the questions and challenges as the girls attempt to express different sides of their identities. After experiencing the creation of the avatars with the teenagers the reader has a good understanding of the thoughtful processes behind identity and self representation. This practical experience, combined with the
detailed overview of current research helps Morrison achieve her goal and provides a strong contribution to academic discourse on the topic.
Works Referenced


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