Superpatriarchy Meets Cyberfeminism: Facebook, Online Gaming, and the New Social Genocide

By Breanne Fahs and Michelle Gohr

“The revolution will not be tweeted.”—Malcolm Gladwell, Small Change

“We know the consequences of this instinctively; we feel them. We know that having two thousand Facebook friends is not what it looks like. We know that we are using the software to behave in a certain, superficial way toward others. We know what we are doing ‘in’ the software. But do we know, are we alert to, what the software is doing to us? It is possible that what is communicated between people online ‘eventually becomes their truth’?... Different software embeds different philosophies, and these philosophies, as they become ubiquitous, become invisible.” —Zadie Smith, “Generation Why?”

Introduction

As the balance between “reality” and “cyberreality”—or the Internet and “outernet”—continues to fluctuate, questions arise about how cyberspace will continue to alter social relationships, politics, leisure, and conceptualizations of selfhood. The power of social networking alone—seen not only in the ongoing coverage of revolutionaries using the Internet in Egypt and the Middle East, but also in the powerhouse success of The Social Network and in the ever-growing use of sites like Facebook, Twitter, social simulations
such as Second Life, and MMORPG’s (massively multiplayer online role playing games) like World of Warcraft—has created mass upheavals in contemporary understandings of communication, connection, and surveillance. Consider this: Facebook represents the most widely visited site in the world (Bosker 2010), with more than 500 million active users, 50 percent of which log on daily, with the average user attracting an average of 130 friends (Facebook 2011). Clocking in slightly lower, Twitter now boasts upwards of 105 million users—with 300,000 new users per day—who collectively produce over 55 million tweets per day on average (Bosker 2010). One of the most widely played online games, World of Warcraft, has over 11.5 million players (20 percent female)—a sum that totals more than the population of Cuba or New York City. Players play approximately 22.7 hours a week and generate $800 million for the company each year (Jai 2010). Further, U.S. citizens spend more than 28 hours per month surfing the web and average more time on the Internet per day than any other country (Bosker 2010). The Internet is so powerful and omnipresent that the revenue of a single online game is greater than the entire GDP of Samoa (Jai 2010); users spend more than half of their work lives surfing the Internet (Jai 2010).

Despite this massive investment of time, energy, and social life devoted to online spaces, little scholarly attention has been paid to the implications of such use, particularly as it relates to gender and social identities. As such, this paper first traces existing work on the relationship between patriarchy and language and then considers the ways cyberfeminists have, in the past, envisioned cyberspace as a utopic project of selfhood. We next examine the potentially dangerous aspects of two key elements of
viral reality: nonymous spaces (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), in which users embody and reflect their actual physical selves and personalities that exist outside of cyberspace, and anonymous spaces (e.g., Second Life, World of Warcraft), in which users create and maintain an idealized “fantasy” self completely separate from their “real world” selves, while also grappling with the existing literature on social networking and cyberspace. In doing so, we argue that, while cyberspace offers a variety of ways to subvert, play with, and disrupt traditional ideas of gender, it has also erupted into a new kind of “superpatriarchy” that results in the erasure of women, intensified (and fetishized) surveillance of women’s movements and bodies, constructions of a hypermasculine consumer, erosion of social life, and reduction of strategies to resist these new manifestations of power. As such, we argue that the Internet has essentially failed in its task to subvert gendered realities and instead created a hyper-realized version of men’s patriarchal access to women, intensified surveillance and cyberstalking, and increasingly obscured ideas about women outside of pre-prescribed, mainstream conceptualizations of the always-available gendered body.

Throughout this paper we will be discussing how cyberspace offers different sites of communication (anonymous and nonymous), and how the differences between the two result in similar, but unique, discourses surrounding women and how they are expected to perform their gender. The discussion compares social networking sites such as Facebook to popular online video games such as World of Warcraft as a means to illustrate how the massive amounts of time and social transactions made online are simultaneously reshaping and reinforcing societal ideas surrounding traditional gender
roles. Because the world is now consumed and indeed nearly non-functional without the Internet, cyberspace has begun to have severe and far-reaching impacts on the way people worldwide react to gender. Because gender and behavior in relation to online spaces is relatively understudied, it is critical that we begin to consider how the Internet is beginning to shape the collective understanding of gender and performance.

**Patriarchy as a Dangerously Intangible Idea**

Like many forms of social and political oppression, the power of patriarchy lies in the fact that it is intangible. As a myth, it has the power to exist as an omnipresent force, much like the idea of a corporation or money. It casts long shadows in the workplace, social life, sexual exchanges, the realm of domesticity, and, of course, in cyberspace (Haraway 1991). The set of rules created through the mere *idea* of patriarchy has succeeded in subverting and controlling the most prominent cultures and societies around the world: “It is because males have had power that they have been in a position to construct the myth of male superiority and to have it accepted; because they have had the power they have been able to ‘arrange’ the evidence so that it can be seen to substantiate the myth” (Spender 1980). Because no recognizable characteristics can constitute a mere idea, we generally fail to criticize exertions of power that arrive via intangibility; relying upon corporeal and tangible characteristics of oppression has long constituted a serious problem for those subjected to mechanisms of power (Butler 1990). Thus, we have unknowingly allowed the force of patriarchy to fester across our
society for centuries and to extend its grasp into nearly every aspect of our existence (Spender 1980).

Much feminist scholarship has examined the reach of patriarchy and its influence on language as written and verbal language dictate reality and, in doing so, produce subjects (Butler 2005). If “language is our means of classifying and ordering our world: our means of manipulating reality” (Spender 1980), this becomes even more true within cyberspace, where gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized subjects are constructed and produced through more abstract channels. Unlike the social environment, where language can rely upon other bodily cues and face-to-face contact (Butler 2005), in cyberspace we have nothing but language to rely upon as a reality-shaping force.

To counter this, one can argue that cyberspace instead has the potential to offer users a creativity of expression far beyond that possible in corporeal realm through popular applications such as Skype, which allows for voice/video chat; deviantART, which allows users to create and display unique artwork, and other graphics and projects, podcasts; and more. Nonetheless, even while cyberspace can be seen as a liberatory site for expression and communication, it remains a volatile interface through which users construct new or alternate identities. Cyberspace also reduces much of the interpersonal dimensions of language present in face-to-face communications. Unlike voice/video chatting, written language is undoubtedly the most easily manipulated medium of online communication, making it the most widely used and the most relied upon. Such language creates new cultures and cybersocieties. Even through Facebook
users create and maintain their image through writing—whether via posting on a friend's wall (which shapes the nature and outside perception of a relationship), commenting on an uploaded photo (which defines and shapes the perception of the photo), or rewriting their bio (which shapes and defines the user herself/himself). Although these options also exist as a part of Second Life’s social network, users generally maintain and present these two “selves” (the Facebook self vs. Second Life self) in very different ways (Yee, Bailenson 2007, Dimiccio, Millen 2007). Consequently, while language is tainted by and formed through patriarchy, racism, and homophobia within the corporeal realm, it takes on hyper-realized significance when dictating meanings that only exist online. This creates a number of different problematic outcomes, particularly from a gendered lens. First, the homogenization of patriarchal language subverts the very nature of cyberspace (which is inherently loosely defined, destabilized, and subject to constant fluctuation) by instead prioritizing the symbolic order of patriarchy. In other words, the combination of sensory deprivation/manipulation combined with language’s power to construct reality results in a system of patriarchy far more intense than the one experienced face-to-face. Cyberspace becomes, most simply, a superpatriarchy. Additionally, unlike the “outernet,” or the actual day-to-day reality outside of cyberspace, Internet socialization not only recreates the basic tenants of patriarchy (e.g., “male-as-norm” ideals), but it also results in the virtual erasure and obliteration of female existence altogether.

**Cyberfeminism and the New Utopia**
Historically, not everyone has seen the Internet as a conduit for “superpatriarchy,” as cyberspace has long been heralded as a new space of resistance through which people—particularly those subjects oppressed through traditional interactions—can transcend the physical and sociocultural biases present in face-to-face interactions. For women, the Internet has always offered an androgynous environment where they can pose as men, try on different gender identities, and create new fluidities in gendering the self. Cyberfeminist founders like Sadie Plant (1997), Susan Luckman (1999), Anna Munster (1999), and Donna Haraway (1991) have long purported a utopian vision of cyberspace where gender inequalities would cease as soon as the virtual world became accessible to women. Writing before the Internet boom and the popularization of social networking, they argued that, as more people become wired-in, “cyberspace has the potential to allow communicants to become disinhibited from sexualized bounds and explore true freedom of expression” (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire 1986, 160). In this feminist utopia, online interactions between men and women “transcend the socialized constraints on their communicative expressiveness and adopt a more androgynous style of interaction” (Sussman and Taylor 2000, 391).

Although early cyberfeminists like Plant argued more politically radical ideologies, particularly that women could naturally and intuitively use the Internet and must therefore immerse themselves in the technical realm, Luckman and Munster argued that “this approach reduces complex technological systems into mere tools and ignores their historical contexts of production and use” (Consalvo 2002). Plant argued that what women brought to the Internet would destabilize men’s dominion over them:
“Cyberspace is out of man’s control: virtual reality destroys his identity, digitalization is
mapping his soul and, at the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his mechanic
erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female
and dangerous” (Plant 1996, 181). Because women could insist upon anonymity,
cyberfeminists labeled the Internet as “an idealized public sphere; a space epitomizing
the heralded ‘level playing field’” (Luckman 1999, 41). She also argued that critical
interrogations of the Internet must continue in earnest, primarily because access to the
Internet remained gendered, classed, raced, and geographically located (Luckman
1999). Additionally, speaking of the potential to destabilize all identities, Haraway (1991)
warned that “the socialist feminist cyborg does not need to be young, Western or well-
educated to be able to utilize her position to pry open the fissures in the hegemony of
the white, capitalist patriarchy. Rather, the socialist feminist cyborg recognizes not only
difference in aesthetic and social senses but, more importantly, she does not take for
granted a particular set of ostensibly privileged class locations” (44).

Cyberfeminists collectively argued that cyberspace, rather than creating a hyper-
masculine reality, actually frees women to choose gender more consciously, present
themselves in ways unimaginable in the physical realm, and experiment with gendered
personalities in a relatively safe and constructive space that wards off traditional policing
of gender. If women choose to perform as “men,” they can do so freely and without
restraint. Women can try on power (Plant 1997). They can assume different identities,
races, genders, sexual identities, classes, locations, and nationalities. They can enter
and exit virtual spaces previously denied them. They can access information about, and
become, middle-gendered/ androgynous beings free from traditional gender norm constraints. As Suler (2002) argued, “people choose a specific communication channel to express themselves” (459). Perhaps cyberspace offers an infinite space for development and resistance to traditional gender roles, as women continually choose different “channels” for expression. “Cyberfeminist authors contend that it enables a transgression of the dichotomous categories of male and female, constructing transgender or even genderless human identities and relations” (Zoonen 2002, 6). Contemporary cyberfeminists recognize the inherent value in a potentially genderless online space for the development and growth of women’s social selves (Burgess 2009), also noting that the Internet has inherited a vast number of gendered problems due to its inception within a patriarchal culture (Terry, Calvert 1997; Daniels 2009; Brophy 2010). Still more, embracing androgyny has the power to destabilize gender as a totalizing category of experience ( Luckman 1999); if people can recognize gender as a performance (Butler 1990), this may undermine patriarchy’s ability to promote unspoken and unseen hierarchies and “truths” about women and men.

Dystopian Jaunts into Cyberspace

Given the strength of cyberfeminist analyses of cyberspace—particularly in highlighting its potentially liberatory power—cyberspace still remains relatively unscrutinized and uncritiqued in its current manifestations. Perhaps now more than ever, cyberspace must be conceptualized as a new discriminatory space. Though the Internet offers freedoms from some of the oppressive hierarchies found in the “outernet,” cyberspace is still “modeled on the power structures and hierarchies of the dominant discourse in the
‘outernet’” (Carstarphen and Lambiase 1998, 121). Such a relationship—where the “outernet” and Internet compete to both define and themselves dominate each other—functions as a sort of mutual parasitism, where one form of patriarchy feeds off of the other (Foucault 1980a). This form of patriarchal interaction results in a particularly effective and powerful feedback loop that, in turn, leads to an ever-strengthening superpatriarchy. As Foucault (1980) argued, the most effective form of power enables power-holders to “gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior” (125). In the new superpatriarchy, not only do the powerful have superficial and tangible access to the bodies of individuals in the “outernet,” but also the minds and behaviors of individuals at an ever deeper level within the Internet. Having access to people’s “cyberselves” results in nearly unlimited access to their language (and how they create language), attitudes, behaviors, and ideas. In essence, cyberspace removes the barriers that once allowed individuals to resist in private spheres and instead grants unlimited access to them at a deeply personal and perpetually maintained and updated level (e.g., ongoing “status updates”).

As such, the Internet has not become a site of resistance, but rather, an even more powerful socializing force in our lives; it does so in part by creating deeper and more lasting ties between individuals and cyberspace, by creating fewer and fewer mechanisms by which people can “opt out” of online intrusions, and by shaping social life such that people consciously recognize these intrusions less and less often (Sofsky 2007). Contrary to some of the more utopian visions of cyberspace, Shimanoff (1980) has suggested that, while behaviors in face-to-face interactions are rule-governed
through direct, language-based “male power displays,” online spaces only utilize latent gendered characteristics of language as status indicators and thus serve to bolster lopsided power dynamics along gendered lines. Thus, the cyberfeminist assumption that cyberspace offers a safe, androgynous environment, free from male bias, overlooks the basic nature and history of how the Internet was born. As discussed by Zoonen (2002), not only was the “actor network’ of human and technical actors involved in the development of the Internet as a technology is almost 100 percent male” (and military based), but the information technology (IT) industry itself has historically been and largely remains a prohibitive and chauvinist culture (11).

Because online interactions are generally limited to text-based communications, these “pre-existing” gender indicators laced in our language create a culture where users project ideologies influenced by patriarchal social conditioning onto other users (Jones 1998, Wilson 1992, Rodino 2006, Ames, Burcon 2011). Butler has described this as democratic censorship or “silencing” (Butler 2005), while Baldwin (1973) wrote, “You know, it’s not the world that was my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself.” For example, people often fail to critically analyze the ways that Twitter accounts eerily mimic the patriarchal fantasy of stalking women, as people (particularly men) can follow women’s every move, thought, action, or goal throughout their day (Haron, Yusof 2010, Dowdell, Bradley 2010). Although Twitter allows for anonymity, its basic use is intended for nonymous interaction with other users. Thus, while Twitter could theoretically have some subversive qualities (e.g., women assuming male
privilege or using Twitter in non-personal ways), Twitter users typically engage in use that involves disclosure of their personal lives. Some women embrace this mechanism of disempowerment through such nonynimity, and thus recreate a cycle whereby their bodies and actions are watched and followed by “choice.” The rather extensive literature on cyberstalking has recently identified Twitter as another mechanism through which people can threaten, intimidate, and control women (Haron, Yusof 2010). Thus, normative ideas about gender and gendered scripts are communicated via the technologies that promote the constant monitoring and watching of women by others.

As another example of cyberspace promoting taken-for-granted gendered scripts, consider the phenomenon of online gamers choosing an “idealized” corporeality—the body they would most want to inhabit—and how such bodies often conform to the idealized corporeality of patriarchal society. While this may seem to be a site through which transgendered individuals find solace from the corporeal constraints of society (see Hegland and Nelson’s 2002 work on transgender identity manifestations in cyberspace), “though many of the cross-dressers presented [in the study] are clearly conscious of the messages they send, they nevertheless prefer to dress to the extremes of femininity and embrace age-old stereotypes that conflate femininity with an overt sexuality” (156); “Creating [such] an identity that is meant ‘to be looked at,’ and solely for the purposes of consumption by the male gaze does little to erase the imprint of male desire on the female body so deeply-rooted in culture, history, and social convention” (157). Thus, although the Internet and anonymous spaces theoretically offer its users liberation, too often participants bring pre-existing biases and cultural
understandings of gender, further degrading the understanding and conceptualization of acceptable gender performance. Such moments represent not only individual choices in using technology, but also instances where the patriarchy of the “outernet” meets the patriarchy of the Internet with intensified ferocity.

**Nonymous Spaces: Facebook and Twitter**

Shockingly little feminist writing has addressed the social and political implications of Facebook—particularly given its global scope, ever-growing number of users, and multifaceted marketing campaigns. Facebook users spend an average of 30 minutes per day—more than they spend reading books—using Facebook, primarily as a tool for “social connection” (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 2009) amidst a platform described by writer Zadie Smith (2010) as “falsely jolly, fake-friendly, self-promoting, slickly disingenuous.” Existing studies of Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites cluster around several common themes: the erosion of social life (Morrison and Gore 2010; Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais 2009), increasing rates of loneliness and social isolation as an irony of increased Facebook and social networking usage (Ahmed and Hamilton 2009; Amichai-Hamburger 2003; Caplan 2007; Ceyhan and Ceyhan 2008; Freberg et al. 2010; Kim, LaRose, and Peng 2009; Young and Rodgers 1998), the creation of different versions of the self (Back et al. 2010; Bargh and McKenna 2002; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006), future directions for social networking trends (Boyd and Ellison 2008), connections between Facebook and social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Tong et al. 2008), links between narcissism,
personality types, and social networking usage (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Bumgarner 2007; Correa, Hinsley, and de Zuniga 2010; Gangadharbatla 2008; Harigatti 2007; Orr et al. 2009; Ross et al. 2009), and the lack of political participation and activism inspired by Facebook usage (Vitak et al. 2011; Valenzuela, Park, and Key 2009). Surprisingly few studies have even mentioned gender, let alone critically analyzed the clear gendered implications of both Facebook and Twitter, suggesting that the invisibility of the superpatriarchy in cyberspace facilitates its continued expansion and growth. Further, with the recent announcement that Facebook would go public, questions exist about the “corporate personhood” of Facebook and how that might interface with the already-troubling gender politics embedded within Facebook as it exists today.

Radical feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s warned of the dangers that occur when men demand constant access to women’s bodies, emotional labor, and sexual labor. As Marilyn Frye (1993) argued, “Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access” (95). Facebook and Twitter essentially intensify these concerns, bringing women’s whereabouts into focus throughout their social networks, providing nearly complete access to their images, thoughts, and, most importantly, movements. Even though users can monitor how much access others have to their pages—which itself generates a false sense of security and control over this content—women also typically neglect the bigger problems of corporate monitoring of the self, “friending” those who they do not know well, “friending”
those who could give others access to their accounts, and assuming ethical use of their
data (particularly photos). One could argue that Twitter represents glorified
cyberstalking, while Facebook generates unconditional access to women around the
clock and in many spheres. Constantly updating one’s “status,” informing others of their
location (and often other details like food choices, clothing, “baby bellies,” secret
longings, and other disclosures), and permitting assessments such as “like” or
commenting on women’s photos and images suggest that these early warnings from
radical feminists remain as relevant as ever.

Facebook also reinforces and intensifies many aspects of patriarchy that occur offline,
particularly the creation of the hypermasculine consumer who must always “like”
corporations and be a “friend” of big business. While one can also “like” non-profits,
Facebook has become a mechanism for corporate advertisement and big business
power. Indeed, Facebook so adeptly shapes consciousness that people often fail to
realize or effectively challenge or confront Facebook about the fact that no dislike
feature exists on Facebook; one cannot dislike a corporation with bad business
practices (e.g., Walmart, Exxon Mobil), just as one cannot dislike a person’s sexist,
racist, or homophobic comment. Some challenge this problem by writing critical
comments or creating separate blogs or pages to critique unethical corporate practices,
but this remains an inherently limited option in comparison to true challenges for the
ways Facebook shapes consciousness by refusing to allow disliking things. As a key
example, many people confront racist, sexist, and homophobic comments on Facebook
but have few options for how to confront those attitudes aside from (passive-
aggressively)”defriending” someone. Language is once again geared toward consumption, particularly around corporate and patriarchal priorities like cars, oil, food, sports teams, and corporate spaces. By creating a virtual hotbed of uncritical consumerists within the highly capitalistic framework of Facebook—and then glorifying this even further through the grotesquely successful *The Social Network*—Facebook has succeeded in becoming the new face of superpatriarchy. Facebook is both noun and verb—one uses Facebook, just as one can actively “Facebook” another person. The corporation becomes a medium of use and control, shaping consciousness and intensifying its efforts for addictive compliance. More and more corporations demand that we “like them on Facebook,” taking on personhood and demanding a social relationship (*The Corporation* film warned of this). Far from seeing corporations as sociopaths, Facebook conceptualizes them as allies in shaping people’s behavior, spending, and social relationships.

Additionally, Facebook also expertly directs people to reproduce, always in a hyper-managed, hyper-experienced manner, the same political and social priorities of the “outernet,” all while giving consumers the illusion of agency and choice about how to use Facebook. For example, women learn to carefully select Facebook photos to present their best image (often with much agony over such self-presentation), people rate others’ comments and photos (further objectifying women), and people write on each other’s “wall”—a kind of graffiti that judges, mocks, supports, or otherwise intrudes upon one’s own self-expression. The variability in how people use Facebook perhaps makes it all the more dangerous, as options for hyper-personalization (e.g., users can
arrange people into groups who can see and not see their material; people have the option to post or not post; people can block others from writing on their walls or seeing their profile; one can slyly “defriend” someone else) prevent users from remembering that Facebook still controls the terms of communication, dialogue, and “options” available. (Perhaps one of the best strategies to combat Facebook’s dominance over social life is to practice a healthy mix of sabotage and/or abstention: avoid it altogether, create fake profiles, lie incessantly on Facebook, or to “like” groups, people, and organizations that criticize Facebook).

In Facebook, you don’t simply create a self; your self is made by others, within a patriarchal lens, always with a clear sense of power embedded in each action. For example, when anyone changes their relationship status, this information is broadcast publicly. For women, this serves as a further extension of the public insistence that she broadcast her sexual availability and continues to function inside that paradigm. Assumptions of heteronormativity are rampant, as outing oneself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered can result in cyberbullying, “defriending” en masse, or worse. When one attempts to deactivate one’s Facebook account (if one can even find the deactivate button!), the available “reasons” for doing so (one must choose one) include comments like, “I find myself on Facebook too much, with little time for anything else.” One can choose an “Other” option where they must “write something,” again signaling the difficulty of leaving Facebook permanently. (Incidentally, Facebook also puts up images of “friends” who will “miss you” if you leave Facebook—eerily reminiscent of pressures to remain accessible in other realms). Nothing is excluded
from the lens of a well-managed reality; all behavior must be accounted for, even departures. Meeting friends becomes synonymous with “Facebooking them.” Interacting with classmates often requires a Facebook account to do so (especially in rural classrooms nationwide). A breakup becomes an opportunity to “Facestalk” an ex-partner, track their behavior, and suffer through the consequences of such unlimited access. In the world of Facebook, we are always subject to surveillance. Facebook never truly goes away, even when deactivated.

Anonymous Spaces: Second life and World of Warcraft

MMOs present a unique formula that could potentially subvert traditional ideas about gender and the physical self: They are adventure/quest/simulation games where large numbers of players interact through an entire virtual world. Similar to the longstanding idea of role-playing games (RPGs) such as Dungeons and Dragons, players assume the role of a fictional character in a fantasy world and can control the way they look, dress, interact, speak, fight, and what powers and skills they possess. Even when the player exits the game, the game continues to exist and evolve as if in the real world. MMO environments are highly social spaces that depend upon socializing as well as building and destroying alliances with other players.

In World of Warcraft, players choose a race, class of fighter, and a faction that they will belong to and fight for. Each of the two factions embodies a different set of ideologies and lore that the players explore as they go on quests to “level up” and proceed through
a story by conquering other races and lands using their unique racial and class abilities. Players may team up with other faction members to accomplish various goals or defeat difficult monsters, or progress through the immersive story solo:

Over the course of his or her life, your character will brave thousands of quests, learn new and powerful abilities, amass (and likely spend) vast fortunes of gold, and find hundreds of powerful weapons, enchanted rings, artifacts, suits of armor, and more. Essentially, the core gameplay of World of Warcraft revolves around fighting monsters and completing quests. Another aspect of the life of a hero is the constant struggle between the Alliance and the Horde. Even though there are currently no all-out wars, tensions are high, and small skirmishes regularly take place all over Azeroth where players from both sides fight each other. (World of Warcraft Cataclysm 2012)

While similar in principle in that gameplay takes place in an online virtual world between thousands of people, Second Life is a virtual simulation in which players can participate and help create and maintain a real online world that mirrors our own, including an independent economy and commodities. Conversely, Second Life has been well known to also offer players an environment in which to express more deviant, often sexual behaviors less accepted in society such as “clopping” (sex between two people of the My Little Pony fandom) and yiffing (sex between two people of the furry role playing community). Both games, however, represent massive online communities of real people playing imagined personas in limitless fantasy worlds. According to Yee’s (2004)
Daedalus Project, approximately “80% of MMORPG players play with someone they know in real life…a romantic partner, family member, or friend on a regular basis.” Yee (2004) reports that players derive gratification from a sense of achievement and cooperation through the building of social relationships in the game.

While emulating the experience of face-to-face interactions through social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter evokes ideas about surveying women’s ideas, thoughts, and movements, anonymous spaces like Second Life and World of Warcraft offer users a different basis for understanding gendered cyberspace. Although MMOs now require players to register their legal name and gender when creating an account, these changes do not affect game play, and have been met with hostility by many female players in particular and the gaming community as a whole, indicating the underlying enjoyment of anonymity within the community (Lee 2010). However, while anonymity is easily obtained and retained in both World of Warcraft and Second Life, there are options available for public/friend only display of nonynity. Regardless, these two genres still vastly differ from sites such as Facebook in their basic intended premise and structure, which is centered on the virtual creation and maintenance of a separate (fantasy) self and role playing as opposed to the exhibition of an already existing person/personality. The recently implemented real ID system in WoW “offers a great way to stay connected with people you know in real life,” (Battlenet 2012) but is not openly accessible or shared with other players; instead, players preferring anonymity among strangers use a nickname known as a BattleTag. Similarly, Second Life allows players to fill out biographies and post images of themselves, but unlike Facebook these
games/simulations are not based on the nonymous foundation of networking and reconnecting with friends and family, but rather adventuring, roleplaying, and simulating experiences unobtainable in the real world.

In World of Warcraft, players are immersed in a fully realized world where they create their own ideal self, or avatar, through which they may choose their gender, skin color, race (human, elf, dwarf, etc.), powers/abilities, and even create personal character back stories or associate personality traits with the avatar. Additionally, players explore, quest, socialize, and battle. Here people can forego realistic, personal physical indicators and embrace a creative environment that more closely resembles Haraway’s idealized cyberspace. For example, in Second Life, users can forego all human qualities altogether and instead inhabit an avatar that resembles a small bulldog, or even a tree, while in WoW players have the option of choosing to be an olive green Orc, or a cyan Dranei, which closely resembles a mythical satyr; both significantly differentiate the user from their true selves outside of the Internet, as opposed to Facebook, which is more likely to reflect the true self if used as intended. While Facebook theoretically portrays the “true” physical being behind cyberreality, Second Life masks the “true” physical being behind a creative, “idealized” self (or avatar). Within the blogosphere, players learn to advertise in-game achievements for these popular online games in order to establish social standing both in and out of the game. Second Life and World of Warcraft each command millions of players/users (Jai 2010) and remain largely understudied (as a result of such new and rapidly developing technology), particularly for gender discrimination and power differentials during game play. While extensive
literature has documented the gaming industry’s ongoing mistreatment toward and discrimination against women (Nakamura et al. 2005; Miller, and Summers 2007; Jenson 2010), particularly in their hypersexualization within video games (Dill 2007), little research has addressed the lived oppression of women during their online interactions. Existing studies of these games (typically called Massively Multiplayer Online games or “MMOs”) focus on adolescent development (Griffiths 1993; Griffiths and Hunt 1995) and aggression (Irwin and Gross 1995; Kestenbaum and Weinstein 1985; Huesmann 1994), but rarely focus on women’s experiences aside from personal online blog entries (Lee 2010; Pierce 2010). Additionally, a fair amount of scholarship has tackled the idea of avatar identities and race/class/gender subversion through such idealized character embodiments (Nakamura 2001), but generally fail to acknowledge the real world and/or ideological implications for such actions (Bessiere, Seay, Kiesler 2007).

Nevertheless, women still represent only a minority of online gamers across a majority of the less casual genres, even with a recent dramatic increase in the number of women players (Entertainment Software Association 2012, O’Leary 2012). Although accurate statistics reflecting gender dynamics of all online gamers is difficult to obtain and often draws from an unrepresentative pool, recent estimates suggest that 42% of online players are female with an average age of 37 (Sliwinski 2011). However, most current literature gives little information about the various types of games played and often makes the mistake of lumping all game play (mobile phone, PC, and console) together as a homogenous conglomerate (Shaw 2011, Sliwinski 2011, O’Leary 2012). This
erases the different gender dynamics in different types of games and gamers which, in turn, alters the discussion around the varying motivational factors and game play styles each medium attracts (e.g., platform shooters, MMOs, RPGs, etc.) (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan Yee 2009). One cannot meaningfully compare the gaming culture of an online role playing game with a first-person shooter (FPS). Although MMOs have begun moving towards what some may consider a more standard FPSs style “pick-up” game play (e.g., dungeon finder raids) that allow players to interact outside of their guild, social circle, etc., difference of communication and community lies in the idea that individuals actively choosing one game genre over another (i.e. rpg over fps) will have significantly different styles of communication and indeed prefer associating with individuals of similar taste (Shaw 2012). Similarly, MMORPGs offer players an immersive, reportedly addictive play style that is distinct from that of a typical FPS (Halo franchise) or other gaming genres (Snodgrass et. al. 2012, Zhong 2011) in that this style overflows into the player’s real life and relationships (Zhong 2011). Furthermore, even with the massive increase in female players, discrimination within certain gaming genres has changed little as evidenced through the recent harassment charges among the fighting game community and resultant backlash against female gamers (O’Leary 2012).

Given this, women often find it difficult to immerse themselves in some of the more stereotypically “hardcore,” or time consuming, challenging cyberspace gaming cultures (O’Leary 2012); further, when we consider that the video game industry (and indeed most technological industries) remains highly male-dominated (West 2009), patriarchal
implications emerge (Shaw, 2011). Because women have historically been systematically excluded from gaming based on patriarchal notions of male superiority, this has led to several self-fulfilling prophecies: Men maintain intensely gendered stereotypes, are regarded as inherently more important and more human in the gaming world, become primary consumers of gaming, and inspire game designs geared toward male fantasies and male consumption. While there has been a shift in the gaming industry toward the development of more female friendly games, these games often marginalize women and only serve to further reinforce harmful gender roles through games such as Butterfly Dress Up, or Cooking Mama. Similarly, MMO environments offer excessive amounts of power to the acceptable collective ideology (patriarchy) because of the anonymity allowed to players. However, compared to face-to-face interactions, online anonymity promotes false stereotypes and the degradation of women, just as it offers users the opportunity to assume and “use” a female body in order to create and maintain such ideologies. Further, it perpetuates racist, homophobic, and xenophobic ideas about how bodies move and circulate in the social economy; in a space where difference could be celebrated, it is reviled. MMOs not only allow access to women in this virtual space, but they also encourage men to literally take over the bodies of women and discard actual women players (Dill, Thill 2007, Dill, Brown, Collins 2008).

Similar to Hegland and Nelson’s (2002) research on transgender cyber identity, online crossdressing communities, while empowering individuals previously excluded to the fringes of society, also has a deleterious effect on women; essentially, by literally
inhabiting and becoming the idealized notion of femininity (similar to MMOs), gender lines and norms are exponentially strengthened, thereby harming women’s ability to adopt a more androgynous presence while simultaneously bolstering the acceptance of transgendered individuals as their idealized self. While anonymous spaces have immense potential for identity exploration, it exists as a double-edged sword, as individuals inadvertently affect how identities function in the larger social network. This behavior serves an idealized patriarchal fantasy: women exist only as constructed by men and in service of men, while actual autonomous, thinking, feeling women are transformed into irrelevant sidebars.

**Gender Hacking**

The occurrence of gender-swapping or gender hacking—where male/female players become women/men in order to receive social benefit—reveals the ultimate manipulation and patriarchal impulse within cyber-reality (Gregory 2011, Poiso 2010, Yee 2010). Although research on gender hacking argues that “female avatars are treated better and more likely to receive gifts and help from other players (who are mostly men)” (Yee 2004), similar scholarship also argues that “in games where third-person perspective is used, men prefer to stare at a female body rather than a male body” (Yee 2004). Research on gender swapping in cyberspace rarely explores the meaning behind gender hacking, preferring instead to rest with andocentric ideas that rarely delve below surface-level interpretations. For example, saying that female avatars are “treated better” not only legitimates male domination and control over the bodies
and psyches of women, but utterly fails to acknowledge that men (playing female avatars) still maintain a privileged and esteemed position within cyberspace. While many feminists argue that gender hacking is just another method for men to maintain control and power over women’s bodies (Vella 2010; Yee 2004) this argument fails to explore the larger motivations behind this phenomenon. By playing female characters, men control women’s bodies, language, and “womanness.” With this power, men not only literally and physically create and maintain the “female” gender, but completely erase femaleness and replace it with their own idealized, biased notions of “perfect femininity” in a patriarchal environment.

While one could argue that female players also have power over masculine stereotypes through gender hacking, this often stems from a different motive: Women’s minority status in the MMO world often requires them to escape degradation by hiding and blending into the male persona. More than 50 percent of gamers have engaged in gender swapping, primarily because they received positive social attributes for being “female” in a male-oriented world (Hussain 2008). Male players reported gender swapping into a female body as a positive experience, while women reported misery and ridicule for swapping into male bodies (Cole 2007, Eklund 2011, Lee 2010). Men, thus benefit far more from their ability to subsume a female persona than do women assuming a male persona. As in the “outernet,” women take on male bodies and male roles in part to avoid discrimination and sexism: “many female gamers register under male identities to avoid stalking, harassment, and the general annoyance of guys” (Lee 2010). Even so, within anonymous spaces one is often required to designate certain
characteristics when registering for an account. Cyberspace still attempts to maintain hegemony through standard outernet classification (M or F when registering for a World of Warcraft account) and simultaneously allows for often harmful subversion and distortions of gender through flawed and biased representations of chosen categorized gender. Even though this may give transgender individuals power to subvert their physical sex in an anonymous online community, such categorization bring with it often harsh, hegemonic performance expectations and pressures (Laukkanen 2007).

A New Social Genocide: Extermination of Women in Cyberspace

Cyberspace presents several new layers of patriarchal domination that women must contend with. While Facebook and Twitter allow unlimited access to women’s actual movements and ideas — all while creating a masculinized hyperconsumer — MMOs allow men to take over women’s gender for sport, while women must assume the male gender for mere survival. This closely references Judith Butler’s (1990) politics of the performative that allows us to “conceptualize digital culture as a resource through which ‘girl’ gamers are mobilized and potentially reformulated, experiencing their gaming identities in contradictory ways, and fragmenting the category ‘girl’ in the very act of articulating their place in a male dominated gaming culture” (Beavis and Charles 2007, 691). Female gamers fragment their identity and inhabit a false persona simply for protection and legitimization from the online community (Jensen 2010). “Each of these ‘roles,’ however, is tenuously maintained within a community that most commonly reads female participation in sexualized terms: mothers at events describe themselves as
‘cheerleaders,’ female players risk being labeled as ‘halo hoes,’ and promotional models become ‘booth babes’” (Taylor, Jensen, and de Castell 2009, 239). The message remains clear: Women willingly conform and indulge in such patriarchal notions, as Second Life and World of Warcraft facilitate the genocide of true femaleness online. The idea of woman and female is being completely erased from anonymous cyberspace and replaced by a mere shadow of the feminine only as imagined through a powerful patriarchy hive-mind.

Through this process, an interesting reversal occurs: While women are controlled through media and advertising in the “real world” and through such outlets are told how to speak, act, and think, the threat to women within cyberspace may be even more real and intense. Rather than directing women how to speak, men literally speak for women; rather than tell women how to act, they take women’s bodies and act for them; rather then tell women how to think, men monopolize women’s minds and thoughts so that women literally no longer have a voice or even a presence in the virtual world. This brings up perhaps the most dangerous consequence of all: the near total erasure of women from cyberspace, and thus, from the consciousness of the Internet.

When reflecting upon these relatively new manifestations of patriarchy, it becomes clear that, while the Internet offers a variety of subversive and novel ways of constructing gender—including opportunities to try on new selves, self-publish on blogs, connect with massive numbers of people, or create new modes of information dissemination and retrieval—it also remains fraught with new modes of disempowerment that threaten and
undermine women’s quest toward empowerment. If the circulation and implementation of patriarchal ideals goes unchecked in the “outernet,” these ideals pose an even greater threat when matched with the anonymity of MMOs like Second Life, the corporate takeover of Facebook, or the virtual stalking of Twitter. Faced with this new superpatriarchy, we must collectively decide how to resist, whether such resistance can truly grow within cyberspace, and why it remains essential that we fight hard against the erasure of women in all worlds, “real” or otherwise.

References

Ahmed, Murad, and Fiona Hamilton. 2009. “‘Facebook’ is adding to problems of loneliness, say Samaritans.” The Times, December 31.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/mental_health/article6972066.ece


Bumgarner, Brett A. 2007. “You have been poked: Exploring the uses and gratifications of Facebook among emerging adults.” First Monday 12(11).


Ellison, Nicole, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe. 2007. “The benefits of Facebook ‘friends’: Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites.”


Gladwell, Malcolm. 2010. Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted. The


Laukkanen, Marjo. “Young queers online: The limits and possibilities of non-heterosexual self representation in online conversations.” In Queer Online:


Miller, Monica K., and Alicia Summers. 2007. “Gender differences in video game characters’ roles, appearances, and attire as portrayed in video game magazines.” Sex Roles 57(9):733-42.


O’Leary, Amy. 2012, August 1. In Virtual Play Sexual Harassment if All too Real. New

Orr, Emily S., Mia Sisic, Craig Ross, Mary G. Simmering, Jaime M. Arseneault, and R.

Paris, Natalie. 2011. “Americans spend most time on the Internet.” The Telegraph,
March 28. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1940196/Americans-spend-most-
time-on-the-Internet.html.

Pierce, Tess. 2010. “Singing at the digital well: Blogs as cyberfeminist sites of

Plant, Sadie. 1996. “On the matrix: Cyberfeminist simulations.” In Cultures of Internet,

Fourth Estate.


Rodino, Michelle. 2006. Breaking out of Binaries: Reconceptualizing Gender and its
Relationship to Language in Computer-Mediated Communication. Journal of
Computer Mediated Communication 3(3): 0.

Ross, Craig, Emily S. Orr, Mia Sisic, Jaime M. Arseneault, Mary G. Simmering, and R.
Robert Orr. 2009. “Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use.”


“Angels in the Twenty-first Century House”: Middle-aged, Middle-class Heroines Who Conform to the Feminine Script

By Dr Jade McKay

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly selfless. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

(Woolf 1931, 2)

Anita Brookner’s The Rules of Engagement (2003) and Mark D’Arbanville’s The Naked Husband (2004) provide an insight into how feminine dictates affect fictionalised women’s lives. The novels assess twenty-first-century women characters who continue to subscribe to the Angel in the House ideal as delineated by Virginia Woolf (1931) in “Professions for Women.” While the two novels analysed in this paper are not specifically written for a feminist audience, they are certainly written for women familiar with feminist principles, hopes and ideas. Both twenty-first-century narratives articulate the oppressiveness of the masculinist institutions and structures Woolf critiqued in the early twentieth century and which feminists of the second wave continued to critique, and all of the female characters are treated as trapped by the feminine script. Significantly, the pathways of escape from the feminine script are cast as tantalisingly available to the female characters, only to be persistently closed off through negative representations. By circumventing possible
alternatives, both novels function as a technology that represses feminist positions and women learn that marriage is not conducive to female happiness, but nor is adultery or the single life. The overall message within these reiterative narratives of failure appears to be that there is no route to happiness for middle-aged women.

That these characters are embodying the ideal would seem to suggest that despite feminist efforts to liberate women, cultural mechanisms to ensure female conformity remain in place. This is intriguing given the implied reading audience and female characters that the novels speak to and about are not the young girls of the twenty-first century who are popularly and academically represented as vulnerable to dominant patriarchal, postfeminist discourses (Gill 2008). The “Grrl culture” girls are seen to be ignorant of feminist principles as, within the framework of postfeminism, feminism is passé and thus not a political agenda to be seriously engaged in (Gill & Herdieckerhoff 2006; Gill 2008; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2004). By contrast, the middle-aged and middle-class women these novels focus upon and address have been subject to the feminist discourse of the second wave and are thus presumably aware of the popular and overt discourse of the 1960s and 70s. They therefore represent a generation of women who have had to engage with feminist ideas and politics, even if only to resist them.

While these narratives and their grim representations are arguably strategic, prompting the reader to revolt at the perspectives of the unenlightened characters, that these representations are so unfailingly dismal undermines the potential for irony. The female protagonists are consistently rendered as pitiable, their powerlessness and victimisation make them objects of derision, and both texts
ultimately fail to envision what female happiness and success may look like for older women. Significantly, the two texts in this paper are representative of a broader sample of thirty-five novels from a PhD study (McKay 2010) exploring representations of middle-aged women in early twenty-first-century fiction (see Appendix A). Firstly, all of the novels were published in the first five years of the twenty-first century (2000 to 2004). Secondly, in terms of their political agendas, each of the novels explored the experiences of the white, western, middle-aged and middle-class category of women specifically in the context of the shifts in feminine norms over time by indicating how they impact upon the everyday lives of women. Thirdly, like the female protagonists they feature, all of the texts were pitched toward a similar readership: a likewise white, middle-class, educated, middle-aged group. Finally, all of the novels belonged to the same strangely unacknowledged and unidentified genre. They were not highbrow literary texts but nor did they fit into the standard “popular” sub-genres of bodice rippers, chick lit, or gothic romance. They seemed to occupy a liminal space between the literary and popular and for this reason they were identifiable as “middlebrow” novels (Humble 2001; Radner 1995; Radway 1997; Light 1991; Beauman 1983; McAleer 1992).

What emerged from the analysis was that female characters were either represented as conforming to the feminine script and attempting to embody the Angel ideal, or they transgressed the feminine script and were subsequently punished (McKay 2006). The alarming message across this larger sample of novels (excluding two) was that this category of women is beyond the scope of happiness in contemporary postfeminist times. These two texts are the focus of this paper precisely because they stand together in conspiratorial confluence, representative of the larger sample,
presenting conformity to traditional femininity in tandem with depictions of the unhappiness awaiting women in middle age.

The Postfeminist-Feminist Divide

The two novels to be discussed are often referred to throughout this paper as “postfeminist” in sentiment. This paper maintains that “postfeminism” is a cultural and attitudinal backlash to feminism and the resistance politics of second-wave feminism in particular. There is significant dissent in the field not only surrounding the term itself but whether it is indeed a backlash and anti-feminist (Felski 2003; Hollows 2000; Moseley & Read 2002; Dow 1996; Rabinovitz 1999). When the term is used in this paper, I am drawing on the definition expounded by Harris (2004):

Postfeminism [...]is the argument that girls and women are doing fine, feminism is unnecessary, and the movement is over. The deployment of Girl Power discourse to make these postfeminist claims plays an important role in the disconnection of Girl Power and feminism by dismissing the need for feminist action. Some journalists have used the language of Girl Power to claim that girls have attained all the power they could ever want, and that there is nothing left to be done. These assertions that feminism is unnecessary promote the idea that girls should be satisfied and content with the current social order, potentially obstructing their attempts and desires to create social change. (72)

Unlike the third wave of feminism, which strives to further the women’s movement by building on past feminist efforts, many postfeminist discourses consider second-wave feminism as passé and in fact often criticise women (Tasker & Negra 2007).
Postfeminism thus forms part of a cultural backlash against the advances made by feminists in the past as well as the efforts of contemporary third wavers. Another way it differs from its more political counterpart is that understandings and theoretical explanations of postfeminism predominantly occur in the media and in media criticism (Gill 2007; Lotz 2001). To this day the media, in particular, espouses the idea that the women’s movement has done nothing to improve the lives of women (Baumgardner & Richards 2000; Caro & Fox 2008). Third wavers Baumgardner and Richards argue that “newsmagazines rarely use the word feminism except to run negative stories about how weak the women’s movement is or, in a contradictory spin, how powerfully detrimental it is to women’s lives” (2000, 94). Caro and Fox (2008) maintain that this has resulted in feminism itself becoming the “F” word of the modern mass media. It is this reductionist postfeminist edict that “feminism has made women unhappy” which results in many viewing postfeminism as a form of anti-feminist backlash.

The texts under examination in this paper actively engage in the backlash by critically assessing their heroines via negative representations of these women and subsequently inviting the female readership to make similar critical assessments that militate against female solidarity. In the populist and journalistic *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy suggests that today’s women do not “bother to question the criteria on which women are judged, they are too busy judging other women themselves” (2005, 103). Although strident and, at times, sensational, Levy’s text raises an important point: inviting women to be critical of each other ensures that their attention is diverted from the core issues of existing gender inequality and patriarchal injustice. The inbuilt criticism of the female characters in the narratives is one of
many intersections between the political thrust of the novels and popular postfeminist tracts.

The idea of “choice” and individualism precipitates this criticism as women are told that they have the choice to do and be anything that they wish (Wolf 1994; Summers 2003). As a result, Henry explains, “women have ultimate responsibility for their problems, happiness, and lives” (2004, 45). That postfeminism is directed to the younger generation ensures, as the novels show, that fictionalised middle-aged women find themselves neglected and overlooked precisely because they are unable to enact these notional choices at points in their life when many opportunities are no longer available. In The Illusions of “Post-Feminism” this issue of freedom to choose is explored: “The implication is that if they do not know what they want, or cannot achieve it, individual lack of purpose or ability must be the cause of failure” (Coppock, Haydon & Richter 1995, 7).

Both novels in this paper have been analysed using a feminist lens deriving from the images of women criticism that was popularised during the second wave (1963 to 1971) (Benstock, Ferris & Woods 2002). This form of criticism entailed the critical assessment of representations of women in literature. This was the work pioneered by Woolf and continued during the second wave by feminists like Friedan (1963), Millet (1972) and Greer (1970). By the 1980s and 1990s, the critical lens had shifted to more sociological understandings of women living under patriarchy typified by the work of Radway (1991), Brownmiller (1984), Wolf (1990) and Faludi (1993).
Wolf and Faludi were particularly successful in reaching audiences beyond the academe and infiltrating the media, and both Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Faludi’s *Backlash* (1993) were wide-selling. Interestingly, five years after publishing *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf shifted her focus, her new work adopting a distinctively postfeminist position. Wolf’s *Fire with Fire* (1994) seemed to undermine the feminist strides made by her earlier text in that *Fire with Fire* champions “power feminism” and makes bold claims about women having “made it.” The text shifts the focus away from how women continue to be oppressed and disempowered, claiming that if women are powerless, they need only step up and claim the power that is already theirs. *Fire with Fire* thus participates in the backlash that Faludi (1993) critiques, primarily by simplifying and at times ignoring patriarchal injustices and existing inequalities facing women. Faludi’s (1993) argument is premised on the idea that the fight for female empowerment must go on. Wolf (1994), meanwhile, claims the fight has been won. When juxtaposed, Wolf and Faludi’s texts are representative of the feminist-postfeminist divide, foregrounding the conflict playing out between feminist and postfeminist discourses since the 1980s, and for this reason, this paper will draw on each of these theorists and their texts to frame the discussion for the novels.

**The Rules of Engagement**

Anita Brookner’s *The Rules of Engagement* (2003) is a novel driven by a contemporary anxiety about women’s ability to embrace feminist empowerment. The narrative is a Baby Boomer retrospective that maps across the lives lived, but more significantly, the mistakes made, by two women born in 1948, and who are instrumental in their own unhappiness and oppression. The first-person narrator,
Beth, is counterpointed against her friend Betsy, and the similarity in their names is one of many indications of the shared issues faced by these schoolgirl friends. Other female characters satellite around these two, in particular Beth’s mother, who haunts her with expectations of women’s roles and station. More significant, however, is a woman named Constance. Constance is pivotal in both the politics and the plot of the novel in that her husband makes mistresses of Beth and then Betsy. In many respects this negatively portrayed woman, one who knows about her husband’s affairs and manoeuvres events so as to further disempower both Beth and Betsy, occupies a similar position to Brookner herself. Constance and Brookner bear witness to and oversee the oppression of women while also profiting from it in real financial terms. Where Constance makes an unpaid labourer of Betsy within the fictional landscape, Brookner collects from book sales that buy into a market of female readers interested in assessing the dubious choices and consequently unhappy life trajectories of these fictionalised peers. While it is facile to imply intention on Brookner’s part, and indeed, she may be using unhappy female characters as part of a cautionary tale to alert women to alternative choices, the overarching implications of this story are embedded in a series of invitations to judge women harshly. This inbuilt criticism of women failing to free themselves from the pressures of social censure around gender roles positions the novel as part of the postfeminist era in which it was written, despite the historical ground that the story covers. There are numerous intersections between the political thrust of Brookner’s novel and the overt messages in contemporary postfeminist discourse as delineated by Gill (2007), McRobbie (2004) and Tasker and Negra (2007) that will here be interrogated as part of the mirrored intra-textual and contextual gender politics of the twenty-first-century western world.
The Rules of Engagement is a tale driven by anxiety about the place of women in society and how they ‘should’ behave, particularly in their relationships with men. At the core of the narrative is the feminine script and its impact on the female characters. The introspective protagonist, Beth, recounts the details of her friendship with Betsy, beginning in the 1950s when the two girls are beginning high school. The narrative then traces their parallel paths into womanhood, detailing the decisions that shape each woman’s life. After completing school, Beth marries Digby, a man many years her senior. Against the cultural backdrop of the activist 1960s, Beth laments the monotonous merry-go-round of housework and wifely duties that marriage entails. Betsy, meanwhile, seems to be the freer spirit of the two. She goes to France to study at university, and begins dating Daniel, a social activist who is handsome and intelligent, but ultimately unreliable. Betsy’s love is buoyant and excessive, qualities which Beth envies, however Daniel does not make Betsy happy, particularly as she ends up supporting him and his politics to the detriment of caring for herself. Seemingly in response to her envy at the passion of Betsy’s relationship, Beth begins an affair with her husband’s friend, Edmund. The affair gives Beth a briefly felt sense of decadent selfishness, but this soon wanes as the relationship becomes yet another in which she subjugates herself.

Beth’s failure to find happiness in relationships with men is counterpointed by Betsy’s similar problems and their lives begin to intersect in physical as well as experiential ways. When Daniel dies, Betsy returns to London. Soon after, Digby also dies. At Digby’s funeral, Betsy is introduced to Edmund and there is an instant connection. Despite her connection to this man who offered her nothing more than her marriage in terms of genuine self-fulfilment, Beth does not warn Betsy about Edmund, nor
does she confide in Betsy the nature of her involvement with him. The friendship between these women is almost as distant and unsupportive as their respective relationships with men. In an act that crystallises their lack of solidarity, the day after Digby’s funeral, Beth ends her affair with Edmund, simplifying the next phase of his abuse of women so that Betsy seamlessly becomes his new mistress. When she becomes ill, Betsy is deserted by Edmund and it falls on Beth to support Betsy. Beth ends up alone, pondering — in a typically brooding fashion that characterises the novel’s narrative voice — the choices she and Betsy have made throughout their lives.

In line with postfeminist pop-political tracts that argue women are free and powerful (Wolf 1994; Gill & Scharff 2011; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004), Brookner’s novel criticises women for failing to take up the opportunities presented to them in the postfeminist world. Brookner’s narrative is set against the backdrop of the feminist movement in ways that accentuate Beth’s passivity. She laments her lack of liberation, claiming: “It had never occurred to me that I could have it all, as the feminists proclaimed” (196). Rather than using such statements to critique the patriarchal oppression of women, the novel concentrates specifically on women and how they cause their own misery. Like so much postfeminist discourse, the novel oversimplifies, even ignores, shared material conditions of female vulnerability and the attendant pain this lack of status induces.

The novel similarly sells female misery and invites the reader, who is presumably reading for pleasure, to consume the pain of other women. Moreover, within the conceptual boundaries of postfeminist discourse and Brookner’s novel lies an
unstated criticism of women who continue to experience pain and subjugation. *The Rules of Engagement* enacts the key assumptions of postfeminism, actively denouncing women who continue to identify with that which oppresses them. The protagonist and narrator, Beth, is representative of women who view themselves as powerless. She is, according to Wolf’s (1994) definition, the quintessential “victim.” The narrative emphasises the hopelessness of such women and depicts them as self-subjugated.

Indeed, the novel critiques a broad range of women. Mrs Crook, Beth’s elderly neighbour, is particularly unpleasant and her role is to denounce feminist change. She asks Beth, “What has happened to manners […] Tradition? Standards? All those dreadful women clamouring to be heard, making fools of themselves. What has happened to morality?” (45). Mrs Crook continues her diatribe:

> “In my day women were looked after by men. I never saw any reason to quarrel with that. My mind was as good as my husbands. Yet I would never have dreamed of protesting, or arguing with them, of demanding more than my due.”

> “I think that women want more than that,” I said.

> “And what good will that do them? They will find out too late, when all the men have deserted them. I despair of my sex […] Not that I have anything in common with this new breed. Women knew how to behave when I was young.” (46)

Her views are represented as harsh and judgemental and Beth is convinced that her safety depends on keeping her “distance from this kind of woman, from the species of which Mrs Crook was an outstanding representative”(44). Mrs Crook’s vitriolic
criticism of women is unsettling for both Beth and the implied reader of the twenty-first century. In a positive sense, Mrs Crook’s characterisation is presented as outdated and laughable and her presence alludes to the restrictive way in which women are judged by other women; however, by locating this message in a narrative structure that entails both Beth and the reader judging Mrs Crook harshly, the novel reverts to encouraging a woman-against-woman mentality. The irony of this character placement in the novel is that Mrs Crook’s political position prefigures Beth’s marital circumstances. Fearing the recriminations Mrs Crook points to, Beth never strays from the path of subjugation, and the reader is not invited to think well of either woman. Regardless of whether the reader takes Mrs Crook’s advice at face value or whether she sees her claims as outdated, she is still immersed in a narrative that judges women as failures of their own making.

Victims and Victimisation

In its construction of female characters as victims or victimised, the novel implies there is only one subject position available to women. That the novel invites the reader to be critical of the female characters while also depicting the female characters as equally critical of each other, results in a situation where no woman is able to escape victimisation, nor are they able to find intimate connections with people, female or male. This construction invites the pity of the reader, however, rather than prompting the reader to sympathise with the impossible situation that women find themselves in, the role of pity in this text is actually a veiled criticism that works to further set women against each other, constellating female relationships as inherently oppositional. The text fails to exhibit any compassion or prompt a sense of
“fellow feeling” between women, suggesting only that unhappy women have no one to blame but themselves. For example, Beth’s discontent is attributed to her passivity and inability to break free from conformity rather than to the restrictions of normative femininity or masculinist institutions.

The novel’s highly optimistic assessment of gender inequalities further chimes with postfeminist sentiments relating to women’s freedom from patriarchy and female power. In line with Wolf (1994), Brookner’s novel suggests that women have “made it” and if certain women still feel miserable then they are responsible. Beth observes that during the “triumphalist” decade of the 1980s, “it was almost indecent for a woman to be bereft and yearn” (127), and furthermore, “A woman in our time is far from helpless; she can work, earn her own money” (86). Such sentiments that equality has been achieved and women should no longer identify with victimhood arguably embody another form of backlash against feminism. This backlash affects female relationships by fostering a divisive set-up in which women view each other as adversaries.

Beth is certainly anti-woman in her relationships with other women, scathing of “the dreadful confidences that women are supposed, indeed entitled, to share” (141). At the hairdressers, she rails against the women trying to welcome her: “women nodded and smiled at me […] I did not want to be drawn into any female conspiracy of the sort I had often witnessed in this place, women discussing minor ailments or telling of laughable mishaps which were somehow reassuring” (102). Even her own mother’s attempts to establish a confidante relationship with Beth are met with resistance: ‘she […] seemed to want to confine herself to women’s talk” (58). Beth
cruelly dismisses her mother’s need for female reassurance: “Her need of support […] had not been met by any helpful suggestion on my part. I was embarrassed for her and by her” (58).

Beth’s mother’s attempts to connect with her daughter are met by a complete lack of empathy from Beth: ‘she seemed more anxious to talk about her own plight than of mine […] she was succumbing to the distress of advancing age, which was not yet my affair” (98). The neoliberalist sentiment expressed here by Beth’s inability to see past herself and her own needs, hopes and fears is endemic in postfeminism, which requires that women respond to patriarchal dictates only in ways that serve their self-interest (Tasker & Negra 2007). While the reader is here positioned to be somewhat critical of Beth and sympathetic towards her mother, the narrative ensures that sympathy is retracted. Beth explains her mother “was the kind of woman whose main attention is given over to other women, as if to calculate their assets, and if possible their disadvantages, with regard to herself. She had been expert at the subtle insinuation, the laughing dismissal, as if these matters were crucial to a woman’s success with men” (54). It is interesting that Beth views these actions with such derision when she herself is doing the same thing to her mother. By contrast she has only sympathy for her father: “I now saw why my father had looked for love and comfort elsewhere. I did not exonerate him, but I understood him” (54).

Beth demonstrates a similar emotional distance and critical assessment of Betsy. Rather than sympathise with Betsy’s situation as motherless and poor, the reader is invited to share Beth’s censure of Betsy as unloved and pathetic. Beth refers to Betsy as her “oldest friend,” however, when they catch up, Beth admits: “At one level
we were genuinely pleased to see each other; at another we were calculating how much information could be disclosed, how much concealed" (167). By depicting women’s relationships as based on mistrust and in most cases, rivalry, the novel eschews the idea of a sisterhood. Beth suggests that she had “been sufficiently imbued with the spirit of the times to believe in sisterly solidarity, although I knew this to be a fiction in the face of rivalry” (129). This oppositional dynamic between Beth and Betsy also extends to all of the other female characters and is a pervasive trope in the two novels under examination in this paper.

On the surface, Constance Fairlie, Edmund’s wife, seems to be the most powerful female character and is someone who Beth is “frightened of […] without quite knowing why” (97). Constance is the only assertive female in the novel — the one woman seemingly in control of her life despite her husband’s affairs, given that she sanctions them and finds material gain from allowing them to flourish. Her power is, however, negatively rendered by its association with her cruelty given she is “not kind at all” (30) and “no friend to women” (150). Throughout the narrative, Beth compares herself to Constance, and feels “diminished by comparison and more than ever conscious of my subordinate status” (31). These feelings ensure Beth experiences little remorse at her affair with Constance’s husband, Edmund, conceding: “It hardly disturbed me that […] Edmund was unfaithful to his wife” (39). She admits, “His wife I managed to forget for most of the time” (40). These sentiments attest to the self-interest and lack of female solidarity that is so prominent in the postfeminist age but is here cast as part of a larger historical trajectory in ways that naturalise the idea that women have always been and will always be rivals.
It soon becomes clear that Constance’s “power” is illusory as she is only granted a certain measure of power because she serves the interests of her husband, specifically by turning a blind eye to his infidelities. Beth explains: “I would be obliged to acknowledge that her cynicism [...] might have been earned the hard way, that it was entirely possible that she knew everything, that the two of them were parties to an arrangement that I could hardly understand” (43). Constance is thus also a victim, forced to partake in a Faustian bargain in which she must ignore her husband’s affairs in order to keep her marriage, because apparently the only thing worse than a cheating husband is no husband at all. Her acceptance of Edmund’s infidelity ultimately lays bare how crucial wifehood and marriage are to normative femininity.

The world of the novel mediates and naturalises a version of the patriarchal real world where women are pitted against each other as competitors for the attention of men. In the past setting of the novel, and in the post-2000 publication date, the woman reader is shown that women compete over most things without question or criticism. As Beth says, “All women compare themselves” (141). The divisionary structure which characterises female relationships depends on female participation and this novel perpetuates the notion of women as “natural” competitors. By pitting female characters against each other — when women are trying to compete in a male-dominated world — the narrative is arguably compounding the victimisation of those who are already victims of patriarchy.

**Angels Thrown to the Wolves**
Brookner depicts the ways in which middle-aged women are caught between traditional and more contemporary notions of femininity. Beth and Betsy were born and raised in the gender-traditionalist 1940s and 50s but the narrative that houses them is written (and read) in the twenty-first century, surrounded by the attendant assumptions that feminism has triumphed. Further, Beth marries Digby during the second-wave feminist movement, and against this politically charged backdrop, finds herself disheartened by the drudgery of wifehood and domesticity, conceding: “I longed to be delivered from this chore, but was not trained to do anything else. The liberating climate of the recent past had not included me in any significant respect” (15). Beth is constantly critical of her own behaviour, aware that her actions and ideas were “not in keeping with the new raised consciousness of women” (207). Her disillusionment is compounded as she reaches middle age in the postfeminist 1990s described in the narrative, and finds her ideas about women rendered obsolete: “The fragmentation of present-day society had meant a loss of hope, so that those who harboured traditional leanings were largely disappointed” (199). Her comments highlight a significant issue: that postfeminism leaves out (or perhaps behind) middle-aged women who are deemed beyond the state of youthful desirability that (apparently) empowers. In this respect, postfeminism embodies the maturation of feminists who are now anxious for their daughters, but in limited ways that are played out in their need to see younger women as enacting a toughness rather than the passivity of old. The Generation X and Y Xenas, however, have little hope of transgressive behaviour when the system has already devised the shape their rebellions should take: sexualised and individualised. This novel, although written in this climate, looks backward and could therefore encompass the possibility of empowerment of currently middle-aged women. Instead, the novel constructs a
category that should perhaps wear the moniker “too late.” There are no benefits to be reaped from feminism as Beth and Betsy experienced it, and this depiction of feminism’s historical trajectory offers little hope for change.

Beth is caught in a tension between old and new, as she struggles to reconcile the feminist ethos with her mother’s teachings and a traditionalism which is most apparent in her attitude towards domesticity. Upon marrying Digby, Beth adopts the role of a traditional Angel in the House believing it to be “decreed by immortal custom” (217). She attributes this to her mother’s influence: “I had drifted into the fatal habit of falling in with my mother’s plans” (15). Beth’s preoccupation with conformity to the ideal permeates every aspect of her life, so much so that she admits her life “depended on a wholly artificial stasis” (84). She recalls her childhood, lamenting the “time before prudence, before artifice, had come to rule my life” (167). She refers to her conforming behaviour in a typically critical fashion: “I am a disgrace to my generation […] I think I was born a little too early to appreciate the fact that I was free to please myself” (185).

Betsy is in a similar predicament and is characterised as a woman “whom experience had taught so little as to make her seem anomalous, even threatening, like a dysfunctional infant” (171). In considering Edmund and Betsy’s affair, Beth notes:

It was […] likely that he was unacquainted with Betsy’s type, that he thought all women able to take care of themselves, as the feminists of the time were so loudly proclaiming. He would have admired such women, seen them as equal partners in the sex war […] A woman like Betsy, with her desire to
become part of a family, would strike him simply as odd. Were women in the 1980s not pursuing their own ends, eager to get ahead with plans to conquer territory formerly the province of men? Was there not something Napoleonic about the new woman, something titillating as well as provocative? Whereas Betsy, who asked only to lay her life at some man’s feet, would be regarded as quaint, anomalous. (111)

This interplay between the old and the new is interwoven throughout the text and there is no escape for Beth and Betsy from the pressures to reconcile the opposing paradigms, as both women ultimately fail to ever become “comfortable in an uncomfortable world” (121). As a result of their inner struggle, both women are persecuted by postfeminism for being passive victims in their lives. Postfeminist discourse would suggest that the position held by Beth and Betsy is inherently weak and “can only rebound destructively on women” (Wolf 1994, 195). Postfeminism, in this sense, fails Beth and Betsy because it is targeted towards a younger generation of women and does not offer older women any possibilities.

These women are depicted as anomalous because, for the most part, they subscribe to the gender-traditionalist mode reminiscent of Woolf’s Angel in the House. Beth’s decisions are influenced by her mother’s traditional views, particularly her views of marriage and domesticity which echo the Angel ideal. The shift from the female solidarity, championed during second-wave feminism, to the individualisation so celebrated by postfeminist discourse, defines these poles. To care about others more than oneself seems to be derided in postfeminist rhetoric. Apparently, it makes women passive, easily victimised and a willing victim of patriarchy. But this configuration is the same sense of directed individuality that sets women against
women, rather than engendering solidarity. When the individual prevails, support, empathy and care for others becomes a marker of subjugation. But feminism as a political movement requires a collective action rather than a celebration of commitment to individual betterment. Brookner’s novel participates in this distortion of the goals into an individualist concern, even in its retrospective fictional assessment of culture in a pre-feminist era. The narrative seems to carry the baggage of the early years of the twenty-first century into its assessment of the past.

Given this stultification of the feminist ethos, it is telling that neither Beth nor Betsy have children of their own, so they are not in a position to influence the next generation — they are essentially dying out (in terms of their genetic line). Perhaps the novel is killing them off as a “positive” step to leaving them and their kind behind? In which case, this could also be read as their punishment for failing to embrace any brand of emancipatory feminist ethos given they subscribe to the Angel ideal.

**Subjugating Relationships**

Where the novel constructs female relationships as inevitably competitive, male-female relationships are characterised as necessarily subject to men’s conditions. Although these delimiting relationship structures are foregrounded, the potential for empowerment is limited because the novel offers no scope for an alternative and does not envision a more egalitarian relationship dynamic between men and women. It could be argued that the novel is realist in this respect, but given the narrative evinces such interest in the function of second-wave feminism, the complete absence of a positively depicted female presence suggests a significant gap. In all of
the relationships Beth and Betsy have with men, the women are characterised as powerless and inferior to the male who determines the parameters of the relationship. The relationships within the novel are constructed along gender-traditional lines and accordingly Beth and Betsy are represented as “doormat” wives and mistresses, but their position is also normalised, and arguably endorsed, by the novel which presents these outcomes as somewhat inevitable. While it could be argued that these constructions suggest to women that seeking fulfilment through men is a no-win situation, any such positive messages are undermined by the fact that the text once again invites the censorious scrutiny of the reader.

While many theorists claim that feminism has seen marriage toppled as the “one true end” and route to happiness for women (Nicholson 1997; Bennetts 2007), this assertion is problematised by the novel’s construction of relationships. Despite growing up during the feminist movement, Beth in no way identifies with feminism. She marries at twenty-five to a man many years her senior, viewing marriage as a woman’s only path to success: “I married Digby Wetherall because […] without him, or someone like him, I had no future” (15). In relation to herself and Betsy, Beth maintains, “We had both been born too soon for the freedoms currently claimed by women; we had assumed […] that safety lay in stability, that love […] could have only one true end: marriage, and no doubt children” (34). Such sentiments denote the attitudes of women in bygone eras. Given the publication date of this novel, this construction arguably counters views that such myths have been exploded. Even when Beth is middle-aged, having lived through the second-wave feminist movement, she continues to maintain outmoded views: “A woman with a partner feels superior to a woman who has none” (174). That her ideas about marriage
never waver demonstrates that not all women are changed by the political values of a given time in this novel’s realist landscape.

Not only does Beth view marriage as the “one true end” for women, but she also sees marriage as an institution in which women must defer judgement to men. Her role as wife is characterised by an “obedient childlike wifeliness” (28), and she displays all of the characteristics generally associated with the traditional “good” wife which Kingston describes as ‘servitude, subordination, self-sacrifice, summarized in the pejorative “doormat”’ (2004, 3). Beth realises early on that her mother’s claims that marriage gives a woman status are ludicrous, admitting her role as wife “was a subordinate one” (26). Underscoring the power of the feminine script to influence female behaviour, Beth constantly feels pressured to self-abnegate. Beth eventually comes to resent her role and the performance she is forced to partake in: “I dreaded the weekends, which were filled with subterfuges of the kind designed to uphold my status as a loyal wife” (49). She admits, “I played my wifely part adequately and yet I could see it for what it was: a sham” (60). Despite this, she continues to play the part expected of her; the cultural pressures are apparently so ingrained that doing anything else seems almost unimaginable. While the novel may well be holding this kind of marriage up to scrutiny, the narrative structure accentuates Beth’s pitiable attempts to conform to the Angel ideal, inviting readerly criticism. The female characters are locked down into positions of hopelessness and powerlessness, while the role that men play in the misery of women is overlooked. It is clear from her introspective narration that Beth has the ability to reflect on not only her subordination but her passivity, and this self-awareness works to underscore her failure to reject her victim status, thereby intensifying the reader’s censure.
The drudgery of marriage and domesticity are cast as the catalyst in Beth’s decision to begin an affair with Edmund:

I descended into clandestinity with a gratitude, a relief, an open-heartedness [...] I had a reason for getting up in the morning other than to make coffee, to pour orange juice, and to grill the bacon on which Digby insisted [...] All day I performed domestic tasks uncomplaining, knowing that the days were a mere preparation for the evenings, when I should see my lover. (38)

Beth regards her behaviour as quite transgressive; however, the fact that she is swapping the constraints of her marriage for another set of constraints with a different man exposes her behaviour as merely a side-step along the continuum of conformity. Beth’s behaviour throughout the affair is ultimately conformist as Edmund dictates the terms: “The agreement, or rather the agreement that had been imposed on me, that we were two strangers who met from time to time for a specified purpose, but who did not otherwise intrude on each other’s lives” (79). Beth defers to Edmund’s directions, and (just like in her marriage) she manages her time to work around a man: “He was a man of pleasure, and I was a means of ensuring that pleasure” (40). Hence, the affair as a potential and viable alternative to her sham of a marriage is also circumvented by the narrative.

Beth’s subservience invites the criticism of the implied, twenty-first-century reader, who is positioned to wonder at her embodiment of the “doormat” wife and mistress. Beth’s overall inaction, by being so recurring, could work to magnify women’s discontent with patriarchy; however, her complete passivity undermines the potential
of such a reading. The novel’s foregrounding of her victimhood is not so much a call to arms as it is a call to resent women who feel powerless.

While both Beth and Betsy find a temporary and fleeting euphoria in their affair with Edmund, both affairs inevitably end and, in Betsy’s case, end tragically. Betsy grows increasingly attached to Edmund and gradually becomes a “problem.” When Betsy is admitted into hospital with a terminal illness, Edmund takes the opportunity to relocate. Betsy’s behaviour, while undoubtedly desperate, is painted as pathetic by the novel through Beth’s censure. In contrast, Edmund’s reprehensible behaviour is not actively critiqued. Both Beth and Edmund are, in fact, critical of Betsy’s actions. Edmund tells Beth, ‘she is round at my house on various pretexts which are in fact quite nebulous” (160), and “I can’t stop her coming to the house. She turns up as if it’s the most natural thing to do, as if she’s a member of the family” (161). Betsy’s behaviour is rendered as a lonely woman’s desperate plea for love and family, a characterisation underscoring the pathetic figure of the middle-aged spinster. Edmund explains, ‘she has so little in her life, that awful flat, no friends […] No family” (162). His summary of Betsy’s life invites the reader to view Betsy through the same censorious lens.

Failing to see the parallels between her friend and herself, Beth is shocked by Betsy’s behaviour. Her explanation invites the reader to participate in this criticism:

She was in love with Edmund and was willing to court humiliation […] I was profoundly shocked. No woman of my generation is allowed to behave so slavishly. Women’s liberation had surely been designed to free us from such
masochistic impulses. But in Betsy’s case such a liberation might not have taken place. (170)

What is most conspicuous in this excerpt is Beth’s complete lack of empathy for her friend, and these are not rules for behaviour that make her happy. Beth chooses emotional distance structured around pleasing Edmund, but she is no more satisfied by these choices than Betsy. Both women are ultimately rendered powerless and unhappy in their relationships with men. Beth, at least, is a woman who supposedly occupies a position of power in western culture and that she feels powerless raises the question: how can women who are not white, middle-class, heterosexual and educated (that is, women who are not part of the dominant group) negotiate these power dynamics?

The implied critique of women within the novel is most apparent when Beth bemoans that neither Betsy nor herself had children and “therefore failed the one essential test that all women feel obliged to pass” (227). The absence of children and access to the feminine ideal through the maternal is the underlying point at which the narrative most criticises these women. They are painted as equally bad feminine failures — a point reinforced by the fact they share the same name (Elizabeth) and the same man. Beth is contrasted with “modern” women leading full lives, juggling careers and families, and is once again painted as inferior: “I felt like a humble petitioner, seeking an hour of their time” (152). When her “busy” friends enviously question what Beth does with her empty days she protests: “I was not entirely inactive, or so I persuaded myself” (152). The reader is well aware that Beth does nothing other than wander aimlessly through suburban streets. The protagonist seems incapable of doing anything right in the novel, and this construction alludes to the way in which many
women are victimised in the postfeminist world — a world which has little time for women who do not (or perhaps cannot) identify with a position of empowerment.

The surface message of this novel is a call to “power feminism.” Like Wolf in *Fire with Fire* (1994), the text appears to be prompting women to discard the role of victim and embrace the power that is rightfully theirs by demonstrating the failed lives lived by Beth and Betsy and inviting the reader to smugly assess these failures. However, none of the female characters are actually able to access the power that the novel seems to imply with its gaping absence. Indeed, *all* of the female characters are strikingly conformist and victims in their lives. Further, the novel invites the reader to view the female characters as ultimately responsible for their oppression. Rather than taking the patriarchy to task and condemning the way it delimits the lives of women, the novel instead reproaches women for their role as functionaries in their own subjugation. So, while the sentiments expressed are about the need for women to relinquish their victim status, overall, the novel actually works to deflect attention away from the patriarchy as the source of disempowerment. By doing this, *The Rules of Engagement* subscribes to a postfeminist sentiment and is part of the backlash against second-wave feminism, functioning to reinscribe gender norms and maintain the status quo.

**The Naked Husband**

Mark D'Arbanville's *The Naked Husband* (2004) is ostensibly a story about the relationships between men and women, fidelity, desire and unhappiness. The plot relies on a soap-opera sequence of events across which a tale of betrayal and
adultery is told from the perspective of the egocentric protagonist and narrator, Mark. The narrative traces Mark’s adulterous escapades with his mistress, Anna, paralleled with the tedious monotony of his marriage to Sue. The two women are juxtaposed throughout the narrative; Anna is depicted as the appropriately feminine woman, while Sue is cast as the woman who fails to “keep herself up.” Mark eventually leaves Sue for Anna, resulting in Sue’s emotional breakdown and suicide. Anna, by contrast, is unable to leave her husband, Paul. When Anna is involved in a serious car accident which leaves her in a coma, the event is the catalyst in forcing Mark to scrutinise his life and his relationships.

The story speaks in realist terms and in particular with an invitation to the reader to understand Mark’s hopes and fears, and to forgive his failures as he seeks a seemingly elusive happiness in his relationships. This realism is writ large in the novel in a meta-narrative moment in which it becomes clear that the author named Mark is the same as the Mark of the fictional narrative. While the surname only appears towards the end of the novel, the identical first names make apparent this slippage from the fictional into the real world. But despite this individualisation of the character, the narration invites the reader to see Mark (as he sees himself) as emblematic of the difficulties men face in navigating mutually positive relationships with women. This narrative focus is what makes the novel of particular significance in assessing the politics of lived experiences of women in the twenty-first century by demonstrating that experience as it is understood from a male point of view. That the subject matter of the novel is directed to a typically female readership makes this mirror of women in the real world and in the eyes of twenty-first-century men particularly compelling.
In alignment with Brookner’s novel, D’Arbanville’s reinscription of gender norms operates behind a smokescreen of empowerment. The novel could thus be considered a postfeminist emissary in that it issues a covert backlash to feminism; whereby the politics embedded in the novel that are most damaging to women operate, according to Faludi, “on the sly” (1993, 395). The surface message is that women need to claim the power that is available to them and “be true to themselves,” in another example of the pervasive individualism of the postfeminist shift away from collective action advocated in the 1970s. Undermining this (already problematic) message of individual empowerment, however, is an additional mechanism of backlash; like *The Rules of Engagement*, the novel invites women to blame, dislike and criticise other women. This divide-and-conquer agenda has been identified as a crucial tool of postfeminism’s backlash and the novel ultimately works in the same way as the backlash by evading overtly sexist representations with a veneer of female empowerment.

Faludi claims that the backlash has permeated western culture and has, along the way, adopted various disguises: either “a mask of mild derision or the painted face of deep “concern.” Its lips profess pity for any woman who won’t fit the mould, while it tries to clamp the mould around her ears […] It manipulates a system of rewards and punishments, elevating women who follow its rules, isolating those who don’t” (1993, p16-17). *The Naked Husband* confirms Faludi’s assessment by presenting a narrative that illustrates a system of rewards and punishments for a range of female characters who emblematise contemporary types of white, middle-class, western-world women. The women in the novel are routinely scrutinised and criticized, as
well as adored and loved by Mark whose focalisation thus frames the choices made and lives lived by these women. By insisting on his version of events and his perceptions of women as paramount, the narrative asks the implied female reader to share his perspective in assessing women and the happiness they are in a position to strive for. The novel thereby requires a conformity such that D'Arbanville's text makes a bid to “clamp the mould around” the implied reader's ears, or in this case, eyes, so she sees what he sees of these women.

Mark's narration promulgates a particularly one-dimensional and stereotypical view of women: “Women are still mysterious to me after a lifetime, the perfume, the underwear, the camisole tops, the little jars and tweezers and pink razors” (62). While Mark's comment suggests his errors of judgement as much as it does common stereotypes about men and their incomprehension of women, placed within the larger narrative context of a novel that asks the reader to empathise with Mark this statement takes on a range of political ramifications that are heightened given that this novel seems designed to be marketed to, bought and read by women as a pleasurable leisure pursuit.

Performing Women, Performing Fictions

Like Wolf's *Fire with Fire* (1994), a quasi-feminist gloss distorts the regressive gender politics of this story. The novel makes a bid for an (albeit highly precarious) position as progressive, pro-feminist and empowering. The first of these empowerments is embodied by the representations of conforming female characters such that the novel successfully exposes how women go to extreme lengths to
embody the Angel ideal and normative femininity. Mirroring the representations of women in Brookner’s novel, all of the female characters are strikingly passive and this representation works to expose how women internalize societal and cultural pressures surrounding the feminine script, and how damaging conformity can be to identity. The novel explores the painful quandary women find themselves in as they are torn between traditional notions of femininity and twenty-first-century roles and demands. The female identity is no longer merely tied up in the Angel ideal and as such it is not enough for women to merely be selfless wives, mothers and housewives. Rather, in negotiating their way through their many roles and identities, women must now also be beautiful and appropriately “sexy” (Gill 2007). Writing at a time when increasing numbers of women were entering the workforce and taking on multiple roles and numerous identities, Chapkis claimed:

> The shift from full-time homemaking to double duty (working both for wages and in the home) has helped create a need for new symbols of identity. Women are discovering that they are expected to have not one, but several conflicting images: the wholesome mother, the coolly professional businesswoman and the sexy mistress. No wonder women turn to the magic wardrobe and make up to provide inspiration for their multiple selves. (1988, 90)

While Chapkis is critical of the importance of such accoutrements, the novel celebrates the “magic wardrobe,” maintaining that it ensures a woman is sexually attractive and alluring to men. Details about Anna’s appropriately feminine attire permeate the text, while Sue’s appearance is briefly mentioned. In this sense, the novel canvasses the consequences which await women should they conform or fail
to conform to these directives. By mapping the two different paths, the novel offers the female reader a chance to weigh up ways of being as though there are a range of possibilities available.

Even as the novel communicates its surface message that the destiny of all women is fundamentally open, the underlying suggestion is that such views are erroneous. After all, not one woman within the text evolves or is able to enact change. There are no representations of women that offer models of autonomous happiness, just emotional and physical punishments for failings even when these failings appear unavoidable. By mapping the sanctions which await women who are unable to satisfactorily embody the feminine norm, the novel becomes a tool of the backlash.

While Mark judges the women in his life, it is Mark with whom the reader is positioned to sympathise. For example, when Mark and Sue return from a holiday in Antigua, he is critical of the change in Sue when she reverts back to a busy wife-mother-businesswoman. Mark laments how her “buoyant mood evaporates […] and when the aircraft touches down in Manchester the stranger is back” (22). He yearns for Sue to be as “playful” (22) as she was on their holiday and eventually confronts her, questioning “where the Antigua woman has gone.” Sue’s response is understandably curt: “The reality is, you can’t have that all the time, Mark. It was a holiday. What do you expect?” (22). While her responses would arguably appear reasonable to the implied audience of twenty-first-century women, this is only one of many instances Mark recounts as evidence for Sue’s lack of femininity — not only her failure to put his needs before her own. He carefully identifies a set of behaviours she exhibits that make him feel unloved in what amounts to a role reversal of the
typical female complaints about men in previous eras. In this sense, the postfeminist world in which Sue is often busy with her career has made her undesirable because, as a function of her working life, Mark is not the centre of her daily universe. Sue may perform her femininity appropriately for the most part, but her failure in this one instance to perform within naturalised gender guidelines automatically renders her “unfeminine.” Mark suffers from a sense of marginalisation and the reader is asked to empathise with his decision to pursue an affair in which he can find some pleasure.

Mark’s expectations of Sue are never cast as unreasonable, and he fails to consider his own part in Sue’s unhappiness. Instead he plays the victim, attempting to arouse the reader’s sympathy: “I want to dance, drink, have fun. Is this too much to ask of your wife, for Christ’s sake?” (27). He laments how the women in his life make him miserable, never considering how his own actions impact on these women. In feminist terms, the female characters are the real victims of cultural pressures that have been internalised by women—to their detriment. Mark is not the real victim, but the way the novel is written from Mark’s perspective (always wounded and a victim of unhappy circumstances) deflects away from this. This is made most explicit in the title itself, as *The Naked Husband* suggests that Mark is stripped down to his raw emotions, making his perspective more truthful and not performative at all.

Every hardship and negative trait of Mark’s is attributed to the women in his life. He credits his ‘shallow and self-obsessed” (33) nature to his mother who spoiled him, claiming: “I was Ivy’s golden-haired boy; but favourite sons grow up with an inflated sense of their own self-importance” (142). Similarly, during the affair with Anna, it is
Anna who is held accountable for his suffering because she refuses to leave her husband. Throughout his marriage, Sue is also deemed responsible for Mark’s unhappiness because she cannot turn herself “into an Anna” (130). While it will be quite clear to the critical reader that his views stem from a distinct lack of self-awareness, for the most part Mark promotes himself as a reliable narrator, giving the impression that he is accurately conveying the “reality” of the situation. For many readers, then, there would be no reason to question his reliability and this has obvious implications when combined with the narrative’s negative underlying message.

While *The Rules of Engagement* victimises each of the female characters, *The Naked Husband* takes this one step further — not only victimising women, but objectifying them also. The women in this novel are thus trapped in the double bind of victim and object. The reader is positioned alongside the desiring male and asked to judge women according to Mark’s standards, through his myopic gaze that sees bodies rather than individuals.

The novel focuses on the two main female characters of Sue and Anna; however, satellitng around these two women are other minor female characters who are also typically one-dimensional. Taken together, the spectrum of female characters in the novel — Sue (the wife), Anna (the mistress), Jen (Mark’s friend), Siobhan (Mark’s ex-girlfriend) and Ivy (Mark’s mother) — amalgamates every face of woman: wife, mistress, mother, friend (no sex), friend (with sex). In all of these stereotypical roles, the text does not characterise a single female character as happy, thereby suggesting that there is no happiness for women. This underlying message locks
women into categories of type but also offers no challenge to these categories by way of an alternative and invites the reader to see all of these women (like Beth and Betsy) as instrumental in their own oppression, allowing — even inviting — their victim status.

**Sue: The Feminine Failure**

That the novel insists the reader view women through a patriarchal gaze has potentially serious political consequences and this is nowhere more apparent than in regards to the character of Sue. Lumby elaborates on the consequence of the male gaze for women:

> Men look at women [...] and women learn to see themselves through the eyes of men. This process determines more than relations between men and women — it determines the way women relate to themselves. Women experience themselves as images designed to please an all-powerful male audience. They act out this image even though it’s in conflict with their “real” selves. (1997, 80)

Sue over-identifies with Mark as the male audience, seeing herself only through his eyes. When he turns his gaze elsewhere, she ceases to exist. Years of suppressing her own agendas eventuate in the actual loss of herself. Lumby maintains that this is a problem for many women who are “uncertain where the representation stops and the self begins” (1997, 81). In Sue’s case, the performance is ultimately so
consuming that when Mark leaves her for Anna, there is nothing behind the performance any longer and she commits suicide.

The text depicts Mark as justified in turning his gaze elsewhere because Sue fails as a woman to approximate an image designed to please a male audience. Sue dresses for practicality rather than ‘sexiness’ and is subsequently found wanting. Mark’s censure is unmistakable when he observes Sue’s “matronly” clothes: “I can barely look at her and I do not know why I am so angry” (144). Sue’s choices, however, do not stem from a desire to transgress the feminine script. Rather, she just fails in her efforts to embody the virtually unattainable ideal, which now expects women to be omnisexual: to serve the men in their lives, to bear the children and more importantly to stimulate their partners — whether through a sexualized appearance or sexual behaviour (Kingston 2004). Mark observes: ‘she is dressed down, as she often is, a black track top, black shapeless cords. No make-up. Like a chameleon she always endeavours to blend into her background” (p54-55). When Mark ponders why he is no longer in love with Sue: “It’s the matronly clothes she wears. It’s the sacrifice. It’s that she never makes me jealous” (p144-145). Months after her suicide, he reflects on the demise of their marriage, likening his relationship with Sue to a fairytale in which “the prince and princess did not live happily ever after” (202). And his reason for the failed romance? The princess “traded in her golden tresses for a hairstyle that was a little more practical” (202). The reader is positioned to see Sue’s failed efforts to embody the ideal as justification for Mark’s affair and this is particularly the case because he focalizes the events and elicits reader sympathy for his perceptions. He does this by tapping into the same ideology
of femininity that women are subject to and showing them the consequences of “letting yourself go.”

While this novel exposes to scrutiny the physical trappings of beauty which women are faced with, it does little to condemn these trappings. Rather, the critique is reserved for the female characters like Sue, who fail in the performance of sexual desirability and beauty. While she is a tragic figure, Sue does not elicit much reader sympathy, and this problem is accentuated by the diary embedded in the novel in which she catalogues all her own failings as though to provide indisputable evidence for Mark’s censure. The diary thus works as a political construct in the novel and is instrumental in the victim-blame D’Arbanville promulgates. Overall the text advocates those views that second-wave feminists attempted to abolish. Chapkis, for example, suggested in the 1980s that the “basic principles remain. The body beautiful is woman’s responsibility and authority. She will be valued and rewarded on the basis of how close she comes to embodying the ideal” (14). Brownmiller similarly claimed: “To fail at the feminine difference is to appear not to care about men, and to risk the loss of their attention and approval. To be insufficiently feminine is viewed as a failure in core sexual identity” (1984, 15).

Despite Mark’s affirmation that women should be “true to themselves” rather than change for men, Anna is loved for precisely her ability to mould herself into the feminine ideal. Sue’s failure to embody the “ideal woman” results in Mark trying to change Sue “into an Anna” (130). While he admits that the pressure he puts on Sue makes him feel “cruel and guilty and shabby” (23), he never feels so guilty that he ceases trying to change Sue. Their fight “ends in tears, as it often does, for this is
what our marriage has become [...] the fight that one day I will win, one day I will persuade her to be what I want” (23). He defends his actions by maintaining that all men want their women to be appropriately feminine: “As justification I looked around, in the football club, at the pub, and saw other men doing exactly the same thing and that made it all right” (130). Mark further asserts: “This is about control now. Whether it is done with smiles or with silence, or as some men do, with violence, control is the mathematics of loving” (199). It is difficult to imagine a woman reader who would not feel affronted by such blatant commentary. In which case, Mark’s views appear to be part of the text’s larger agenda to perhaps demonstrate to the female reader that this is how it is with men, and more disturbingly, that women who want a man had better play the game. Such ideas are indicative of the overall ideology of the novel which works toward justifying male control even though it exposes the mechanics of this control.

As well as her failure to adorn herself in an appropriately feminine fashion, Sue is also criticized for her dependence and passivity. The protagonist portrays Sue as spineless and consequently as someone to be pitied: ‘she stands and touches my arm, lightly. There are hot tears in her eyes. She is breaking in front of me” (116). Sue’s breakdown is symptomatic of her behaviour throughout the entirety of her marriage and up until her suicide she continues to play the role of passive victim. Mark reasons: “It’s unthinkable that she should still want me after my affair with Anna, everything I have done calculated to make her let me go. I had thought to find the limit of her needing of me and have not” (p115-116). While Mark finds her passivity “unbearable” (116), he and the novel fail to register the pressure that western culture puts on women to be passive (see Kingston 2004). That
heterosexual relationships and the dictates of motherhood require this passivity—which ironically becomes Mark's reason for rejecting Sue—allude to the impossibility of this double bind.

The novel characterizes Sue's dependence and passivity as pathetic and the implied female reader is positioned to wonder why Sue does not assert herself. Initially, after learning of the affair, Sue locks Mark out and the reader celebrates her sudden defiance:

Sue has changed the locks [...] Later that day, when she sees the car pull up [...] she runs inside and locks the front door. I call to her to let me in and she hides in the back room.

Everything has been dragged out of the study and piled in the carport. She has torn up some of my old scripts [...] spools of videotape lie around where she has smashed them. (66)

But even this act of rebellion proves illusory. Mark's admission that he compelled Sue to kick him out exposes Sue's rebellion as hollow: "I have set it up that she has thrown me out, instead of walking away first" (41). Once again, Mark retains the power and Sue's subsequent and continual pleas for him to return further undermine her act of defiance. Even after Mark has left Sue for Anna, Sue declares: “I can’t live without you, Mark. I don’t know what I’ll do” (117). Sue’s portrayal is never complimentary and her inability to assert herself is a source of frustration to Mark and, in parts, to the implied reader. What is most disturbing about this climactic event, however, is that the reader is positioned to sympathize with Mark, and view
Sue as the one in the wrong because her weaknesses are multiple. She fails to see Mark’s manipulative strategy, she grovels, and she wants to hold onto a failing and unhappy relationship with a cheating husband which suggests her lack of self-respect. This characterization invites the reader to blame Sue for her unhappiness, while simultaneously ensuring Mark escapes criticism.

Sue’s journal, which Mark discovers after her suicide, generates an important facet of the text. While granting the reader an insight into her thoughts could have been redemptive, this becomes a mechanism for further victimisation. It is through the extracts from Sue’s journal that the text conveys its surface message that a woman’s fate is entirely a “course of her own making.” The final diary entry that Mark recites supports this:

I am dying because the way I have lived for the last forty years is not working […] I did this but at the price of never being there for myself, or at the cost of being so busy with everything else that I never had time for me. I have desperately tried to cling to the […] people in my life who have defined who I am [rather] than face the frightening prospect of having to define me for myself […] I have to trust and listen to the voice inside. I know I’ll continue to die inside and begin to die outside if I don’t do this. (270-71)

She also expresses her anger at her self-abnegation: “I spent enormous energy redecorating his study. I guess I would have loved it if I had spent that energy on a room of my own” (139). This allusion to Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, is certainly an apt reference in that it evokes images of what Sue tries so hard to be: an Angel in the House. Woolf saw the Angel as a martyr complex which programmed women to
believe that they must be charming and conciliatory if they are to be considered appropriately feminine and, even in the twenty-first century, the Angel remains a potent influence on normative femininity. This is confirmed by the novel which depicts a wife and mother in 2004 striving — literally killing herself — to embody the Angel ideal.

Typically, this potentially positive insight is undermined by the text, as Sue’s suicide seems a convenient way to remove her from any requirements of ongoing reader engagement. Mark uses Sue’s diary as proof of her failings. That the journal describes how much she tolerated and why she did nothing to save herself, works to exonerate Mark more than condemn him. When reading her entries about her unhappiness and inability to overcome her subjugated role, Mark finds consolation, convinced that of his blamelessness: “There is a profound sense of relief in hearing these things from her, even now” (171).

Anna: The Feminine Success?

Unlike Sue, who slips in her duty to be “all things” for her husband, Anna is characterized as someone who successfully achieves the housewife-businesswoman-mistress identity shift. Unlike Sue’s brief description as “ash blonde, petite and fearful” (22), Mark goes into considerable detail about Anna’s appearance describing her as appropriately feminine: “Anna has on a pink scarf, her hair tied back with a tortoiseshell clip” (37). The writerly attention that is bestowed on Anna and her ability to draw Mark away from Sue substantiates Greer’s (1999) assertion that women who attract and snare a man in patriarchal culture are granted a certain
status. Her characterization substantiates Brownmiller’s (1984) claim that the “world smiles favourably on the feminine woman: it extends little courtesies and minor privilege” (15). Mark observes:

She is on her toes as she applies her make-up. I admire the long curve of her spine, black lace underwear, curious after so long, something uncurling inside me…

Sue always shuts the bathroom door.

I love the way Anna wears her clothes for herself, not for me or for her husband, her sensuality is the whole point. (61)

Passages like this demonstrate how the novel celebrates conformity—specifically, by portraying the appropriately feminine woman through the complimentary male gaze. It also paints Anna’s eagerness to follow male convention as the route to validation (Kingston 2004). The text fails to critique how Anna’s actions are products of capitalism, neo-liberalism and postfeminism which ask that women respond to patriarchal gender dictates in ways that serve their self-interests — but really serve male interests (see Gill 2007). Anna wins because she embraces, indeed, apparently enjoys, playing up her appeal to men. She participates willingly in the oppressive apparatus of beauty and sexual availability and this capitulation is what stands her in good stead. Where she has two men, Sue has none. Anna has internalized the black lace and cosmetics to a degree in which she enjoys the sport for which they are the uniform, perhaps because, as a slender and attractive woman, she knows she can win.
Sue is criticized for her failure to approximate the feminine ideal, however, even though Anna is deemed suitably feminine by Mark, she does not escape objectification. The latent message appears to be that regardless of a woman’s femininity (or lack of), she will be an object to the gaze of men — either admired or found wanting. When Mark and Anna are at the art gallery, she stands scrutinizing the paintings, while Mark stands assessing her:

We are standing in the Tate Gallery, she is staring at a portrait by Rubens and I am staring at her. She is not classically beautiful, the lines of her chin are not perfectly defined and she has an endearing bump to her nose. She has a feminine poise and allure that comes from inside, it is unique and sets her aglow and makes her one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. (73)

Being privy to his thoughts, the reader is prompted to view such scrutiny as “natural.” Mark is characterized as an unfortunate victim of his own libido, and the reader is prompted to see this as a legitimate excuse. Indeed, this is paralleled to art appreciation as though one could no more reject assessing great art as one could resist an appropriately feminine woman. The novel not only presents the objectification of women as normal and harmless, but romantic as well. Mark likens Anna to a piece of art: “Beautiful woman with blue eyes, in black overcoat and pink scarf. By Rubens. A masterpiece” (73). Where D’Arbanville could perhaps have critiqued male attitudes towards beauty and women, he has opted instead to reinscribe such attitudes.
While Anna initially appears quite strong and in control, eventually the reader learns that there are aspects of the victim about her also. Anna laments that “men have disempowered her all her life” (68). In regards to Paul, she reveals: “All I wanted, once, was to find a way to make him love me” (45). And later she admits: “He had an affair once. I put all his things in a suitcase and put them outside the door. Then I brought them in again. I did that five times before he came home. I knew I’d make him love me in the end” (46). Her complaints are not only confluent with those expressed by Sue, but are typical of what some postfeminists call a victim mythology and are anomalous in postfeminist culture in which women are purported to be both free and equal (Faludi 1993). Accordingly, the reader is invited to criticize Anna and her outmoded views which belong to another time, another generation. Anna admits to loving Mark and yet passivity — as the ultimate driving force in her life—compels her to stay with Paul. Mark states: “You can change this,” but Anna merely sips her drink and looks away” (71). She appears rooted in her victimhood, seemingly incapable of any certitude or determination or agency. That Anna’s views belong to a bygone era is most apparent when she tells Mark: “I love that you open car doors for me... Paul would never think of doing that, or holding my coat for me. I can be at a party all night and he never checks to see if I have a drink” (70-71). However, perhaps the reader should see such regressive views as indication that a feminist movement is still requisite, instead of a reason to criticise women as the novel implies.

Anna confides in Mark: “My family thinks I’m perfect [...] I’d like to be a little wicked, just once. I’m sick of being everyone’s angel” (72). Despite voicing these sentiments, Anna continues playing the role of the Angel, demonstrating how the warnings from
the 1980s and 90s “about the “consequences” and “costs” of feminist aspiration have had their desired effect” (Faludi 1993, 80). Although her passivity exasperates both Mark and potentially the reader, it is through Anna that the reader is able to gain an insight into the reasons why women conform. Indeed, within this mode of being Anna finds safety and security. This would seem to support Pearson’s problematically essentialist claim that a “woman’s basic instinct is for a home and security, and it is unlikely she’ll do anything to jeopardize that security” (1997, 28). Anna is thus exposed as having more in common with Sue than first thought.

Both are dependent on men for their happiness, both are equally passive and both women subscribe to what postfeminists term a “victim” mentality. The all-encompassing passivity which permeates their lives extends towards suicide as they apparently see it as their only escape. While Sue actually takes her own life, there is doubt surrounding the circumstances of Anna’s accident, and Mark intimates that it was intentional: “The accident was how she had once described it to me, how she had rehearsed it so many times in her head, her car lurching into the path of an oncoming truck [...] This was her way out” (2). Pearson (1999) questions whether it is possible that women “are using gestures of self-destruction as a form of empowerment and a language of protest” (23). However, combined with both women’s self-effacement while alive, the final self-destructive act does nothing but underpin their complete powerlessness. Like *The Rules of Engagement*, the novel is suggesting that neither of the choices represented by these women makes women happy. This begs the question: what does? But the novel certainly offers no answer.

**Conclusion**
Both *The Rules of Engagement* and *The Naked Husband* trade in negative depictions of women in ways that are made more disturbing by being addressed to the same kinds of women as their key female characters, namely, white, middle-class, middle-aged women who are considered to be (and in many other respects are) culturally empowered by their social location. It is perhaps this position of power that makes them the necessary objects of gendered models of oppression. Where postfeminism targets young women deemed to be in need of direction while they are impressionable, the women of these stories appear to have lost that desirable innocence and so they have become fair game for men and women writers alike. While the impact of these stories cannot be measured given the individual nature of different readers’ responses, the broader cultural messages can be understood as part of a continued and perhaps increasingly oppressive stance against women in the wealthy western world.

**Works Cited**


Appendix A

My initial canvassing of the genre entailed the reading of thirty-five novels from a random sample taken from the middle of the market. From this I narrowed the sample down to ten novels (see below), those novels which best represented the shared narrative features and ideological preoccupations mapped across the larger sample. A final six novels were whittled down from these ten and selected as being typical of the entire selection, yet unique in the way the experience of middle-aged womanhood was thematised.

Introduction

As access to the internet has grown, women have begun to use the web—and more specifically, blogs—to create online spaces to promote women’s issues and foster community. A 2002 study by Lisa Guernsey, a writer for *The New York Times*, revealed that between 40-50% of blogs were written by women, but since that time, the number of women participating in the blogosphere has grown. In fact, a 2012 study by Gina Chen published in *Computers in Human Behavior* reports that women are significantly more likely to write blogs than men (172). It is clear that the number of blogs created by women continues to grow and that women now command a significant web presence as bloggers. The increased number of women writing for the web is significant because as the number of women bloggers grows so too does their ability to shape the rhetorical conversations taking place on the web.

One way in which women have begun to influence the rhetoric of the web is through “birthing blogs.” These blogs have responded to a growing trend in which women insist that the modern medical establishment accept natural, non-medicated, and midwife-assisted birthing practices as legitimate. Birthing blogs promote the idea that women’s pregnancies and birthing stories are important sources of information that should be shared in an effort to empower other
women and to foster community. Although there are hundreds of birthing blogs in existence, the blog “Birth Without Fear” (birthwithoutfearblog.com/) is among the best examples of a blog which aims to support women in their birthing practices and to create a space in which women can celebrate their birthing stories and experiences.

In 2009, a woman using the name January created the “Birth Without Fear” blog in an effort to “reach more women and educate them about what birth really should be” (“About Birth Without Fear”). January’s belief, shared by the majority of the blog’s subscribers, is that the medical establishment has largely failed to educate women on the diverse birthing options available to them such as home, water, and intervention-free births. Thus the blog responds to this perceived lack of information by presenting readers with an array of alternative birthing practices intended to empower women and eradicate the fear-based rhetoric surrounding birth. Just as importantly, the blog acts as a public space where women can openly share their birthing experiences through narratives, photos, and videos. These features make the blog an important site of feminist rhetoric because women’s voices are able to promote a woman-centered rhetoric and to create digital networks in which women’s voices are valued.

Considering the vital role that “Birth Without Fear” plays as a source of feminist rhetoric, I offer here a rhetorical analysis by addressing three significant questions: 1.) In what way does the rhetoric of digital storytelling play a role in
building online feminist communities? 2.) How do the visual and multimodal aspects of the blog help women legitimize their stories and create moments of rhetorical witnessing? 3.) By what means does a blog like “Birth Without Fear” act as a site of rhetorical feminist activism in response to censorship? In exploring these questions, I will illustrate the diverse ways in which “Birth Without Fear” promotes a woman- and feminist-centered rhetoric. While there has been a recent surge in research regarding women and blogging (particularly in the fields of communication and the social sciences), there is little focus on the rhetorical importance of women’s blogs, especially those devoted to birthing. Rhetorically analyzing these digital spaces is essential; however, as it provides an opportunity to understand how birthing blogs help women share their experiences and in so doing, create important sites of feminist rhetoric.

The Rhetoric of Digital Storytelling

The defining strength of the “Birth Without Fear” blog (known as BWF among the community) is that it creates a digital space where women can share birthing stories and experiences. Studies on blogging by Huang, Shen, Lin, and Chang (2007) as well as by Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) indicate that women engage in digital storytelling for a number of reasons, but most frequently to build a sense of community by seeking others’ approval and by expressing emotions through narrative. Gina Chen, a researcher in Public Communications at Syracuse University, expands this rationale by noting that “[w]omen blog to
express deeply held emotions, articulate ideas, form and maintain community forums, provide commentary, and document their lives” (172). The women who belong to the BWF blogging community most often use their birthing stories to achieve these societal and personal goals. The process of sharing their narratives helps the women establish an ethos within the community, while also promoting the value of storytelling. This recursive process makes the blog a site of feminist rhetoric because women use digital storytelling to create virtual communication networks to build a sense of community online.

One of the most poignant examples of one woman’s birthing story which creates community is revealed in a February 9th, 2012 post in which Jennifer, one of the community participants, explains to readers her birthing experience as well as her desire to have a non-medicated, midwife-assisted birth. Before beginning the birth narrative, however, Jennifer pauses to explain the deep emotions underwriting her desire to tell her story as well as the value she places on storytelling:

We had planned to take pictures to document the whole day. After waiting for so long, I wanted to remember every detail. The pictures didn’t quite happen. So as soon as she came, I had an overwhelming desire to write out the story of Stella’s birth. It took me two and a half weeks, as I was overcome with deep emotion just recalling the details of, what has been thus far, the most momentous day in my life. But I finally got it all written down. The words don’t seem like enough, but they’re what I have. And I
Jennifer’s disclosure that her birthing experience was “too beautiful, too miraculous for its story not to be told” underscores the role that storytelling plays as a means of personal expression and community-building. Because the rhetorical space of the blog values individual testimony, Jennifer’s narrative initiates her into the community and reinforces the value the community places on natural childbirth.

Jennifer’s narrative also allows her to celebrate her child’s birth in a public space where other women can provide support and positive feedback. This recursive process allows the BWF community to reinforce their belief that natural, non-medicated child-birthing is ideal. In fact, one user, Alena, comments that:

**Wow… This story brought tears to my eyes, and when she was crowning I stopped breathing. What an amazing, beautiful, precious story!! It was just what I needed to read today – I’ll be having my own natural, unmedicated hospital birth with a midwife (and hopefully my doula – she just had her own baby in December, so we’ll see how things go in April when I have mine), and lately I’ve been feeling unsure and unsettled about everything. I needed to read this – thank you thank you thank you for sharing!! Stella is beautiful (“Natural, Unmedicated, Midwife Assisted Hospital Birth”)**

Because blogs, unlike print media, are ever-evolving, community-oriented spaces, Jennifer’s readers are able to respond to her story and strengthen the
idea that natural childbirth is ideal. Alena, for instance, uses Jennifer’s story as an opportunity to share her own thoughts on natural birth, saying that she’ll be having her “own natural, unmedicated hospital birth with a midwife” in the months to come (“Natural, Unmedicated, Midwife Assisted Hospital Birth”). Sharing stories helps these women create a discourse community in which storytelling and disclosure binds the community and strengthens their devotion to natural birthing practices.

The ability of users to comment on Jennifer’s post also reveals the social nature of digital storytelling where narratives act as centerpieces around which the blog users interact and create meaning collectively. In this sense, the relationship between narrator and audience underscores the fact that digital storytelling is not a solitary act, but a social one (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht). Mark Federman, a researcher at the University of Toronto, highlights the social nature of blogs, pointing out that “[u]nlike normal conversation that is essentially private but interactive, and unlike broadcast that is inherently not interactive but public, blogging is interactive, public and, of course, networked—that is to say, interconnected” (qtd. in MacDougall 83). Because Jennifer’s post is on a blog, it makes the storytelling process interactive, allowing both writer and participants to expand and complicate the narrative, while simultaneously building community.

The value the blog subscribers place on storytelling plays an important role in reinforcing the exigency of “Birth Without Fear” (BWF). Unlike some blogs in
which an “individual blogger has control of the space and the administrative permissions to delete readers’ comments for any reason” (Ratliff 128), BWF is a relatively open forum where users can share narratives and comments with minimal censorship. This open-forum approach is inherently feminist as it decentralizes January, the blog owner, as an authority figure. January even claims that “I truly believe women can learn much from one another and that sharing and support is vital for women” (“About BWF”). January’s stance that women can “learn much from one another” subverts a rhetorical hierarchy in which some voices (or even her own voice) are more important than others; by using a community-centered rhetoric to describe the exigency of the blog, she creates an ethos in which all women’s stories, ideas, and perspectives are valued. In this sense, the women belonging to the blog engage in a heterarchical, rather than hierarchical, social composing process in which each woman’s voice carries equal weight (Joyce and Tringham 330).

The concept of social composing, however, is unique to digital environments. Although multiple individuals may author a print text, it is only in an online space like a blog where such a large and diverse number of individuals can work collaboratively to create a woman-and community-centered rhetoric. Because the blog is socially composed, subscribers create their own sense of rhetorical feminist agency in which language plays a powerful role in promoting women’s issues, particularly regarding birthing.
Feminist Rhetorical Witnessing

Yet another significant way in which women unfold their stories on the “Birth Without Fear” blog is through photographs. Although text plays an essential role in the storytelling process, the combination of textual and visual rhetoric helps writers legitimize their narratives, while also giving viewers the opportunity to witness childbirth. The relationship between rhetor and witness is significant as it creates a dynamic scenario in which both the storyteller and witness collaborate to exchange ideas and experiences. This recursive process of feminist witnessing creates a powerful bond of shared experience among women in the community, particularly in a digital space where individuals may have no personal knowledge of one another.

In recent years, the rhetorical significance of witnessing has gained the attention of feminist scholars. Wendy Hesford, for example, argues that in composition classrooms both teachers and students should recognize the powerful rhetorical role that images and witnessing play on cultural perceptions of groups and individuals. In “Feminist Witnessing and Social Difference: The Trauma of Heterosexual Otherness in Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth” Ilya Parkins uses feminist theory to analyze issues of witnessing and remembrance. Although these texts present examples in which women are negatively impacted by witnessing, they still provide a framework in which to begin to think about the
positive ways in which witnessing can affect groups or individuals, particularly in digital environments.

The rhetorical situation present when an individual witnesses a story, however, is complex. As Judy Iseke, a scholar at Lakehead University, indicates there are three levels of witnessing that must be considered:

A first level is when a person is a witness to oneself in his or her own recollections of an experience or event. A second level of witnessing is being a witness within the process of sharing testimony about an experience or event. The final level is being a witness in the process of witnessing the testimonies of others. (311)

Each of the three levels outlined above take place on the “Birth Without Fear” blog as both narrators and witnesses engage in the storytelling process. In a February 2nd, 2012 post a young mother named Kacey shares a childbirth story where images support her narrative and create powerful moments of witnessing. Her post includes a range of images from the induction of labor to the birth itself to pictures of the placenta and birth cord. In Kacey’s story, each level of rhetorical witnessing is present: the first level is experienced as Kacey reflects on her birthing experience; the second level becomes visible as readers view and comment on Kacey’s photographs; finally, the third level is realized as I—a researcher, writer, and viewer of the blog—witness others experience Kacey’s photographic testimony.
The rhetorical significance of this process is profound as it reveals the interdependent and recursive nature of visual rhetoric in digital environments. More specifically, the fact that Kacey’s photographs are posted on a blog (rather than on a webpage) allows viewers to act not only as witnesses, but also as participants who help expand the rhetoric of blog as they post comments and ask questions. In fact, several individuals who view Kacey’s post comment directly on the photographs in her story. One user writes:

Thank you so much for sharing your beautiful story. So wonderfully written… I felt like I was right there with you! And the pictures…. wow, I am hoping that with baby #3 we get as good of pictures as you have. Something to be cherished forever! (“Birthed Without Fear with Induction due to Kidney Problems, Gas and Air, an Epidural and a Great Birth Team”).

The blog reader’s perception that she is “right there with” the narrator emphasizes that this is not a passive act of witnessing, but a dynamic one. This recursive process allows the viewer to experience a sense of empathy with the writer, something which is achieved primarily through images, rather than text. From a feminist rhetorical standpoint, this moment is significant because it emphasizes the central role that images play in reinforcing a sense of lived experience and in building community, traits specific to storytelling in digital environments.
While images play an important role in helping women create powerful moments of rhetorical witnessing, they also help women create visual texts which articulate feminist rhetorical agency. Because the blog community defies what it perceives as a societal and medical rhetoric of fear regarding childbirth, some women choose to document their birthing stories through photographs and videos in an attempt to subvert this rhetoric.

Stacey, a contributor to the blog, for instance, writes that “I haven’t had a chance to write out my story but I have a beautiful video to capture the beauty of my birth” (“Midwife Assisted Home Water Birth Video, Surrounded by Family and Friends”). By sharing her birthing experience through video, rather than text, she literally shows that childbirth can be a beautiful, rather than fearful process. This is especially central to Stacey’s story as she chose to have a non-traditional, home water birth, a practice generally discouraged by the medical establishment.

The important relationship between rhetor and witness is also demonstrated as several blogreaders comment on how important it is for mothers to show, rather than tell, their birthing stories. One user, Bonnie, writes:

This is such a beautiful video. It is inspiring and loving and should be shown to all the people who do not understand about home birth. A hospital birth is never this uninterrupted and calm. What I want for ALL women is that they educate themselves about birth by reading “good” birth books (not the fear based kind with the “catchy” title) and watch videos
exactly like this one. Also they should attend meetings where others who have gone on this journey can share their experiences and their joy. (“Midwife Assisted Home Water Birth Video, Surrounded by Family and Friends”)

Bonnie’s comment that “ALL women” should “watch videos exactly like this one” underscores the power of feminist rhetorical witnessing. Because images and videos, unlike text, seem more verifiable to viewers, they help legitimize Stacey’s story and reinforce the blog’s rhetoric that natural birthing experiences are not only possible, but ideal.

It is essential to note that Stacey’s use of a video to subvert a rhetoric of fear associated with non-traditional childbirth is possible only because her story is delivered multimodally. Unlike a print medium in which Stacey’s narrative would be delivered via text, she is instead able to visually relay her experiences, thus creating moments of feminist witnessing. This increased access to rhetorical agency reflects what Laura Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic in their piece “Digital Rhetoric and Public Discourse” argue are some of the benefits of digital rhetoric, including speed, reach, interactivity, and collaboration and community (499-501). Because Stacey’s story unfolds in an online forum, she is able to utilize each of these unique rhetorical forms and in so doing, create feminist rhetorical agency.

While the thrust of this essay supports the notion that blogging sites like “Birth Without Fear” increase women’s access to rhetorical agency, it is also important
to note that these spaces can sometimes unintentionally make women who are unable to have natural childbirths feel disempowered. Many of the bloggers who share their stories through visual narratives portray childbirth in a romanticized way, often showing neatly edited images of supportive family members, the birthing mother in carefully selected clothes, and setting their narratives to uplifting music. Rarely do these videos reveal moments of sadness, regret, or unmanageable physical pain. They instead celebrate the fact that the mother, whose dream is to have a natural childbirth, has finally experienced this moment at long last.

While a mother’s desire to share her birthing story in such a way is certainly understandable, these types of narratives can sometimes inadvertently cause individuals who are unable to have idealized births feel a sense of loss or disappointment. During the early stages of my research for this article, for instance, I spoke with a female colleague about the blog. She quickly commented that idealized stories like those presented on birthing blogs made her feel as though her own childbirth (which was not intervention-free) was perceived as less valuable by natural birthing communities. From this perspective, the rhetorical act of witnessing can have the unintended consequence of “othering” some viewers. While individuals who are able to achieve their desired birthing experiences are certainly not culpable for such “othering,” it is important to note that these scenarios have the potential to negatively impact certain individuals.
Censorship, Blogging, and Feminist Rhetorical Activism

While the “Birth Without Fear” blog functions as a digital space for women to share and witness each other’s stories and experiences, it is also a site of rhetorical feminist activism. Traditionally, scholars associate activism with organized protests and collective action, but Stacy Sowards and Valerie Renegar in their work “Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts” argue that feminist activism also includes “feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels” (58). The BWF blog utilizes each of these forms of feminist activism in an effort to subvert internet censorship of photographs associated with childbirth.

The BWF blog has consistently dealt with issues of internet censorship on its sister site, the BWF Facebook page. In a February 8th, 2012 post January informed the BWF audience that Facebook censored an image of a placenta. To her chagrin, Facebook argued that the image was a “violation of their ethics” (“Again…BWF Banned From Facebook: The Offensive Placenta”). Facebook administrators promptly removed the photo and banned January from posting for twenty-four hours, with the added threat that if she posted another photo like it, her entire page might be erased.

January’s response to Facebook’s censorship was to repost the picture of the placenta on the BWF blog and to create a private BWF forum where members can “share openly and safely” their stories and images (“Again…BWF Banned
From Facebook: The Offensive Placenta”). Furthermore, January argued that internet censorship would not be tolerated by the BWF community and that she would continue to provide a censor-free forum for women to share and discuss birth:

This has actually been on my mind lately, as I watch other natural and birth pages put in time out or detention and even scolded or deleted. I’m not surprised it is my turn. The thing is, this is MY blog and it is not going anywhere. BWF is now a strong community of women that inform and support each other in TTC, pregnancy, labor, birth, post partum, breastfeeding, parenting, womanhood and more! (“Again…BWF Banned From Facebook: The Offensive Placenta”)

Rather than allow Facebook’s censorship to stymie the group’s ability to share images, January uses it as an opportunity to create a rhetoric of feminist activism, arguing that “this is MY blog and it is not going anywhere” (“Again…BWF Banned From Facebook: The Offensive Placenta”). In doing so, she reinforces Sowards and Renegar’s idea that contemporary feminist rhetorical agency is often guided by the need to create feminist identities and to share stories. In this case, the BWF community’s sense of identity stems from their ability to share birthing images and narratives without censorship.

Over the years, January and the blog’s subscribers have continued to raise awareness regarding internet censorship and childbirth. In an April 9th, 2012 post, for instance, January bemoans the fact that Facebook banned yet another
series of birth-related photographs, contending that “Birth is a normal part of life. Trying to cover it up, hide it, ban it and censor is ludicrous and I won’t allow it. So, if vaginas and nipples offend you when in the context of birth and breastfeeding, hit the ‘red X’ now and walk away! You’ve been warned” (“More Birth, Breastfeeding and Placenta Pictures Removed From Facebook”). Her challenge is that the photographs were posted in a private, closed Facebook forum (which requires that participants request access to the group) and therefore should be permitted. January’s response to Facebook’s censorship was to once again repost the photographs on the BWF blog.

January’s ability to subvert Facebook’s censorship by relocating the images from one digital space to another begs an important question: in what ways does the internet create moments of rhetorical feminist activism that are unique to the web? Digital spaces, unlike print media, are initially easier to censor as site administrators can simply remove materials at their discretion; they are ultimately more difficult to control, however, because users have a multitude of ways in which to redistribute text and images. In January’s case, because she is the administrator of her own blog, she was able to redistribute the so-called “offensive” images from Facebook to the BWF blog. For the BWF community, this move is significant because it allows them to control the rhetoric and images used to represent childbirth. It also creates a sense of solidarity among the community, something important in an online forum where rhetors and audiences may have little to no physical contact with one another.
Accompanying January’s reposting of the photographs was a barrage of responses from the blog community against the censorship of the images. One subscriber, Jennifer, exclaims: “these pictures are amazing and wonderful. how people can report them on Facebook is just ridiculous. They are such beautiful pictures and amazing xxx” (“More Birth, Breastfeeding and Placenta Pictures Removed From Facebook”). Another writer, Lynette, adds:

Thank you for sharing these in spite of the ridiculous people on FB. If they don’t want to see childbirth pictures, then why on earth are they a part of your “closed group”? I don’t get it either. They either do not have children yet, or they are jealous that they didn’t have a beautiful birth experience. Either way, it is very immature of them and of FB for caving to their childish demands to remove the pics. They’re beautiful! (“More Birth, Breastfeeding and Placenta Pictures Removed From Facebook”)

Comments like those outlined above play an essential role in reinforcing the exigency of the community by supporting the idea that women’s bodies during the childbirth process are not vulgar or offensive, but natural. These women’s contributions (in the form of photos, comments, and stories) allow them to create a feminist rhetorical space in which they “rewrite” the negative rhetoric surrounding women’s birthing bodies. Because individual women’s voices are valued within the space of the blog, these women both create and enforce moments of rhetorical feminist activism and agency.
While the BWF blog is an important site of rhetorical feminist activism, it is worth noting that birthing blogs also have the potential to undermine and disempowered women, especially blogs which support an “all or nothing” approach regarding natural births. In fact, over the years the “Birth Without Fear” blog has often become a site of controversy regarding the rhetoric used to categorize and describe women’s birthing choices. In an April 27th, 2012 January takes up this issue, telling readers that:

You have a few natural birthing communities that freak out at women who have interventions or cesarean sections. They exclaim the mother was not patient enough, strong enough or educated. When a mother shares a loss, they are shunned. Not always because other women want to hurt a loss mom, but because their own fears of loss in childbirth cause them to do so. (“Supporting Women in All Birthing Choices…Is it Possible?”)

January, however, uses the space of the blog to promote an open, supportive approach which acknowledges all women’s choices in birth:

To those that are concerned, I want you to know where I am at. I really want to bridge a gap ... and there most definitely is one. I don't want loss moms¹ or moms who had crappy natural births to feel the only place they have to turn is a really negative, hateful source (that I in no way support). While I still have my passion and opinions on birth options and choices, including UC, VBACing, home births, breech, etc., I also want mothers

¹ The phrase “loss moms” refers to mothers who have lost children during or after childbirth.
who had bad experiences or who don't agree feel welcome and not shunned.

This is not an easy thing to do and not for the light at heart. This is something for someone with a big heart, who wants to do right and is willing to be a leader. I am very serious about trying to be an example. Trying to be a natural birth community that is open and accepting. I know that no matter what I do, I will have people not like me, what I stand for or what I'm trying to accomplish. That is something I have accepted. I hope that many of you can be understanding and patient with me. ♥ ~January (Mrs. BWF).(April 27th, 2012 Facebook post)

January’s claim that she wants to maintain “a natural birth community that is open and accepting” and that does not make some women feel “shunned” reveals her devotion to feminist rhetorical activism as she openly supports all women’s choices and defies a rhetoric of non-acceptance promoted by some childbirth communities. The importance of January’s stance regarding this issue becomes especially noteworthy when we consider the fact that blogging communities thrive on an individual’s ability to remain anonymous. Although anonymity creates opportunities for women to share their viewpoints regarding natural births anonymously, it also creates situations in which some individuals openly criticize and undermine other women’s choices without consequence. The fact that January, as the leader of the “Birth Without Fear” community, has
tackled this complex issue in an open and supportive way clearly reveals her devotion to feminist practices and values.

**Conclusion**

The processes of digital storytelling, witnessing, and rhetorical activism each play a key role in making the “Birth Without Fear” blog a dynamic site of feminist rhetoric. While I have treated my analysis of each of these aspects of the blog separately, it is important to note that they overlap in significant ways. Digital storytelling, for instance, helps create moments of feminist witnessing, particularly in a multimodal forum like a blog. In turn, digital storytelling and feminist rhetorical witnessing are in and of themselves tenets of feminist rhetorical activism, whether overt or subtle.

While each of these facets of the “Birth Without Fear” blog make it an important nexus of feminist rhetoric, what ultimately does this analysis mean for rhetorical studies? Although my analysis responds to a dearth of research regarding feminist rhetorical voices in digital environments, it also brings to light ways in which a dynamic community like “Birth Without Fear” can create a space in which women from all walks of life can gather information, form friendships, and share stories. Just as importantly, the blog functions as a public space where women’s voices regarding birthing are a major influence in both creating and shaping rhetorical conversations about women’s bodies taking place on the web.
Works Cited


Chinese Women in Globalization: New Gender Discriminations and New Feminist Voices

By Peiling Zhao

Introduction

The processes of globalization, forcefully transforming structures and institutions across the globe, behoove us to understand issues in specific countries in the context of globalization. This is particularly true of the emerging gender discriminations against women in China since China’s opening and reform. While China’s unprecedented economic development has brought both Chinese men and Chinese women more economic opportunities, higher living standards, and more desirable lifestyle, Chinese women have not achieved equal job opportunities or equal treatment from society as Chinese men. In this context, the Chinese government has amended labor laws in 2007, offered new interpretation of marriage law in 2011, and extended maternity leave at the end of 2011 to meet various international standards. As scholars Gita Sen, Caren Grown, and others see, the assumption that the improvement of women’s economic position would guarantee improvement of women’s social status has been proved deadly wrong before the reality of women’s unequal employment and participation in the development process. With the restructured relationship between China’s state and market, some advantages that used to protect women are being taken away. Traditional Chinese patriarchy, with Western patriarchy as its accomplice, reemerges in society as a stronger force, while
market ideology is eroding the proletariat and communist ideology. Though men are also vulnerable to the engulfing forces of globalization, women’s vulnerability is “further reinforced by systems of male domination” that “deny or limit their access to economic resources and political participation,” and “impose sexual divisions of labor that allocate to them the most onerous, labor-intensive, poorly rewarded tasks inside and outside the home, as well as the longest hours of work” (Sen and Grown 26) As a result of these and many other changes, some aspects of women’s social status are getting worse, especially when compared to conditions during pre-reform China.

Globalization has contradictory effects on Chinese women. On the one hand, the unequal development opportunities for women has created new gender inequalities that post-reform China finds hard to handle. This underdevelopment, as Desai sharply points out, “arose from their enforced but asymmetric participation in the process of development in which they bore the costs but were excluded from the benefits” (190). There are gender-specific issues emerging after the reform: unequal job opportunities and wages for urban women, lower status and exploitation of the migrating rural women, the rapid decline of women’s political participation, and the rampant reemergence of prostitution and concubinage. On the other hand, as the state control over individuals is relatively relaxing, Chinese women start organizing to address these problems. Academic feminists begin to introduce feminist theories and set up women’s studies programs, and state feminism starts to transform itself to deal
with the new gender issues. These women’s movements overcome tensions to build solidarity and create a collective identity to influence decision-making, educate the mass, and ultimately raise consciousness for both the public and the state.

To explore how the confluence of relative retreat of state, the market ideology, and patriarchy has effected discriminations against Chinese women and forced women to organize themselves for a change, this paper examines four major discriminations emerging in reform China: the decline of women’s political participation, gender inequality in job opportunities and wages for urban women, discrimination against rural migrating women in urban industries and informal sectors, and the degradation of women’s status in prostitutions and concubinage. In exploring these issues, I will emphasize that women’s improved access to education, improved economic situation, and improved living standard have not substantially changed women’s subordination. More importantly, I will discuss how various Chinese feminists respond to these gender inequalities and work together to construct a collective presence and voice to effect changes in women’s lives. Finally, the paper will highlight that raising the consciousness of Chinese women, society, and the state is a necessary and useful strategy to effect changes of gender subordination.

Declining Political Participation of Women: A Decline of Social Status or a Decline of Liberation Consciousness Level?
Benefiting from the state’s commitment to gender equality and social rights, Chinese women have enjoyed a high social position. This high position appears to have been sustained during the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, as shown in the high ranking China has on UN’s gender-related development index and gender empowerment measures (Shang 195). However, like in other European socialist countries, the state in China has to retreat and relax its control over politics, economy, industry, agriculture, and education in order to nurture a growing market economy. As a result of the state’s retreat and the introduction of market economy, women’s political participation, which used to be guaranteed by fixed quotas, has suddenly declined a few years after the reform. The decline is not only disappointingly radical but also present across all levels of political institutions. As Xiaoyuan Shang points out, Chinese women “constituted 21 per cent of Standing Committee members at the Fourth NPC in January 1978” but occupied “only 9 per cent at the Sixth NPC in January 1983,” which is not as scary as the disappearance of women cadres in many areas “as soon as multi-candidate elections were introduced as a symbol of the democratic reforms in 1987” (195-6). In Qi Wang’s study, the percentage of villages with basic-level women cadres has dropped from 70 per cent in the 1950s to 10 per cent in the 1990s; the numbers look more abysmal with a closer look at the breakdown of the 10 percent: “In 1993, women accounted for only about 3.8 percent
of the country’s township administrators, 5.9 percent of the county heads and 5.8 percent of the municipal responsible managers” (19).

What do these dwindling numbers suggest about Chinese women? Scholars both inside and outside China have noticed the decline and started heated debates about whether this decline literally and symbolically means a decline of women’s social status. While some laments at the transition as disadvantageous to women, others stress that declining numbers do not equal with declining social status. Still others, not alarmed by these numbers, contend that these statistics are only the consequence of “women’s unwillingness to take on positions of social or political responsibility in addition to their full-time jobs and domestic chores” (Shang 196). While some attribute the decline to the persistent traditional prejudice against women, “discrimination against women both in the process of selecting cadres or representatives and in the wider society,” others take the numbers as proof of women’s lower quality—lower educational level— and lower qualifications for political leadership (195-7).

Xiaoyuan Shang responds to these arguments and argues that these arguments have not questioned the old forms of women’s participation in the mainstream political system. Shang contends that this decline does not mean that women’s status has actually deteriorated. Her argument is that “women’s participation in the mainstream
political system such as government, party agencies, and the NPC, according to fixed quotas introduced by the party-state,” is “tokenistic,” because “it is not a form of real participation for ordinary people, irrespective of whether they are men or women; it makes no difference how many women there are in the government if ordinary women are not active in policy making at the basic level” (197).

These debates may throw some light on the issue of women’s political participation, but there are many discussions missing from these arguments. First, the state’s support of women’s political participation has been decreasing in the process of transition from planned economy to market economy. In “State-Society Relation and Women’s Participation,” Qi Wang made an insightful exploration about the reasons for such an unexpected decline:

In Mao’s time, women’s political participation was an integral component of the overall political development of China from 1949, through which the Chinese state both gradually penetrated into society and succeeded in transforming women into an object of politicization and a political constituency of the regime. The strong state input facilitated the inroad of women into China’s local leadership structure, but also made women politically dependent on the state for support and legitimacy. I further argue that China’s post-Mao political transition, marked by the retreat of the state from society, has undermined the foundations of women’s political participation. (20)
Wang concludes that with the retreat of state support, Chinese women have to face up the society and to rely on themselves to compete with men for their political participation.

Second, the state ethics about women’s roles has been transforming during China’s transition from planned economy to market economy. While the double load—a full-time job and the housework—for pre-reform Chinese women remains true of today’s Chinese women, but state ethics about women’s roles is different in the two time periods. The Maoist leadership “transplanted into the web of society the willingness to sacrifice family life or personal life for the good of the public interest” (Wang 28). By “elevating such ethics to the status of true virtue, the state fostered,” in both men and women, faiths “that family or individual matters must take second place to public needs and that the relation between political duty and family life should be handled through heroic conduct” (Wang 28). The conflicts between domestic duties and personal comforts are thus resolved through a heroic will to serve the public. As a result, even if Chinese women in pre-reform era knew that they served their husbands and parents-in-laws at the sacrifice of their personal comforts, they were willing to believe that they were making a heroic sacrifice for the good of the general public. But this conflict haunts women in the post-reform China when it is embracing both a capitalist market economy and capitalist ideology: collectivism is giving way to individualism; personal comfort or family life is put before public duty. The state ethics
about women’s roles no longer asks women to put their production and social roles before their motherhood and wifehood or to sacrifice personal comfort for the collective. Women no longer believe that political participation and serving the public was an enormous honor or that prioritizing motherhood and wifehood is suspicious of petty bourgeois. Also, the state ethics encourages women to take new opportunities to contribute to the economic growth. Since being woman cadres does not bring economic opportunities as attractive as other jobs, women are less economically motivated to be woman cadres. Also, because men hold better jobs than women, women are encouraged to support their husbands by taking care of domestic chores, the children, and the elders.

Third, the celebration of traditional womanhood with a modern twist is increasingly visible in mainstream discourse: CCTV series, movies, and literature. In shocking contrast to Mao’s erasure of femininity, media in post-reform China create a discourse that overemphasizes women’s femininity and sexuality. Unlike the sexless, or masculinized image of Chinese women in Mao’s time, women in the post-reform era are portrayed as sexually attractive in many media channels. From millions of commercials on women’s make-ups and apparels to the eye-catching neon signs that use sexy women to attract consumers, women cannot fail to notice the emergence of this new image or to feel the need to fit into this new image. Since the tough image of an orthodox woman cadre, whose femininity is silenced by her masculine dress and
behavior, is in intensive conflict with the promotion of femininity of the dominant
discourse, women are not willing to be women cadres. Consequently, instead of
dismissing women’s unwillingness to be involved in politics as a simple issue of the
conflict between time for work and time for housework, we need to acknowledge how
the undermining of a masculinized femininity embodied by female political leaders
and cadres has also contributed to Chinese women’s withdrawal from active political
participation.

Fourth, gender discrimination has been as old as China, but it is generally agreed that
there was no overt expression of gender discrimination in Mao’s China. While many
agree that in the post-Mao era the backlash against gender equality is apparently a
reemergence of China’s traditional patriarchy, we also need to know that traditional
patriarchy has never been absent in China’s history and that it is not alone in the
post-reform era. First, traditional patriarchy is never challenged throughout China’s
history, not even in Mao’s time, which did mobilize women to work the same as men
but did not mobilize men to treat women equally both at home and at the workplace.
Gender discrimination was almost erased, both rhetorically and socially, but gender
discrimination and subordination never disappears from the cultural consciousness of
both men and women. Today, with the relative retreat of state control, individuals are
allowed relatively more autonomy and so there emerges overwhelmingly blatant
expressions of gender discrimination in every part of today’s life. Besides, this time
Chinese patriarchy is not alone; it has been buttressed by western patriarchy, which is imported into China along with market economy, along with McDonalds and KFC, along with sexist Hollywood Movies and western fashions, and along with internet technology. Therefore, it is not that women’s quality in the post-reform era is lower that makes them not suitable for politics; it is, rather, that men want to continue, like their forefathers, to subordinate women by excluding them from policy making process.

Finally, Shang’s argument that women’s political participation is only tokenistic is not totally wrong. However, it is tokenistic in a different sense. Women’s liberation is given to Chinese women without going through the process to raise the consciousness of the majority of Chinese women; therefore, the high political participation rate of Chinese women does not automatically mean that Chinese consciousness of gender equality is also high. Unlike the feminist movements in the West, women’s liberation was mostly given to women by the Party while most women themselves were generally not aware of what had happened in the process. As Cecilia Milwertz argues, while women’s movements have been going on globally for seventy years, “women in China achieved this position of equality very easily and have only understood this relatively slowly” (47). While women in other countries have developed and enhanced their awareness of gender equality in the process of feminist movements, the consciousness of gender equality is developed only in a
small number of Chinese women “engaged in women’s work” (Milwertz 47). Thus, it is not far-fetched to say that Chinese women, except the very few involved in women’s work, have seldom realized the importance of political participation. As a result of multiple factors, women have not realized their privilege until they lost that privilege. To win back their equal political participation, they have a long way to go.

The decline of women’s political participation is, indeed, a decline of women’s social status, and this decline in turn gives impetus to the strengthening of patriarchy. While juggling to be sexy women and good wives, while struggling to support husbands’ careers and succeed in their own jobs, while praising the improved job opportunities, the majority of Chinese women are reinforcing patriarchy and losing a privilege. On the other hand, the decline of women’s political participation does not mean an automatic decline of women’s liberation consciousness, because the liberation consciousness of the majority of Chinese women has never been as high as their high political participation rate. As many women activists and feminists are endeavoring to argue, to raise women’s consciousness of gender equality is a necessary and urgent thing to do right now. It is a process that Chinese women have skipped but cannot skip for ever. Without the support of state input, women have to depend on themselves to face up the gender discrimination to fight against patriarchy.

Gender Inequalities in Jobs and Wages: Urban Chinese Women
Because China is adjusting itself to market economy, the first thing it does is to break “iron rice bowl,” which means there will be no permanent job security. This policy has given enterprises not only more autonomy to hire and fire employees but also a more “decent” or legal excuse to lay off women workers, to give low-paying jobs to women, and to reject women college graduates. At the same time, the state passes some laws and regulations to counteract against this new emerging gender discrimination against urban women. Many of these laws and regulations, however, have not shielded women from discrimination at work: they gave enterprises more excuses to exercise gender discrimination.

The laws passed after 1978 have been trying to protect urban women’s rights and interests. As Margaret Y.K. Woo has explained in “Chinese Women Workers: The Delicate Balance between Protection and Equality,” the 1982 Constitution adopted offers a strong promise of equality for women and guarantees that women enjoys “equal rights with men in all spheres of life,” and that the state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work to men and women alike” (279). This promise of equality was reaffirmed by the adoption in 1992 of a Women’s Rights Protection Law, which pledged to protect “women’s special rights and interests granted by law” (Woo 279). The 1986 Health Care Regulations and the 1988 Labor Protection Regulations are in the same line with these two laws.
Both regulations emphasize the importance of health education, prenatal and postnatal care, and call for the provision of facilities to ensure health care and non-discrimination. *Real Right Law*, the *Labor Contract Law*, and the *Employment Promotion Law* was passed in 2007 in part to protect women’s rights. These laws and regulations surely have provided stated guaranty of Chinese women’s equality in production and reproduction, these guarantees have been mixed blessing. As Woo continues to argue, there is little doubt that these laws and regulations have represented “advances in addressing the health needs of women,” and the “recognition of positive guarantees is consistent with international standard, which encourages the provision of support services and benefits for women workers” (Woo 282). Nonetheless, these regulations can also do women a disservice. As Woo points out, “these regulations can themselves contribute to the problems of discriminatory hiring and occupational segregation” (282). Despite their original intention to secure women’s equality, these regulations are interpreted as reinforcing the idea that women are biologically weaker and need more protection than men (Woo 279). The reasons for this (mis)interpretation are multiple. First, by being protective around women’s health and reproduction, these regulations have been reinforcing the stereotype that women’s role of reproduction comes before their role of production. Then, these regulations have also reinforced the traditional notion that women cannot do many works that men can do. As Gita Sen and Caren Grown emphasize, gender-based subordination and discrimination is “deeply ingrained in the
consciousness of both men and women and is usually viewed as a natural corollary of the biological differences between them;” and is “reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems (both traditional and modern) that assign to women lesser status and power” (26). Just because there are some jobs, like lifting and working in cold water are not suitable for women when they are in critical situations like menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, and nursing, and menopause, men would assume that these jobs are not suitable for women at all times. Even though in Mao’s time, women are praised to hold up half the sky, the state discourse does not erase the “traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices regarding women’s participation in economic and social life” (Sen and Grown 16). Thirdly, “these regulations also deter employees from hiring women because of the cost of benefits that must be provided to women workers” for maternity leave and delivery of children and etc (Woo 283). Under the influence of western market ideology, people would try all means to minimize costs to maximize profits. In this sense, women are believed not to be as productive as men. Actually, this view of productivity is only a patriarchal view of productivity. Vandana Shiva argues that “productivity means different things from different perspectives:” from the perspective of capitalist patriarchy, productivity is a “measure of the production of commodities and profit;” from the point of view of women, productivity “is a measure of producing life and sustenance” (192).
The results are not just that women are more likely to be laid off than men are; there are also consistent gender disparities in job opportunities and wages. In their article “Wage and Job Inequalities in the Working Lives of Men and Women in Tianjin,” Yanjie Bian, John Logan, and Xiaoling Shu compare the gender disparities in wages in a large city Tianjin and offer us some disheartening statistics:

Our previous multivariate analyses of wages in Tianjin have shown that the net effect of gender on wages, controlling for background factors and job characteristics, was essentially unchanged: a 15.2 percent male percentage in 1978 and an 18.3 percent male advantage in 1993. Further review of the Tianjian data reveals that the gross gender disparity, i.e. the effect of gender with no controls for background factors and job characteristics, was even more stable: a 26.1 percent male percentage in 1978, compared to 26.0 percent in 1993. (111)

While many researchers expect a market economy to bring full gender equality to women, they are disappointed to see that both the state-as-equalizer model and the market-as-equalizer model fail to bring gender equality to Chinese women. More sadly, the gender wage gap and job opportunity gap are becoming persistently stable; as women’s job security is taken away, and more and more women are being forced to return to domestic sphere. As authors Bian, Logan, and Shu observe, the work unit
managers in the post-Mao era are learning from western capitalists to see women as less reliable and more expensive, and thus they tend to pay women less and put women top on their list of employees to be laid off. Some enterprises reject female college graduates, and others don’t even give top female college graduates a chance for interview. Further, the same authors mentioned above, after a review of occupational differences between men and women, conclude that the “key male advantage seems to be in administrative occupations and occupations with market potential” while women have an advantage in clerical occupations and those with market activity (151).

While the Chinese government has endeavored to provide more legal protection of women’s job opportunities and gender equality, established policies and regulations in numerous areas continue to prevent women from benefiting these legal protection. For example, these authors believe that the early-retirement policy for women has excluded women from salary increase beyond the age of 50; less access to education and party membership has adversely affected the distribution of base salaries and wages for women; the lower status of traditional female occupations prevents women’s salaries from increasing as much as men’s (132).

**Discriminations against Migrant Rural Women in Urban Industries and Informal Sectors**
To provide a sufficient labor market for urban industries, the state relaxes its control over urban-rural division and implements a policy of migration. Migration policy consists of the core policy—the household registration system—and a number of supplementary decrees and regulations. The household registration (hukou, in Chinese) has long divided countries from cities and peasants from workers. By implementing the hukou system, “the state has de facto generated a status-based society, where people and labor are identified by a whole set of hierarchical criteria in socialist China (Huang 95). The hukou system was relatively relaxed from 1980 onwards and consequently mobilizing rural labor to migrate out of native villages. As a result of this migration policy, there are millions of rural people selling their labor in cities, towns, and non-native villages. However, the migration does not dismantle the traditional rural-urban divide, because there are still restrictions and regulations to rural migrants, which continue to define their status as lower than urban people. As a result, rural people can only sell their labor in certain types of labor markets with prescribed status.

Unquestionably, the migration policy has both fed the labor needs of industries and improved rural people’s economic opportunities. However, the traditional urban-rural division created and sustained by the state and the market forces have exposed rural people to the exploitation of their employers. The jobs they can find are most likely to
be temporary jobs that urban people do not want. Among them, women are more vulnerable for a number of reasons. First, women have less mobility to migrate to get jobs; second, rural women’s labor is concentrated in urban informal sectors and light industry sector; working in these two sectors, women are not only treated as lower or lesser workers but also paid less; third, since they are temporary rural women workers, they don’t have the protection, security, and welfares that urban women workers have.

The informal sectors in cities are least desirable to urban women, so it is no surprise that rural migrating women are squeezed into this urban service sectors and private commercial and service enterprises. In the process of urbanization there are a huge increase of job opportunities in domestic service, canteens, hotels, and stores, where rural women, mostly young, are working with low dignity and low pay. As many notice, domestic service has “become a source of employment for and is dominated by migrant women”: “in 1989, three million rural women working in cities were recorded as housemaids” (Huang 95). Before 1949, housemaids were very common and were considered as low-status servants, but after 1949, especially in Mao’s time, Chinese people were not allowed to have housemaids, because having a maid means feudal oppression of women and petty bourgeois lifestyle of exploiting women for one’s personal comforts. In post-reform China, having a housemaid is seen as an improvement of their lifestyle and a convenient solution to the conflict between work
and family. In addition to the long tradition of low status, their illiteracy or semi-illiteracy and rural behavior code segregate housemaids from urban women. Their low-status, low pay, and hard work has enabled urban men to excuse themselves from housework and allowed urban women more time for themselves. Women who work in urban private commercial and service enterprises are vulnerable to another kind of discrimination: migrant women workers are not provided the social benefits that urban workers at state-owned or collective enterprises have; their jobs are contingent; their works are usually heavy and physical works that receive low pay and demand long working hours.

In the industrial labor market, the gender “disparity between men and women in terms of jobs, pay, and working conditions” is almost as universal as natural (Huang 97). The majority of migrant women workers have unskilled, dirty, heavy jobs that demand longer working time and offering lower wages and no social benefits. As Xiyi Huang elaborates:

Women work also more intensively than men in the assembly process. Furthermore, in the special economic zones, male technicians and skilled workers often earn considerably more than women—3-400 yuan per month for a technician, 1000 yuan for a skilled worker and even 800 yuan for a casual worker; whilst a female operator earns only around 500 yuan per month. (98)
Huang further argues that migrant rural women in the industrial labor market encounter discriminatory treatment different from local women, because better job opportunities are allotted to local women. Besides this social bias and male bias, migrant rural women are also vulnerable to the profit-orientation and market-driven mentality of their employers who give the lowest possible wages to women workers and fire them when they are married, to avoid the cost of housing and nursing facilities (Huang 100-1).

Even though they are encountering social bias and gender bias, migrant rural women workers are not left with many other choices, because if they don’t want these jobs their employers would have sufficient labor reserve from labor market to substitute them, and any request for a change of working conditions or pay would end up in failure. This is truer of women in certain export-based industries and occupation, which are typically producing “consumer electronics, semi-conductors, toys, and sporting goods, textiles, and apparel, footwear, luggage, wigs, optical equipment, and bicycles” (Sen and Grown 35). To maximize their profit, these transnational industries are always hunting for the cheapest labor, which most of the time happens to be poor rural women, who have difficulty in finding better-paying jobs and are, therefore, willing to settle with a minimal salary. As Sen and Grown argue, “attempts to improve the income and working conditions in this sector pose a serious dilemma. Since multinational corporations locate in these countries principally because of the
presence of cheap female labor, attempts to demand better wages, working
conditions, job security, and advancement prospects often induce further capital
flight” (35).

As Shiva argues, the assumption that the “improvement of women’s economic
position would automatically flow from an expansion and diffusion of the development
process” would turn pale in front of the extremely exploitative conditions of migrant
rural women.

The Reemergence of Aged Social Ills: Increasing Prostitutes and Concubines

In China, prostitution, as well as concubinage, has been centuries old. As China
celebrated its liberation in 1949, it also passed marriage laws that protect women’s
rights and prevent prostitution and polygamy. While these laws still exist today, they
were carried out with the utmost force during Mao’s time because the New China
State, eager to establish it as different from both feudal and capitalist states, exerted
all forces—political, ideological, social, cultural, and legal—at all levels of
administration to guarantee prostitution and polygamy were not practiced at all.
Coupled with endless anti-feudalist and anti-capitalist dominant discourse, the New
China State performed a miraculous eradication of both prostitution and polygamy.
Since the reform, there is, however, a disturbing stormy backlash of prostitution and
concubinage, especially in cities and special economic zones. Even though every year the government has taken strong measures to ban pornography, prostitution, and polygamy, it seems that these measures only produce counter effect.

The reemergence of prostitution and concubinage in China, of course, cannot be dismissed simply as a decline of morality of Chinese women. We cannot fully understand this issue if we fail to find out the factors and players that are prompting their appearance and supporting its existence. Jyothi Sanghera sheds light on this issue in her article, “In the Belly of the Beast: Sex Trade, Prostitution and Globalization.” As one of the oldest professions, prostitution exists, as she argues, both because the “social and economic vulnerability of women and their attendant powerlessness in society has left them only a small range of options open to them to eke out a livelihood always true in every class society,” and because there is always a demand for female sexuality in any patriarchal society where men can appropriate the female body in the same way as they possess land and resources (47). She believes that “basic, determining factors on the supply and demand side remained principally the same in most countries” (48).

Prostitutes in the Chinese history have been condemned as the lowest, and concubines are never socially, legally, and culturally sanctioned. Yet the confluence of the market economy, the backlash of patriarchal notions, the new vulnerability to
market economy, and the increased mobility in population have revitalized these aged traditions. While Mao’s regime did away with prostitution and concubinage from society, it never erases them from the consciousness of Chinese men and women. Although women throughout history have traded sex or dignity for food, security, and other needs, the market economy, which turns everything into commodities, nurtures more opportunities for women to commodify their bodies for economic benefits. As the relaxing state control is giving more autonomy to individuals, the patriarchal notions of consuming female bodies find rich soil in the opened China. The borrowed market economy has not only justified the idea of turning women’s bodies into commodities; it has also largely increased women’s social and economic vulnerability. Masses of urban women who are laid off by the former state-owned enterprises are middle-aged women, who do not have chances for reeducation and reemployment. In order to keep the urban living standard, they choose to do so. For young rural and urban poor women who do not have much education or skill would find it an easy way out. Furthermore, as a result of the migrating policy, there is a huge migrating population thronging to industrialized cities; they leave their wives or girlfriends in their hometown and seek prostitutes for their satisfaction. Also, men’s jobs have more mobility than women’s, because their travel is a lot more frequent and further than women. Meanwhile, the mushrooming restaurants and hotels are built to meet the needs of prostitution. In the coastal areas, the phenomenon of prostitution and concubinage is more popular because of the high concentration of migrating
population and rich men. Finally, because there is no job security and financial security, some women, even highly-educated college women, are willing to be illegal wives of married rich men who can provide a safe wall against the forces of competitive market economy.

The extreme degradation of prostitutes and concubines indicates the decline of social status of Chinese women as a whole and makes gender subordination more visible to society. Forced into the process of development and catch-up with the first world, with the worst opportunities, these women are suffering the costs of the development without benefiting from the development; they are carrying both a traditional burden of gender subordination and a modern load of merciless market economy.

**The Emerging Public Space: Women’s Activism and Feminism**

In reaction to these contradictory effects brought by the expansion of market economy and the gradual state withdrawal of employment security in the post-Mao era, an impressive number of women’s organizing activities have emerged in China. In responding to the gender inequalities that emerge after the retreat of state, a new field of women’s studies has also been created to reconstruct women’s identity. To adapt to the new mission of state and to deal with the new women’s work, state feminism represented by the All-China Women’s Federation is transforming itself to
be more representative of women’s interests. As a public space is emerging, these feminisms create new voices for women and complement each other in their struggle to call for a women’s collective consciousness.

From the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards, the relaxing state control allows for the development of a wide range of (more or less controlled) activities in the sphere that has been theorized as civil society and public space. Urban educated women have exploited emerging spaces and have also created new political spaces to address gender-specific discrimination in relation to issues such as employment, education, and rural to urban migration. Activists have set up social services to support women in vulnerable situations related, for example, to prostitution, domestic violence, and divorce. In the past over fifteen years, there have emerged many women’s organizations in Beijing alone. Among them are the East Meets the West Feminist Translation Group, The Blue-Stocking Group, the Queer Women Group, the Association for Promoting Rural Women in Development, The Women’s Health Network, the China-Canada Women’s Project, the Center for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, the Women’s Research Institute (later Maple Psychological Counseling Center), the Jinglun Family Center, and the Migrant Women’s Club (Milwertz 5-22).
The relationship between citizens and the state has been transformed as citizens expand their sphere of participation in social change, so there emerges a unique fluidity in Chinese women’s activism in relation to central structures of power: the activism is “situated both inside and outside the center, yet sometimes preferring to negotiate in the interstices, the spaces in-between, working outward from the inside, but also influencing the center from the outside; starting from positions of weakness and marginality and transforming these into mobility and strength” (Hsiung et al 4). Because of such fluidity, their activities have adroitly delineated “a borderland of social and intellectual movement which is leaving neither the center nor the periphery unaffected and unchallenged. (Hsiung et al 4). As a result, the experience “accumulated by these activities forms part of the collective experience and identity and consciousness transformation that is at the core of collective organizing for social change” (Hsiung et al 8).

Numerous centers for women’s studies have mushroomed at tertiary educational institutions in China during the historical changes of the mid-1980s. The four universities that pioneered the establishment of women’s studies centers to raise women’s consciousness are Zhengzhou University in 1987, Hangzhou University in 1989, Peking University in 1990, and Tainjin Normal University in 1993. These four centers as well as the numerous women studies centers burgeoning before and after the Women’s Conference in 1995 build solidarity among themselves and seek,
through both formal and informal relationships with upper-levels offices and powerful
administrative positions, to develop their curriculum and institutionalize their operation
and modes of collaboration (Du 242).

Playing a unique double role, the All-China Women Federation (ACWF) represents a
more “dynamic organizational identity in its advocacy of women’s interests, lobbying
for policy and the improvement of women’s lives in response to needs expressed at
local levels” (Husing et al 9). As China is transforming itself, ACWF is also
transforming itself to be more effective to advocate for women’s interests; the
Women’s Conference has given ACWF unprecedented chance to develop itself. As
many researchers have noticed, Women’s Federation has cooperated, at various
levels, with new forms of popular women organizing and with academic feminism.
Meanwhile, ACWF has both transformed and strengthened itself through its active

As expected, there have been tensions and boundaries between women’s activism,
state feminism, and academic feminism. But as Sen and Grown argue, “feminism
cannot be a monolithic in its issues, goals, and strategies, since it constitutes the
political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions,
classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds” (18-9), the diversity of feminisms in
China can respond to and address the diverse needs and concerns of diverse
women, but this “diversity builds on a common gender oppression and hierarchy” (19). The collectivist tradition as well as the practical strategy needed have encouraged Chinese feminisms to devise strategies to bypass and transcend these tensions and boundaries so that a solidarity could be built up to create collective consciousness in China.

As Sen and Grown advocate, while women’s organizations provide excellent examples in raising consciousness, mass education—through institutional education and mass movements—must be supported by agencies and governments (77). While raising the consciousness of the general mass is urgent, Sen and Grown further contend, “raising the consciousness of government and agency officials and functionaries is an ongoing necessity as it largely determines their ability to recognize women’s potential for developing methods to mitigate and perhaps even resolve the various crises outlined earlier” (77).

As pioneer Chinese feminist Xiaojiang Li articulates, women’s liberation is both a social and a personal issue. Echoing Sen and Grown, she calls for a development of collective consciousness, which she believes is the ideological basis for women’s liberation: “if the collective consciousness of Chinese women were awakened, then we would definitely see enlightened women actively involved in society, and would see self-improvement and consciousness-raising movements for women” (382).
also stresses that the state support and participation in decision-making are important
to raise the consciousness of the whole society.

Works Cited

Bian, Yanjie, John R. Logan;, and Shu Xiaoling. “Wage and Job Inequalities in the
Working Lives of Men and Women in Tianjin.” Redrawing Boundaries: Work,

Desai, Manisha. “Transnational Solidarity: Women’s Agency, Structural Adjustment,
and Globalization.” Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local
Routlege, 2002.

Du, Fangqin. “‘Manoeuvring Fate’ and ‘Following the Call’: Development and
Prospects of Women’s Studies.” Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres,
Feminists, Muslims, and Queers. Eds. Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok,


The Lady of the Rings: Female Resistance, Female Containment, and the Magical Circus

By Zara T. Wilkinson

Circus scholar Yoram S. Carmeli has written that the enduring popularity of the circus is rooted in society’s reaction to a postmodern existence, which is characterized by a fragmentary, disenchanted, and industrial social order. To Carmeli, circus literature in particular “reifies for the readers an illusionary totality, a totality lost in an era of fragmentized order” (Carmeli, “Books” 214). Through the circus’ consistent exclusion from mainstream society, which symbolically reoccurs every time it opens, “lost community and biography are nostalgically disclosed” (Carmeli, “Lion” 87). However, society is also fascinated by the circus because it occupies a precarious social position. It can be conservative and nostalgic, as it is to Carmeli, full of wholesome, family-friendly entertainment. However, it is also a place of death-defying acts and monstrously weird bodies—a dangerous, carnivalesque space that does not follow the rules of ordinary life. Paradoxical and not quite definable, circuses are characterized by an inherent duality, and this dual nature is exemplified in magical circus novels Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti and The Night Circus. These novels present a fascinating look at the circus as a space of resistance as well as of containment, and the magical circuses therein either question or uphold the dominant social hierarchy and, in particular, rigid gender roles.
Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti by Genevieve Valentine and The Night Circus by Erin Morganstern are two novels vastly different in plot and tone that might, in other circumstances, never be compared. However, because they were published in the same six months of 2011, and because they feature magical circuses and circus performers, they have understandably been discussed in relation to each other. Abigail Nussbaum, in her review for Strange Horizons, asserts that there is “a sense in which these books are the same” as well as “another sense in which these books are opposites.” There is also, she concludes “a sense in which Mechanique and The Night Circus work better as a paired reading than individually.” She means they complement each other in terms of the flaws and strengths of their respective authors, but pairing these novels also creates an opportunity to discuss the ways in which they conceptualize competing visions of the circus’s role in society. Evoking the conflicting qualities of resistance and containment, the magical circuses in these novels transgress or uphold the existing social order. Because established gender roles are a very important part of social hierarchies, the relationship between these circus and their societies can be best seen through the ways that these circuses resist or reinforce the prescribed position of women in society. In Mechanique, circus women are afforded opportunity and power outside the dominant society, while in The Night Circus they are contained and imprisoned.

Although historically representing wholesome family entertainment, the circus is in many ways a transgressive space and offers many opportunities for resistance. It is a “powerful cultural representation of a form of otherness, of an irreducible strangeness”
(Parker 556)—a space that celebrates difference and deviation. In contrast to everyday city life, full of restrictions, the circus functions as a “space of freedom” (557), where even the laws of nature (and gravity) need not apply. As an “institutionalized questioning of stability and classification” (Parker 560), the circus can be located as a reiteration of the Bakhtinian carnival, which was itself “an embodiment of the liberated communality of people in perennally renewed rebellion against the social and spiritual restrictions of the official order” (Lindley 17). Carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 10) and allowed the common people to embrace concepts such as “community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). Carnival was an equalizing force, allowing the ordinary person to be “reborn for new, purely human relations,” which were experienced and “not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought” (10). Rebirth is implicit is Bakhtin’s carnival, as well; carnival, more than anything else, is about “becoming, change, and renewal” (10) and the “pathos of change and renewal” (11).

Carnival promises this change and renewal for society itself. The creation of a space freed from the constraints of official order and control, Bakhtin believed, would also create a venue for communality and rebellion:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure... Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterpoised to the all-powerful
sociohierarchial relationships of noncarnival life. (Bakhtin, "Dostoevsky" 123)

Thus, carnival exists in order to forge “a new mode of interrelationship,” one that, for at least a small time, possesses a power that rivals that of society’s ruling institutions. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival turned upside down the official order, offering “both an escape from and a critique of the static, oppressive hierarchy of class and economic relations” (Lindley 18). Like Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, the circus has been linked to the simultaneous promise and threat of cultural transformation:

The circus freely manipulates a cultural system to such an extent that it leaves the audience contemplating a demonstration of humanity freed from the constraints of the culture within which the performance takes place. Circus tradition . . . is . . . a set of rules for cultural transformations, displayed in a ritualistic manner that tempers this transgressive aspect. (Boussiac 8)

However, not everyone would argue that a circus is, by its very nature, subversive. Above, the ritualistic property of the circus tempers its transgressive aspect. The “questioning of stability and classification” noted earlier was an institutionalized questioning, co-opted and perhaps even welcomed by the dominant society. The Bakhtinian carnival also carries with it the sense of institutionalization, of a threat neutralized by the very act of being spoken aloud. For those who have the most to lose from unrest and rebellion, carnival represents a safe way for the common people to express their displeasure:
But the most common objection to Bakhtin’s view of the carnival as an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State, is that on the contrary it is part of that culture . . . [and] is best seen as a safety-valve, which in some overall functional way reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension. (Dentith 73)

In this way, minor disruptions of social order such as carnival and the circus sate a very real desire for social upheaval, thus lessening the chance of actual unrest. While retaining the trappings of a resistance and transgression, they ultimately function as a method of social control and placation. The dominant culture, by positioning the circus as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or as a nostalgic event outside of “normal” life, can then attempt to manage or contain it: “It is through this positioning of circus and artist as other that the disciplinary society attempts to objectify and master them, to bring them under the control of surveillance, to make them visible” (Little 19). On a smaller scale, the circus itself, despite carefully establishing and maintaining the illusion of disorder, is a highly ordered, carefully managed event. There is an order of acts, a beginning and end, and even the clowns are safely anarchic, never causing actual trouble or inspiring actual chaos. In all of these examples, the appearance of transgression and resistance is a careful illusion, and any risk of real social unrest is mitigated by the possibility of containment and institutionalization.

The Circus Tresaulti in Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti is characterized by a resistance to social order that is anything but institutionalized. The Circus Tresaulti is a steampunk circus traveling through a grim post-apocalyptic future. The performers are
perpetual outsiders, and not only because when they join the Circus Tresaulti they are surgically altered, their bones or lungs or spine replaced with metal. This circus exists completely outside of normal, hierarchal society, resisting control, capture, and categorization. It is socially resistive, especially in terms of gender, and is even run by a female proprietor. Her successor is male, so the circus is not strictly matriarchal, but its internal social structure affords women a great deal of power. The specific ways that the Circus Tresaulti offers escape from and resistance to the dominant social order can be best seen by examining the circumstances of each of three categories of female circus performer: dancing girl, aerialist, and proprietor.

The dancing girls use the circus to travel outside of society with the goal of re-assimilating in a location and role of their choosing. Because they are still human and do not have the copper bones, they are temporary, travelling with the circus only until they find something better. Despite being called “girls,” they are all women, all former soldiers and factory workers. They are not traditionally feminine and “all muscle” but eventually they all learn “the profit in the curled hand and the cocked hip” (Valentine, *Mechanique* 10). Their performance is a performance of femininity, directly tying their gender identity to whatever opportunities they realize as a result of their participation in the circus. The transience of the dancing girls is emphasized in *Mechanique*, and to this end at least three former dancing girls are mentioned. Two stayed behind in cities where there were jobs—to become a stonemason and a baker, respectively—and one stayed behind, perhaps more traditionally, because she found somebody to marry. Each of these women joined the circus to escape the horrors of war or the drudgery of low-
paid factory work, and each of them succeeded in increasing their options in a time when opportunities are scarce.

The dancing girls use the circus in order to locate opportunities in the non-circus world, but the rest of the women in the novel embrace the Circus Tresaulti as a viable alternative to the non-circus world. Historical circuses provided their participants, especially their female participants, with opportunities that were available to them in few other parts of society: "In an era where a majority of women's roles were still circumscribed by Victorian ideals of domesticity and feminine propriety, circus women's performances celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social norms" (Davis 83). While leadership roles in other industries were reserved for men, the circus was a nebulous force in which anything was possible:

[C]ircus people – many of whom were social outsiders – often found a refuge of sorts in this nomadic community of oddballs. In fact, the circus often provided a better income than was available elsewhere. (Female stars, for one, made just as much as their male counterparts or more, and a few women, such as Mollie Bailey and Nellie Dutton, became successful circus owners.) (Davis 26)

Here the benefits of joining the circus are explained in social as well as financial terms; for these women, the circus offered not only a community that would celebrate difference, but also an income and a chance to rise to a position of power or become a business owner. Like the women of the Circus Tresaulti, these historical circus women
found that the alternative social structure of the circus offered them more chance of
success than would participation in mainstream society.

Historical circus women, like the dancing girls, could leave the circus at any time, albeit
with fewer opportunities available to them if they did. The other performers in
Mechanique, however, are irrevocably, biologically changed once they join the circus.
The aerialists, for example, must be given "skeletons of hollow pipe" that are “tougher
than bone, and lighter, and easier to fix when it breaks" (22). Once they are
transformed, they are moved permanently to the periphery of normative society, evoking
the situations of some of the more traditional circus and sideshow performers. The
following quotation demonstrates not only some of the moral rationale behind the
lucrative sideshow industry, but also the very real ways in which these physically
different “freaks” would have struggled to navigate mainstream society:

    An alligator girl can’t be a waitress, or a receptionist, or a nurse, or a babysitter.
    How many job opportunities are open to Siamese twins? How many personnel
    managers are looking for monkey-faced boys? Would you climb into a taxi driven
    by a dwarf with a pointed head, or a guy nine feet tall? (Hartzman 5)

Such rhetoric is of course problematic in terms of modern understandings of physical
disability, as many people with many kinds of bodies participate and thrive in modern
society. However, as previously able-bodied people, the aerialists’ choice to become
“freaks” does represent, on some level, a willingness to reject social norms about what
bodies should and shouldn’t be. As a result, the altered aerialists are forced to
completely eschew the values of the dominant society and, in fact, to fear the values of the dominant society. When the government man comes around, those with the metal bones are the most frightened: they “knew something the rest of us didn't know—about Boss, about the man with the orange lion on the side of his car; they knew what might happen, without even looking at one another” (60). The performers who have the metal bones can never return to the non-circus world, not even if they are offered a well-playing job or if they fall in love. That is what they pay for entry into the new social order of the Circus Tresaulti, and what they trade for job security, for food on their tables, and for a place in a community.

The Circus Tresaulti has a female proprietor, Boss, and her position in the circus highlights one of the most important ways that it is resistive. Boss does not have the bones, but she is just as tied to the circus as the aerialists: she is the necromancer-magician who keeps the circus people in their state of not-quite-alive, repairing their flesh with mechanical parts. To the rubes, the townspeople, she downplays her role in the circus, explaining that her late husband created the mechanical people and that she "can barely oil the things" (22). Nowhere else in the novel does Boss refer to a husband, and so presumably he is fictional, created to deflect attention from Boss, to keep people from thinking too much about how powerful she must be. Those who are part of the circus know differently, and always have: Boss is the most powerful person in the circus, the Circus Tresaulti’s tough-love matriarch and giver of life. Several times throughout Mechanique Boss is acknowledged as the symbolic mother of the circus performers. When Elena refers to her "third time being born" (144), two out of three of
her births occurred in Boss's workshop. Later, speaking to Bird, the second-person narrator describes Boss as "your mother" (207). Later still, Boss looks down from her cell as the Circus Tresaulti unites to rescue her, and she thinks, “These are my children, this is my circus” (264). Instead of carrying her children in her womb, Boss takes them into her workshop, from which they emerge with new life.

Boss’s motherhood also alludes to the gendered social conflict at the heart of the novel. Boss’s power, although here magical and unexplained, is at its core a woman’s power: she can give life, and unlike matters of “normal” reproduction, she needs no male involvement. Her power of generation makes her a target for the government man, who cannot, as she can, create life out of nothing. Evoking the role of women in the very male need to beget male offspring, he needs a wife-figure who can birth the soldiers he will use to restore the society that once was: “‘I want to make every city like the old world,’ he said, ‘one by one. For that I need lieutenants who won’t die from gunshots. I need soldiers who can jump over the city walls and drag everyone into a world that isn’t just animal colonies snapping at one another’” (185). The government men are particularly notable because they are government men, referred to by exclusively male pronouns in a novel full of female soldiers. The main antagonist is known to the circus and to the narrator as only “the government man,” even though his troops and the people who live in the city he governs call him “the Prime Minister.” Through such phrasing, the world he wants to (re)create is explicitly gendered male, a nascent recreation of the traditional, male-dominated social hierarchies of days gone by. In order for this world to come into being, the government man needs to conquer Boss, a woman
more powerful than he, and he needs to reshape the transgressive, female-dominated circus into an instrument of the very social order it transgresses. When the capture of Boss instigates a literal battle between the circus people and the government man’s soldiers, the Circus Tresaulti is able to secure its transgressive status by striking a blow against society itself.

One final way that *Mechanique* and the Circus Tresaulti evoke resistance and social change is through the presence of grotesque bodies. Grotesque imagery involves blending seemingly disparate elements with the goal of questioning the absoluteness of the disparity:

The grotesque is a representational practice fitted to distinctions between natural and artificial. By definition, something appears grotesque if it contains an apparently unnatural mixture of elements… the grotesque causes “the perception that something is illegitimately in something else.” The grotesque mixes domains typically thought of as separate, such as human and animal or man and woman. (Oliver 238)

In *Mechanique*, human beings are blended with metal, with clockwork lungs, bones of pipe, and wings made of metal and (actual) bone. The bodies of those who have gone into Boss’s workshop are neither human nor nonhuman, neither dead nor alive, in a constant state of flux. To Bakhtin, a grotesque body “is a body in the act of becoming . . . never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). Grotesque bodies are pitted against “classic images of the
finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 25). The classic body is static and completed, but the grotesque refers to the changes implicit in birth, digestion, conception, and death. The grotesque body is one that “builds and creates another body,” locating all female bodies firmly within the realm of the grotesque. Bakhtin frequently discusses the social role of the grotesque in reproductive terms. To degrade the high and the spiritual is, for example, “to hurl it down to the reproductive stratum, the zone in which conception and new birth take place” (21). Additionally, by linking death and birth using the image of a pregnant hag, Bakhtin repeatedly seeks to establish a cycle “in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one” (318). This cycle of life proceeding from death features heavily in Mechanique: to transform the circus performers Boss must kill them and, once she has (re)built and (re)created their bodies, she brings them back to life using her singular magic.

The preoccupation with conception and birth directly links grotesque imagery to carnival. Like carnival, the grotesque functions as method of renewal and replacement:

[The grotesque] has political consequences, enabling a radical intervention in the common people’s sense of identity. The representation of what breaks the surface or extends from the body specifically combats the version of identity propagated by those in power to maintain social order… This rather triumphalist image of the grotesque’s communalism is tempered, however, by how it
functions, namely by replacing the ‘official’ order of society with this new openness. (Oliver 240)

By celebrating the grotesque body, *Mechanique* creates a world, within the Circus Tresaulti, that privileges bodily and social difference. The bodies of the circus performers are the result and the cause of their exclusion from mainstream society. Their bodies enable them to thrive in the non-traditional social order represented by the circus and to upset the social order outside of the circus through the war against the government men. Within the novel, this conflict is framed in terms of gender; it is waged between the grotesque, female-owned, self-reproducing Circus Tresaulti and the male, male-dominated, traditionally-ordered government. In “The Finest Spectacle on Earth,” a story set in the Circus Tresaulti universe, the point-of-view character Little George, acknowledges that the circus is a potentially dangerous threat:

> A little sideshow could come and go, neither a thrill nor a threat. A circus, I could tell, would be a different thing—a circus was something real, something united.

> My hands were shaking. I pressed them to my sides.

> “Some people won’t like it,” I said.

> Boss said, “Then they can be afraid of it.” (Valentine, “Spectacle”)
The social resistance enacted by the Circus Tresaulti is best traced through *Mechanique*’s female characters, and likewise the social containment represented by Le Cirque des Rêves in *The Night Circus* is best seen through the situation of Celia, the novel’s female protagonist. *Mechanique* is set in a fragmented, post-apocalyptic society with ample opportunity for an alternative social order such as the Circus Tresaulti’s to thrive, but the events of *The Night Circus* take place in 19th century London. The setting alone implies highly-ordered, firmly-established social hierarchies, and for Celia the circus Le Cirque des Rêves becomes an integral part of that order. Celia begins the novel lacking agency, a female object in a male world. She arrives at her father’s dressing room with her mother’s suicide note pinned to her dress. Described as a “package” (Morgenstern 9), she is delivered by a lawyer, passed on to the male theater manager, and left in the dressing room of Hector Bowen, the father who does not want her. From her first meeting with her father, it is clear that he is not invested in having a child; only once she displays a natural talent for magic does he declare her “interesting” (11). Hector’s interest manifests in control rather than care and nurturing; he contacts old friend and fellow magician Alexander to propose a competition between Celia and whatever child Alexander chooses. In this competition, Celia will represent innate magical skill and, consequently, emotion, and Marco, the orphan adopted by Alexander, will represent intellect and the ability to learn magic through study. At six years old, Celia is drafted into a battle that will define and engulf her life, and she is bound to complete by a magical spell that to her is an extension of her father’s power.

In a binding ceremony, Celia and Marco both receive a ring that, when placed on their
fingers, burns away into nothingness, leaving only a scar, a physical, lasting reminder of powerlessness:

Her momentary glee at the adjustment is crushed by the pain that follows as the ring continues to close around her finger, the metal burning into her skin. She tries to pull away but the man in the grey suit keeps his hand firmly around her wrist.

The ring thins and fades, leaving only a bright red scar around Celia's finger. (18) The boy tries in vain to pry the ring from his finger as it dissolves into his skin. . . . The boy only nods and does not question further, but that night, when he is alone again and unable to sleep, he spends hours staring at his hand in the moonlight, wondering who the person he is bound to might be. (29)

The binding is “permanent” (29), physically unpleasant, and Celia and Marco will later discover that even thinking about abandoning the wager causes a great amount of pain. Because the children are opposite-gender, the binding strongly resembles a betrothal or marriage, a fact which is evident to at least one of the characters: referring to the scar, Celia scornfully describes herself as “already married” (63) well before she meets or falls in love with her opponent. Marco feels resentment about being bound as well, but he doesn’t describe it as marriage, because for him the action is not gendered. As a dutiful daughter, Celia must obey her father even when his wishes are contrary to her own; that would be true even in the absence of magical wagers, and she identifies the ring-binding ceremony with the social mores that allow and expect her father to choose
her a husband. To Celia, her forced participation in Prospero and Alexander’s competition is directly related to the lack of power she holds as a young woman in the 19th century.

As an orphan adopted by a presumably rich benefactor, Marco does not seem to possess much more social power than Celia in terms of class and privilege, but *The Night Circus* very clearly establishes that he and Celia are not equal. Le Cirque des Rêves, which becomes the venue of the magical competition, is built not by Celia but by Marco and his employer. Celia later comes to have undeniable power over the circus, but she is denied participation in its creation only because she is female and cannot, as Marco does, secure a position as assistant to the wealthy Chandresh. Because Marco has an active role in establishing the circus itself, his role within it is guaranteed, but Celia, as an outsider, must audition for it like anyone else. She is bound to compete, powerless against the wishes of her father, and her powerlessness is emphasized by the fact that she must ask to be part of the circus, as well as that her male rival is one of the people who views and judges her audition. Chandresh, and by extension Marco, allow Celia to join Le Cirque des Rêves, but only after making it clear that the circus is a male production with only minor roles for women: "We're auditioning illusionists, my dear girl. . . . Magicians, conjurers, etcetera. No need for lovely assistants at this time" (75). Even Celia and Marco's roles within the circus are gendered. Like other female performers Tsukiko and Isobel, Celia is constantly on display, dressed in elaborate and brightly colored dresses, while Marco, his face concealed by a magical mask, machinates behind the scenes; for this reason, Marco knows Celia is his opponent far
before Celia does. Additionally, Marco is located in London for most of the novel, absent from the circus, while Celia has few opportunities to leave. Celia is a powerful magician who adds many beautiful tents to the circus, but she does not seem to gain any social power from it.

At the conclusion of the novel, Celia’s metaphorical imprisonment, symbolized by the scar and embodied in her forced participation in the circus, becomes a literal imprisonment. Slowly, Celia learns that she and Marco are not the first students Alexander and Hector have bound, and that in all previous wagers one of the two participants had to die. The competition is a “test of endurance” (317) and, rather than being declared, the winner is “the one standing after the other can no longer endure” (300). Tsukiko, for example, won her competition only because her opponent, a woman she loved, killed herself in a pillar of fire. Only in the heat of the moment do Celia and Marco discover a way to end the wager that does not involve Celia committing suicide or Marco trapping himself within the magical fire that fuels the circus. In a feat of ill-explained magic, Celia anchors herself and Marco to the circus. The magic she casts is understood to be a reworking of Hector Bowen’s attempts earlier in the novel to “remove himself from the physical world” (260). Whereas Hector had “had trouble pulling himself back together again” (260), however, Celia uses the circus as a touchstone, so that she and Marco are immaterial but tethered. They are “liberated from the world and reinstated in a confined location” (352): ghosts who will forever haunt the circus they created. To the outside world, Marco and Celia are dead, and for Hector and Alexander the terms of the challenge have been fulfilled.
Earlier in the novel, Celia explained her father’s actions as both an attempt to escape the realities of his approaching death and an attempt to control of his own destiny:

“If I had reason to, I think I could [do the same],” she says. “But I am rather fond of the physical world. I think my father was feeling his age, which was much more advanced than it appeared, and did not relish the idea of rotting in the ground. He may have wished to control his own destiny, but I cannot be certain as he did not consult me before he attempted it. . .” (261)

Hector’s desire to shed the physical world is cast as negative, the folly of an old man with megalomaniacal tendencies. Later, Celia’s actions will resonate with her father’s wish to “control his own destiny”; by removing herself from the wager, she too is attempting to control her own destiny. For her, to do so is to attempt self-actualization, to become a part of the game rather than a pawn on the board. While Celia’s successful defiance of her father and his influence over her life could be seen as an empowering act of rebellion, a woman standing up to decide her own fate, this interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, as seen in the quotation above, Celia obviously views her father’s decision as negative, and says that she herself would not choose the same. She is “rather fond of the physical world,” after all, and goes on to say she is “not certain” she wants “to be stuck in a tree for the rest of eternity” (261). Secondly, and far more worryingly, the result of Celia’s attempt at self-determination is that she has replaced her father’s prison with another—or, because in both cases it is the circus that restrains her, with itself.
As referenced above, when speaking of her father, Celia states, “But I’m not certain I’d want to be stuck in a tree for the rest of eternity, myself, would you?” Marco replies, presciently, “I think that would depend on the tree” (261). In this exchange, Celia and Marco unknowingly echo an earlier conversation between Murray twins Widget and Poppet. When Poppet asks Widget about his retelling of the Merlin myth, he expresses a sentiment very like Marco’s:

“Is it not that bad to be trapped elsewhere, then? Depending on where you’re trapped?”
“I suppose it depends on how much you like the place you’re trapped in,” Widget says.
“And how much you like however you’re stuck there with,” Poppet adds, kicking his black boot with her white one. (175)

In Widget’s story, a powerful wizard tells his secrets to a girl, and she uses his own magic against him, enclosing him in a tree forever. Ultimately, this imprisonment is positive for the wizard and allowed him victory over the girl who had tricked him: “by losing his secrets, the wizard gained immortality. His tree stood long after the clever young girl was old and no longer beautiful, and in a way, he became greater and stronger than he had ever been before” (174). Through Widget, then, The Night Circus depicts imprisonment as acceptable and even desirable, at least if one likes one’s
prison and fellow inmates. Later, Widget also argues the positivity of Celia and Marco's fate even when the other characters disagree:

“You think being imprisoned marvelous?”

“It’s a matter of perspective,” Widget says. “They have each other. They are confined within a space that is remarkable, one that can, and will, grow and change around them. In a way, they have the world, bound only by his imagination. . . . So yes, I think it’s marvelous.” (379)

Like the wizard, Celia and Marco gain immortality, and as Widget says their prison cell is much more “remarkable” and exotic than a tree. They may also, like the wizard, be “in a way… greater and stronger,” but that distinction means little when they are unable to use their increased power in any meaningful way.

Widget’s description of Celia and Marco’s existence within the circus is also troubling because of the assertion that “they have the world, bound only by his imagination.” Their world is bound by Marco’s imagination, not by Celia’s imagination, and not by their collective imagination. The implication here that is that even though Celia initiated the magical spell that tied them to the circus, only Marco can manipulate their space. Celia is trapped in whatever illusions Marco creates, whether positive or negative, and the distribution of power is once again unbalanced. For Celia, being tethered to the circus with Marco includes rather than eschews a distinct gender hierarchy. Because Marco’s magical skill is privileged in discussions about their life together, and because Celia’s magic is not mentioned or presumed to no longer matter, their situation may even allude to an unequal marriage—a natural progression from the pseudo-betrothal of their
childhood. This reflects, albeit perhaps coincidentally, the fact that Widget’s story about the wizard is strongly gendered both in terms of the “man triumphs over woman who oversteps her bounds” narrative and the reaction it garners, i.e. that Widget assures Poppet that imprisonment is not “that bad.”

Celia’s eventual imprisonment in the circus is far worse than the social constraints placed on her by her father and his wager. This is an imprisonment she chooses as well as one she accepts in good spirits. Celia, Marco, Widget and indeed the narrative of The Night Circus contend that Celia and Marco have gotten a happy ending. In many ways, this represents the ultimate form of containment. Celia, to once again evoke Widget’s story, uses her father’s magic against him. Even though her actions do not directly affect Hector Bowen, she is attempting to break the hold he, as her father, has on her by trying to escape the wager. She takes action to assert herself, but her reward is not freedom from social constraints, nor is it the ability to choose for herself. Instead, she ends up trapped within the circus that already symbolizes patriarchal control, with the man her father bound to her. Ultimately, Le Cirque des Rêves upholds social hierarchies, especially the male-female hierarchy, and unlike the Circus Tresauti, does not offer Celia the opportunity to successfully transgress, resist, or reshape the society that confines her.

Based on this comparison of the interaction between the magical circus and social mores in these two novels, one might assume that Mechanique is unquestionably the more “feminist” of the two. However, when considering whether or not this is true, the
setting of these novels begins to take on more importance. One novel is set in the magical – one might even say nostalgic – past, while the other is set in a mysterious, apocalyptic future, and perhaps it is significant that neither is set in “the present.” *The Night Circus* features problematic gender politics, but they are in some way excused by virtue of the explicit nineteenth-century setting. *Mechanique*, on the other hand, lacks a clear sense of chronology. Though the reader assumes a futuristic setting, the characters and events of *Mechanique* are almost completely divorced from “reality.” Were it not for the Western character names, the Circus Tresaulti could be travelling through an alien landscape or an alternate dimension with only a precursory similarity to modern-day Earth. By extension, the female-dominated, feminist space of Boss’s circus is also distanced from reality. There is a clear path between the hierarchical society of *The Night Circus* and “the present,” and only a vague sense of how “the present” connects to the world of *Mechanique*.

Even if *Mechanique* represents a possible future in which societal hierarchies are being broken down and rebuilt, the novel is not an entirely hopeful look forward. The distance placed between the Circus Tresaulti and the readers, as well as the generally negative depiction of life in *Mechanique*, complicates *Mechanique*’s status as a feminist work. The people of the Circus Tresaulti are constantly surrounded by war, poverty, and encroaching despots. The gender politics notwithstanding, the decadent whimsy of *The Night Circus* is far more appealing than a war-torn landscape, and some might find Celia’s romantic imprisonment more pleasant than the lifeless immortality of those whom Boss has given the copper bones. However, one possible interpretation of
Mechanique and its setting is that the transgressive space of the Circus Tresualti represents a fresh start for society. The Government Man and men like him, who signify the same hierarchical society that contained and imprisoned Celia, had their chance. Under their watch, society fell apart. In this reading, The Night Circus is a nostalgic glance backwards, at a circus that presents only the illusion of disorder and transgression while upholding social hierarchies. Mechanique, on the other hand, allows its readers a guarded look forward, a view of a world—and a circus—so drastically different that it only be born after a complete collapse of what came before.

Works Cited


Orloff versus Misra et al.: Assessing Feminist Approaches to Gender, the State, and the Transition to Employment Insurance in Canada

By Leslie Nichols

1. Introduction

The connection between social policy and unemployment has long been a disputed topic in Canada. Questions about how to define unemployment, whether to provide support for unemployed workers, through what mechanisms, and to what extent have been hotly debated for decades (MacDonald 2009a, 252-254). Two distinct positions, supported by two distinct ideological orientations, have been evident in these debates: a view that suggests it is society’s responsibility to support unemployed people and a view that suggests that it is generally an individual’s responsibility to find work and stay employed (MacDonald 2009a, 252-254). In 1997, Canada saw a move from the former view to the later, with a policy shift from the Unemployment Insurance Act (UI) to the Employment Insurance Act (EI) (Lin 1998, 43). The expressed motivation behind the change to EI was to reduce individuals’ reliance on the state, in keeping with neo-liberal ideology, while continuing to provide some form of “shock absorber” for times of labour market fluctuation (Lin 1998, 43).

This paper will compare and contrast two different feminist approaches to women and social policy, represented in the work of Ann Orloff and that of Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller and Michelle J. Budig, in order to better understand the impact of these changes.
in employment insurance policy on women. I will explore how each approach proposes to assess the relationship between gender and social policy, specifically EI policy, and enables us to understand the impact of this policy on women’s lives. I will begin with an exploration of Orloff’s feminist lens for welfare state analysis and apply it to an understanding of EI’s work time requirements. I will then use Joya Misra, Stepanie Moller and Michelle J. Budig’s interpretation of Nancy Fraser’s (1994) model of the four gendered welfare state strategies to examine EI and work time policies. By comparing and contrasting these two different feminist welfare state theories and applying them to an understanding of Canadian EI policy, I will able to identify what components of, and questions about EI policy still need to be addressed in order to best capture the experiences and needs of women.

2. Unemployment Insurance Policy and the Welfare State: Some General Background

The welfare state has roots in the British Poor Laws of 1601, which initiated the idea of a state run charity-based system for dealing with society’s most needy (Mulvale 2001, 11; Briggs 2006, 19). As Mulvale (2001, 11) notes, the model of the welfare state saw its greatest expansion in the several decades following the conclusion of World War Two. During this time, numerous advanced industrial countries developed a wide variety of social programs aimed to protect citizens and encourage economic growth (Mulvale 2001, 11; Briggs 2006, 19). Beginning in the 1950s in Canada, the “Keynesian welfare state” provided security for its citizens via economic and social supports (Mulvale 2001,
11) and built up its social safety net through a range of new policies, most notably unemployment insurance. But, as Patricia Evans (2010, 263) describes, during Brian Mulroney’s conservative government, from 1984 to 1993, social policies such as UI came under attack. The drive was to increase the number of hours required to access benefits and reduce the kinds and amounts of worker supports, such as re-training programs (Evans 2010, 263); these changes garnered much support from corporations and private interests (Pierson 2006, 348).

In the 1980s, the social welfare state model was restructured as a result of the dominance of “neo-liberalism”: a political ideology that argues state-run enterprises should be privatized and asserts that capitalist markets should be allowed to lead the conduct of all society (Mudge 2008, 715, 704). Under neo-liberalism, the government’s involvement in private issues is avoided at all costs and the responsibility of the individual for their own fate, including their employment situation is central (Mudge 2008, 705-706). The ascendance of neo-liberal ideologies in the 1980s and 90s guided the government’s policy shift from UI to EI, which made eligibility requirements for insurance benefits more restrictive (MacDonald 2009a, 252 - 254). This change from the Keynesian social welfare state to neo-liberalism encouraged individual independence through employment in the labour market while reducing the state’s financial risks (MacDonald 2009a, 252 - 254).

The shift from the UI Act to the EI Act in 1997 was due to a belief held by federal policy-makers, under the influence of neo-liberal ideology, that UI was too generous and that
many citizens saw it as a better option to working at full-time low wage jobs (Finkel 2006, 296). Women, especially, were seen to be taking advantage of the UI program, entering the labour market only as needed and then returning home to care for their families while they collected benefits (Finkel 2006, 296; MacDonald 2009a, 254). The changes in policy included a change in the definition of labour market attachment wherein a claimant must have contributed 180 days within the past 2 years (Lin 1998, 43). Eligibility was now based on a 35 hour week rather than the number of weeks worked (Lin 1998, 43). These changes did not support those workers who were employed on contract or with fewer hours, and clearly illustrated a change in views of who and what a worker is, how we define “unemployment” and who is responsible for the fate of unemployed workers (MacDonald 2009b, 67; Finkel 2006, 295). In addition, these policy changes targeted women specifically; women were more likely to work part-time and on contract due to the continuing demands placed on the home.

3. Orloff and Misra, Moller, Budig: Setting the Stage

As noted above, the work of Orloff and Misra et al. represent two different feminist approaches to women and social policy. Orloff is a socialist feminist scholar at Northwestern University who founded the journal, Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society. She argues that the welfare state is not only a tool needed to protect all citizens, but is something that could aid women specifically, as appropriate policies can be generated within it to address gender inequality and overthrow patriarchal hierarchies (Orloff 1996, 52). Joya Misra is a professor at
University of Massachusetts Amherst and is the editor for Gender and Society. Stephanie Moller is a professor at University of North Carolina. Michelle J. Budig is a professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst. All of these scholars explore social justice and welfare states to some degree in their work. Misra et al. (2007) also take a feminist approach to welfare state analysis; for them, the welfare state is essential in order to modify the conditions of women and their access to work. Both approaches, then, believe that feminist issues should be at the foundation of social policy and that the welfare state can work to advance social change and gender equality.

Orloff (1996) argues that traditional scholarly analyses of gender relations and the welfare state fit within two different categories: 1) work that looks at the different ways the welfare state creates and maintains the gender hierarchy in society and 2) work that attempts to address gender inequality through social policy analysis (1996, 51). According to Orloff (1996, 51), the problem with these approaches is that they do not explore all the dimensions of gender relations; they ignore cultural comparisons or changes to gender roles across history, and they do not consider the role women might play in the creation of social policy. In response to these approaches, Orloff (1996, 54 - 55) argues for exploring gender relations as they are conceptualized within the political sphere. She points out that two new approaches to gender and social policy have recently developed; the first explores the historical creation of state programs and their implications for women, and the second explores and compares the different connections between gender relations and the welfare state in various national contexts (Orloff 1996, 68). Orloff (1996, 69 - 70) notes that determining which theory of gender
relations should be used when composing policy is a difficult process, but that a feminist lens should always be employed in some way or another.

Like Orloff, Misra et al. (2007, 823, 820) also insist on the importance of putting women at the center of social policy questions and focus on the ways different conceptualizations of gender relations end up producing different kinds of policies. For instance, welfare states have factored women into the equation in different ways when devising policies to reduce poverty and increase employment. Misra et al. outline the different views about women evidenced in this variety of strategies, which include the career strategy, the career-earner strategy, the earner strategy and the choice strategy (Misra et al. 2007, 808-809). All of these policy approaches have had differing impacts on women in different social locations and include more or less support for families and mothers through different policies and programs, and each one rests on different assumptions about women and their social role (Misra et al. 2007, 812 – 815, 808-809).

4. Orloff’s Feminist Analysis of the Welfare State and Gender Relations Applied to EI Policy

As indicated above, Orloff stipulates that two approaches to social policy and gender relations have recently emerged – one looks at the historical development of social policies and the other explores the multiple connections between the welfare state and the social policy across national contexts; both emphasize the general importance of the feminist lens for all forms of analysis of the welfare state (1996, 51-52). In what follows,
I will apply these approaches to an examination of EI policy in relation to women. First, I will introduce the benefits of using a feminist lens when analysing EI policy, and then I will examine the history behind the development of EI policy and its implications for women. Next, I will explore the different connections between gender relations and the welfare state as they have developed in EI policy and determine whether another dimension can be added to feminist analysis by exploring the case of EI in terms of eligibility requirements. Finally, I will explore the strengths and weaknesses of Orloff’s approach.

a) The Benefit of the Feminist Lens

Orloff outlines feminist approaches that argue we must attend to the “gendered dimensions of variation” within and between women, including differences in cultures, nations, gender, race, and class, as a way to generate more direct and specific results in our assessment of social policies (Orloff 1996, 73). We must keep in mind that these variable positionalities can help us identify how and to what extent different aspects of gender are highlighted in social policies, and can help us to more clearly assess “the ‘woman-friendliness’ of the state” (Orloff 1996, 74). We can also identify similarities in findings about the intersection between gender issues and the state, and identify social inequalities as they might be perpetuated in policy development and implementation. These approaches ask: “How will this particular policy or practice affect people differentially? Who will benefit, who loses out and how can these inequalities be
mitigated?” (Callahan 2010, 170) This is significant because it insists that the policy-making process be modified so that it is more inclusive of different lived experiences of inequality rather than focusing on the views of those deemed ‘experts’ (Callahan 2010, 170).

As think tank literature notes, with the switch to EI, women’s connection to the labour market is put into question. Specifically, women’s caring role in the home comes to the fore as a central issue; in the policy. This caring role is structured as a liability, thereby creating a systemic gender bias (Townson and Hayes 2007, 5, 32). As Monica Townson and Kevin Hayes (2007), from the think tank, Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, argue, on the surface the changes seemed to be gender neutral, yet in truth more hours are required with EI than with UI; the shift from the number of weeks worked to the number of hours seriously disadvantages part-time workers, most of whom are women. EI policies do not take into account women’s life demands and different life cycles; rather, EI is based on an adult male breadwinner with long-term stable employment (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350 -351).

Ken Battle (2009, 2) indicates that the gender gap within society overall had increased significantly from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, when it was the smallest. In fact, after the switch to EI, less than 32 percent of women were covered by EI benefits (Torjman 2000, 21); currently one-third more men are eligible to receive EI benefits than women (Battle 2009, 2). This is clearly due to the fact that women typically carry an extra burden of responsibility. For instance, if a woman temporarily leaves the labour market
or works fewer hours in order to deal with family or child care responsibilities this can drastically reduce her earnings, which will then either reduce her EI benefits or make her ineligible (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). Also, women often take on part-time jobs in order to accommodate their work in the home, but are unable to qualify for EI benefits as a result of this part-time work (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). Here, a feminist lens allows us to see the ways in which a significant gender gap has been allowed to develop in EI policy but does not necessarily allow us to explore the differential effects of EI on women in different social locations (Orloff 1996, 73; Callahan 2010, 170).

Therefore, this evidence can lead to an argument that current policy should be changed because it does not address the needs of a large number of workers, most of who are women, who are forced to work in part-time or precarious contract work, and yet still pay into the program. This contradiction runs throughout the policy as a whole; at the same time as the neo-liberal state celebrates and defends the power of the market to reorganize work into part-time, shorter, cheaper, benefit-free contracts, it punishes workers who choose these jobs by denying them access to unemployment benefits when they are laid off or lose their jobs, encouraging them to address their needs through their families or the free market (Lewchuk 2010, 57). The workers who suffer the most from this contradiction are women. In this way, we can see current EI policy as emblematic of what Orloff (1996, 51 - 52) calls the “gendering of the welfare state regimes” (Mulvale 2001, 23). As she would contend, recent feminist approaches to social policy serve to uncover injustice in many aspects of society, but, in the end, there is no “one size fits all” solution to these issues (Callahan 2010, 170; Orloff 1996, 51-52).
i. Exploring the historical development of EI

Orloff argues that the historical analysis of social policies has helped to expose the fact that “punitive policies have [not] been forced onto women” in welfare states (1996, 56), even while some elements of the policies appear to simply reaffirm patriarchal gender roles. She argues that feminists have contributed to the creation of social policies in order to protect families and women’s choices, and that many of these policies were not necessarily designed to further marginalize women (Orloff 1996, 51, 73). In this way, Orloff agrees with Mary McIntosh’s (2006,120) claim that women are trapped in traditional gender roles in most social policy, but believes at the same time, that the state can potentially support women.

In Canada, UI developed out of the post Second World War welfare state and its drive to support workers during times of labour market fluctuation (Porter 2003, 37). The policy began in the government of McKenzie King in the 1940s as a form of commercial insurance comprised out of a fraction of the workers’ original wages (Lund 2006, 223). The policy was intended to help ensure the economic and social security of the citizens of Canada and expanded to include the majority of the working population by the 1960s (Lund 2006, 221). During this time, the program was improved so that it lined up more directly with the worker’s previous salary; it was eventually liberalized further to include sick and maternity leaves (Lund 2006, 223). The policy was originally designed to reflect the ideal of a male breadwinner, (MacDonald 2009a, 253, 252; Porter 2003, 3) and
ignored the fact that some immigrant and racialized social groups needed the women in their families to work in order to survive (Orloff 1996, 51; MacDonald 2009a, 264).

Indeed, much of the social policy that emerged during this time reflects the commonly held assumption that men were the breadwinners of the family, while women were the homemakers (Porter 2003, 3). The welfare state was positioned to take on the patriarchal role when, or if, the male head of household lost his job (Porter 2003, 37). Orloff (1996, 63) notes that most welfare state social policy is predicated on these assumptions and, as a result, is unlikely to operate in the interests of women; instead, its primary concern is with maintaining the family wage. The feminist lens allows us to see how, initially, welfare state policies had the effect of strengthening the division of labour within the home; traditional gender roles were simultaneously reinforced and reproduced during its’ development. This illustrates the ways in which state forms and gender relations are both “mutually constitutive structures and practices, which produce gender differentiation, gender inequalities and gender hierarchies in a given society” (Orloff 1996, 52).

At the time unemployment insurance was developed, women were considered to be the givers of “care, nurturance and morality” (Orloff 1996, 57). In light of this, Orloff (1996) explores the ‘maternalism’ of social policy, which focuses on women’s key role as protectors of their families, as opposed to an assessment of welfare state ‘paternalism’, which focuses on the male as breadwinner and central to the maintenance of the capitalist system. While both approaches explore the differences between the genders
and assess the issue of the family wage, they look at the “institutionalization” of connections between the state and individuals differently (Orloff 1996, 57). For example, Orloff (1996, 57) notes the ways European leaders over the years have established ‘paternalistic’ programs to keep males in the work force and have entrenched gender distinctions by stating that men are better in the trades. A focus on maternalism, however, allows us to see the ways in which women in Canadian society have generally been positioned as caregivers only, and therefore have been the “big losers” in terms of the UI/EI system and the labour market in general (McGregor 2004, 30). Even with the policy change to EI, Monica Townson notes that only 32 percent of women now qualify for benefits, as compared to 40 percent of men (2007, 36). Keeping in mind Marilyn Callahan’s (2010, 170) question of who benefits and who is neglected by a social policy, we can identify the ways social policies develop differently over time and reflect the dominant ideas of their time periods.

While MacDonald (1999, 57) claims that the recent changes in employment policy began in the 1990s, Vivekarandan locates the beginning of these policy changes in the 1980s as a result of both Liberal and Conservative governments (2002, 45), and the general consolidation of “a neo-liberal welfare state” (MacDonald 2009a, 250). During this time, we see a move away from Keynesianism, a philosophy that championed social democratic priorities, which functioned to protect workers and encourage social equity, stability and economic growth (Harvey 2005, 7-8). This move away from Keynesian principles was not only characteristic of the shift in EI policy, but also of politics and governance in general. In the 1980s, the Keynesian welfare state gives
way to the neoliberal welfare state, marking a shift away from central state planning and any kind of market regulation or labour protections (Mudge 2008, 705-706). As the focus of government support moves from individuals and groups to business interests, (Gindin and Stanford 2006, 384; Harvey 2005, 7-8) workers come to be seen as, either, resources to be exploited or barriers to be overcome. Workers under neoliberalism experience widespread wage stagnation, job deskilling, more part-time jobs, the loss of ability for job advancement, and increases in overtime hours (Scott-Marshall 2007, 22-29). With the new EI policy more hours are required for benefits, thereby privileging long term employed workers, eligibility has decreased and less money is paid out, forcing more Canadians into precarious, unstable jobs (Panitch and Swartz 2006, 384); under neoliberalism, the overall vulnerability of workers increases (Harvey 2005, 16; Pulkingham and Ternowetsky 2006, 290).

It is important to examine the ways these political economic shifts have not only reflected but also arguably produced changes in social discourses, specifically the discourse around women and work, and gender relations more generally (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). As noted above, at the time when the Unemployment Insurance Program was created, Canada was still very much under the sway of traditional gender roles (Orloff 1996, 63; Pateman 2006, 136). Thus, as Orloff contends, an analysis of ideologies expressed in social policy over time allows us to trace broader ideological shifts and changes; a feminist lens allows us to see previously hidden knowledge to expose the ways the current neoliberal agenda has had a negative impact on certain social groups (Mulvale 2001, 23; Orloff 1996, 51).
ii. Gender Relations and the Welfare State: Points of Connection in the Shift from UI to EI

Orloff also asserts that we must examine the crucial points of connection between gender and the welfare state and compare them across national contexts. She argues that not all Western countries’ versions of the welfare state see gender relations the same way and that there are many different views about gender within a single nation (Orloff 1996, 63-69). In terms of examining the switch from UI to EI, it is important to remember, as Martha MacDonald (2009b, 67) notes, that women were disadvantaged under UI as well; their attachment to the labour market was questioned because of their work in the home and the fact that they had babies.

The goal of the policy change to EI, then, was to “encourage” women’s continuous attachment to the labour market, through the doubling of hours required to become eligible (MacDonald 2009a, 254; Noble 2007/2008, 186), and, in addition, to push individual “self-sufficiency” through labour market employment (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). This can be compared to the case of Denmark, described by Orloff (1996, 63, 64). Denmark recognizes women’s double shift via a social policy that works to, both, address the caring needs of the next generation and women’s access and attachment to the labour market. Orloff (1996, 63, 64) compares Denmark to Britain, whose policy positions are similar to Canada, where women’s role in the household is prioritized and the male breadwinner model remains dominant (Pateman 2006, 136). The result is that
women’s ability to access the labour market or retain their attachment to it is minimized (Orloff 1996, 63,64). As Orloff (1996, 63-64) argues, a cross national analysis of employment policy allows us to detect many different, often contradictory underlying assumptions about the roles of gender in Canadian society and its policy initiatives. It can also inform us about possible ways we might improve social programs so that they support women trying to access the current EI policy or, potentially, reform it (MacDonald 2009b, 67; Callahan 2010, 170).

In the switch to EI we see a shift to the universal breadwinner model, in which all adults in the family are assumed to contribute to supporting the family, in contrast to the patriarchal breadwinner model that informed UI policy (MacDonald 2009a, 254). EI assumes that all workers, no matter their gender, work 35 hours a week (MacDonald 2009a, 254). Feminist welfare state literature, however, argues that women's simultaneous care giving roles and increased labour market participation, even in a now weakened labour market, create different kinds of work patterns and types of labour market attachment (MacDonald 2009b, 67); women now tend to work in a variety of types of situations, including paid, part-time, contract, and unpaid work, and they also have a different life cycle and different life demands, which have never been adequately reflected within the current policy (Noble 2007/ 2008, 186). An approach to employment through the lens of a life cycle incorporates and considers the different transitions individuals undergo within the “interrelated domains of work and education, health and family” (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 351).
b) Problems with Orloff’s Analysis

Orloff notes that recent approaches to policy suffer from “inadequate theorization of the political interest of gender and a failure to specify the dimensions of social provision and other state interventions relevant for gender relations” (Orloff 1996, 68, 69). She questions what analysts do, and do not, consider to be evidence of patriarchal rule, and whether or not they consider the ways gender identities are connected to other points of social identity such as class (Orloff 1996, 68-69). In addition, she asks who determines what constitutes “gender interests” (Orloff 1996, 69). Who decides who or what gets researched and analyzed? Whose interests are included and whose are left out as a result?

However, it is important to ask whether Orloff’s insistence on taking an historical view allows us to address all the implications of the entrenchment of the traditional gender roles in Canadian policy. Is it not also important to analyze the specifics of current issues surrounding the policy? We could also ask whether too much focus on cross-national comparisons can come at the cost of national specificity. In the case of EI in Canada, would changes to the hours required to collect EI necessarily benefit all women? Who would be permitted to be involved in the process to change the policy? Would including more working women in policy discussions have the desired effect or would it simply marginalize certain groups? If inequality is variable within and across individuals, is not it also variable over time and geography? National social policy must be universal in scope and cannot possibly take in to account all of this variability and
difference. In fact, assessing individuals’ social status as part of a complex interlocking system of oppression that addresses multiple sites of marginalization may be too complicated a task for social policy, programs, and legislation, and, therefore, may simply not be feasible.

If we were to explore these policy shifts through the lens of class and not gender, we would see more commonality between working class males and females than between women of different classes. Judy Fudge and Leah Vosko argue that there is a feminization of the labour market occurring with the loss of the standard employment model, in which all members of society have had cuts to benefits, safety and job security (Fudge and Vosko 2001, 272). This is due to the ongoing feminization of the labour market. Over the past decades, many traditional male jobs have disappeared from Canada (Krahn et al. 2008, 150); for instance, many factories have closed up and moved to Mexico and China (Krahn et al. 2008, 150). Many of the new jobs that have been created have been part-time or temporary and people of both genders have had to accept these jobs and this new state of affairs. It is not clear whether Orloff’s argument is able to accommodate a consideration of the position of men, who often occupy similar precarious labour market positions to women within this feminized labour market. Would Orloff consider this fact to be an example of gender variation in its points of connection to the labour market? In the end, should feminist social policy reforms only consider those deemed biologically women, or should it include all those who are in need and dependent on the state for support? In other words, does the feminist lens itself need to
be refocused and move beyond traditional ideas about gender, dependency and vulnerability?

5. Misra et al. and a Variety of Welfare State Work-Family Policy

Misra et al. explore the recent spate of work-family policies, which comprise new approaches to work and the family under the neo-liberal welfare state; they argue that all of these strategies illustrate a “particular gendered understanding of women’s role” (2007, 806). The policies are designed to address two distinct sets of needs; they attempt 1) to help alleviate the potential for poverty within the family, and 2) to provide women better access and attachment to the labour market. According to Misra et al. (2007, 808), some of these policies include paid and unpaid parental or family leave, caregiver allowances, and work-time policies. These initiatives can be analyzed based on Nancy Fraser’s (1994) four welfare state strategies, which include the career strategy, the earner strategy, the choice strategy, and the earner-carer strategy (Misra et al. 2007, 808). While these strategies will be compared to Orloff’s exploration of gender in relation to welfare policy regimes (1996, 69) below, both approaches argue that gender considerations should be foundational to policies that have the goal of benefiting and supporting families (Misra et al. 2007, 820). I will begin by tackling one strategy at a time, reviewing each of the strategies and then connecting them to Canadian EI policy. Following that, I will explore the problems with Misra et al.’s approach.

i. The Carer Strategy
Misra et al. (2007, 808) explain that the ‘carer strategy’ is similar to the previously held breadwinner-female caregiver model. If we read this in relation to the switch to EI, we can see that the increase in hours required is still premised on the view that men are viewed as the ones who should be working and that women’s roles are, and should be, caretaking in the home (MacDonald 2009a, 263). This policy also assumes the family wage, but assumes that the man’s wage will support the entire family (Misra et al. 2007, 808). These assumptions are present in both UI and EI policies in Canada, even though Canada is not seen to hold to a carer strategy. EI expects women to work and contribute to the family income but does not support them in their carer needs. Misra et al. note that Netherlands, Germany, and Luxembourg are carer policy focused; some of their policies include “care-giver allowances, parental leaves, and flexitime and the state encourages part-time employment as an ideal strategy for women who wish to combine employment and care” (2007, 808). They argue that these policies help encourage the further development of traditional gender roles by supporting women’s work as carers in the home and by normalizing women’s precarious attachment to the labour market via the support of flextime or part-time work (Misra et al. 2007, 808).

In this case, unemployment policy is generally aimed at men, conceived as breadwinners, similar to the assumptions behind the former UI policy in Canada; if a female loses her job, it is assumed that the male wage will support the loss or replace it. This is because traditional heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions about the roles of men and women still underlie these policies. For instance, while caring is only part of the women’s role in society, evidence suggests that they do far more than their fair
share of it, often leading to them having to leave the labour market (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). This is noted in the fact that 40 percent of women are employed in forms of non-standard work, compared to only 30 percent of men (Townson and Hayes 2007, 5-7). Misra et al. (2007, 808) note the case of Germany, for instance, where child care support by the state is poor, but high levels of support are maintained for parental leave. If Canada was to adopt these assumptions, we would move back to the breadwinner model UI policy. We could possibly include pension supports for up to ten years of child care, as they do in Germany (Misra et al. 2007, 808), but even if we did, this model does not address or modify the current problems with EI policy overall, rather it would only push us backwards and re-entrench traditional gender roles.

ii. Earner Strategy

The basis of this strategy considers labour market attachment to be equally important for both males and females and sees state support for the caring aspects of life to be unnecessary (Misra et al. 2007, 808). Canada, the United States, and United Kingdom are noted for being earner strategy countries, in which the policies are designed to help women already in the labour market, rather than addressing work-family issues (Misra et al. 2007, 808). Here, state support for caring issues of life are virtually non-existent (Misra et al. 2007, 808). While it is important to note that these policies do provide ways for women to access full time employment, as Misra et al.(2007, 808-809) note, women
must still contend with the complications of their work-family situation and these policies provide no support for them in that regard.

In the switch to EI, the assumption was that workers, no matter the gender or position in the labour market worked 35 hours a week (Townson 2007, 36). Thus, all workers contribute to EI and are able to access it when required; here we can see the earner model at work, as all workers, no matter their gender, are theoretically able to benefit from the policy (MacDonald 2009a, 252-254; MacDonald 2009b, 68). This model is premised on a view that all workers must do what they can to maintain themselves, but ignores the fact that women typically carry an extra burden of responsibility in the home and have different life cycles as a result (Cooke and Gazso 2009, 350). As noted above, women are often forced to take on temporary or part-time work due to their obligations in the home, but this fact either reduces their ability to claim EI benefits or renders them ineligible. Clearly, the earner strategy ignores caring work in the home, does not take into account different gendered life cycles, and supports market forms of caring for children. As Orloff points out, Canadian women have what she terms, “body rights”; for example, they have legal rights to abortion, but do not have the “social rights” to “help ... provide the services” needed to support their legal rights (1996, 68).

iii. Choice Strategy

The choice strategy emphasizes the importance of women as, both, caregivers and as workers, and assumes that they should be able to choose between these roles (Misra et
al. 2007, 809). France and Belgium both endorse this model and provide a mix of policies in order to give women choice between employment and work in the home (Misra et al. 2007, 809). These policies recognize women’s need, both, for full time employment and time for care giving, particularly when their children are young (Misra et al. 2007, 809). They emphasize women’s care-giving specifically, and do not tend to encourage the equal involvement of men in care giving roles or challenge assumed gender roles in society overall (Misra et al. 2007). In France, for example, women are the beneficiaries of “generous parental leave” as well as a childcare allowance for children under two years of age (Misra et al. 2007, 809).

If Canada were to follow this model, the unemployment insurance regime would remain relatively unchanged, but women would feel more supported in their caring work. We could look towards the Quebec model of state supported child care for an example of what this would look like; there, the choice policy has also worked to increase the amount of labour market participation by women (Lefebvre and Merrigan 2008, 491). In this view, both genders are considered potential breadwinners, similar to the current belief of universal breadwinner that under pins the EI system in Canada (Misra et al. 2007, 809; MacDonald 2009a, 254). There are still strategic issues within this model, as, Canada would have to revamp and introduce new social policies to make it happen, such as a national childcare policy or better and more generous parental leaves.

iv. Earner-Carer Strategy
The earner-carer strategy incorporates a new view of gender relations, in which both genders, male and female, are involved in care giving and employment needs (Misra et al. 2007, 809). Sweden, Norway, and Finland, all endorse this view and provide strong publicly funded child care, as well a generous parental leaves, which both parents are encourage to take (Misra et al. 2007, 809). As well, employers are required to modify their practices to accommodate the needs of parents and their caring work, by “providing them with a shorter workweeks and employment-enabling services” (Misra et al. 2007, 809). These types of policies represent a move towards blending traditional gender roles and can be seen as a way to achieve gender equality (Misra et al. 2007, 809).

In terms of unemployment policy in Canada, current EI policy and its assumption of the universal breadwinner and role of caring should be able to distribute the responsibilities of caring to both genders. Women should not be the only gender forced to deal with tensions between their families and their work and should be supported in both roles, as should men. This model would allow more equal distribution of the work and caring needs within Canadian society. While instituting this model would require new and revamped social policies, the benefits to society as a whole would be large, as it would help to ameliorate poverty and increase female access to, and retention in the labour market. As Misra et al. (2007, 809) note, this policy strategy promises the best results for women, particularly single mothers.

a) Problems with Misra et al.’s Analysis
While Misra et al.’s (2007) approach reinforces the idea of putting women at the base of social policy creation and demonstrates how different policies impact, involve, and implicate women in different ways across their different social positions, it does have limitations. Here, similar to Orloff’s work, there is a lack of an analysis of power distribution within policies and their projected results. While both approaches examine the effects of policies on women, I would ask them to analyze who has the power to change these policy assumptions. Will those already in advantageous positions in society not just continue to represent their own interests in policy creation? In terms of EI, who are the women complaining about the issues? Who will have the time to actively lobby to change them (Callahan 2010, 170)?

Misra et al.’s template also seems somewhat limited; what about countries that might fit into two of the strategies she outlines? Canada, for example, could arguably fit into either the carer strategy or the earner strategy. Even though EI policy states it is gender neutral, this is not the case. Rather, there remain biases and contradictions against women who do break stereotypical gender roles, for instance through the 35 hour work week requirement, and those who maintain their caring role by leaving the labour market to rear children or care for the elderly (MacDonald 2009a, 252-254). It could also be argued that the Canadian welfare state may be trying to enact an earner- career strategy, via its adoption of the idea of the universal breadwinner and so does not feel it needs to do anything more to improve women’s work situation. The issue of clearly categorizing different welfare states is also problematic; as Orloff (1996, 51-52), notes,
these categorizations inevitably ignore crucial issues. Here some more historical analysis would useful, as it allows us to track the conceptual models that have informed policy changes and can help us to strategize about how and what needs to change for individuals in need of employment support in the future.

6. Assessment of the Two Socialist Feminist Approaches

Both Orloff (1996) and Misra et al. (2007) have different approaches to understanding social policy and its relation to gender issues. Misra et al. (2007, 820) outline how different ideas about gender relations end up producing different kinds of policies. When devising policies to reduce poverty, for instance, different states have factored women into the equation differently (Misra et al. 2007, 808-809). The four different policy approaches Misra identifies have had differing impacts on women in different social locations and include more or less support for families and mothers (Misra et al. 2007, 812-815, 808-809). Orloff (1996, 51) argues for exploring the historical development of state programs and their implications for women, and analyzing and comparing the different connections that have been posited between gender relations and the welfare state through a feminist lens. Both of these socialist feminist approaches help to further our understanding of the gendered assumptions and implications in our current social policies.

In relation to EI specifically, Orloff’s (1996, 51) feminist lens is useful, but further development is required. Fruitful questions that should be asked include: whose ideas
and values informed the creation of the UI policy? And, whose values and assumptions
informed the switch to EI? Given the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of the welfare
state, we should interrogate whether the rigid ideological views of bureaucrats and
politicians have come to outweigh the voices and rights of those most marginalized in
society. Orloff’s perspective does not adequately allow us to get at these questions.

While both feminist approaches reviewed here assume the power of patriarchy,
they fail to substantially trace how this power operates and how it changes. For
instance, which women within our society have the ability to choose a part-time job in
order to spend more time raising their children? Or, who in society is regularly forced to
work over 35 hours a week, often in multiple jobs, to support their families? Or, more
pointedly, who is deemed marginal in society and how do we define gender? How do
we best develop policy for citizens as a whole, and how do we determine which social
groups need programs especially targeted to them? In addition, how do we address the
“hyphenated” (Hobson 2000, 241) social identities such as race, gender and class as
well as the complex relations that occur within them? As Joan Acker (2000) notes, for
feminists, it is often easier to conceptualize issues of power than to conduct research
into them due to “fractal-like patterns of never-ending complexity and
fragmentation” (cited in Hobson 2000, 241) inherent in lived social identities.

Michel Foucault (1990, 99) argues that power is fluid and it transforms and changes
depending on its historical and sociological context. This fluidity of power, in turn,
produces multiple systems of oppression, which comprise what Gayle Letherby (2003,
46, 47) describes as a systemic framework of subjugation; different people are
differently located in these systems and some have more privilege then others. In this case, some individuals have more of an ability to pose questions and problems in relation to EI than others. In the end, intersectional analysis of the “multiple and contradictory intersections of gender, race and class”, which works “to develop fuller considerations of power relations flowing from them” (Vosko 2002, 65, 67), allows us to deconstruct how citizenship is framed and defined in ways that can seriously limit the kinds of unemployment policies that get written and implemented.

I believe on the basis of Orloff and Misra et al work, that we have a social responsibility to address the needs of unemployed workers and the issues of power that surround their ability to access state support; society is riddled with social inequalities and not everyone has equal access to the labour market or to their constitutionally guaranteed rights to access state support as a citizen. Jamie Peck (1996, 46, 51) argues that the labour market itself is a social construct in which broader social issues and identities are sedimented, fought over, and played out. This occurs specifically in the construction of a primary and secondary labour market based on social beliefs and ascribed social characteristics. The primary sector includes skilled jobs, higher income, secure employment, as well as the possibility for promotion, and is often characterized by white male privilege (Peck 1996, 51; Krahn et al. 2008, 136-137). The secondary sector includes less skilled or desirable jobs, poor wages and working conditions, and insecurity (Peck 1996, 51; Krahn et al. 2008, 136-137). Often the individuals within the secondary sector are minorities, women, youth, and disabled people, however this is currently expanding to include other groups (Peck 1996, 51; Krahn et al. 2008, 136-
Labour market segmentation theory highlights the ways the labour market is tiered, whereby employers divide workers against each other in order to control the mode of production (Peck 1996, 51, 53). Those individuals within the secondary labour market do not qualify for unemployment benefits. Thus, we can see that labour market segmentation actively contributes to social inequality, rather than ameliorating it (Peck 1996, 51, 53); it is this labour market segmentation and the power relations it expresses and reinforces that feminist approaches, such as the ones described above, must address more closely in their analysis.

Feminist social policy analysis, then, when addressing issues of EI for example, must work to determine how difficult policy decisions can be made amongst a more nuanced and complex understanding of the wide variety of needs and demands of society. It also must confront the fact that this might involve posing alternative terms and definitions of the foundational terms of debate (Vosko 2002, 65, 67); feminist analysts also must work to challenge the very grounds upon which the issue of EI is framed and understood. While feminist social policy analysis is much more inclusive than traditional policy analysis as a result of its use of the feminist lens (Orloff 1996, 51; Callahan 2010, 170), it must work harder to bring intersectional analysis to the foreground. This would involve conducting research that actively attempts to hear from as many people as possible across the social spectrum and include demands new forms of research practice (Weber 2007, 674; Vosko 2002, 65, 67). In order to critically engage in policy creation, we need to examine what is counted as data and who is counted (Weber 2007, 674).
7. Conclusions

Misra et al. (2007, 808-809) allow us to see how different policies conceive of women differently, and how these conceptions end up affecting real women’s lives. An analysis of Orloff (1996, 51-52) allows us to see the importance of the use of the feminist lens, of a broad evaluation of the variety of ideas about women and their relations to the welfare state, in addition to an historical analysis of where the policy came from and why. As Malcolm Payne (2005, 10) notes, it is also important to remember that policy-makers, bureaucrats and politicians often have motives that are not entirely apparent to the public and may run counter to the public’s interests. So, questioning how power is wielded, who gets to speak about issues, who gets to define their importance and, most importantly, who writes the policies to address them is also strategically important when evaluating any social policy, including EI (Vosko 2002, 65, 67). In sum, we need to assert a “feminist presence in all the places where changes in social policy are fought for” (McIntsoh 2006, 130). Clearly, both Orloff and Misra et al. have contributed much to this effort and have greatly enhanced the analysis of gender, social policy, and the state. In the end, however, all feminist analysts need to theorize, explore, and assess issues of power and gender interests more fully.
Bibliography


Patchwork Quilt: The Development of Social Policy in Canada, (pp. 263-274).

Toronto: University of Toronto Press.


Political Theory, 22 (4), 591 – 618.


Reviewed by Heather Saunders, Nipissing University, MLIS, MA (Art History)

Helène Aylon, now 81 years old, decided to be an artist at age thirteen but she was discouraged from attending the Music and Art High School in Manhattan. The reason—it might make her late for the Hebrew high school for girls in Brooklyn, where her Orthodox Jewish family lived. She was dissatisfied with her parents’ compromise of a correspondence course in art, and it was not until she was married that she pursued her passion. Even then, when she enrolled in Brooklyn College, majoring in art, it was under a pseudonym to avoid shaming the family name of her rabbi husband. When she was 30, he died, and she was liberated, but it was another five years before she had her first exhibition. In her prolific career, she interacted with important Jewish artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Mierle Ukeles, and she embraced feminism, ecofeminism, and anti-war activism. She balanced the burden of being an artist and a mother, and later, the burden of being a feminist and an academic.

The artist’s memoir, *Whatever is Contained Must be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist* was published in June on the heels of books on Jewish artists Gertrude Sandmann, Judy Chicago, and Lee
Krasner. Although Aylon has been included in literature on Jewish artists, such as a chapter in Matthew Baigell’s *American Artists, Jewish Images* (Syracuse University Press, 2006), this is the first monograph on her.

*Whatever is Contained Must be Released* describes Aylon’s dual identity that she kept secret until she was 60 years old. This fraught relationship with her Jewishness extends back to her childhood, when she mumbled her prayers but approached her father with pride to get his approval of her homework for Hebrew studies. As the new bride of a rabbi, she had “prayed to believe” (98) but ultimately it was feminism that was her salvation. When she became a widow, she moved away from religion slowly and began to see it objectively. Still, the traditions haunted her, bringing tears to her eyes when she revisited them. Even at the time of writing this book, she could not separate her former religious and cultural identity from her artistic identity, evident in her impulse to write the Hebrew letters for B and H—traditional inclusions at the start of correspondence—in grant proposals.

Aylon admits that her memoir “read[s] like Judaism 101” (286), but this focus may be inevitable for someone so entrenched in the religion that she claims to have “J-dar” (17), the ability to differentiate between Orthodox and secular Jews. Navigating her vivid portrayal of domestic life can be challenging for readers unfamiliar with Judaism, as not all of the Hebrew terms are translated, requiring the reader to discern their meaning from context. Thus, her direct writing style is
appreciated. For example, of being in a coma for 20 days, she writes, “…it wasn’t bad” (271).

Scholars of the intersection between religion and feminism will appreciate Aylon’s candid critique of Orthodox Judaism, as she cites numerous examples of gender bias. A firstborn child, if it is a girl, is not considered such, and the morning prayer that boys recite gives thanks for not being made female. The virginity (i.e., honor) of a little girl is jeopardized in the case of incest; a woman is sexually ‘permitted’ to her husband; and a woman is considered unclean when she is menstruating, to the extent that she cannot embrace her bed-ridden husband. A widowed woman is no longer allowed to kiss the Torah when it circulated but she can expect to continue to receive mail in her married name even if she changes her name. In describing these situations, Aylon implores the reader for sympathy. For example, between relaying stories of being separated from boys by her mother for fear of her virginity being lost, she writes, “As if that’s not enough, hear this.” (83).

Aylon provides irreverent descriptions of the members of her family tree, with no personality quirk overlooked amongst her ancestors or the relatives she grew up knowing. When it comes to the nuclear family she formed, though, the book does not tell the gensa meisa (whole story); she’s fairly tight-lipped about her relations with her husband and her children. The relationship that is explored most is that with her mother, for whom she started writing the book before her death at age
It's a touching gesture in light of the tension in their relationship: Aylon would place her mother’s fork upside down on an otherwise perfectly arranged table, and her mother refused to hug Aylon at her son’s wedding because she disliked her outfit. She writes that at an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, she felt like a schoolgirl trying to justify her work to her mother. Ultimately, Aylon won the pride of her mother and Aylon admitted to striving to be more like her mother as an artist.

Whatever is Contained Must be Released is a useful complement to Lisa E. Bloom’s Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity (Routledge, 2006), which argues that Second Wave feminist artists erased their Jewishness to emphasize their gender in a collective movement. Aylon is an interesting case in keeping her identity secret for so long but ultimately using it as subject matter. In this generously illustrated publication, the reader is privy to the clear connection between Aylon’s past and her artwork. She has worked extensively with text, combining images with dogmatic passages such as, “That man shall rule over woman” (The Women’s Section, 1997). She also inserted pink slashes throughout the Bible where the female presence was excluded and struck through negative—namely misogynistic—words. Aylon has staged equally radical performances, like a four-week project in which Jewish and Arab women came together for the simple act of gathering stones and carrying them in sacs to archways. Aylon’s art and life are inspiring in equal measure.
About the Contributors:

Breanne Fahs
Breanne Fahs is an Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University. She has published widely on women's sexual subjectivities, cultural narratives of women's bodies, radical feminism, and political activism in journals like Feminist Studies, Gender & Society, Archives of Sexual Behavior, and Sexualities, and also has a book, Performing Sex, with SUNY Press (2011). She is also a private practice clinical psychologist specializing in sexuality, gender identity, and trauma.

Lori Beth De Hertogh
Lori Beth De Hertogh is an instructor in the Department of English at Appalachian State University. She currently serves as the Assistant Director of Composition & as a Digital Media Consultant for the Writing Across the Curriculum Program. In the fall of 2012, Lori Beth will begin a Ph.D. in Rhetoric & Composition at Washington State University.

Michelle Gohr
Michelle A. Gohr received a B.S. in both life sciences and women and gender studies from Arizona State University. She is a graduate student in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and plans to specialize in evolutionary biology. Her research interests include women’s status in online communities and video games, women’s participation in sciences, and cultural constructions of the “vagina dentata” and other abject gendered spaces.

Jade McKay
Dr Jade McKay is a Research Fellow at the Higher Education Research Group at Deakin University, Australia. She has taught in Literary Studies for seven years and her research draws on feminist theory to interrogate gender political representations of women in western culture.
Leslie Nichols

Leslie Nichols is a PhD student in the Policy Studies department at Ryerson University. She holds a Master of Arts in Work and Society from McMaster University. As well, she holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) with distinction in Women and Gender Studies and Historical Studies from the University of Toronto.

Heather Saunders

Heather Saunders, MLIS, MA (Art History) is Manager of Reference and Information Services at Nipissing University (North Bay, Canada). She has also worked at FUSE magazine and at commercial, artist-run, campus, and public galleries, including the National Gallery of Canada. She writes the feminist art blog, Artist in Transit.

Zara T. Wilkinson

Zara T. Wilkinson is a reference librarian in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She holds a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Pittsburgh and a Master of Arts in Literature from West Chester University.

Peiling Zhao

Dr. Peiling Zhao earned her doctoral degree in Rhetoric and Composition from University of South Florida in 2005 and taught feminism rhetorics and writing theories at Milkin university for several years. She is currently teaching English at Central South University in China. Her published scholarship ranges widely from feminist rhetoric to feminist pedagogy, from writing program development to emotions.