

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

---

2008

## Beyond Postmodern Margins: Theorizing Postfeminist Consequences Through Popular Female Representation

Victoria Mosher  
*University of Central Florida*

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Mosher, Victoria, "Beyond Postmodern Margins: Theorizing Postfeminist Consequences Through Popular Female Representation" (2008). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 3605.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/3605>

BEYOND POSTMODERN MARGINS:  
THEORIZING POSTFEMINIST CONSEQUENCES  
THROUGH POPULAR FEMALE REPRESENTATION

by

VICTORIA MOSHER  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2008

©2008 Victoria Mosher

## ABSTRACT

In 1988, Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser published an article entitled “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” arguing that this essay would provide a jumping point for discussion between feminisms and postmodernisms within academia. Within this essay, Nicholson and Fraser largely disavow a number of second wave feminist theories due to their essentialist and foundationalist underpinnings in favor of a set of postmodernist frameworks that might help feminist theorists overcome these epistemological impediments. A “postmodern feminism,” Nicholson and Fraser claim, would become “the theoretical counterpart of a broader, richer, more complex, and multilayered solidarity, the sort of solidarity which is essential for overcoming the oppression of women” (35).

Interpreting “Social Criticism” through a feminist cultural studies model in which texts are understood to be simultaneously constituted by and reflective of their own sociopolitical spaces, I argue that the construction of Nicholson and Fraser’s “postmodern feminism” is, first and foremost, neither a postmodernist critique nor a means of overcoming the pitfalls of essentialism and foundationalism. Instead, the construction of this theoretical paradigm can be shown to be complicit with postfeminist discourses, wherein an implicitly patriarchal discourse of postmodernism is called upon to repair the deficiencies of feminisms, deficiencies that postmodernisms, in some ways, helped to bring into view. To provide a conceptual backing for these claims, I move toward an examination of mass culture, surveying the similarities between “Social Criticism” and the film *What Women Want*. Such a comparison, I suggest, facilitates a better understanding of how “Social Criticism” can be shown to be imbedded in a postfeminist

narrative structure in which feminisms are relegated to a discursively subordinate gendered position in relation to postmodernisms.

Finally, in what I find to be the most important aspect of this thesis' inquiry, I ask what it means to build a "broader, richer, more complex, and multilayered solidarity" by disavowing second wave feminisms in favor of postmodernisms. I conclude that, in using postmodernisms as a panacea for feminist theories, Nicholson and Fraser curtail what might have been a rigorous interrogation of and direct engagement with second wave feminist theories that would also attend to the phallogocentric underpinnings of postmodern theories. To underline the potential consequences, I turn to a set of televisual and filmic texts including *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* to gauge what their "postmodern feminism" might represent in practice rather than what it entails as philosophy. This juxtaposition of these two differently defined and yet overwhelmingly similar postmodern feminisms, I propose, underscores the potential that Nicholson and Fraser may have instituted a postmodern feminist methodology in which it is possible that feminisms might emerge not as discourses essential for "overcoming the oppression of women" but rather as discourses that can be critiqued into oblivion.

For my grandfather Lester Hughes –an inspiring model of social responsibility who taught me to be compassionate and humble in regard to all humankind and to never expect more for myself than I could give to others – and for my daughter Maya – my greatest source of inspiration and strength who I hope to similarly inspire as she comes into her own strong voice and her own unparalleled sense of social justice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since my work on this project spans nearly seven years (back into my undergrad days), I could not possibly sufficiently acknowledge the people who have played a role in shaping my academic progress and in stimulating a deeper intellectual engagement with the subjects addressed herein. Nonetheless, I would like express my gratitude to a few exceptional people who have either read my work or engaged in moving discussions about these ideas, some of whom did so into the early morning hours. First and foremost, I would like to extend my thanks to Tony Grajeda, Anna Jones, Adenike Davidson, Ernest Smith, and the members of my thesis committee, each of whom played a substantial, though different role in arousing my interest in a wide array of critical theories and inspiring my start as an “academic.” I would like to thank my committee for their willingness to support a project that required them to comment upon many more pages than is usual for a master’s thesis and for their awareness to the fact that this project meant much more to me than a degree, an awareness made evident through their investment in my work. I would not have chosen these committee members if I had not thought that they would challenge me to think beyond the boundaries of the text produced. I am indebted to them for their dedication, encouragement, and “tough love.”

In particular, I would like to James Campbell for his unparalleled ability to articulate (and so eloquently) the complex thoughts that I tried to sift through in our discussions and for the confidence he conveyed in my ability to complete this project while discovering myself as a new mother. His willingness to expand the boundaries of “literature” and allow me to compose papers on film in his undergraduate courses marked my first engagements with film theory and cultural studies. I would like to thank Kevin Meehan for his shared commitment to social justice and for introducing me to the radical films and theories of Third Cinema. My engagement with these

texts raised new questions regarding American mass culture and has furthered my own social responsibility in struggling to understand how the ideological constructs therein might be disrupted and dismantled. I owe my deepest appreciation to Claudia Schippert, an extraordinary mentor and friend, for criticizing me from beginning to end and for keeping me in tune with the effort it takes to evaluate the vast nuances of all texts, experiences, and modes of subjectivity. The implicit ethics of critical thought that she imparted to me will remain forever invaluable to me. I thank her most of all for pushing me to explore the motivations behind this project as well as how my experiences in writing this thesis might shape my future commitments.

I would like to thank my friend Jen Snow for the relevance she perceived in my ideas and for giving me the confidence to see my subject position and view of my social surroundings as shared. I would like to express my warmest admiration and appreciation for my indispensable partner and friend Tony, for his integrity and insights, for his wit and compassion, for the years of thought-provoking conversations, and for the refuge that our life together has created. His endless support of my many subject positions was a great source of strength in this endeavor.

Finally, I am beholden to the women in my family, from my great-grandmothers to their daughters to their daughters' grand-daughters, each of whom revealed to me, though perhaps unknowingly, the pervasiveness and endless varieties of sexism, classism, racism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism within American society and culture. Although resilient, each of them had no outlet for her voice, like my great-grandmothers Ivey Spilliard who was dragged from her home to undergo "shock therapy" for a "psychosis" that should have been diagnosed as postpartum depression and Cora Penton who had the strength to "mother" six children through The Great Depression. These women may not have found a voice to speak about their unimaginably oppressive circumstances, but they daringly encouraged me to find and inhabit mine.



Patriarchal Poetry is the same.

If in a crossing there is a if in a crossing if in in crossing nearly there is a distance if in crossing there is a distance between the measurement and exact if in in crossing if in in crossing there is a measurement between and in in exact she says I must be careful and I will

Never to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Not to let her to be what he said not to let her to be what he said.

Never to be let her to be never let her to be what he said. Never

These  
faction ma  
mean to be  
very kind

It is  
she said th  
tance them

Rearr  
a rearrange  
As a rearra

As a  
So ca  
which is w

Let h  
her to be le

Let h  
Let h  
Let h  
Never  
Never

let her

nearly  
wet in-  
nearly  
medium  
but in-  
This

I know  
w what  
e her to  
e who  
dfather  
and then  
know  
e to be  
as right

Poetry"

Theo

ation!

I cannot sp  
I speak wh  
literary crit  
of woman  
the word "r  
that provid  
corner of th  
establishme  
might say a  
word "wom  
man" is a r  
I not carve  
definition f

constructive  
decade that  
ous  
mately  
s to, one  
he  
elf.  
ivist," I  
of  
that  
order to keep  
a stand. The  
elf

making definitions is in a provisional and polemical one. I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. "Man" is such a word in common usage. Not a word, but *the* word. I therefore fix my glance upon this word even as I question the enterprise of redefining the premises of any theory.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*

Patriarchal Poetry is the same.

If in a crossing there is a if in a crossing if in in crossing there is a distance if in crossing there is a distance between the me ment and exact if in in crossing if in in crossing there is a me ment between and in in exact she says I must be careful and I will.

[...]

These words containing as they do neither reproaches nor faction may be finally very nearly rearranged and why, because mean to be partly left alone. Patriarchal poetry and kindly, it would very kind in him in him of him to be as much obliged as

[...]

It is very trying to have him have it have it have him. Have she said the last was very very much and very much to distance t tance them.

[...]

Rearrangement is a rearrangement a rearrangement is widely k a rearrangement is widely known. A rearrangement is widely known As a rearrangement is widely known.

As a rearrangement is widely known.

So can a rearrangement which is widely known be a rearrang which is widely known which is widely known.

Let her be to be to be to be to be to be let her be to be to be to be to be to be when is it that they are shy.

[...]

Let her let her try to be let her try

Let her try.

Let her try.

Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Not to let her to be what he said not to let her to be what he said.

Never to be let her to be never let her to be what he said. Never

to be what he said.

Never to let her be what he said. Never to let her to be let her

let her to be let her what he said.

Near near near nearly pink near pink nearly near near nearly

Wet inside and pink outside. Pink outside and wet inside wet in-

and pink outside latterly nearly near near pink near near nearly

three pink two gentle one strong three pink all medium medium

medium as medium sized as sized. One as not mistaken but in-

pted. One regularly better adapted if readily readily to-day. This

s this readily.

[...]

Make it a mistake

Patriarchal she said what is it I know what it is it is I know I know

at I know what it is I know so I know so I know so I know what

Very slowly, I know what it is it is on the one side a to be her to

is to be their to be in and to be I know what it is he who

a known not known was he was at first it was the grandfather

it was not that in that the father not of that grandfather and then

to be to be sure to be I know to be sure to be I know

sure to be not as good as that. To be sure not to be sure to be

correctly saying to be sure to be that. It was that. She was right

s that.

Patriarchal Poetry

Gertrude Stein, "Patriarchal Poetry"

It is in writing, from woman toward woman, a phallus, that woman will affirm woman somewhat the Symbolic. May she get out of booby trapped her domain.

the challenge of the discourse controlled by the ence, the place reserved for her in and through have the margin or the harem foisted on her as

Hélène Cixous

I cannot speak of feminism in general.

I speak what I do as a woman within

literary criticism. My own definition

of woman is very simple: it rests on

the word "man" as used in the texts

that provide the foundation for the

corner of the literary criticism

establishment that I inhabit. You

might say at this point, defining the

word "woman" as resting on the word

"man" is a reactionary position. Should

I not carve out an independent

definition for myself as a woman?

making definitions is in a provisional and polem woman's putative essence but in terms of word Not a word, but the word. I therefore fix my glar redefining the premises of any theory.

ect my definition as a woman not in terms of

"Man" is such a word in common usage.

ed even as I question the enterprise of

Here I must repeat some deconstructive

lessons learned over the past decade that

I often repeat. One, no rigorous

definition of anything is ultimately

possible, so that if one wants to, one

could go on deconstructing the

opposition that displaces itself.

Therefore, "as a deconstructivist," I

cannot recommend that kind of

dichotomy at all, yet, I feel that

definitions are necessary in order to keep

us going, to allow us to take a stand. The

only way that I can see myself

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*

Patriarchal Poetry is the same.

If in a crossing there is a if in a crossing if in in crossing nearly there is a distance if in crossing there is a distance between the measurement and exact if in in crossing if in in crossing there is a measurement between and in in exact she says I must be careful and I will.

[...]

These words containing as they do neither reproaches nor satisfaction may be finally very nearly rearranged and why, because they mean to be partly left alone. Patriarchal poetry and kindly, it would be very kind in him in him of him to be as much obliged as that.

[...]

It is very trying to have him have it have it have him. Have it as she said the last was very very much and very much to distance to distance them.

[...]

Rearrangement is a rearrangement a rearrangement is widely known a rearrangement is widely known. A rearrangement is widely known. As a rearrangement is widely known.

As a rearrangement is widely known.

So can a rearrangement which is widely known be a rearrangement which is widely known which is widely known.

Let her be to be to be to be to be let her be to be to be to be let her to be let her to be to be when is it that they are shy.

[...]

Let her let her try to be let her try

Let her try.

Let her try.

Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Let her to be what he said.

Not to let her to be what he said not to let her to be what he said.

Never to be let her to be never let her to be what he said. Never

let her to be what he said.

Never to let her be what he said. Never to let her to be let her to be let her to be let her what he said.

Near near near nearly pink near pink nearly near near nearly pink. Wet inside and pink outside. Pink outside and wet inside wet inside and pink outside latterly nearly near near pink near near nearly three three pink two gentle one strong three pink all medium medium as medium as medium sized as sized. One as not mistaken but interrupted. One regularly better adapted if readily readily to-day. This is this this readily.

[...]

Make it a mistake

Patriarchal she said what is it I know what it is it is I know I know so that I know what it is I know so I know so I know so I know what it is. Very slowly. I know what it is it is on the one side a to be her to be his to be their to be in and to be I know what it is he who was a known not known was he was at first it was the grandfather then it was not that in that the father not of that grandfather and then she to be to be sure to be I know to be sure to be I know to be sure to be not as good as that. To be sure not to be sure to be sure correctly saying to be sure to be that. It was that. She was right it was that.

Patriarchal Poetry

Gertrude Stein, "Patriarchal Poetry"

## Beyond Postmodern Margins: Theorizing Postfeminist Consequences through Popular Female Representation<sup>1</sup>

It is in writing, from woman toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus, that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than silence, the place reserved for her in and through the Symbolic. May she get out of booby trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harem foisted on her as her domain.

Hélène Cixous

I cannot speak of feminism in general. I speak what I do as a woman within literary criticism. My own definition of woman is very simple: it rests on the word "man" as used in the texts that provide the foundation for the corner of the literary criticism establishment that I inhabit. You might say at this point, defining the word "woman" as resting on the word "man" is a reactionary position. Should I not carve out an independent definition for myself as a woman?

making definitions is in a provisional and polemical one: I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. "Man" is such a word in common usage. Not *a* word, but *the* word. I therefore fix my glance upon this word even as I question the enterprise of redefining the premises of any theory.

Here I must repeat some deconstructive lessons learned over the past decade that I often repeat. One, no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible, so that if one wants to, one could go on deconstructing the opposition that displaces itself. Therefore, "as a deconstructivist," I cannot recommend that kind of dichotomy at all, yet, I feel that definitions are necessary in order to keep us going, to allow us to take a stand. The only way that I can see myself

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE: BETWEEN MARGIN AND CENTER .....	1
INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF POSTMODERNISMS .....	5
The Question of <i>Postmodernism</i> .....	9
A Risky Move: From Postmodernisms to American Mass Culture .....	15
CHAPTER ONE: <i>POSTMODERN FEMINISM</i> : THE METANARRATIVE OF LINDA NICHOLSON AND NANCY FRASER’S “SOCIAL CRITICISM WITHOUT PHILOSOPHY” .....	21
The Encounter: A Discursive Analysis of “Social Criticism” .....	23
Nicholson and Fraser’s Thoroughly <i>Postmodern Feminism</i> : An Explication of Initial Concerns .....	26
Postmodernisms’ Archetype: Jean-François Lyotard as a Modern Sign .....	31
Terminological Squibbles: The Delegitimation of Voice within Nicholson and Fraser’s <i>Postmodern Feminism</i> .....	35
Already Postmodern Feminisms: A Rejection of Nicholson and Fraser’s Categorical Assessment of Feminism in “Social Criticism” .....	38
<i>Postmodern Feminism</i> : A Modern Discourse.....	40
Voices of Dissent: The Structure of Nicholson’s Edited Collections <i>Feminism/Postmodernism</i> and <i>Feminist Contentions</i> and Subsequent Responses .....	49
The Embeddedness of Assumption within a Specific Historical Context .....	54
CHAPTER TWO: WRITING <i>POSTMODERN FEMINISM</i> INTO POSTFEMINIST NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: A CONSIDERATION OF “SOCIAL CRITICISM’S” DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH POSTFEMINIST DISCOURSES THROUGH A COMPARISON TO THE FILM <i>WHAT WOMEN WANT</i> .....	59
Postfeminism: The Historicity of the Term .....	68
Restructured Hierarchies and Postmodern Flux .....	75
Postfeminism and Male Subjective Crises.....	81
Writing Feminisms into Gendered Subordination .....	93
CHAPTER THREE: FORGETTING LYOTARD: INVESTIGATING <i>POSTMODERN FEMINISM</i> IN PRACTICE IN POSTMODERN, POSTFEMINIST AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS	110
An Enigmatic Term: The Vulgarization of the Term “Postmodernism” within Popular American Consciousness and Its Consequences.....	115
Tone, Intertextuality, and Discursive Implosion: The Construction of Women-Centered, Postmodernist, Postfeminist Texts around the Turn of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century .....	141
Female Voiceovers, Voiceoffs, and Uncontrollable Speech: The Authoring of Feminisms in Postmodern, Postfeminist Audiovisual Texts .....	154
The Discursive “I”: Questions and Definitions of Femininity and Feminisms .....	179
AFTERWORD: POSTMODERN FEMINISMS AND THE ROLE OF THE EXPONENTIALLY “OTHERED” FEMALE SUBJECT .....	188
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	195

## PREFACE: BETWEEN MARGIN AND CENTER

This thesis emerges from within, from some distinct part of the mind that is finally capable of understanding only some of the current contradictions within feminist articulations and surrounding the term “feminism” in general. It flows from a concern, personal and political in origin, over perceived stagnancy assigned to feminisms by backlash politics, created by a somewhat paralyzing culture that preaches individualism, agency, and equality to girls and women, while always holding those ideals a little beyond the arm’s reach.

Most specifically, this thesis erupts from an infernal frustration with three subjective experiences that shape my interpretation of the contradictions related to feminist-inflected speech and the social definition of feminisms in general: first, being taught from birth that I was a feminist, inheriting an equal world and the potential to inhabit that world in any way I desired; second, learning, through literary and feminist analysis, that the cultural representations I have been taught to interpret as representing gender equality and female agency were more one-sided than equal and promoted male satisfaction rather than female achievement; and third, finding, after penetrating feminist theory from inception to the present moment, that no theoretical perspective thus far offered me a means of articulating the immeasurable cultural divide that I had encountered – between academic feminisms, avant-garde feminist texts, radical feminist activism, and versions of feminisms portrayed within American mainstream mass media – much less the subjective splitting that occurred somewhere along the way.

This thesis, then, is my attempt to speak about and from what has become another unspeakable position – occupying a feminist subject position in a society that largely considers itself to be “postfeminist” or “beyond feminism.” To accomplish this, which perhaps can only be done by speaking through existing discourses, I juxtapose a series of women-centered, mass

culture texts alongside postfeminist and postmodern feminist theories, and interrogate their interconnectivity, realizing at the same time that these discourses do not necessarily maintain that connectivity beyond my own critical articulation. Drawing attention to the way these discourses collectively inform perceptions of feminist subjectivity, female agency, and gender equality, however, seems to offer a way of understanding what Toril Moi describes as a waning of feminisms within our contemporary cultural climate (“I Am Not A Feminist, But . . .” 1735).

After much reading, thinking, writing, revising, and rethinking, I’ve come to understand that the primary question motivating this thesis is one concerning the intersection of margin and center and the improbable simplicity of moving between the two or eliminating the lines of division altogether. I see this waning of feminisms as being directly related to a partially postmodern moment in which the distinctions between margin and center are temporarily and speciously blurred. Akin to questions regarding other binaries, man/woman for example, where “who” speaks of them and “how” and “why” they are used are primary concerns, responding to this question involves the difficulty of suggesting that the envelopment of the margin within the center, when this centering of the margin is initiated by the centered speakers and for their own purposes, is contradictory to causes that seek to promote equality. In an attempt to provisionally resolve this problematic aspect of my inquiry, I also draw a distinction between the “who” that is involved in blurring this margin/center dichotomy and the “how” and “why” this blurring is accomplished.

Nevertheless, as this thesis is part of a larger investigation that I have yet to fully theorize and articulate in written form, the work herein can only be said to encapsulate half of this story. Because my own definition of “feminism” places an emphasis on gendered oppression in relation to other subject positions for which one might be discriminated against, I know no way to

commence my project other than by beginning with and proceeding from analyses that take gender as their primary object of inquiry. But along the way, I point toward what I hope will someday consist of the second half of this inquiry (possibly in the form of a dissertation), analyses that get eclipsed in asking these gender-specific questions, specifically those that consider the intersection of gender with class, race, sexuality, and ethnicity. I find the part of this project that has yet to be written the most important element, and thus the potential meaning or purpose of this thesis is also only half-articulated. Nonetheless, I feel obligated, ethically, to explore the construction of feminisms in relation to gender within my own sociopolitical contexts before I can begin to explore different positionalities (my own included) that inform, confront, and disrupt those constructions.

Simply stated, instead of attempting to shift the position of “woman,” or rather myself, from margin to center, I examine some ways in which the margin becomes useful to the center in perpetuating long-maintained hierarchies of gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. I situate this exploration in two discourses specific to my spatiotemporal location, each of which allege to dissolve the distinction between margin and center by simultaneously appropriating “Otheredness” and denouncing “modern” or “second-wave” feminisms as a means of justifying those ends: the first, a “postfeminist” discourse that I locate within a set of women-centered, mass culture texts, and the second, a “postmodern feminist” discourse specific to Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser’s essay “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism” (1988). Rather than providing an answer to its own inquiry, this thesis undertakes the task of exploring the subjective splitting that can occur within rhetorical and cultural frameworks that effectively (though speciously) dissolve the margin/center binary, consequently silencing and paralyzing subjects speaking from the margins

by convincing them that their own perceived marginality no longer exists or perhaps was always a misconception.



## INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF POSTMODERNISMS

Yet such nonmimetic, non-western modes also seem to lay themselves open to the academized procedures of a peculiarly western, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject, with its now characteristic stance of self-irony, across both space and time. The expansive forms of the modern and the postmodern novel appear to stand in ever-polite readiness to recycle and accommodate other cultural content . . .

-Kum Kum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible" (1987)

Since at least the early 1980s, the complexities and paradoxical dispositions of the term "postmodernism" have been debated both within and outside the walls of American academia.<sup>1</sup> As a theoretical and cultural signifier acquiring status alongside the emergence of an "age of globalization" – which to some means a process of economic colonization on a global scale to produce Western, imperialist rewards – the significations of the term "postmodernism" have been as varied as they have been imprecise, thus making any question specific to the term an error without first stipulating the definition of the term "postmodernism" itself. To ask such a question would be to violate the very principles of what many understand to be postmodernity, wherein the term, even as it contains all things "postmodern," has no single postmodern referent or set of characteristics that comprises its sum total. But given the wide-array of attention that postmodernisms have received and its international impact, these questions must surely be asked.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note use of "postmodernism," "feminism," "postcolonialism," "Marxism," "Psychoanalysis," and all other references to theoretical positions classified under single universal signifiers like these will be italicized to indicate that these terms have either been used by others in this way or that I am responding to their use of this terminology. I think it is important to my argument to draw a distinction between the way these terms are used in their singular and plural forms, although I myself am not immune from tending to apply these terms universally, especially within informal discussion. As much as this italicization serves to point toward this tendency within feminist theories, it also serves as personal exercise in unlearning the marginalizing and universalizing practices of the larger American culture.

Some youth-oriented, American subgroups, in particular, have developed a distinct fascination with the postmodernness of an object, text, or individual, often relying on queries as to how “po-mo” something or someone is (or is not) not simply as a form of entertainment but more importantly as a way of forming identities, communities, and the standards of “cool.”<sup>2</sup> Within a particular set of these communities in Orlando, Florida, “postmodern” is enacted as a term that describes an object or individual’s particular quirkiness and unacceptability. Thus, these youngsters, my presumed peers, provide a set of credentials for obtaining or proceeding from a postmodern status. Orlando, Florida is perhaps one of the most interesting sites of investigation as to how these groups operate and maintain themselves given Orlando’s inestimable suburban conclaves and daunting (and sometimes disturbing) constructed environments – like the Disney-owned, “Mainstreet U.S.A” town Celebration – each of which are severed and further fragmented by Orlando’s endless assortment of strip malls – the newborn, the trendy, the refurbished, and the commercial graveyards of strip malls dead. The characteristics of these “po-mo” collectives are most certainly dependent on whether the investigation is conducted in one of Orlando’s *alternative* hair salons, coffee shops, or concert venues, as well as which specific location within these categories has been chosen as the site of research. But there is certainly a degree of overlap between various social spaces – XM radio stations, vintage clothing, and a variety of imported beers, to name only a few. What remains clear, however, is that no matter how loosely drawn the definition of the postmodern terrain or the disparity of definitions between groups, “po-mo” has been defined and so have the prerequisites that precede any distribution of the exclusionary “po-mo” label.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a personal observation and semi-hypothetical account derived from my own discussions with individuals and groups of individuals who identify with this subgroup and frequent these Orlando-specific locales: Bar-B-Que Bar, Stardust, Alchemy, I Spy, Austin’s Coffee Shop, Independent Bar, Will’s Pub, the Peacock Room, the Social, Back Booth, D’echoes, and other no longer existent spaces such as the Kit Kat Club, Java Jabbers, and Guinevere’s.

Within academia, intellectuals have propagated rather different inquiries, focusing not simply on an object or person's "postmodernness," or rather "postmodernity," but digging into the mysterious subterranean of the term itself. Nevertheless, their reasons for asking these questions are not that dissimilar from the emo-punk-indie "alt. kids" in Orlando – signifiers ready to signify – who wonder how their peers will regard them if they have not exhibited themselves as truly postmodern. Like these alt. kids who discuss this nonconformist "po-mo" label as a way of accepting themselves as not part of the glorified popular cookie-cutter mold (though, notably, there has been a continual surge of appropriation and infiltration of the "po-mo" alternative since at least the early 1990s by the popular itself<sup>3</sup>), intellectuals operating "from the margins" have found a selection of postmodernist concepts to substantiate their "difference" and provide a similarly alluring degree of acceptance and forward-thinking.

Despite the innumerable definitions and theoretical approaches that have come to be categorized under the signifier "postmodernism," a few particular concepts have been solidified in the logic of postmodern theories, mainly those that call into question the stability of signification, the authenticity of the Cartesian subject, the dynamics of power and authority, and the decentering of transcendental reason and narrative discourse. For the aforementioned youngsters, the disruption of youth-centered, conformist ideologies seems to play out quite agreeably, but it is also worth noting that a new "po-mo" Cartesian subject is created and

---

<sup>3</sup> Since the context in which I situate my analyses of mass culture mostly centers on the decade and a half spanning from 1990 to 2006, I point here towards a discourse that surrounded allegedly non-Billboard music in the early 1990s that was first described as *progressive* but became known later as *alternative* – a signifier that often connoted "grunge" culture and "garage" bands. Within this discourse, discussions arose in which bands and group members were described as "selling out" and a particular distaste was developed for the appropriation of the flannel shirts and torn jeans by the mainstream "Polo" wearers (though such appropriation was no unprecedented process) who had been known to deride the poverty within which "grunge" culture was often thought to be ingrained. This terminology would of course be overwritten by discourses on "indeed" rock and film. See Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) for a more theoretical and thorough discussion of mainstream mass media's incorporation and assimilation of subcultures.

advertised and becomes particularly conformist in its own justification and entitlement. Yet the dynamics of power and authority that these “po-mo” youths try to elude remain relatively intact, principally because the “po-mo” focal point disregards both the acceptance and rejection of “normality” required by that authority (and society), even though a certain homage is paid to the term postmodern in the acceptance of “idiosyncrasy” as a rule. But the systematic dynamics of hegemonic American society also persist due to the fact that the disregard enacted in defining the “po-mo” as unorthodox is invested in a subsidiary of that authority’s power – appearance – rather than the dynamics and structures of the system itself. This is not to say that other systems of belief do not emerge as a result of this performativity, underlie this signifier, or attach themselves to the definition of the “po-mo” identity as a reverberation of its very dissidence. Notwithstanding, as this acknowledgement of and abidance to *appearance* (and the appearance of postmodernity) exists as one of the primary structures of the “po-mo” label within this subgroup, it serves as a sketch to evoke in relation to similar postmodernizations within American academia.

During the moment when a variety of voices in academia were attempting to speak from the margins and legitimate their voices and experiences, regardless of the conformity and assimilation being foisted upon them (within higher education, intellectual circles, and American society in general), the congruities between their own discourses and these postmodern concepts sometimes seemed to suggest that an affiliation with postmodernisms would be a complimentary and communal relationship. Moreover, in some cases, this affiliation, however provisory, has been accepted sometimes without fully considering which previous structures might remain integral to individual experiences as a consequence of a rather different form of conformity and assimilation to *postmodernism* itself. This thesis undertakes an inquiry that explores the

questions that postmodernisms should raise for feminist theories by analyzing the relationship between *postmodernism* and *feminism* established in Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser's "Social Criticism without Philosophy" and attempts to show how their *postmodern feminism* becomes fully embedded in the subordinate and feminized position that the discourses of postmodernisms leaves open for them.

### The Question of *Postmodernism*

Within feminist and postcolonial theories, a number of voices have emerged that appear to move beyond some of the premises and assumptions of earlier movements and toward an exploration of a more postmodern form of subjectivity and self/other relations that challenges the identity-based politics underwriting previous modes of investigation and critique. However, while some postcolonial theorists seem to have maintained a distance from postmodernisms, claiming that the "post" in *postcolonialism* and *postmodernism* uphold rather different political specificities, certain feminist terrains throughout the 1980s and 1990s, undergoing changes of their own, attempted to argue instead that a *postmodern discourse* does not retain a contradictory political element if considered through a feminist lens, an assertion that Nicholson and Fraser insist upon in their facilitation of the discussion regarding the merger of feminist and postmodern theories<sup>4</sup> (Ashcroft et al 118). Moreover, feminist theorists like Nicholson and Fraser, many of whom previously identified with what would come to be known as *second wave feminism*, regarded these postmodern theoretical positions as ones that might help them overcome the

---

<sup>4</sup> In generalizing about these two decades here, I am referring to feminist specific critiques that teeter upon the edge of considering a merger between feminisms and postmodernisms as unproblematic or those that use postmodernisms to critique what they see as the flawed aspects of feminist theories. I am not referring to other feminist theories that engage cautiously and critically with postmodernisms in a way that considers the negative possibilities in regard to race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

tendency within a large portion of second wave feminist theories to marginalize the voices of women who are not part of the white middle-class.

Within “Social Criticism,” Nicholson and Fraser define *postmodernism* as a discourse that obstructs the “tendency [within feminisms] to universalize instrumental reason,” or “to subject *all* discursive practices indiscriminately to the single criterion of efficiency, or ‘performativity’” (25). In other words, Nicholson and Fraser understand *postmodernism* as a discursive practice that will help feminisms avoid the essentialist and foundationalist underpinnings that infected the philosophical frameworks of second wave feminisms and “repressed” the “differences among women of different classes, races, sexual orientations, and ethnic groups” (31). A *postmodern feminism*, Nicholson and Fraser write, would combine a postmodernist incredulity toward metanarrative with the social-critical power of *feminism*” and create “a practice made up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribable by an essential definition” (35, my emphasis). Instead, a *postmodern feminism* would be based upon the core principle that, “while some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather, they are interlaced with differences, even with conflicts” (35)

Yet despite Nicholson and Fraser’s existing perception of postmodernist discourses as less marginalizing in terms of race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, other theorists of feminist and postcolonial origins persist in affirming that, realistically, the discourses of postmodernisms are equally marginalizing and, as follows, any fusion between these differently inflected theoretical positions cannot be thoroughly egalitarian.<sup>5</sup> For example, postcolonial theorists such as Kwame Appiah argue, conversely, that the “post” in both *postcolonialism* and *postmodernism* are

---

<sup>5</sup> See bell hooks, Seyla Benhabib, and Judith Butler for example

certainly “space clearing gestures,” but he continues to uphold the previous distinction between the use of this prefix, claiming that *postmodernism* is “not concerned with going beyond colonialism” and that “‘syncretism’ in global exchange is not a result of this space clearing gesture”<sup>6</sup> (119). Contrary to a space cleared that might permit the subject some form of autonomy and discursive power, the space vacated by *postmodernism*, as Kum Kum Sangari points out, is a position that, however critical, disempowers the subject as “an enabling idea and relocates the impulses for change as everywhere and nowhere”<sup>7</sup> (146). Echoing this concern from a feminist perspective, Sandra Lee Bartky suggests that the location of “power is everywhere and nowhere” as well (79).

Some postcolonial theorists such as Simon During persist in thinking beyond the improbable Utopian sphere of a *postmodern* world of syncretism, speculating that “[f]rom the side of the post-modernity, English (multinational capitalism’s tongue) will museumify those pre-colonial languages which have attached themselves to print and the image so belatedly”<sup>8</sup> (128). Rather than being a discourse of liberation, *postmodernism*, as a discourse that fuses disparate subject positions that are often appropriated randomly from distanced and separate locations to constitute postmodern subjectivity or textuality,<sup>9</sup> is exemplified by During as a discourse that presses flat the differentiations within the term “difference” and enfold the specificity of “differences” within its comprehensive Western, Anglocentric discourse. As Sangari suggests, *postmodernism* “sets out to rework or ‘process’ the knowledge systems of the world in its own image” (146). But in spite of these further warnings regarding *postmodernism*’s

---

<sup>6</sup> From *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. London: Methuen, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> From “The Politics of the Possible.” *Cultural Critique* 7, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> From “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today.” *Textual Practice* 1(1), 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Along this line of thought, it could be argued that postmodern mass culture, particularly American postmodern mass culture, is perhaps a product of, if not a manifestation of and testimony to, imperialism and colonialism – to the extent that mass culture can be said to bear witness to America’s pillaging of others’ cultures, artifacts, etc.

colonizing power,<sup>10</sup> Nicholson and Fraser have continued to speak of this space clearing gesture as an opportunity of *their* own right, as one that resulted from *their* own efforts, and as one that demonstrates the degree of equality that has been achieved by *them*.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to the “po-mo” alt. kids’ hastily sketched, revolutionary standpoint of transcending established conventions of dominant American society by refusing recognition of the system’s existence, Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism without Philosophy” plunges into the indecipherable space of the postmodern with little skepticism toward the power structures that remain securely in place in the sociopolitical spheres of postmodernity or in postmodern theories themselves. Moreover it does so without asking how the postmodern subject both “continues to nourish the self defining critiques of the West” and labors in *its* own preoccupation with *its* “ongoing disruptions and reformulations” as “the self-ironizing [postmodern] bourgeois subject” (Sangari 146). Thus in defining the answers to the feminist-proposed question of *postmodernism* (and postmodern identification) as being a theoretical stance that allows *feminism* to open up an emancipated sociopolitical space for all subjects, Nicholson and Fraser commit the error of asking the question of postmodernisms without first stipulating a definition (or referential critique) that might grant access to *all* subjects. What is

---

<sup>10</sup> Looking at the criticisms offered by postcolonial theorists prior to the first publication of “Social Criticism” seems important here in relation to my secondary claim regarding Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* – that Nicholson and Fraser’s attempt to deal with the marginalizing aspects of feminist theories in relation to race, ethnicity, and sexuality actually abbreviates these questions if not elides them altogether.

<sup>11</sup> In looking critically at Nicholson and Fraser’s work regarding feminisms and postmodernisms I examine their work as being in dialogue with other work that falls either before or during the timeframe beginning when “Social Criticism” was first published in *Communication* (1988) and ending with the reprinting of “Social Criticism” in Nicholson’s edited collection *The Play of Reason* (1999). These texts also include *Feminism/Postmodernism* (edited by Nicholson with introduction and a reprint of “Social Criticism” 1990), “Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism” (1992), *Feminist Contentions* (edited by Nicholson with introduction in 1995), *The Second Wave* (edited by Nicholson with introduction and framing of hers and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* in 1997), and Nicholson’s “A Response to My Critics” (2001). I take them at their word when they say they are attempting to start a discussion regarding feminisms and postmodernisms and thus find it important to understand which voices get neglected in or excluded from this discussion and how these alternate points of view are contextualized by Nicholson and Fraser within this discussion as being non-contradictory.



more, they assume that such a liberating definition can and does exist, one seemingly bestowed upon feminisms by critiquing feminist theories according to the terms of postmodern theories. The error here seems to be that Nicholson and Fraser, first, do not consider whether and how postmodernisms are marginalizing discourses and, second, do not provide any new means of analysis for examining female subject formation in postmodern spatiotemporal locales from a feminist perspective.

Yet while no tangible postmodern subjective referent is proposed in “Social Criticism,” limits are certainly fixed upon a proper subject, even if an absent subject, and those who do not fall within those boundaries are certainly shifted yet again to the outer fringes, if not excluded completely. In other words, Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* suffuses an already cleared sociopolitical space in feminist theories with a certain postmodern notion of subjectivity that is, like the alt. kids conception defined above, dependent upon the untiringly visible definitive flux and interminable construction of the female feminist subject. But their *postmodern feminism* falls short of defining the ways by which this constructed, fluid subjectivity might be interpreted and deconstructed in the theoretical space that is cleared within *postmodernism for feminism*.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a viable critical method of subjective investigation, interpretation of the subject is either left wide-open or rendered utterly inaccessible. As Laura Kipnis argues in a 1989 essay “Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism”: “The subject that drops its veils one by one to reveal its naked status as construction, rather than nature, bares everything *except* the answer to its insistent appearance: if everywhere we look the subject is all that is visible, what is it that is hidden?” (158). In response

---

<sup>12</sup> In fact, what becomes clear is that Nicholson and Fraser do not really clear a space within *feminism* for *postmodernism* but seem, conversely, to be attempting to clear a space within *postmodernism* for female subjects and feminist theories.

to this question, one might answer that the subject's visible inaccessibility submerges every possible meaning that the subject, whether consciously or unconsciously, strives to signify in her construction as a subject. Removing the possibility of intentional subjective signification as well as the tools that allow for more intensive forms of subjective investigation, this ill-defined application of the "postmodern" label that is attached to *feminism* in Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" takes for granted the "reality" of and the substantiation of that reality of and by the very entity being rendered to this state of uncertainty. Along these lines, to ask the question regarding postmodernism in this imprecise manner is to completely dance around the question of subjectivity rather than answer it. Moreover, in avoiding the question of subjectivity in relation to their *postmodern feminist theory*, Nicholson and Fraser also circumvent questions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality in relation to gender.

Kipnis' theoretical texts are often polemical, stretching concepts to their limits to compel discussions of a concept's subterranean, or rather, exploring ideas that are likely to fall outside conventional discursive and logic-based structures or those that linger behind theoretical disregard and indifference. But in suggesting that the "mysterious subterranean" of the signifier *postmodernism* has not been sufficiently considered in this line of feminist thought, Kipnis sets the stage for what will be the focus of my own consideration of the *feminism/postmodernism* debate and my simultaneous attempt to more fully excavate the term's significations and suggest possible answers to these already raised questions: Which power structures remain in the framework of Nicholson and Fraser's allegedly *postmodern feminism* and how do they come into or maintain their existence? How do Nicholson and Fraser interpret, describe, and control postmodern feminist subjectivities? Within Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism*, what kind of agency do these subjects wield, how much agency is ascribed to them, and by whom?

What potential consequences result from neglecting and/or omitting these questions in asking this feminist-specific question of *postmodernism*, and how might these end results foster the precise marginalizations that Nicholson and Fraser intend to purge in exploring this question of how *postmodernism* can remedy the deficiencies of feminisms?

The polemical characteristics of and the concepts illustrated in Kipnis' essay are highly constructive in clarifying the consequences that result from the feminist-initiated merger of *feminism* and *postmodernism* in Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism," what becomes a marriage between *feminism* and *postmodernism* in every respect of the power asymmetry and confinement within America's hegemonic matrimonial institution. Kipnis seems to suggest that the failures of these philosophical arrangements result from each respective theory's ability to be "constitutive of" mergers between feminist and other critical theories but not "reflexive about the consequent formation" with regard to the juncture at which their *encounter* is initiated and defined. This is the argument I will make regarding the *postmodern feminism* that Nicholson and Fraser bring into being (150). In fact, the only subject that I will attempt to formulate a definitive thesis around is the way in which Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* folds under its own theoretical configuration and lends to, rather than stops or curtails, marginalization.

### A Risky Move: From Postmodernisms to American Mass Culture

I begin this inquiry in Chapter One by sifting through the tangled facets of Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism without Philosophy" in an attempt to show that their *postmodern feminism* is neither a postmodernist critique nor a means of overcoming the pitfalls of essentialism and foundationalism, the philosophical deficiencies that they perceive as the cruxes upon which the Anglocentric tendencies of *second wave feminism* turn. However, my analysis is

not primarily an attempt to suggest that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* is theoretically unsound, though my analysis at times does and must move towards this conclusion even as it can offer no answer as to what a theoretically sound postmodern feminist critique might entail. (And I think that this is the point.) Instead, my analysis in this chapter is more precisely a deconstructive move, one that points toward the fact that Nicholson and Fraser do not and necessarily cannot adequately gauge the limitations or conditions of a *thoroughly postmodern feminism* specifically because their understanding of both the postmodern condition and their own subjective positioning in a social space characteristic of postmodernity are inevitably incomplete. Along this line of thought, I suggest that the theoretical flaws of Nicholson and Fraser's work regarding their *postmodern feminism* from 1990-1999 can be attributed to a lack of historicity and an implicit assertion of irrevocability and terminality. In other words, as one result of their categorical abandonment of feminisms past, Nicholson and Fraser miss the point being made regarding the Anglocentric biases of feminist theories to which their *postmodern feminism* seems to be a response – that “a” *postmodern feminism* cannot be definitely defined or assume it can speak for “all” women or “the” conditions of postmodernity in which they are implicated, and that postmodern feminisms,<sup>13</sup> as they would be better understood, are never fixed, but always in progress.

To provide a conceptual backing to this claim, I move toward an examination of mass culture in Chapters Two and Three. For the purposes of this project, mass culture operates as a space in which their *postmodern feminism* can be examined to reveal how it is embedded in and

---

<sup>13</sup> Nicholson and Fraser acknowledge this in “Social Criticism” when they say: “One might best speak of it in the plural as the practice of feminisms” (35) However, this notion gets lost when they begin looking back upon and defending their essay and the *postmodern feminism* it calls into being. Moreover, the plural “feminisms” is reduced to its singular form when Nicholson and Fraser begin suggesting that all feminisms could fit comfortably under the signifier postmodernism.

constructed by two of the leading discourses of its sociopolitical space – a discourse of postfeminisms illustrated in Tania Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women* and a popularized discourse of postmodernisms. Interpreting Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism” through a feminist cultural studies model, in which texts are perceived to be simultaneously constituted by and reflective of their own sociopolitical spaces, I suggest that the intrinsic theoretical flaws of their *postmodern feminism* (as are outlined in Chapter One) manifest, in part, because their theoretical paradigm is unmistakably implicated within these discourses and not because of a lack of ethics (feminist or otherwise) or an unsophisticated mode of feminist inquiry. These two differently defined examinations of mass culture, then, serve as opportunities to allude not simply to the tangible and potential repercussions for both female subjects and feminisms under Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminist paradigm* but more importantly the current contextualization of feminisms and female agency within the American mainstream.

In Chapter Two, I draw comparisons between the structure of Nicholson and Fraser’s essay “Social Criticism” (as well as the *feminism/postmodernism* debate they supervise in two edited collections on this subject) and the film *What Women Want* (2000) in an attempt to show how their essay emerges within a postfeminist discursive structure and seems to be implanted in what Tania Modleski describes as a postfeminist moment. Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism” is certainly not the first postfeminist text written from a feminist theoretical perspective, as a number of those are already analyzed in Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women* (1991).<sup>14</sup> However, while feminized men are the primary subject of analysis in *Feminism Without Women*, it is the female subject in *What Women Want* and “Social Criticism” who

---

<sup>14</sup> Modleski’s analysis includes some comments regarding the collection *Postmodernism/Feminism* edited by Nicholson.

invokes the specter of the “male gaze,” an all but absent apparition who defines how she interprets both herself and her feminist standpoints despite the fact that she thinks these thoughts are a product of her own consciousness and agency.

The function of Chapter Two is two-fold. As part of the fundamental work of this chapter, I use *What Women Want* to illustrate the composition of postfeminist texts and the hierarchal orientation of the feminized male subject within them, drawing comparisons along the way to the structure of “Social Criticism” and the positioning that Lyotard receives in this essay. This helps to imagine “Social Criticism” outside of its theoretical platform, the locus of my examination in Chapter One, to show that the structure of the essay and the debate that it calls into being can be interpreted as complicit (albeit compulsively and not consciously) with the postfeminist discursive structure from which they both surface, one that demarcates gender hierarchies quite definitively while adorning itself with the auspices of gender equality. Underscoring the potential implications of this discursive complicity, the secondary work of this chapter, I argue that a new form of female agency is written upon female bodies in these fictional texts, wherein the female subject is allocated an authority to reject feminisms as a flawed aspect of her subjectivity. Moreover, the agency inscribed upon these female bodies is the veritable vehicle for the delineation of gender hierarchies within their metaphorical field of gender equality. This comparison between *What Women Want* and “Social Criticism” is thus constructive in considering how feminisms are written into a subordinate gendered position in “Social Criticism” by two of the leading feminist theorists dealing with theories of postmodernity at this historical juncture.

In Chapter Three, I explore, in depth, the position of the female subject in what could be called an emergent form of postmodern, postfeminist texts and her relationship with feminisms

past and present. Because these texts can be interpreted, structurally, as postmodern texts, they provide an opportunity to consider the blowback of Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* in relation to the female subject if their theoretical paradigm transpired as a realistic feminist subject position within this postmodernist, postfeminist discursive structure. Within the fictional texts examined— *What Women Want*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* – the female characters can be read as collectively and individually representative of an amalgam of feminisms past and present, as they often think about and choose between a number of feminist responses with regard to their temporal and spatial locales. Their subjective composition is one, thus, that easily lends itself to comparison with the definition of *postmodern feminism* offered in “Social Criticism,” characterized as being:

inflected with temporality, with historically specific institutional categories like the modern restricted, male-headed, nuclear family taking precedence over ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering. [. . .] Moreover, postmodern feminist theory would be nonuniversalist. When its focus became cross-cultural or transepochal, its mode of attention would be comparativist rather than universalizing. [. . .] Finally, a postmodern-feminist theory would dispense of the idea of a subject of history. [. . .] In general, postmodern feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic. (34-35)

One cannot speculate that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* has actually influenced the construction of the forms of *postmodern feminism* found in the fictional texts examined. However, it can be argued that each of these postmodern feminisms, regardless of any insinuation of inclusivity and diversity, construct a very narrow definition of *feminism* in the present moment, one that seems to undermine the broadened conceptualizations of a complex

and incongruous female subjectivity to which some previous feminisms granted access. But the perhaps more telling feature of these texts, and the one that illuminates the underlying work of Chapter Three, is the way in which female subjects in these mediated texts write *feminism* into oblivion through a fictionalized rendering of postmodern feminist critique. By “writing” I mean the literal authorship of this critique through the female voiceover and the various forms of press sited within these texts. Highlighting the similarities between authorship in these two divergent media is useful, first, because they point toward the way a multiply signifying *postmodern feminism* can be rendered determinate within hegemonic discourses (specifically postfeminist and postmodern discourses), and secondly, because they underscore the possibility that Nicholson and Fraser, too, have written *feminism* into a subordinate position in answering the “question of *feminism* and *postmodernism*” without being “reflexive about the consequent formation” (“Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism” 150).

In part, the undertaking of this thesis breaks down the barriers between genre-based literary analysis by proposing that “Social Criticism” and the *feminism/postmodernism* debate that Nicholson and Fraser command can be read as something of a story where Nicholson and Fraser can be analyzed in the same way that the characters in film and television are. Drawing comparisons between their work and American mass culture is also a way of arguing that there is no distinct divide between academic culture and mass culture, but rather they inform and reflect upon each other and together can reveal the more pervasive ideologies of the sociopolitical space that surrounds them.



CHAPTER ONE: *POSTMODERN FEMINISM: THE METANARRATIVE OF LINDA NICHOLSON AND NANCY FRASER'S "SOCIAL CRITICISM WITHOUT PHILOSOPHY"*

Over the last few years, however, I have also begun to see that, rather than deconstruction simply opening a way for feminists, the figure and discourse of woman opened the way for Derrida as well.

-Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*

In the years that immediately preceded the publication of Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser's "Social Criticism without Philosophy" in 1988, American academia witnessed both a waning of confidence in feminist theories – due in part to justified claims regarding a negligent attention to the diversity between women's experiences – and a rise of interest in theories that attended to the structural aspects of an era of postmodernity – the sociopolitical locale in which those experiences would now be embedded. From a historical perspective, a feminist interest in postmodernist theoretical perspectives could be logically attributed to reviving the credibility of and investment in critical feminist perspectives, and this pragmatic rationale is to a large extent confirmed within Nicholson and Fraser's essay. In fact, Nicholson and Fraser's essay has been regarded as groundbreaking in establishing a discussion between feminisms and postmodernisms, so much so that a number of prominent feminist theorists have engaged in that discussion by placing their essays within two collections on the intersection of feminisms and postmodernisms edited by Nicholson – *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990) and *Feminist Contentions* (1995). The feminist theorists taking part in the discussions within these collections include: Jane Flax, Christine Di Stefano, Sandra Harding, Seyla Benhabib, Susan Bordo, Nancy Hartsock, Elspeth Probyn, Donna Haraway, Andreas Huyssen, Anna Yeatman, Iris Marion Young, and Judith Butler. As Eloise A. Buker notes in the review of Nicholson's collection of her own previously published essays *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Postmodern*,

“Social Criticism” “was important in initiating dialogue about *postmodernism* among feminists, but the issues raised have been more elaborately developed in subsequent works, including an important book Nicholson edited, *Feminism/Postmodernism*” (1983, my emphasis)

It could also be argued, as this chapter does, that theories of postmodernity offered a cursory solution to what Seyla Benhabib and Laura Kipnis describe as the “profound identity crisis” confronting feminist academia in the early 1980s (“Feminism and Postmodernism” 20). Nicholson and Fraser’s implementation of *postmodern theory* as a remedy for the problems facing feminist theories, however, was problematic in a number of respects. First, as Gayatri Spivak makes clear, the substantial claims elicited within postmodern theories owe some credit to preceding discourses of feminisms. In relying on postmodern theory as an authority that could validate the critiques already articulated within feminist theories, Nicholson and Fraser sidestep the Eurocentric tendency within the larger terrain of American feminist theory to occlude issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, among others, in favor of a postmodern theoretical perspective that denies the claim to the authority that would make subordination and oppression possible. In essence, the previously established power dynamics and hierarchal structures of American hegemonies are disavowed rather than challenged or altered in their *postmodern feminism*. Secondly, Nicholson and Fraser become responsible for a skewed historical revision of a diverse array of feminist critical theories and activism that spans more than two decades, lumping this work together in less than eight pages of descriptive analysis as categorically “wrong” in pragmatics and practice. In addition, because Nicholson and Fraser depict their *postmodern feminism* as having the “right” pragmatics and thus the “right” practices, their theoretical standpoint becomes a totalizing theory itself, one that is distinctively a product of the modernist discursive structure from which it emerges. As a result, the theoretical perspective

they espouse lacks a method of analysis that could attend female subjectivity and experience within the sociopolitical locales of postmodernity.

#### The Encounter: A Discursive Analysis of “Social Criticism”

For Nicholson and Fraser, the “coincidental” juncture at which feminist tensions seem to coincide with *postmodernism*’s central theses becomes for them an indispensable encounter that would help feminisms avoid falling into the traps of “foundationalism” and “essentialism” (19-20). Throughout their essay, they purport to show why an encounter between *feminism* and *postmodernism* would be one with positive outcomes for feminists attempting to deal, on a historical level, with the marginalization of specific feminist voices as well as one that would prevent, in terms of feminist social criticism, future marginalizations. Asserting that “the ‘modern’ conception [of *feminism*] must give way to a new ‘postmodern’ *one* in which criticism floats free of any universalist theoretical ground,” Nicholson and Fraser perform two fairly extensive critiques of postmodern and feminist theories within the first two sections of their essay (21, my emphases).

In the first section, “Postmodernism,” they take Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* as a representative source of *postmodernism*’s “tendencies”; outline the “internal tensions” of his argument, which amount to what Nicholson and Fraser see as “the” limitations of *postmodernism*; and claim to “suggest some alternative formulations” (20). In “Feminism,” the second section in which they take to task *feminism*’s tendency to incline toward “the sorts of philosophical metanarratives rightly criticized by *postmodernism*,” Nicholson and Fraser outline a small “representative” selection of feminist theories that they ascertain to fall, in some way, within the philosophical categories of essentialism and foundationalism and suggest that the

experiences articulated by other feminist voices are marginalized as a result (26, my emphasis). When juxtaposed, these sections provide what can be described as a fairly encouraging analysis of *postmodernism* and a rather unsympathetic censure of *feminism*. Together, this staged encounter, described in their introduction as “the initial, critical phase” in developing a postmodern feminist “perspective,” becomes “the” trajectory for establishing, in the third section of their essay “Toward a Postmodern Feminism,” what they describe as the conception of a thoroughly postmodern mode of feminist thought and inquiry (20).

Presumably, in the introduction and in the title of this third section, Nicholson and Fraser are developing insights “toward” what they believe might become a form of postmodern feminist critique. However, in this third section, they demarcate the characteristics of what they categorize as *postmodern feminism* quite definitively, despite their description of this practice as “a patchwork of overlapping alliances” that might be described “best” “in the plural as the practice of feminisms” (35) Esteeming the value of the phrase “justice of multiplicities” quoted from Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* earlier in “Social Criticism,” the plural configuration of feminisms that they propose is represented by the sign “postmodern feminism.” Taken in its singular form, their *postmodern feminism* restructures feminist thought in accordance with the particular structure of postmodernism offered by Lyotard. This theoretical position is not one, then, that coexists beside other forms of feminist criticism such as Marxist feminist theories or postcolonial feminist theories or even different conceptions of postmodern feminist theories. Rather, their *postmodern feminism* incorporates “all” other feminist theories as part of a mixed whole, a convergence that they champion as one that “floats free” from the limitations outlined in reference to preceding feminist theories and as one that would create “a broader, richer, more complex and multilayered feminist solidarity” (“Social Criticism” 35).

During the fifteen years that followed the initial publication of this essay, however, a number of feminist voices whose work is placed textually by Nicholson and Fraser within the framework of their *feminism/postmodernism* debate have called the signifier “postmodern feminism” itself into question and expressed considerable feelings of marginalization in relation to this “broader, multilayered feminist solidarity” that Nicholson and Fraser claim to generate. This is the line of inquiry I explore in this chapter. In addition to arguing that Nicholson and Fraser’s ‘Social Criticism without Philosophy’ fails to meet its own objectives and marginalizes other voices as a result, I return to the fundamental premise upon which their *postmodern feminism* is established – the encounter between *feminism* and *postmodernism* that they stage as a means of producing this thoroughly *postmodern feminism*. I examine, first, the parameters of this *postmodern feminism*, parameters that Nicholson and Fraser claim are “requirements which constrain the development of such a perspective” (20). I then sift through their conception of Lyotard as being representative of a *postmodernism* that provides, for them, “a postmodernist reflection on *feminist theory*” that “can help remedy [*feminism*’s] deficiencies” (20). It is only by returning to the “initial, critical phase of the encounter,” I believe, that questions can be approached regarding how this *postmodern feminism* has functioned within the field of feminist theories and why it never materialized as the kind of “free floating” theoretical position that Nicholson and Fraser imagined.

In exploring the possible insights that these questions might produce, I analyze their *postmodern feminism* in Chapters Two and Three as one enveloped in the social context of a thread of feminist backlash culture – the phenomenon of postfeminisms<sup>1</sup> - and as one obscured by and impinged upon by the cultural implications of a massified definitions of *postmodernism*.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Tania Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (1991).

But within this chapter, I suggest that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism*, at the point of and shortly after its conception, does not conform to their own understanding of postmodern theories and is not, despite their own claims, postmodernist. Finally, I explore their *postmodern feminism* as a modern discourse and theoretical structure, one that intensifies rather than alleviates the marginalization of voices within feminist theories.

#### Nicholson and Fraser's Thoroughly *Postmodern Feminism*: An Explication of Initial Concerns

Postmodernists, as Fraser and Nicholson claim, "seek, *inter alia*, to develop conceptions of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings," or, in other words, *postmodernism* seeks to deem "grand narratives of legitimation" unreliable and replace them instead with local narratives in which legitimation becomes "plural, local, and immanent" (21). Thus in the section entitled "Toward a Postmodern Feminism," Nicholson and Fraser apply the postmodernist concept above to their understanding of *feminism* and offer this often quoted definition as an explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of their *postmodern feminism*:

[T]he categories of postmodern feminist theory would be inflected with temporality, with historically specific institutional categories like the modern restricted, male-headed, nuclear family taking precedence over ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering. [. . .] Moreover, postmodern feminist theory would be nonuniversalist. When its focus became cross-cultural or transepochal, its mode of attention would be comparativist rather than universalizing. [. . .] Finally, a postmodern feminist theory would dispense of the idea of a subject of history. [. . .] In general, postmodern feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic. (34-35)

For Nicholson and Fraser, the essentialist and foundationalist philosophical cornerstones of second wave feminist theories are the very theoretical obstructions that *postmodernism* appears to eradicate. Claiming that a number of these “representative genres of feminist social criticism [. . .] rely on the sorts of philosophical underpinnings which their own commitments, like those of postmodernists, ought in principle to rule out,” Nicholson and Fraser base the formulation of their *postmodern feminism* largely upon several critiques of the works of other feminist theorists who they find guilty of this charge (namely: Shulamith Firestone, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Nancy Chodrow, Ann Ferguson, Nancy Folbre, Nancy Hartsock, Catherine MacKinnon, and Carol Gilligan), hoping to “encourage such theory to become more consistently postmodern” (20, 34).

The above definition (an extensive excerpt from their page and a half rendering of a *postmodern feminism*) is highly aspirational. However, it is important to consider, more than momentarily, that the possibility of avoiding the theoretical traps of foundationalism and essentialism remains, almost unquestionably, as impractical as removing the subject from the confines of the social world and examining her or him as an isolated entity. In particular, those who have tried to eschew essentialism in their work, as demonstrated by Diana Fuss in *Essentially Speaking*, have never completely succeeded. Thus when Fuss proposes that “the logic of essentialism can be shown to be irreducible even in those discourses most explicitly concerned with repudiating it,” the question of whether and how Nicholson and Fraser fall into the very theoretical traps of essentialism and foundationalism that they critique becomes an important one to ask, and this is an inquiry that informs a large portion of this chapter (2). Furthermore, the fundamental concepts of *postmodernism* that Nicholson and Fraser find appealing and those upon which their definition of a *postmodern feminist critique* rests are similarly unrealistic,

principally in *postmodernism*'s situatedness as a theoretical position that eschews both philosophy and power, a position that must be and is carried over into their *postmodern feminism*. In considering the improbable if not impossible professed positionality of being without philosophy and power, the question of whether and how their theoretical position becomes imbued with both power and philosophical legitimacy should also be raised, one that is only provisionally answered here when examining Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" and their *postmodern feminism* as modern discourses.

In addition to eradicating tendencies toward essentialism and foundationalism, Nicholson and Fraser assume that, under the philosophical construct of a *postmodern feminism*, "legitimation descends to the level of practice," where speakers "problematize, modify, and warrant the constitutive norms of their own practice even as they engage" them (23). At the same time that these speakers control the norms of their own practice, they also, as Nicholson and Fraser claim, "assume responsibility for legitimizing their own practice" (23). The contradiction that seems embedded in these two statements is located in an underlying humanist rationale that these speakers will reshape these social norms to produce equality (in any shape or form) and that they will legitimize practices that are beneficial to the "cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods" and not declare themselves an authority or their theoretical standpoint as absolute (34). In fact, one need not look any further than "Social Criticism" itself to see the shortcomings of such an assumption, especially when looking at the way Nicholson and Fraser respond to and situate contesting voices, like Seyla Benhabib's, within their *feminism/postmodernism* debate.

While Nicholson and Fraser certainly qualify their *postmodern feminism* in such a way that seems to allow for the other feminist theorists to "problematize, modify, and warrant"



alternative constitutive norms, they also claim that “there is nothing self-contradictory in the idea of a postmodern theory” and rarely allow contradicting voices the chance to “problematize, modify, and warrant” any portion of this theoretical position according to their own cultural specificity. Rather, as it will become clear in this chapter, Nicholson and Fraser do assume the responsibility for legitimizing their own practice, but in the process of doing so, they similarly delegitimize a number of other voices as well as the practices that each silenced voice attempts to legitimize. Without even examining the consequences that arise when *postmodern theory* is established as a save-all for the collective whole of feminist inquiry, Nicholson and Fraser’s assertion of authority should raise a few troubling concerns in relation to the history of privileged feminist activism and theory that they attempt to simultaneously rewrite and erase.

These “practitioners,” as feminist theorists are referred to in “Social Criticism,” face tremendous difficulties legitimizing interpretations of already existing institutions and preexistent feminist theoretical positions, which should suggest an even greater struggle in legitimizing their “practices” under Nicholson and Fraser’s proposed paradigm. This is not to mention the paradox that arises in legitimizing a practice or method of analysis without espousing either power or authority. Secondly, feminist theorists and activists face an even more difficult task when their already suspect practices are rendered doubly illegitimate both by Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism*<sup>2</sup> and the postmodern abandonment of grand narratives of legitimation. The problematic aspect of relinquishing these narratives, politically and socially, is that the very discourses still seeking legitimation become paralyzed in the middle of their own ongoing processes of laying claim to that legitimacy in the first place. At the same

---

<sup>2</sup> This double marginalization begins to sound like a chilling echo of the very voices Nicholson and Fraser purport to represent.

time, those non-legitimized discourses are subject to the continued denial of authenticity within hegemonic discourses that have in no way relinquished their own power (or had that power stripped from them) because of their envelopment in any emergent forms of a postmodern condition. This problematic aspect of postmodern theories, especially when it comes to feminist discourses, has often led leading intellectuals like bell hooks to ponder the question: “Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the “subject” when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?” (“Postmodern Blackness” 2482).

At the same time that this very legitimation becomes impossible due to the “self-negation” implicit in their model of “legitimation as practice,” the discursive power (still on the throne) continues to “hover above,” as Nicholson and Fraser put it, in other words suggesting, I suspect, the position of a “god’s eye view” (“Social Criticism” 23). Thus this enables the unchallenged discursive powers, “hovering above,” to continue to contradict marginalized interpretations of reality (the interpretations that call into question these “powers that be”) by superimposing their own dominant narratives, while impeding, through new modes of suppression, the attempts of marginalized voices to legitimize themselves, as has been the state of affairs since those marginalized voices first began demanding legitimation. Nicholson and Fraser’s presupposition that legitimation will be local, plural, and immanent remains an all too Utopian fantasy that involves an ability to predestine a reorganization of power structures, structures impervious to full identification and dissection. Moreover, Nicholson and Fraser’s attention to Lyotard’s postmodern theory falls short of considering the already altered hierarchy of discursive powers has transpired precisely as an effect of the postmodern condition, a point that will be explored more thoroughly in the analysis of *What Women Want* in Chapter Two.

## Postmodernisms' Archetype: Jean-François Lyotard as a Modern Sign

In defining this postmodern feminist critique, Nicholson and Fraser rely on Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a text they find to be "generally exemplary of the larger tendency" of postmodern plurality, to open up feminist critique and solve the problems of racial, ethnic, and sexual exclusion (21). From this point, they develop their *postmodern feminism*, offering definitions that largely seem to conform to their reading of Lyotard's text and that, as they claim, will be specific enough to the needs of *feminism* as to avoid the occlusion of voices and experiences that inevitably results when feminist writers attempt to speak for all women, everywhere. Correspondingly, they offer this reading of Lyotard's description of the "postmodern condition":

For Lyotard, postmodernism designates the general condition of contemporary Western civilization. The postmodern condition is one in which 'grand narratives of legitimation' are no longer credible. By grand narratives, he means overarching philosophies of history like the Enlightenment story of the gradual but steady progress of reason and freedom, Hegel's dialectic of Spirit coming to know itself, and, most importantly, Marx's drama of the forward march of human productive capacities via class conflict culminating in proletarian revolution. ("Social Criticism" 22)

Because of what they take here to be an official description of *postmodernism*, one that resounds similar feminist critiques of psychoanalytic and Marxian concepts expressed in the 1960s, Nicholson and Fraser correspondingly assess the potential that Lyotard's critique of these metanarratives has to render powerless any discourse that "purports to be a privileged discourse

capable of situating, characterizing, and evaluating all other discourses but not itself to be infected [. . . by] historicity and contingency” (“Social Criticism” 22). Thus, in their discussion of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, which moves from this point to Lyotard’s discussion of the power implicit in the privileged modern discourses, Nicholson and Fraser become particularly interested in the way that *The Postmodern Condition* calls “truth” and “justice” into question. As a result, they rely on the brief encapsulation of the answer that they maintain Lyotard sketches in answering his own question of where “legitimation reside[s] in the postmodern era”: “there will necessarily be many discourses of legitimation dispersed among the plurality of first-order discourses” in which “legitimation becomes plural, local, and immanent” (23).

At the same time, Nicholson and Fraser seem equally concerned with repudiating what they see as Lyotard’s attempt to show that social criticism has no place within “postmodernism”:

We submit, it would be apparent that many of the genres rejected by postmodernists would be necessary for social criticism. [. . .] A phenomenon as pervasive and multi-faceted as male dominance simply cannot be adequately grasped with the meager critical resources to which they would limit us. [. . .] On the contrary, effective criticism of this phenomenon requires an array of different methods and genres. It requires, at minimum, large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology. (26)

Despite their recognition, here, that *postmodernism* is limiting in dealing with phenomena that feminist theorists confront in struggles toward equality, notably struggles not strictly specific to male dominance, Nicholson and Fraser do not qualify their *postmodern feminism* in such a way that would prevent the imposition of “merely any form of *postmodernism*,” like Lyotard’s, on

feminist theories in a manner that would render social criticism inadequate (“Social Criticism” 34, my emphasis). Instead, Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism” is subject to their own word-for-word critique of Lyotard. In other words, Nicholson and Fraser “narrate [sic] a fairly tall tale about a large-scale social trend” – feminist theories – confining feminist theories as a whole within the constraints of a specific postmodern archetype, Lyotard, with the exception of the mostly hollow description of what they call “appropriate” forms of metanarrative and social criticism (25, 34).

Another problematic aspect of Nicholson and Fraser’s reading and classification of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* can be found in a quote I referenced earlier in which Nicholson and Fraser’s claim that “postmodernists seek, *inter alia*, to develop conceptions of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings” (21). In the same paragraph, Fraser and Nicholson exemplify the meaning of this statement, as I did earlier, by stating that the “‘modern’ conception [of philosophy] must give way to a new ‘postmodern one in which criticism floats free of any universalist theoretical ground” (21). Nevertheless, what is important here is the contradiction that occurs two paragraphs after Nicholson and Fraser clarify this basic postmodernist concept when they begin using Lyotard’s theoretical analysis to defend their *postmodern feminism*.

Fraser and Nicholson, as exemplified in their use of these two statements, are attempting to convince their readers that *postmodernism* can operate as an open-ended category with no unilateral domain and no implicit or explicit claim to authority. Yet, in a counterproductive move they tell the reader to consider the example of Jean-François Lyotard, energetically introducing him as “genuinely exemplary of the larger tendency” and his *The Postmodern Condition* as “the locus classicus for contemporary debates” that “reflects [. . .the ] concerns and tensions of the

movement” (21, 22). By setting up Lyotard and his work as an unconditional representative of *postmodernism*, they lump all other postmodern theorists under the all-inclusive sign “postmodernism,” for which Lyotard is to serve as *postmodernism*’s principal embodiment. In doing this, they seemingly exclude the qualifying phrase in their description of postmodern theories, “inter alia,” and canonize Lyotard’s work and Lyotard himself as “the” overarching authority, one that conceivably “hovers above” all other postmodern discourses (21). As a result, Nicholson and Fraser homogenize and oversimplify the diverse array of postmodernist thinkers who they define as part of what they call the “postmodern movement,” which must inevitably result in the exclusion of any competing or contradictory postmodernist critiques.

The postmodern “movement” or “tendency” itself, in the way that Nicholson and Fraser categorize and define it, then, also becomes a metanarrative (a story about the story of postmodernist philosophy) and in some ways even the projection of a narrative about philosophy onto and into the future. Nicholson and Fraser’s narrative, thus, does not tread far from other “grand Enlightenment narratives,” what Hal Foster refers to in “Postmodernism in Parallax” (1993) as a penchant for fascist tendencies within the history of American critical theory. Rather, their reading bolsters the legitimacy of the already articulated metanarratives of postmodern theories, and in effect, further diminishes any revolutionary power that postmodernist theory might have once furnished.

Terminological Squibbles: The Delegitimation of Voice within Nicholson and Fraser's *Postmodern Feminism*

In providing a five page discussion on Lyotard as the representative theorist of postmodernisms, Nicholson and Fraser, I think, are trying to rebut the claim that the use of *postmodernism* leads to a philosophical methodology in which all points of view are equally valid and all belief systems are equally true, or rather, relativism. They must do this because such a methodology would obviously impede the political potentiality of feminisms if the effect were the creation of an incapacitated feminist subject who could not call phallogocentric discourses into question. However, they actually proceed and again quite reductively, to do something quite different in comments regarding Seyla Benhabib's critique of "Social Criticism" and her use of Lyotard as an example. Nicholson and Fraser's five page discussion on Lyotard in "Social Criticism" is perhaps either what triggers Benhabib's essay, "Epistemologies of the Postmodern: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard," which appears later in Nicholson's *Postmodernism/Feminism* collection (1990) or a consequent reaction to the theoretical positions upon which Benhabib takes issue with Lyotard. The origin of this discussion never becomes clear. Nevertheless, though "Epistemologies of the Postmodern" is not the essay I will be using to illuminate Benhabib's position on the *postmodernism/feminism* debate, Nicholson comments in a section of her introduction to the *Feminism/Postmodernism* collection about Benhabib and Benhabib's essay illuminates Nicholson's inability to at least reconsider the complexity of the debate and the potential shortcomings of their postmodern feminist stance.

Referring again to the theoretical essentialism of feminist theories emerging from the period spanning between 1960 and 1980, Nicholson and Fraser argue that feminist theories "have been susceptible to the same kinds of criticisms that postmodernists make against philosophy"

(5). It is from this point, to emphasize this once more, that Nicholson and Fraser appear to find a need to use postmodern theories, in its singular form, as a universal system of checks and balances for the broad spectrum of feminist theories that emerged during the period often referred to as *second wave feminism*. To this assertion, which is at best a conclusion reached by traveling on a very slippery slope, Nicholson claims that Benhabib has “no objection” (7, my emphasis). In (and after) making this statement, Nicholson simplifies Benhabib’s “objection” to a “quarrel” with the writings of Lyotard and his tendency towards relativism and inconsistency,<sup>3</sup> using two words, objection and quarrel, that seem to imply that Benhabib has a particular distaste for one line of postmodern thought based on an immature notion that has not been thought through to its “correct” conclusion (7-8). The implications of Nicholson’s censure and the authority they exercise here suggests that if Benhabib could overcome her objection to or simply overlook this particular aspect of postmodern theories, she would understand, as Nicholson and Fraser do, *postmodernism*’s “centrality to the needs of *feminism*” (16, my emphasis). As Nicholson asserts with a particular certainty: “With such a conclusion, I believe, all of the contributors of this volume would surely agree” (16). However, since many of the contributors in their *Feminism/Postmodernism* collection do not reach this conclusion, taking issue with much more complex issues regarding postmodern theories than relativism and contradiction, Nicholson and Fraser once again place the voices and practices of a collection of other feminist critics into a quite reductive category of Nicholson and Fraser’s own definition.

---

<sup>3</sup> Fraser and Nicholson, of course, elaborate on these words “relativism” and “inconsistency” in the five page discussion of Lyotard in “Social Criticism” and attempt to rectify a tricky obstacle by calling for a “trading of criticisms” (20). In doing this, they also assume that postmodern theorists would participate in this union as if it were a two way boulevard and invite feminist theorists to “help remedy the deficiencies of the other,” or rather, that postmodern theorists would invite a feminist reflection and reworking of postmodernisms according to some primary feminist epistemologies(20).



In “Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance,” an article published in 1991 by the journal *Praxis International* and again in a 1995 collection edited by Nicholson (*Feminist Contentions*), Benhabib, perhaps inadvertently, rejoins Nicholson’s above stated “belief,” saying:

*Feminism* and *postmodernism* are often mentioned as if their current union was a foregone conclusion; yet certain characterizations of *postmodernism* should make us rather ask “*feminism* or *postmodernism*?” At issue, of course, are not merely terminological quibbles. (17, my emphases)

For Benhabib, neither *postmodernism* nor *feminism* is useless, but her disagreement with *feminism/postmodernism* union is also not, as she puts it, a “terminological quibble.”

In contradistinction to Fraser and Nicholson’s elucidation of *postmodernism* as a “modern” sign<sup>4</sup> that Jean-François Lyotard can adequately represent, Benhabib identifies *postmodernism*, and *feminism* as well, as “constitutive and evaluative terms, informing and helping define the very practices they attempt to describe” (20). Thus, she seems to see these terms as ‘signs’ that constitute (shape and design) and not as ‘signs’ that have been constituted (rendered fixed and terminal). In other words, postmodern theories interpret a set of experiences and conditions within a social milieu and are, likewise, affected by the very social environment under investigation. Postmodernisms cannot, then, be understood as fixed categories from which feminist theory can emerge and remain. “As categories of the present,” she continues, “they project modes of thinking about the future and evaluating the past” (20-21). Benhabib is more than willing to take into consideration the importances of postmodern theories, the postmodern condition, and their effects on both the subject and her or his social world. However, as a central concern to Benhabib’s argument, seeing *postmodernism* as an uncomplicated or indispensable

---

<sup>4</sup> Butler identifies *postmodernism* in the essay “Contingent Foundations” as a necessarily modern sign.

ally to *feminism* means failing to highlight the already postmodern aspects of feminisms and feminist theories, failing to recognize these already postmodern aspects are legitimate in their own right, and failing to observe that postmodern theories can be marginalizing discourses in and of themselves.

#### Already Postmodern Feminisms: A Rejection of Nicholson and Fraser's Categorical Assessment of Feminism in "Social Criticism"

Referencing Jane Flax's book *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Seyla Benhabib leans on Flax for a "characterization of the 'postmodern moment' provided by a feminist theorist" (the very feminist theorist who has said that white women categorically reject postmodernisms as an easy solution to the guilt, discomfort, and anxiety they feel coming to terms with difference) (Benhabib 18). Benhabib then uses Flax's portrayal to show that the central theses of postmodern theories—"The Death of Man," "The Death of History," and "The Death of Metaphysics"—have already been articulated in feminist terminology—the "Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason," the "Engendering of Historical Narrative," and "Feminist Skepticism toward the Claims of Transcendent Reason" (17-18). While Nicholson, Fraser, and Flax claim that the alliance between *feminism* and *postmodernism* would produce a more desirable and more productive *feminism*, Benhabib, by deconstructing points of correlation between the two, shows that each postmodern thesis actually undermines its corresponding feminist endeavor. As she asserts, these three fundamental theses of postmodern theories, again using Flax's illustration as a case in point, cause these corresponding results: "The Death of Man" prevents the subject from being "self-reflexive" or "acting on principle," "The Death of History" dissolves the "epistemic interest

in history of struggling groups in constructing their past narratives,” and “The Death of Metaphysics” circumvents any “criticizing or legitimizing [of] institutions, practices and traditions other than through the immanent appeal to the self-legitimation of ‘small narratives’” (29). From the expanded version of these points that she provides in her essay, Benhabib expresses the urgency of her appeal to reconsider the negative possibilities of Nicholson and Fraser’s need to use *postmodernism* as a feminist safeguard:

Feminist theory is undergoing a profound identity crisis at the moment. The postmodernist position(s) thought through to their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of *feminist theory* but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women’s movement altogether. [. . .] A certain version of *postmodernism* is not only incompatible but would undermine the very possibility of *feminism* as a theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women. [. . .] Thus, *postmodernism* undermines the feminist commitment to women’s agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women’s own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender ‘in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity. (20, 29, my emphases)

Given the weight of Benhabib’s concerns and the great stakes she seems to perceive in relation to a merger of postmodern and feminist theoretical tenets, it is hard to believe that Nicholson and Fraser would classify Benhabib’s position so simply in suggesting that the foundation of her perspective was merely a terminological squibble. But as Laura Kipnis proposes, such is the depth of denial that has been known to infect the sum total of such theoretical mergers,

especially when, as Benhabib points out, the subject (*feminist theory* in this case) is in a state of crisis looking for an immediate subjective resolution.

### *Postmodern Feminism: A Modern Discourse*

Perhaps the most contradictory element of Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* is that, by appropriating *postmodernism* as a remedy for the underlying subjective crises facing feminist theories in American academia, their *postmodern feminism* becomes part of the modernist structure of feminist critique that it sets out to dismantle. In other words, the non-totalizing theory that they attempt to implement suggests that a union of *postmodernism* and *feminism* would allow for the formation of an all-encompassing feminist perspective, and therefore, Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* becomes, by default, a totalizing theory itself. The specific *postmodern feminism* that Nicholson and Fraser's essay embodies, applied as a totalizing theory, speaks quite authoritatively about those who find the stakes of the union to be deceptively dangerous. While this can be demonstrated explicitly in the preceding example of Seyla Benhabib, it perhaps becomes more transparent when observing the way the power-ridden and silencing aspects of their *postmodern feminism* are carried over into and utilized within the work of other feminist theorists.

For example, in her essay "The End of Innocence," pushing for a *postmodern feminism* similar to that defined by Fraser and Nicholson, Jane Flax describes a conference on the *feminism/postmodernism* debate that she attended in 1990 as having an "atmosphere of tension and hostility," implying in the context of the paragraph that the debate was neither a "friendly [n]or productive exchange" (445). In the next paragraph, she proceeds to report "on the claims that some feminists make about *postmodernism*" that had been articulated during the conference,

describing these claims with the arrogant flare and a tone of intolerance that Nicholson and Fraser take when diminishing the concerns of feminist critics who take issue with their *postmodern feminism* (446).

More importantly, Flax's conveyance of the claims she describes (made by feminists who question an alliance between *feminism* and *postmodernism*) is simply articulated, lacks context, and, as a parade of soundbites, fails to offer the elaboration that might constitute the legitimacy and/or importance of those claims. For instance, similar to Nicholson and Fraser's assumption that *postmodernism* would help *feminism* solve its Eurocentric tendencies, Flax takes it upon herself to judge the appropriateness of postmodernisms in addressing issues of race, asserting that "the projects of *postmodernism* and women of color overlap" (459). From this postulation, Flax stumbles along the trajectory of her own logical fallacy to claim that the oppositions of white feminists to engagements with *postmodernism* are based upon their own "guilt and anxieties about racism (and our anger at the 'others' for disturbing the initial pleasure and comfort of 'sisterhood')" (459). Where Seyla Benhabib and bell hooks' resistance to the *postmodernism/feminism* union might fit into Flax's categorical, "if you're white, your either with *us* or you're a racist" paradigm is also an imperative question, but one that only Flax could answer. But as Benhabib and hooks' "hostility"<sup>5</sup> towards a feminist engagement with postmodernisms makes clear, it would be more plausible to argue, as I do in this thesis, that the appropriation of postmodernism by these white feminists circumnavigates the issue of diversity altogether.

In a twice-removed application, a quotation is taken from the latter part of Flax's "The End of Innocence" and used in Robyn Wiegman's *American Anatomies*, a study that Wiegman

---

<sup>5</sup> For Flax, oppositions to postmodernisms can be read as hostility toward postmodernisms.

claims dwells on “two main currents of conversation”—“the critique, on one hand, of *feminism’s* historically white female subject and the postmodern suspicion, on the other, concerning the constitution of the subject altogether” (179, my emphasis). Wiegman states:

Most crucially, Flax interprets white women’s hostility to the postmodern as a displacement of their own “guilt and anxieties about racism (and our anger at the ‘others’ for disturbing the initial pleasure and comfort of ‘sisterhood’).” But because any direct challenge to the way whiteness has been critiqued “would be politically unthinkable,” Flax suggests that it is “easier and more acceptable for white women to express our discomfort with difference . . . and the politics of knowledge claims by categorically rejecting *postmodernism*. (185, quotations from “The End of Innocence” page 459)<sup>6</sup>

The quotation, disconcerting in and of itself, is also troubling given that it is offered in *American Anatomies*, a book about the intersection of race and gender, with little context or explanation by Wiegman. But as it follows a quite favorable view, on Wiegman’s part, of Fraser and Nicholson’s “Social Criticism,”<sup>7</sup> Flax’s all but tangible claim to authority simultaneously points towards Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* as a modernist discourse and theoretical position and suspends its legitimacy by calling into question its ability to ever manifest from one theoretical text to another without silencing and unequivocally rejecting the dissensions of other feminist theorists.

These examples are important in showing that, as a modernist discourse, the authority and power of Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* extends beyond the temporality and

---

<sup>7</sup> See the chapter “The Alchemy of Disloyalty” in Robyn Wiegman’s *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995).

locality of its own publication. But considering how this power and authority might have been carried over from the *postmodernism* they invoke is also crucial. In “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’”<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler begins this inquiry. Suggesting that “the question of *postmodernism* be read not merely as the question *postmodernism* poses for *feminism*, but as the question, what is *postmodernism*?” Butler begins her essay with this set of questions:

The question of *postmodernism* is surely a question, for is there, after all, something called *postmodernism*? Is it an historical characterization, a certain kind of theoretical position, and what does it mean for a term that has described a certain aesthetic practice not to apply to social theory and to feminist social and political theory in particular? Who are these postmodernists? (35, my emphases)

Answering, she explains that *postmodernism* is often taken as an overarching methodology, as it is in “Social Criticism,” under which “many modalities and permutations” are lumped under a singular and thus unquestionably “modernist” sign (36-37). While the postmodern project seeks to “call into question the ways in which such ‘examples’ and ‘paradigms’ serve to subordinate and erase,” it, in fact, operates as a subterfuge of power that “domesticates” and “colonizes” the theoretical positions included under its name—particularly the theories of Lacan, Kristeva, Foucault, Cixous, Derrida, and Irigaray, to name a few—some of which are posited against or emphatically in contention with others (37).

By investigating what *postmodernism* is rather than how *feminism* can benefit by fitting comfortably within its boundaries, Butler uses her critique of *postmodernism* to show that power

---

<sup>8</sup> *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (1995) is a collection also edited by Nicholson and includes work written by Fraser.

always precedes, no matter what provisions are made in terms of methodology, politics, or identity. As a methodology that makes no claims to power, *postmodernism* can be shown, in quite the opposite manner, to be imbued with even more power than discourses that explicitly marginalize other speakers:

If *postmodernism* as a term has some force or meaning within social theory, or feminist social theory in particular, perhaps it can be found in the critical exercise that seeks to show how theory, how philosophy, is always implicated in power. [...] To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful, forceful conceptual practice which sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power through recourse to the tropes of normative universality. (38-39, my emphasis)

Using *postmodernism* as an example of the way an alleged non-authority and non-entity acquires power and, in that, the power to dominate even as it appears to have no power at all, Butler lays the foreground for the question of how Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* acquires power and, in that, the power to dominate even as it appears to have no power at all (36-39).

As suggested in the beginning of this chapter, understanding how Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* has existed within its cultural, sociopolitical, and theoretical contexts requires examining the bases upon which this theoretical position was founded. In exploring this question, I would like to return again to the theoretical underpinnings of *postmodern feminism* wherein Nicholson and Fraser establish Lyotard as the figurehead and archetype of *postmodernism* and offer the following reading of *The Postmodern Condition*:

For Lyotard, *postmodernism* designates the general condition of contemporary Western civilization. The postmodern condition is one in which “grand narratives



of legitimation” are no longer credible. By grand narratives, he means  
overarching philosophies of history (22, my emphases)

Identifying Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* as a form of *postmodernism* that “designates,” as in designates the general condition of contemporary Western theory, and Lyotard as one who “means,” as in “he means overarching philosophies of history” are “no longer credible,” is problematic, most specifically when these designations and meanings are applied to their *postmodern feminism*. As Lyotard’s text begins to *designate* and *mean* for Nicholson and Fraser, it also begins to designate and mean from a very specific perspective and one that emanates from a particularly colonizing modern foundation of knowledge, chiefly the Eurocentric perspective from which neither they nor Lyotard can remove themselves. Nicholson and Fraser’s text also *speaks* when they neglect the qualifier “contemporary Western civilization” to which Lyotard is attentive in *The Postmodern Condition*. In other words, how *The Postmodern Condition* “means” and “designates” depends upon the “who” that is interpreting the text as well as the “from where” and “under what conditions” this who is speaking, as Lyotard’s rendering of the “condition of contemporary Western civilization,” too, depends on these variables.

While Nicholson and Fraser might see their interpretation of *The Postmodern Condition* as positive in so much as it delegitimizes white, male, Western accounts of history, other understandings could vary significantly. In adaptations and rewritings of these accounts history by previously silenced and/or oppressed voices where grand narratives of legitimacy began to supply the means for a move toward human equality or where a kind of Marxist hope of overcoming subordination and oppression has emerged, the portrait of the “postmodern condition” being drawn by Nicholson and Fraser might be viewed as one that is very bleak and one without much prospect for resistance and change. Exacting a philosophical position that

conceives of itself as being wholly applicable is a risky endeavor in this respect, one that, though perhaps unconsciously, institutes a global, totalizing socio-philosophical narrative schema that orders and explains knowledge and experience.

The potential, possibly unintended effect of suggesting that a theoretical position is altogether practical for all individuals, without limitations to the possible places and times that such application might not be sufficient or at least a recognition that in some cases it may not be adequate, is that this statement begins to echo Nicholson and Fraser's description of the "privileged discourse capable of situating, characterizing, and evaluating all other discourse" that Lyotard regards as illegitimate. It seems paradoxical that they would deviate from Lyotard's denunciation of the power implicit in metanarrative discourses at the same time they all but fully validate their own overarching metatheory. Nevertheless, suggesting that Lyotard's categorical rejection of metanarratives does not apply to them allows Nicholson and Fraser to broaden and extend their own entitlement to the power-ridden position that they take when defining the paradigmatic structure of *postmodern feminism* and privileging it over the feminist methodologies that call its utility and relevance into question:

A first step is to realize, *contra* Lyotard, that postmodern critique need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures. This point is important for feminists, since sexism has a long history and is deeply and pervasively embedded in contemporary societies. Thus, postmodern feminists need not abandon the large theoretical tools needed to address large political problems. There is nothing self-contradictory in the idea of postmodern theory.

(34)

I agree with Nicholson and Fraser that these “large historical narratives” and “analyses of macrostructures” most certainly are important to critiquing long-existing, perpetually modified histories of sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of tyranny. But Nicholson and Fraser’s sanctioning of metanarrative discourses is, at the same time, that which gives authorization to their own construction of a postmodern feminist metatheory within their essay and one of the reasons the “idea” of postmodern theories (an idea that at least becomes the vanguard of their *postmodern feminism*, if not explicitly offered as such) is “contradictory.”

Nothing but their own claim to the absence of self-contradiction washes out this antipodal positioning of their postmodern feminist perspective as one placed firmly within the narrative of *The Postmodern Condition* and as one exempt from its critique. Its irreconcilability, like the essentialist essence of any critique that involves the mention of gender or sexed terminology, is the philosophical subterranean that provides definition for this *postmodern condition*, and its modern, foundationalist substructure or underpinning is not dislodged simply by Nicholson and Fraser’s invocation of *feminism*’s maturation to some kind of postmodern status. Similarly, Lyotard’s description of a “condition” is much different from Nicholson and Fraser’s attempt to propel feminisms into the structures of that condition, and this crucial distinction to draw. But I would like to return momentarily to the idea of *postmodern theory* presented in “Social Criticism” and the way that it is employed by Nicholson and Fraser not as a promising subjective position to which they should aspire but as a means of justifying what seems to emerge as their own metatheory.

By situating the term “postmodernism” in “Social Criticism without Philosophy” as an idea that “can, in principle, be conceived in ways that do not take us back to foundationalism,” Nicholson and Fraser construct their interpretation and implementation of *postmodernism* as an

anti-theoretical theory (23). As follows, they assign value to *postmodernism* by framing it as having the “right pragmatics” and thus the “right practices.” Hence the theoretical tools that Nicholson and Fraser use to argue for a “multiplicity of theoretical standpoints,” and also to facilitate the legitimation of their postmodern feminist theory, generates a distended substantiation of what has already become the remarkably powerful metatheory of their *postmodern feminism* specifically because of the authority they assume to have in making this value judgment regarding “right” and “wrong” pragmatics and practices.

Moreover, they stage this encounter and present their *postmodern feminism* as the original *postmodern feminist Theory* when they claim within the first paragraph of their essay: “So far, however, they [*feminism* and *postmodernism*] have kept an uneasy distance from one another. Indeed, so great has been their mutual wariness that there have been remarkably few extended discussions of the relations between them” (19). Consequentially, Nicholson and Fraser discard the already postmodern aspects of feminist philosophy in a number of feminist theoretical texts, texts that not only have been recognized as postmodern in their own right but also have been accepted as similarly valuable and none capable of representing “all” experiences and social conditions. Nicholson and Fraser’s appeal to *postmodernism*, particularly the “exemplary” Lyotard, raises the form of postmodernism offered by Lyotard to this metanarrative position, and their authority and power to do so resides in the process of framing (not to mention defending) their *postmodern feminism* in such a way that it too becomes a metatheory. The qualifiers they offer regarding their appropriation of *postmodernism* seem of no substance when placed into the context of their essay and when situated alongside Nicholson and Fraser’s consistent rebuttals of other feminist theorists’ critiques, such as those of Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib, Susan Bordo, and others.

Voices of Dissent: The Structure of Nicholson's Edited Collections *Feminism/Postmodernism* and *Feminist Contentions* and Subsequent Responses

Not unlike the tone of voice of other feminist theorists that Nicholson and Fraser claim has “hinder[ed] alliances with other progressive movements” from the 1980s to the present, Nicholson and Fraser’s argumentative and derisive tone of voice (as well as their sometimes blatant dismissiveness of other stances in the debate) seems to undermine the “cross-cultural,” “transepochal,” “comparativist” theory that they attempt to justify (34-35). Although their call for a multifaceted feminist commonality is justified and, as well, they may be correct in attributing the current stall to contentions between metanarratives and narratives which interweave race, sexuality, class, and/or ethnicity, the simple union of *feminism* and *postmodernism* into what they term “postmodern feminism” is still absent of certain facets that other feminist theorists regard as essential in analyzing or dismantling marginalizing hierarchies. For instance, the *postmodern feminism* they conceive is deficient of “clear definitions and political aims for feminists and feminisms” that, as hooks claims in “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” have been necessary throughout history and are still of critical importance (23). In spite of the need for the analytical tools and philosophical foundations that have been and continue to be indispensable, Nicholson and Fraser univocally reject any concept that retains modern theoretical underpinnings.

Furthermore, Nicholson and Fraser rarely provide explanations or examples that consider the ways in which any form of social, political, or historical narrative “rendered temporally and culturally specific” might actually manifest if explored through this theoretical paradigm and, as well, often discredit and sometimes silence other voices who attempt to weigh the missing social

and political components and consider the significance of their absence. At the point at which the voices that attempt to do so are subordinated or stifled for the sake of legitimizing Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism*, it seems that "social criticism," rather than "philosophy," undergoes an explicit devaluation, one that parallels the disavowal of social critique in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* that Nicholson and Fraser outrightly reject. Moreover, this theoretical position, to a rather extensive degree, removes the very tools that have been and continue to be pragmatically useful in resisting subordination and oppression, particularly to those individuals who Nicholson and Fraser reassert as "occluded from axes of domination other than gender" ("Social Criticism" 33). It becomes important, then, to consider whether this would have been the result if this "encounter" had not been as one-sided as Nicholson and Fraser cause it to be.

Time and time again in Nicholson and Fraser's facilitation of this dialogue between *feminism* and *postmodernism*, the ideas of other feminist intellectuals are displaced, reinterpreted, and dismissed. As a result, Nicholson and Fraser have been able to instruct these feminist theorists (as well as their readers) as to how their differing conceptions of and oppositions to this *feminism/postmodernism* encounter can fit neatly and uniformly within the *postmodern feminism* that Nicholson and Fraser have instituted. Each time this occurs, the qualifiers that are offered – local, fallibilistic, plural, etc. – disappear into a void of increasing silence(ing) as if only placed within "Social Criticism" to deny its metanarrative (or metatheoretical) constitution. This nears the philosophical equivalent of statements made to maintain the subjective figments of political correctness in American society today, whereby: homophobics deny their homophobia, sexists deny their sexism, anti-feminists deny their anti-feminist practices, racists deny their racism, and so too ethnocentrists deny their ethnocentrism.

One might ask, then, is it possible, in trying to avoid the stratifying and universalizing critiques that second wave feminist theorists tend toward, that Nicholson and Fraser go too far in the other direction, where the already legitimized critiques, interpretations, and narratives of marginalized groups are delegitimized under the grand narrative of *postmodernism*, as it has in some ways come to exist? Is it possible that the structure of their collections *Feminism/Postmodernism* and *Feminist Contentions*, as well as their responses to the critiques other feminists offer regarding their *postmodern feminisms*, categorically positions “Social Criticism without Philosophy,” too, as a secondary master narrative? And what do Nicholson and Fraser mean to suggest in describing the changing roles of intellectuals during the postmodern era in the following explication:

When no longer anchored philosophically the very shape of criticism changes. It becomes more pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual, and local. With this comes a corresponding change in the special role and political function of intellectuals[?] (“Social Criticism” 21)

“Social Criticism” raises more concerns regarding the relationship between postmodernisms and feminisms than it can explain away in the numerous publications produced to defend their position. Raising these questions might have been beneficial to an understanding of how feminisms are implicated in and compounded by a set of postmodern conditions as well as how feminist theories might begin responding to or analyzing a set of postmodern sociopolitical circumstances. But the explication, in the above quotation, of the role of intellectuals in a time of postmodernity, first of all, assumes that the progression “towards” postmodernity is complete and, as a result, limits the role of feminist intellectuals to a very restricted view of their sociopolitical locale. In other words, if postmodern feminist social criticisms are only pragmatic,

thus only deal with factual or tangible occurrences, the intellectual or feminist critic cannot begin to concretely analyze invisible forms of domination and subordination or the structural foundations of systems that create, reinforce, and perpetuate both (35). If postmodern feminisms are more “ad hoc,” meaning that postmodern feminist critiques are confined to “a” specific purpose, it becomes even more difficult to investigate complex systems of oppression identified across historically and socially contingent channels and different directions of flow and synthesis. Moreover, it becomes more difficult, if not unfeasible, for this critique to also be contextual. Finally, the application of this methodology becomes even less likely to transpire if one were examining multiple or split subjectivities or interstitial spaces as opposed to a singular event occurring in an isolated space and time.

Granted, a theoretical interpretation can be focused on a localized event that takes place within the larger context of its immediate time and place. But to make judgments about the theoretical imperative or correctness of any of the above is to invoke the very Philosophy with a capital P that Nicholson and Fraser intend to avoid when they stress: “in the postmodern reflection on the relationship between philosophy and social criticism, the term ‘philosophy’ undergoes an explicit devaluation; it is cut down to size if not eliminated altogether” (“Social Criticism” 21). In fact, the theoretical position they describe here, when planted in the social realm as opposed to the theoretical space it enjoys in their essay, becomes both one from which a voice speaks that assumes the authority to have conclusive knowledge about a particular event and one from which that voice affects an implicit authority in defining the contextual surroundings of that particular event. In practice, this *postmodern feminist theory* requires the imposition of one’s interpretation of an experience(s) on another whose experience(s) may differ, no matter how singular the event or experience under consideration.



Nicholson and Fraser seem to acknowledge this set of circumstances within their attempt to reveal *postmodernism* as a “restricted,” androcentric theoretical position, saying:

The term philosophy maintains an implicit structural privilege. In the new postmodern equation, then, philosophy is the independent variable while social criticism and political practice are dependent variables. The view of theory which emerges is not determined by considering the needs of contemporary criticism and engagement. It is determined, rather, by considering the contemporary status of philosophy. This way of proceeding has important consequences, not all of which are positive. (“Social Criticism” 21)

This is perhaps one of the few times that I find myself agreeing with Nicholson and Fraser without needing to qualify that consensus. Yet even as they take into account the limitations of the version of postmodernism considered in their essay and recognize the possible consequences of the “contemporary status of philosophy” in relation to their reading of *postmodern philosophy*, the *postmodern feminism* that emerges appears as one that is invested only in its current philosophical status in relation to the philosophies that it deems credible (*postmodernism*) or lacking (seemingly all theory under the signifier *feminism*). Moreover, it suggests a second potential effect wherein their denial of “Social Criticism” or *postmodern feminism* as a metatheory begins to resound what Nicholson and Fraser see as Lyotard’s indispensable observation regarding first-order metanarrative. In other words, “Social Criticism” becomes a metanarrative that contends “not itself to be inflected by the historicity and contingency which render first-order discourses potentially distorted and in need of legitimation” (“Social Criticism” 22).

## The Embeddedness of Assumption within a Specific Historical Context

Nicholson and Fraser claim that whether it was academic *feminism* or Marxist feminist scholarship, *feminist theory* has from the beginning “failed to recognize the embeddedness of its own assumptions within a specific historical context,” a problem they hope to resolve by redefining *feminism* according to the abovementioned terms (1-2, 34-35). Their argument is problematic, first and foremost, because it fails to recognize the necessity of historically progressive events. In other words, that feminisms began with a formation of alliances built around a “universally shared interest or identity” is historically important, as one could not imagine, for example, movements of this caliber (women’s suffrage and the Women’s Rights Movement) being founded upon a multitude of “specific institutional categories” (Nicholson and Fraser 34-35). Without this initial commonality, women such as bell hooks and Adrienne Rich, both of whom are mentioned within a single paragraph of “Social Criticism,” might have never gained the voice that, as Nicholson and Fraser note, “unmasked the implicit reference to white Anglo women” and “exposed the heterosexual bias of much mainstream feminist theory” (“Social Criticism” 33).

However, the conceptual basis upon which Nicholson and Fraser found their *postmodern feminist philosophy* as part of an attempt to become “[sufficiently] attentive to *theoretical* prerequisites of dealing with diversity” is one that insufficiently attends to the way these concepts are based upon and entwined with sociopolitical and cultural “realities” (“Social Criticism” 33). The way these diverse bodies experience their own sociopolitical and cultural worlds is devalued if not altogether ignored in “Social Criticism.” To put it a different way, Nicholson and Fraser do not consider the degree to which these experiences cannot be separated from what they see as the falsehoods and failings of modernist theories/philosophies simply by

“criticizing lingering essentialism in contemporary *feminist theory*” (“Social Criticism” 33, my emphasis). Nicholson and Fraser, in effect, deny that these experiences have been and are still at least partially embedded in a modernist historical context wherein the essentialist paradigms that they want to altogether abandon in feminist criticisms operate as tools of subordination. In addition, “Social Criticism” itself “fails to recognize the embeddedness of its own assumptions within a specific historical context.” In other words, it fails to recognize it is implanted between modern and postmodern eras and is itself subject to being impinged upon by the conditions of both. Conceivably, one of the most telling failures, here, is that Nicholson and Fraser do not consider that arrival of postmodernity is not a foregone conclusion but rather a moment of redefinition, already taking place, and simultaneously defining its own constitution.

If a postmodern metanarrative is coming into existence, whether called to this position by “outsiders” like Nicholson and Fraser or by postmodern theorists themselves, then by all means, we must be witnessing a critique, interpretation, and (re)definition of “marginalized” discourses, signs, identities, and knowledges by that very metanarrative, though through which particular postmodern metanarrative no one can be sure. However, one can be certain, as Kumkum Sangari has noted, that various versions of this postmodern condition have been accepted by speakers of dominant discourses on a global scale and often imposed on people and in places not experiencing the same postmodern condition, if they are experiencing such at all. Understanding *postmodernism* as a “condition,” rather than a philosophical “position,” might have allowed for the silenced critiques of oppression both within and outside of these postmodern contexts to speak about their experiences within what has to be acknowledged as an interstitial subjective space. But instead of looking from the inside out, as in examining the potentially beneficial concepts of postmodernisms from distinct feminist perspectives, “Social Criticism” and its

authors continue to place the emphasis on a male gaze that stands outside staring in (*postmodernism*), scrutinizing individual qualities of feminist theories, instilling its own logic, and continuing to refuse any agency to the possessor.

Though Nicholson and Fraser describe this as “a postmodernist reflection on feminist theory [that] reveals the disabling vestiges of essentialism,” at times it becomes difficult to discern whether the gaze is that of the *postmodernism* described in their essay or another that emanates from the authors’ unconscious sociopolitical, cultural, philosophical, and/or alternative subjective assemblage, although the gaze rarely seems to become self-interested. In other words, while Nicholson and Fraser often assess other feminist theories through their own understanding of their postmodern temporal and spatial locale, they disallow that appraisal when it is returned upon their own theoretical interpretation.

Nonetheless, it is in placing *feminism* under the subterfuge of *postmodernism* and defining *feminism* according to the terms of Lyotardian postmodern theory that Nicholson and Fraser seem to think that they can remove themselves, as well as feminist theories, from the gaze being imposed upon them. But their *postmodern feminism* does not emerge as the “robust postmodern feminist paradigm of social criticism” that they describe as “possible” (35) Rather, it becomes, itself, positioned outside that *postmodern feminist paradigm* due to its own failure to fulfill its particular paradigmatic requirements. More importantly, because Nicholson and Fraser “fail [sic] to recognize the embeddedness of its own assumptions within a specific historical context,” they fail to see that their institution of this self-imposed introspection of feminism according to *postmodern theory* seems to place *feminism* firmly within the postfeminist and postmodern discourses gaining recognition in America’s social realm. This possibility is explored in the chapters that follow in this thesis.

By asserting that feminist theories have already articulated *postmodernism*'s central tenets, Tania Modleski makes a move similar to Seyla Benhabib and bell hooks, asking: Why does *feminism* need "a male authority figure to speak on its behalf and certify its legitimacy as well as its sanity?" (3). Modleski's *Feminism Without Women*, then, whether intentionally or not, solicits a critical question: Does the possibility exist, at this critical juncture where the identity crisis faced by feminist theorists and the emergence of postmodernisms meet, that *feminism* itself felt the effects of a postfeminist backlash and was convinced to some degree not simply of a perceived equality (between postmodern and feminist discourses) but also an underlying feminist misery with its own philosophical history? To some extent, the answer to this question appears to be "yes," and to the extent that it is, Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" can be read as what Modleski identifies as a postfeminist text. Comparing Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" to a reading of the film *What Women Want* in Chapter Two, I suggest the *feminism/postmodernism* debate that Nicholson and Fraser both capture and regulate can be read as a "battle of the sexes" text wherein a gendered male theory (Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*) is locked in a full scale battle with a gendered female set of feminist theories. Reading "Social Criticism" as a postfeminist text, I suggest that the feminization of patriarchal discourses, as postmodernisms must be considered if their central theses resemble and postdate ones articulated in feminist theories, has succeeded in "bringing men back to the center state and diverting feminist from [their own] tasks" (Modleski 6).

The rebuttals within and outside of Nicholson and Fraser's collections situate their "Social Criticism without Philosophy" as the "locus classicus" against which others speaking from differing feminist perspectives have (dis)engaged with the *postmodernism* that Nicholson and Fraser's article both depicts and executes, while at the same time remaining critically

engaged with postmodern theories. Looking at the alliance of “*feminism* and *postmodernism*” with a skeptical eye, as I did here in terms of Fraser and Nicholson’s essay, uncovers the emergence of a substantially different relationship between postmodernisms and feminisms than either Nicholson or Fraser suggested or anticipated. But, rather than fault them or call their theory an error because of unforeseen manifestations, feminists could benefit more by understanding what went awry and by learning from it. Just as Diana Fuss suggests in *Essentially Speaking* (1989) that the “risk of essence” might be vital to feminisms because of feminisms’ need to critique essentialism itself, feminisms might, by examining this debate, find the risk of not forming an alliance between *feminism* and *postmodernism* essential. Critiquing and learning from postmodernisms’ own failing objectives might be the crucial shift out of the debate taking place behind the walls of academia and into the sociopolitical space from which it is initiated.

Some of Nicholson and Fraser’s conceptualizations are very useful and have already been used in the work of many feminist theorists (Robyn Wiegman, Jane Flax) not to mention other intellectual work and sociopolitical and cultural activism. However, their framing of these noteworthy goals within the structures of the version of postmodernism offered in their reading of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* is problematic in the least harmful of cases in terms of both philosophy and social criticism, if not also symptomatic, regressive, and sometimes oppressive. They violate their own rules, and in doing so, bolster the already existing systems of oppression as well as variations of previously existing repressive structures that emerge within postmodernist and other male-headed approaches to and interpretations of society and culture.

CHAPTER TWO: WRITING *POSTMODERN FEMINISM* INTO POSTFEMINIST NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: A CONSIDERATION OF “SOCIAL CRITICISM’S” DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH POSTFEMINIST DISCOURSES THROUGH A COMPARISON TO THE FILM *WHAT WOMEN WANT*

Nicholson and Fraser’s essay “Social Criticism” and the debate regarding the merger of feminist and postmodern theories that it initiates occur during a time of political upheaval, philosophical change, and feminist backlash, three conditions marked by their striking similarity to another period in American history– the 1920s. Both of these periods witnessed a shift toward political conservatism, the emergence of new philosophical standpoints that gained consensus within the mainstream (i.e. Freudian psychoanalysis and postmodernisms), a decline in feminist activism following considerable gains in women’s rights, and the rise of a rhetoric of “postfeminism” proclaiming that equality between the sexes has been achieved. Moreover, the winning of women’s right to vote in 1920 and the failure to ratify the ERA in 1982 both ironically led the general public to the conclusion that gender equality had been realized and thus helped to reinforce a complacency in regard to women’s rights already taking hold within mainstream America. One of the most arresting aspects of these synchronized dynamics (from a theoretical perspective), however, is the way in which the interstitial relationships between Freudian psychoanalysis and feminisms in the 1920s<sup>1</sup> and postmodernisms and feminisms in the 1980s have contributed to these cultural and social retreats from feminisms and the tangled discourses of postfeminisms that have coincided.<sup>2</sup> This has occurred, some have maintained,

---

<sup>1</sup> Though this would not emerge as a potential theoretical merger until the 1960s, Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis was assessed and disputed in relation to its construction and maintenance of gender roles by women in the 1920s as well.

<sup>2</sup> I choose to place emphasis on the emergence of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in the 1920s, as opposed to Marxist theories for example, because its reception within the American mainstream retains some important comparative elements in relation to the reception of postmodernisms around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, I’m referring to the vulgarization by the public of Freudian psychoanalytic and postmodernist theoretical

because feminist theorists have positioned feminisms within the phallogenic discourses of Freudian psychoanalysis and postmodernisms as a means of overcoming an identity crisis in feminisms, an identity crisis that resulted partly from mediated declarations of *feminism's* dotage or death and a waning of feminist activism.

The similarities between these two historical periods creates an interesting lens through which Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* might be explored, one that is useful to briefly call attention to here to historicize the reason a merger between feminist and postmodern theories might have seemed promising to Nicholson and Fraser as well as to frame the ramifications that, perhaps, should have been considered when "Social Criticism" was first drafted. Feminist interest with theoretical mergers of this caliber has been historicized as being conceived by their progenitors as a philosophically innovative move, inasmuch as emerging theoretical perspectives – Freudian psychoanalysis and postmodernisms, for example – could proffer new ways of developing feminisms and feminist inquiry. Yet, even as these theoretical discoveries undisputedly opened up new avenues of inquiry within feminist theories, feminist theorists have insisted on the importance of reflecting on the implications of phallogocentric discourses like Freudian psychoanalysis as much as they have demanded self-reflexive investigations of the theoretical underpinnings of feminist discourses and theories.

---

concepts, wherein each mode of analysis was redefined and rewritten for and by the general public in ways substantially different from their original conception. It is also interesting to note, though I do not plan to include this in my analysis, that Freudian psychoanalysis continues to be referenced within the mass culture texts that I examine here and is used exclusively to critique the "feminist psychoses" of the female characters within these texts – Darcy in *What Women Want* and Carrie in *Sex and the City* in particular.



Feminist theorists in the 1960s, for example, documented the circumscription of women to gender-specific roles and behaviors within the boundaries of psychoanalytic thought.<sup>3</sup> While some feminists were considering psychoanalysis as a tool in exploring the internalization of the male/female gender dichotomy and the social construction of each respective role, these other feminist intellectuals were pointing to the peculiar role psychoanalytic theory played in delimiting those social constructions as well as in helping to foment them within the social unconscious. Within psychoanalytic theory, Woman becomes “nothing but an effect of a phallic fantasy,” feminist theorists contended, and in placing themselves within the psychoanalytic dialect, feminists cannot generate any comprehension of Woman outside of that *phallic fantasy* (Wright xv).

Nicholson and Fraser’s attempt to create a new feminist Theory that would fit (rather) neatly within the boundaries of Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of postmodernity is subject to the same critique, especially as postmodernism(s) becomes *démodé* within mainstream American media, or rather, especially as the term “postmodernism” begins to signify according to popular definition of the term. On one hand, as noted in Chapter One, Nicholson and Fraser’s attempt to erect a *postmodern feminism* that might help resolve some of the theoretical dilemmas developing within feminist theoretical circles during the 1970s and 1980s suggests that *postmodernism*, as a theoretical speaking and signifying position, might be intrinsically revolutionary. What becomes clear, though, if a more thorough examination of the paradigmatic shifts occurring around the 1920s and 1980s was rendered, is that, despite the personal implementation of radical political perspectives at these junctures by feminists, feminist

---

<sup>3</sup> Feminist reflections on psychoanalysis that were articulated in the 1920s includes what Elizabeth Wright calls the “most articulate and sophisticated of Freud’s ‘feminist’ colleagues” Karen Horney, who in 1926 “challenges Freud’s characterization of femininity,” claiming that “it is partial and value-laden, representing men’s interests” (132)

discourses that emerged during these two historical moments were not unsusceptible to the power structures that remained intact within psychoanalytic and postmodernist discourses and, as follows, were subject to the relegation of the female voice to the margins by these implicitly patriarchal discourses.

The particular problem with placing feminisms within a Lyotardian discursive field lies within the construction of his postmodern discourse as one absent of hierarchal distinctions between race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. As Judith Butler suggests, the postmodernist claim to an absence of power in regard to sociopolitical designations like race and gender situates *postmodernism* as a “forceful conceptual practice which sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power through recourse to the tropes of normative universality” (39). What this suggests in regard to Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* is that the “question of postmodernisms” being asked in relation to feminist theories (and sometimes being asked as if *feminism* and *postmodernism* were already inseparable terms) cannot be answered adequately by Nicholson and Fraser because they do not have the tools to discern how the inherent powers of postmodernisms have been “sublimated” and “disguised.” The unavailability of these tools might be attributable to the fact that theories of postmodernity, as well as the individuals writing postmodernity into being, are situated in a sociopolitical space that remains in limbo, somewhere beyond modernist hegemonies, yet not quite postmodernist. As Laura Kipnis notes in an essay published one year after “Social Criticism” first received publication: “What is crucially lacking is a postmodern political discourse. I want to attempt to trace this symptomatic gap as it is manifested in first-world feminist theory, which seems to be suspended between an emergent postmodern political logic and a residual modernism” (“Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?” 158).

To begin speaking of a *postmodern feminism* without attending to the very foundational concepts of feminist theories – the power to oppress women, female voices, and feminist discourses – is a risky if not disadvantageous endeavor. The particular risks involved include problematically abandoning modernist feminist epistemologies that are not completely antiquated, ones that have investigated and revealed the various sites of power under conditions of modernity, for a postmodernist method of critique far from being fleshed out. Furthermore, in neglecting questions regarding the site(s) of power within conditions of postmodernity and within theories that attend to those conditions, it is possible for the *postmodern feminism* that Nicholson and Fraser advocate to become entangled in the very postmodern conditions that it attempts to disrupt, neither able to critique the structural aspects of postmodernity (and with that the positioning of the female subject within postmodern sociopolitical structures) nor able to reflect upon the paradoxes of its own theoretical underpinnings. Without this dual consideration of what is lost in abandoning modernist feminist theories and what remains to be investigated in postmodern theories, it is also possible that the resulting effect would be the production of a feminist epistemology that is comparatively irrelevant to both past and present spatial locales precisely because the feminist critique erected is dependent upon (mostly male-initiated) speculations as to what conditions of postmodernity might entail. This consequence might be better understood by identifying the underlying presumption of Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* – that the era of postmodernity has reached maturation – as one that propels feminisms from an indeterminate state where both exploration and reflection are possible into a rather unpleasant and authoritatively determined postmodern condition.

But more important than what seems to be a disappointing neglect of the question of power in relation to Lyotardian postmodernism within their essay is the way that Nicholson and

Fraser regard their “discussion” of feminisms and postmodernisms as if it were taking place in a vacuum, exempt from the sociopolitical conditions and other discursive powers that frame their temporal locale. This chapter is an exercise in considering this so-called discussion outside of that vacuum by asking how it might emerge within and become informed by a postfeminist discourse.<sup>4</sup> While reading “Social Criticism” through or in conjunction with other leading discourses around the time of its publication would produce a rather different set of insights – postcolonial, poststructuralist, and anti-feminist discourses, for example – interpreting “Social Criticism” and Nicholson and Fraser’s facilitation the *postmodernism/feminism* debate as being complicit with and constituted by postfeminist discursive structures allows me to bridge academic and mass cultures momentarily to suggest that, together, they say something very important about the limitations of postmodern theories as well as the beneficial modes of inquiry that can be derived from a feminist critical engagement with postmodern theories. Inasmuch as this critique is instructive, I suggest that it is possible to argue that Nicholson and Fraser write *postmodernism* and themselves into a postfeminist narrative because *postmodernism* operates for them as a feminized male discourse that can repair the errors of a whole historical category of feminist thought. It is worth playing with the boundaries of the genre of theory by reading “Social Criticism” as a postfeminist narrative and Nicholson, Fraser, and Lyotard as postfeminist characters if such a reading produces insight into the construction of gendered identity and

---

<sup>4</sup> It’s important to note here that Nicholson and Fraser’s essay does not claim itself to be a product or example of a postfeminist discourse, text, or subject position, although it is attended to as such in Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women*. It is, rather, the structure of their essay and their theoretical work regarding the *postmodernism/feminism* debate, their reading and representation of feminisms, and their positioning of and need for Lyotardian postmodernism that makes Nicholson and Fraser a good theoretical example of Tania Modleski’s understanding of a postfeminist moment. My reading of Nicholson and Fraser’s work as a postfeminist text or postfeminist metanarrative is more of a symbolic claim rather than a literal one, one that attempts to provide insight into the contextualization of feminisms and female agency within my own sociopolitical milieu. It is also one that suggests that Nicholson and Fraser’s postmodern feminist epistemology is limited because of its inability to anticipate a moment in which a similar *postmodern feminism* might be used to critique *feminism*, or rather feminist subjective positions, into extinction within the realm of mass culture.

gender hierarchies in a moment approaching postmodernity, as I suggest it does in the chapter that follows. This is not to suggest, however, that such a reading is not problematic, especially in its reliance upon the male/female gender binary in the categorization of “Social Criticism” and the *feminism/postmodernism* debate as structurally postfeminist.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I historicize the uses and meanings of the term “postfeminist” from its inception in 1919 to Tania Modleski’s documentation of the term 1991, suggesting the term signifies the consequences that arise from premature assumptions of gender equality when its use over the course of nearly a century is analyzed historically. Next, I contextualize the most recent shift toward a postmodern rendering of female subjectivity through a reading of gender in the film *What Women Want*, using the film first to clarify and illustrate Modleski’s conception of *postfeminism* in *Feminism Without Women* and then to show, by way of comparison, how “Social Criticism” and the debate it inspires could be read as implicated within a postfeminist moment. I then to draw parallels between the film and “Social Criticism” to point toward a change in postfeminist narrative structure wherein an emergent form of female agency is written into female subjectivity. However, rather than being an agency enacted to dissolve gender hierarchies and normative femininity, I argue, this agency more precisely represents the capacity to write feminisms into extinction and return women into positions of marginality. As I propose

---

<sup>5</sup> Modleski’s reliance upon a masculine/feminine gender binary is perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of her work, and thus, it is important to call attention to this in this thesis, especially since Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* would likely rule out essentialist categories like masculinity and femininity. The use of these gendered terms in this chapter, however, is based upon the construction of gender within *What Women Want* and not on some categorical distinction that I think can or should be drawn between masculinity and femininity. Rather, within the examinations of mass culture that take place in this thesis, I attempt to call attention to the way femininity and masculinity are constructed on differently sexed bodies as well. While seeming to suggest a dispersal of the gender binary within the American mainstream, thus bringing mass culture more into alignment with postmodernist feminist theories, I argue that a gender binary and gender hierarchy are maintained within the American mainstream because of the way multiply signifying gender identifications (feminized masculinity and masculinized femininity for example) are regulated to the singular domain of “proper” gender signification within each text.

in the conclusion, Nicholson and Fraser's revisionist account of feminist history in "Social Criticism" constitutes, symbolically, this emergent postfeminist structure.

The construction of female subjectivity in *What Women Want* can be compared to Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* in that it is both defined by the multiplicity of feminisms written on a gendered female body and ridden with irresolvable contradictions and conflicts regarding the errors of those feminist standpoints. The film, like Nicholson and Fraser's essay, also seems stranded somewhere between modern and postmodern frameworks, and similar to the "postmodern feminists" imagined in "Social Criticism," *What Women Want's* female protagonist Darcy is mired in the phallic fantasies of the vulgarized forms of Freudian psychoanalysis and postmodernity that the text creates.<sup>6</sup>

*What Women Want* is an important text as it represents something of an apex for postfeminist texts. At first glance, the emergent "postmodern" ideological conflicts represented in the film appear not far removed from those of the postfeminist texts analyzed by Tania Modleski in *Feminism Without Women*. In fact, the reading of *What Women Want* that follows in this chapter could suggest that every aspect of the film is systematically and exhaustively illustrative of Modleski's theoretical perspective. However, while the film becomes representative of a postfeminist text through the male protagonist's (Nick) feminization of himself, it becomes something more as Nick's ability to overhear women's thoughts reveals Darcy's dependency upon a specter of the "male gaze," an invisible onlooker who determines how she interprets her actions (especially actions that could be identified as products of the Women's Rights Movement such as her decision to become a high-powered executive), despite

---

<sup>6</sup> Though I do not pursue the latter line of investigation, I think this point should be at least be mentioned as a more thorough investigation of the historical junctures mentioned in the introduction of this chapter would likely involve looking at the prevalence of Freud in these postfeminist texts.

the fact that she thinks these thoughts are a product of her own consciousness and agency.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, this all-but-absent onlooker (both Nick and the specter of the “male gaze” embodied in Darcy’s voiceover) simultaneously reveals Darcy’s subjective crisis in regard to her “feminist” decisions and allows her to both overcome that crisis and reoccupy her “appropriate” position in the gender hierarchy. It is this very moment in the film, when the “male gaze” becomes a recognizable component of the female voice (as it is in Darcy’s voiceover), that the comparison between *What Women Want* and Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism” becomes most instructive.

Through an understanding of Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* as it is revealed through its juxtaposition to these discursive shifts within the theoretical and mass-mediated realms of the same temporal space, their “postmodern feminism” can be shown to be a thoroughly postfeminist discourse, at least in regard to its semantic structure, one that, at its inception, is far from being postmodern. Nicholson and Fraser’s attempt to thrust feminisms into their postmodern form, as a result, can be shown to produce a deficient method of analyzing or subverting this emergent postmodern form of female subjectivity and female subjugation. Rather, it can be used to reveal the construction of female subjectivity within postmodern locales. As Laura Kipnis suggests in regard to theoretical mergers of this caliber, Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* is not simply entrenched in postfeminist backlash culture, it is by definition a postfeminist narrative, one that participates in invalidating a large portion of the history of feminist critical thought

---

<sup>7</sup> One interesting line of further investigation might consider the moments in *What Women Want* when Darcy becomes confused as to whether her thoughts are, in fact, her own

## Postfeminism: The Historicity of the Term

The first documentation of the term “postfeminist” in women-centered communities occurred after women gained the right to vote in 1919 and began to enter the labor force. In June 1919, a group of grassroots, female literary radicals based in Greenwich Village introduced their new “postfeminist” perspective in their inaugural publication of *Judy*, a journal initiated to portray their newly defined theoretical position (Cott 282, 365 footnote 23). These Greenwich Village “radicals” proclaimed that “moral, social, economic, and political standards ‘should not have anything to do with sex,’” assumedly believing that equality was on the horizon if not already realized (Cott 282). Their claim to abandon ‘sex’ as a factor for consideration, however, was embedded in a society that increasingly described *feminism* as attempting to at once “make women over into men” and “set women against men in deadly sex antagonism.” Advancing this position alongside women’s efforts to define themselves in the workplace not as women but as equals, these writers vowed to be “‘pro-woman’ without being ‘anti-man’” and declared themselves and their position “post-feminist” (Cott 282).

This theoretical position, nonetheless, was enfolded in a time of profound antagonism toward feminisms and a moment in which women participating in or joining the movement stumbled upon variegated ideas regarding “feminism” as a categorical term. These factors complicated the creation of an environment that might cultivate cooperative unanimity between women who identified themselves as feminists and would be experienced repeatedly throughout the future of feminist activism. In short, as Nancy Cott concludes, feminists were informed of “the liabilities of making reductive generalizations about women as a group” (278). The fundamental principle that might have served as the groundwork in furthering feminist aegis, as Cott explains, was obscured if not in every respect misplaced (275). Within the context of the



1920s, the term “postfeminism” signified a general disdain for *feminism* and an attitude toward *feminism* as obsolete, while at the same suggesting that women had achieved equality to the extent they desired and in some cases more so than they had wished.

Bordering on similarity in relation to the feminist literary radicals’ presumption of equality but proportionally antithetical, aggregated non-feminist voices in the 1920s inched toward specifying varying bases for and dissimilar understandings of *feminism*. These included not only the abovementioned sex-based distortions in which women were presumed to desire becoming men even as they hated men but also media-based commemorations of women’s emancipation that “coopted” and “diluted” feminist bravado, juxtaposed by denunciations of *feminism* such as those denoted by: article titles like “Feminism Destructive of Women’s Happiness,” “What More Do Women Want,” and “Still a Man’s Game: Reflections of a Slightly Tired Feminist”; surveys that “consign[ed] *Feminism* to oblivion”; and a relinquishment of feminists to the field of self-absorption through claims that pronounced that feminists were “only concerned with their individual problems and welfare” and lacked awareness to “the great new issues [of war]” (Cott 271-80, my emphasis). These sentiments would all be revived again in the 1980s after the culmination of a second seemingly unitary moment of feminist activism and democratic gains in the attempt to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

In 1982, the term “postfeminist” was reintroduced into American media in a *New York Times* article entitled “Voices from a Post-Feminist Generation,” another article that sought to prove women’s overall displeasure with and lack of need for *feminism* in general. Shortly after this article was published in the *Times*, some feminist critics such as Ann Brooks attempted to imbue the term “postfeminist” during its second emergence with more positive connotations, claiming it to be representative of the “intersection of *feminism* with [. . .] *postmodernism*, *post-*

*structuralism*, and *post-colonialism*,” representing ultimately “*feminism*’s ‘coming of age’”<sup>8</sup> (Brooks 1, my emphases). Disregarding the utilization of the term in the 1920s, though she documents this usage in her book, Brooks understands the term “postfeminism” as being “appropriated” by the media rather than initiated by voices within the media. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that “the widespread ‘popular’ conception” of the term, as explicated by Lynn Alice in “What is Postfeminism? or Having it Both ways” (1995), “has new currency, which is often hostile and directed towards feminists in particular” (Brooks 2).

Brooks’ attempt to redefine the term “postfeminism” in 1997, virtually 15 years after one of the term’s first reemergences in the 1982 *New York Times* article, has the potential to be as effective as Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* in which postmodernisms will supposedly retain a distinctive feminist-based definition as opposed the variety of other meanings that have and might become attached to it.<sup>9</sup> How the term “postfeminism” signifies

---

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that *feminism*’s coming of age is a good thing for Brooks

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Brooks applies a definition to reclaim the term “postfeminist” that is so similar to the description that Nicholson and Fraser offer for their *postmodern feminism* that one could allege that Brooks changed the sentence structure of the chapter section “Towards a *Postmodern Feminism*,” using a thesaurus (at times), and placed Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* under the new signifier “postfeminism”: “*Postfeminism* as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within *feminism* from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of *feminism*, but a political shift in *feminism*’s conceptual and theoretical agenda. *Postfeminism* is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. *Postfeminism* expresses the intersection of *feminism* with *postmodernism*, *poststructuralism*, and *post-colonialism*, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal, and imperialist frameworks. In the process *postfeminism* facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of *feminism*, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic *feminism* capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and postcolonial feminisms. *Postfeminism* [. . .] is about the challenges posed to what has been identified as ‘hegemonic’ feminism [. . .] with its roots clearly located in the Anglo-American influences so powerful in the conceptualization of *second wave feminism* (4, my emphases). Though I will eventually allege that Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* to an extent does belong under the signifier “postfeminism,” Brooks’ use of the term here, for me at least, is quite indicative of the line of reasoning I will later employ to show that while Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* is not necessarily postmodern at conception, it in fact seems to become postmodern. Counter to Brooks’ reading of postfeminist discourses, however, I will argue that Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* begins to signify as a postfeminist text according to the “widespread ‘popular’ conception.” It is also interesting to note here the theorists that Brooks documents as “theoretical, conceptual, and disciplinary influences of what she refers to as *postfeminism* as some of these names have either been propagators of *postmodern feminism* – Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser – or have explicitly

within what Brooks calls the “widespread ‘popular’ conception” suggests, nonetheless, that during the 1980s and 1990s the term came to inhabit the identical dialectic space that it occupied in the 1920s and began to effect a hostility toward feminisms as the term “postfeminism” continued to carry baneful significations.

The definition of the “widespread ‘popular’ conception” of the term is encapsulated, for all intents and purposes here, in Tania Modleski’s *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (1991). Unlike Brooks who believes that the term “postfeminist” has been appropriated by the media, Modleski locates the use of this term in media-based and theoretical declarations of a “postfeminist moment.” Attempting to articulate an explanation of *postfeminism* as it is constructed within and by American society, as opposed to rendering a definition of the term for that society, Modleski turns her examinations toward mass culture (mostly film) and often situates her critiques of those texts within the proximities of critical theoretical debates occurring around that time. Unlike Brooks, Modleski discerns *postfeminism* as one thread of what Faludi identifies as the sociopolitical and cultural backlash against feminisms that gained momentum the 1980s and attempts to distinguish how women (feminists in particular) are further entrenched in that backlash by this postfeminist rhetoric.

As Modleski notes in her preface, the explication of the various components of this “postfeminist moment’ in *The Female Gaze*<sup>10</sup> reveals that when cultural criticism emerges from an assumption that “the goals of *feminism* have been attained,” what Modleski calls “an assumption that seems premature at least,” cultural criticism can be shown to be *complicit* with

---

questioned and challenged it by some means – bell hooks, Judith Butler, Anna Yeatman and Rosi Braidotti. Some of the others intriguingly include: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Meaghan Morris, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sneja Gunew, and Teresa de Lauretis (4).

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that an Amazon.com search for this book offered the following suggestion for further reading in relation to what “customers who bought this item also bought”: Christina Hoff Sommers’ *Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women*

mass culture (ix, my emphases). What Modleski means here, as she explains, is that “the critic is never wholly outside the culture she analyzes, or completely resistant to its forces, retrograde as these may often be,” a fundamental concept that becomes particularly important in relation to the hierarchal gender struggles and male-triumph that she locates in “postfeminist texts”<sup>11</sup> (ix). Thus inasmuch as women speak from a feminist inflected discourse (or any discourse for that matter), they are necessarily implicated in the discourses that surround them – including Marxist, psychoanalytic, postmodern, and postfeminist discourses as well as other mainstream hegemonic discourses.

The context in which Modleski’s conceptualization of *postfeminism* is located echoes the situatedness of *postfeminism* within the 1920s with a profound resonance. Most notably, the sociopolitical locale of *postfeminism* in the 1980s and 1990s is similar to the position that *postfeminism* occupies in the 1920s in that both “mark a major conservative shift in the cultural climate” and a shift in philosophical discourses and because both are rooted deeply within anti-feminist sentiments (x). However, according to Modleski, the route and site of power of postfeminist discourses (excluding those such as Brooks’) in the 1980s seem to proceed from a fundamentally disparate direction. Unlike the postfeminist constituent of the backlash against feminist activism in the 1920s, the intersections between mass culture and existing theoretical debates in the 1980s reveal, as Modleski infers, that “what distinguishes this moment from other moments of backlash is the extent to which it has been carried out not *against* feminism[s] but in its very name” (x). Providing an article written about Elaine Showalter as a case in point, Modleski illustrates this particular strand of feminist criticism that emerges as ostensibly

---

<sup>11</sup> This concept is also important in understanding how “Social Criticism” maintains a dialectical relationship to postfeminisms as will be explained in the last section of this chapter.

“*against*” feminisms by illustrating the way in which Showalter’s flagrant denunciation of a “lunatic fringe of radical *feminism*” propounds the article toward a conclusion that “literary feminism has not only come of age, but passed its prime and entered its dotage,” a conclusion rather disparate from Brooks’ claim (4, my emphasis).

This sentiment certainly hinges upon the “biological clock” aspect of the backlashes against feminisms in both the 1920s and 1980s. But Modleski is more concerned with what she calls a “process of ‘male feminization’” wherein men “appropriate femininity” as both an instrument and method of “dealing with the threat of female power,” while this appropriation becomes, in the same moment, both an instrument and method in a process of oppressing women (6-7). Deriving this concept from readings of filmic and theoretical texts, Modleski offers the following depiction of those texts, categorizing them under the signifier “postfeminist”:

An even more telling sign of the times, however, has been the advent in the 1980s of a new form of anthology organized around debates between men and women who read one another’s texts and take each other to task for their positions on a whole array of issues relating to male *feminism* and sexual difference. [. . .] While these books, in staging the perennially fascinating “battle of the sexes,” make for very compelling reading, they can be considered “postfeminist” in several respects. First, insofar as they focus on the question of male *feminism* as a ‘topic’ for men and women to engage (as the first one did), these books are bringing men back to center stage and diverting feminists from tasks more pressing than deciding the appropriateness of the label “feminist” for men. Second, the books in their very format betray a kind of heterosexual presumption [. . .] Third, the anthologies tacitly assume and promote a liberal notion of the formal equality of

men and women, whose viewpoints are structurally accorded equal weight. Thus, while terms like “dialogism” (drawn from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin) are commonly invoked in the rationale for these volumes, it is hard to see how such a term functions as anything other than a euphemism for “dialogue” – a concept that in eliding the question of power asymmetry has rather conservative implications.<sup>12</sup> (6, my emphases)

Like feminist theorists who fail to consider the power inherent in male-centered discourses, Modleski suggests here that a kind of “fair and balanced” approach to feminisms, in which men and women attempt to effect a harmony in regard to what the term “feminism” should and/or does mean, extirpates the fundamental basis of feminist thought as always predicated upon the question of power, the authority of that power, the position from which it originates, and the subject upon whom its ire strikes. As much as I do not subscribe to the idea that all men consciously attempt to maintain an elevated hierarchal position in relation to women, neither do I believe that some kind of flagrant, malicious, and underhanded appropriation of the feminine is consciously underway in the minds of men across America. But this is also not to say, as suggested by Modleski in her preface, that these dynamics are not mired in the venerable systems of oppression that exist within unconsciously perpetuated American hegemonies. It is with this “fair and balanced” approach to feminisms that Nicholson and Fraser investigate the interstices of postmodernisms and feminisms and formulate their *postmodern feminism*, presupposing, as they claim, that their dramatic encounter between “*feminism* and *postmodernism* will initially be a trading of criticisms” (“Social Criticism” 20, my emphases).

---

<sup>12</sup> A more complete explanation is given in Chapter One

## Restructured Hierarchies and Postmodern Flux

The motion picture and television industries, with their tendency to both create and (often distortedly) mirror society, have produced many texts that could be examined to determine how the phallogocentrically cocked pistol of mass media now aims toward its target. However, one film released in 2000, *What Women Want*, constructs a dichotomy by which the capitalistic society, with all of its phallogocentric and ethnocentric “wonders,” can be dissected to expose core components of sociopolitical systems during the last decade. The film constructs its own analysis of male hegemony and power through a gender struggle set, fittingly, in the advertising world and exposes the need for “hegemonic patriarchy” to undertake what Modleski describes as “an exemplary process of ‘male feminization’ that is empowering to men and disempowering to women” (7). Thus, the film creates not only a context for critiques of how and why images of femininity are both scripted and produced by the American advertising of the 1990s but also a site for a contextual analysis of how gendered relations, rendered through the ordinary heterosexual constructs of dominant American melodrama, have been reconstructed and (re)conformed in what is sometimes described, not necessarily simultaneously, as both a postmodern and postfeminist era. The following reading of *What Women Want* is offered, thus, to both illustrate the composition of what Tania Modleski calls “battle of the sexes” texts and reveal the hierarchal positioning of the feminized male within them, highlighting along the way one significant modification to postfeminist narrative structure – the invocation of the “male gaze” within the female voice<sup>13</sup> (Modleski 6).

---

<sup>13</sup> This could also be read as an internalization of the postfeminist narrative structure within the female voice, where the female subject is seen writing her own postfeminist narrative into being.

*What Women Want*, in terms of genre and choice of lead role, clearly shoots towards the female audience, appearing to be the next Mel Gibson dime novel turned romantic comedy. Nick Marshall, the “ultimate man’s man” (as identified by his ex-wife Gigi), finds himself locked in a full scale battle with the self-announced “man-eating bitch, Darth Vader of the ad world,” Darcy McGuire, who has just “stolen” his promotion as creative director at Sloan-Curtis. Though the film is primarily designed to appeal to the sentimentality of women, the text clearly addresses the structural, binary opposition of men and women in America’s “postmodern” capitalistic society. While the audience presumably ignores the man/woman conflict because the film is structured to serve both sexes’ aspiration to become “the” dominant gender, in the end, one sex clearly wins. However, closer examination renders an ambiguous and somewhat contrary conclusion, especially after taking into account the implausible method, or male fantasy (being able to hear what women think), by which Nick (the “masculine”) regains leverage against Darcy (the “feminine”). The looming ambiguity blurs lines of gender domination considerably, but a clearer demarcation of gender difference and dominance seems to appear when looking beyond the positions Darcy and Nick occupy within the film to the way the text effectively dissects and recircumscribes its own construction of female/male gender binary. While in the film, this process is rendered through Nick’s ability to hear women’s thoughts, it is more accurately what he hears Darcy thinking – her own narrative – the reinscribes her to a position of subordination. Darcy’s narration of her own subordinate repositioning, as will be explored in the conclusion of this chapter, is one through which comparisons can be drawn to reveal the ways in which Nicholson and Fraser’s voices participate in a theoretical dissection and recircumscription of the female voice within the female/male binaries of academia.



Nick's boss, Dan Wanamaker, explaining to Nick that he would not be promoted to creative director, rather despondently declares that their male "glory days" in the eighties, when the ad world was all about "alcohol, tobacco, and cars," are over. Highlighting the reason that Darcy would be hired, Dan tells Nick that "in the nineties, men simply stopped dominating how the dollars were spent," and that while they [men] were out shooting "beer commercials with the Swedish bikini team, the industry has been transformed." Dan goes on to point out that if they (men) do not "evolve and think beyond our [man's] natural ability," the industry is going to go down, insinuating that previously men simply had to sell to their own sexual desires. Undoubtedly because Dan has yet to conceive of a way for men to transcend the simplicity of this "natural" ability and answer the elusive question of "what women want," he sees no way to regain control or compete in the consumer sphere of advertising without a woman who knows how to appeal to the consumer majority ("women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four"). Nick resists both the challenge to his manhood that such a change in the industry would represent and the female domination on the horizon that he fears will marginalize him within the realm of mass media (as both "ad king" and remote operator), apparent in his subsequent claim that "there's too much estrogen on TV these days." As a result, Nick refuses to accept his own incapacity, the powerlessness being suggested by Dan, to function and rule the ad world.

From this point on, the text embodies, metaphorically, the changes in the advertising/consumer world outside of the film, suggesting, as well, transformations in the sociopolitical system at large (ostensibly the materialization of a postfeminist society), while focusing within the text on a long, drawn out struggle between man and woman in dealing with this very transformation. The semi-ambiguous rendering of gender domination throughout the

film allows for criticism to traverse the many facets of the production industry's "revolutionized" system, as it is described by Dan, by exploring a host of binary opponents (among them: masculinity and femininity, the formerly blinded "man's man" and the new informed feminized man, domination and subordination, strength and weakness, hidden and overt sexuality, feminized man and homosexual man, acceptance and rejection of the female image). But as Nick recuperates the authority that his masculinity once signified, the film begins to suggest that male dominance can be established even in a postfeminist society, and what is more, its return can appear to be the product of female desire. This line of thought provides a jumping point for an analysis of Nicholson and Fraser's participation in the reconstitution of gendered hierarchies within American academia in the last section of this chapter.

Moreover, the textual play of a repetitive inversion of hegemonic gender dichotomies that hierarchically arrange male and female bodies generates a transitory, destabilized foundation that becomes emblematic of certain theoretical interpretations of postmodern territories. Within this destabilized terrain, however, gender roles within America's capitalist society can be legislated and controlled to bolster male hegemony, even though the power to do so is rendered either invisible or ambiguously defined. The power only remains this way, of course, to the extent that Nick's ability to perceive and use women's thoughts to resecure his position remains within the extradiegetic realm of sound within the film, invisible to the characters that surround him. Even still, the power continues to be locatable and local, especially for the viewer, not to mention the near exposures and "close calls" that Nick fears he might be facing. But nonetheless, the power has yet to be located, a fact of which Nick must be reassured often throughout the film as every "close call" is made to appear only a result of his own psychoses. Only at the point that Nick's perceived superiority to Darcy allows him to become recognized by those authorized to this grant

this type of legitimation (Dan) is the power rendered discernible again, although his method of attaining it remains hidden until his confession at the end of the film. Though Nick manipulates these women's thoughts to his advantage, his necessarily gendered supremacy is reestablished as both "natural" and thus innately and perpetually present, even when called into question by Dan at the film's commencement and by Nick himself during the film's denouement. I would like to suggest, here, that these structural aspects of the film – a male-initiated denunciation of power and an elusive form of power that remains despite that denunciation – markedly resemble Judith Butler's analysis, provided in Chapter One, of the structural aspects of postmodern theories.

The masculinized "god's eye view" that Nick personifies and the feminized susceptibility to manipulation and inferior intellectual capacity that Darcy embodies effectively reinscribes the preexisting gender hierarchy upon which Nick (and the advertising world) depends. However, it does so by redefining the hierarchies' components as always sexed, regardless of the particular gender(s) that their bodies appear to signify.<sup>14</sup> Thus even though gender is to an extent deessentialized and the binary construct seemingly dismantled, the male/female sexed binary (in addition to the heterosexual/homosexual binary) remains firmly and epistemologically intact, allowing the purposes behind and the reasons for "legitimate" gendered embodiments (or rather the gender performances legitimized by the film) to be defined accordingly. In other words, the "masculinized female" (Darcy) working within the public and thus masculine sphere of a large corporation signifies weaknesses (first in her thoughts and then through verbal confessions) that

---

<sup>14</sup> It is also important to note, here, that the questioning of Nick's masculinity, which occurs many times throughout the film, is often done so by also calling into question his heterosexuality. The film thus relegates the signifying terms of the feminized male body to the domain of heterosexuality, allowing it to signify in close proximity to a subject position that gained legitimacy in the 1990s – the "metrosexual." As a result, such feminization not only excludes the possibility of non-heterosexual masculinities while legitimizing the cooptation of the "feminine" as a tool for male dominance but also delegitimizes the same "feminine" qualities when present in bodies historically excluded from the mainstream delimitation of the category of masculinity. As the subtitle of Mark Simpson's Salon.com article makes clear: "He's well-dressed, narcissistic, and obsessed with butts. But don't call him gay."

are revealed as being effectively concealed through her display of fabricated forms of masculinity, a miserable state of existence under which she ultimately breaks down. “Feminized females” (Nick’s two “secretaries”) signify essentialist forms of femininity,<sup>15</sup> having no thoughts beyond that which is socially accepted and occupying submissive and subordinate positions willingly and happily, a fact that catches Nick by surprise as he waits to hear their belittling thoughts of him only to be stunned by the silence that follows.<sup>16</sup> “Feminized males” signify strength to endure femininity as a now necessary component of their superiority, control, strength, endurance of pain, and power and one necessary in returning order to disrupted gender hierarchies.<sup>17</sup> And “masculinized males” signify an appropriate masculinity that must maintain a constant vigilance to the forces of a chaotic postfeminist world that might threaten to disrupt that masculinity, and when necessary, the “masculinized male” becomes protean, metamorphosing to whatever form is needed for the purpose of maintaining hegemonic order in the face of utter chaos.<sup>18</sup> Representing the last of these four configurations, the “protean masculinity” personified by Nick in this “battle of the sexes” text is aligned with the type of backlash culture that

---

<sup>15</sup> These females (Nick’s assistants) signify a version of televisual femininity present in shows that directly predate “postfeminist” backlash culture.

<sup>16</sup> His shock materializes when he asks his two secretaries in a disbelieving tone of voice if they had any other thoughts to offer.

<sup>17</sup> “The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis -- because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference. Particular professions, such as modeling, waiting tables, media, pop music and, nowadays, sport, seem to attract them but, truth be told, like male vanity products and herpes, they’re pretty much everywhere. For some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism. The stoic, self-denying, modest straight male didn’t shop enough (his role was to earn money for his wife to spend), and so he had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image -- that’s to say, one who was much more interested in being looked at (because that’s the only way you can be certain you actually exist). A man, in other words, who is an advertiser’s walking wet dream” (Simpson).

<sup>18</sup> The film, of course, leaves very few variations of these four categorical definitions of gender and in providing these limited definitions minimalizes any disruption of gender in the process of creating a new means for gender bifurcation, stratification, and eventual rehierarchization. Under this purportedly more inclusive organization, other configurations and definitions are inevitably excluded to maintain hegemonic order.

Modleski terms “postfeminism.” It is through Nick’s ability to perform as though he has succumbed to his feminized position (necessarily a position of inferiority) that he is also able to appear as if he exists to help the women around him secure their subjective stability at the expense of his own. While this is, in part, true (though none of the other female characters represent a real threat to his masculinity), his subjective performance is more precisely an attempt to resecure his own subjective and necessarily masculine subjectivity at Darcy’s expense, the one woman capable of rendering Nick to a subordinate position within gender hierarchies for the foreseeable future.

#### Postfeminism and Male Subjective Crises

Within the boundaries of Modleski’s analytic structure, which itself problematically depends on hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity, Nick’s method of regaining control, superiority, and order becomes the symbolic embodiment of the postfeminist form of male power that Modleski seeks to expose and dissect. This male power is one that might make claims similar to an argument made by Christopher Newfield that Modleski uses as one of the bases of her critique:

Hegemonic patriarchy can survive [. . .] without male assertion, but not without feminization: only feminization enables men to evade the one-directional dominations of stereotypical masculinity, to master the non-conflictual, and to occupy both sides of a question. Whereas tyranny depends on male supremacy, liberal hegemony or “consensus” depends on male femininity.” (Modleski 7)

While this meticulous statement by Newfield could be quite perplexing given the many facets up for exploration, each of which enjoys some form of attention within *Feminism Without Women*,

it indicates what Modleski has identified as the crisis of male subjectivity<sup>19</sup> currently underway and the degree to which the male subjectivity sustains power and gender dominance “through cycles of crisis and resolution [by incorporating] the threat of female power” (Modleski 7). In shedding a little more light onto Modleski’s interpretation of Newfield’s statement: To the extent that that the “cultural imperative to be men” requires a perpetual submissiveness to masculinity, male power and gender dominance are sustained precisely because male subjectivity is always approaching and impeding crisis, unendingly testing and proving his manhood.<sup>20</sup>

In *What Women Want*, for example, Nick’s attempt to become a woman – before he is able to hear their thoughts – includes trying on and trying out every product in the little pink box that Darcy distributes during her introductory meeting, each of which becomes a test of his manhood. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror with finger and toenails painted red, mascara applied, and hair substantially moussed, Nick stares at a glass container of hot wax in the sink and then applies it to a large, hairy section of his leg. Jumping around the room yelling “hot, hot, hot,” Nick exclaims in a deepened voice: “test of manhood . . . Okay passed.” After commenting on how nice and warm it feels and questioning why any woman might complain about waxing their legs, Nick rips off the paper, finds himself thrown backwards against a wall, and in a tone of a much higher pitch, he cries out: “Women are insane. Who would *do* that more than once? I don’t know. Why would anyone ever do the other leg?” Instances like these pervade the film,

---

<sup>19</sup> This supposed “crisis of masculinity” is not only attended to in Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women* but is also one of the principal subjects of investigation in a number of anti-feminist texts, such as Christina Hoff Sommers *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. Hoff Sommers book, for example, claims that girls, by and large, are experiencing more freedom and gaining more constructive knowledge than their male peers because girls are favored in education materials and modes of teaching, while boys are falling behind academically because education renders boys “less competitive, more emotionally expressive, and more nurturing.” (NYT review <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/sommers-war.html>)

<sup>20</sup> It’s interesting to note here that Newfield seems to suggest that the performance of masculinity is in essence a feminized position in that men must continue to “submit” to it, suggesting, in turn, that the feminization of masculinity symbolically represents a truer form of power and dominance (at least subjectively).

and throughout Nick's process of feminization, nearly every single task or hurdle that needs tending is imbued with an ultimate test of his manhood and the underlying threat of insanity should he fail. Thus, as Nick's statement above renders explicit, insanity is equivalent to womanhood and is identified as "the" site of the "feminine," and the only way for Nick to appropriately inhabit a feminized position is to inhabit it in a very masculine manner. No space exists between these disparate gender extremes.

The male subjectivity in fear of and attentive to impending crisis in *What Women Want*'s delineation of the "feminized man" parallels Modleski's explication of the subjectivity of the "feminized man" in *Feminism Without Women*, one that appears to be steeping in an intensified state of crisis, whether it is one involving self-loathing, loss, *inexpressivity* in terms of that loss that includes an accompanying pity-ridden disparagement of women's lack as "expressible," or in the case of Christopher Newfield, an attempt to recuperate lost masculinity and "man power" (11, 9, 9, 7). Throughout *What Women Want*, Nick in one way or another embodies each of these forms of male subjective crises. Often, as Modleski conjectures from her examples, his recovery occurs either at the expense of the women who surround him or, more importantly, the women who threaten to consign him ineradicably to this state of instability and crises<sup>21</sup> and thus bound him to a "feminine" domain indefinitely. As no point exists between or beyond extreme subjective crisis and full subjective recovery in regard to *What Women Want*'s construction of the "feminized man" and "masculine man," the subjective differentiation between genders is dichotomized further, and the vacuum between masculinity and femininity distends.<sup>22</sup> To prevent himself from truly becoming a woman, Nick's masculinity must return, at least momentarily, to a

---

<sup>21</sup> One might note that *only* then would feminization be complete.

<sup>22</sup> In other words, Nick's character is only emasculated within the film in the time after his rejection as creative director and before he acquires the ability to hear what women think.

stable, masculine subjective field. In this case, this stability is secured through Nick's power to create and control his feminine side, while demonstrating that his masculinity needs no validation and is no longer threatened by the "feminine." A more thorough examination of Nick's character will clarify some of the parameters of the male subjectivity in crisis outlined here.

The first moment of subjective crisis begins when, in the process of telling Nick that he is not being promoted, Dan Wanamaker tries to reaffirm Nick's masculinity, telling Nick:

You know I love you Nick. But it's a woman's world out there, and getting into a woman's psyche is not exactly your strong suit. You can get into their pants better than anybody on earth, but their psyche is a whole other ballgame.

Nick, who has been mostly looking at his watch throughout the meeting, acts profoundly confused, though whether he is faking this confusion or whether it results from his tendency to tune out to this kind of discourse about women is not totally clear. What is clear, however, as Nick realizes, is that he has depended too much on his status as a "masculinized man" and that his lack of attending to and proving his masculinity, as well as defending himself against emasculation, has put both his male dominance and masculinity at risk, and on a rather large scale: Nick often seems held responsible for maintaining the superiority of the whole male population.<sup>23</sup> Once Nick realizes that Darcy has been hired for a position that he expected to seize and almost prematurely celebrates,<sup>24</sup> he sets out to locate a method by which he can

---

<sup>23</sup> He is also responsible for bringing men into this postfeminist moment and helping them regain gender dominance.

<sup>24</sup> The viewer witnesses a moment of simulatory ejaculation as his secretaries ironically let the cork fly out of the champagne bottle before Nick's success is realized. This figurative ejaculation is quite different from the other two that follow in that it more accurately represents premature ejaculation and sexual impotence, corroborated by Lola in the semi-explicit sex scene that follows. (This scene is semi-explicit considering the visual images brought to mind by Lola's overheard narration of the sex act itself.)



“become a woman,”<sup>25</sup> proceeding without any indication of doubt that he, in fact, can become a woman. Nick so firmly believes in his own superiority that he echoes Modleski’s critique of Donald Pease’s comments as Nick’s behavior and assuredness suggest: “Insofar as men are men, they are women” (Modleski 11). Nick’s outright objection to female domination, explicit here, denies a subordinate or even equal role of man in terms of woman. Female domination is unthinkable, especially within corporate advertising territory; hitherto, Nick has not even considered the possibility. A woman is non-potential to Nick, and as such, Nick can be both woman and man and can do so, he assumes, without becoming any less of a man. In the beginning of the film, then, Nick’s fundamental failure – not realizing he is living in a postfeminist world – becomes clear.

Similar to Modleski’s assessment of Valentine in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* which links work and production to a masculine role in comparison to a feminized role which is equated with consumption and passivity, Nick will reject Darcy’s post as creative director because, unlike Nick himself, Darcy cannot occupy the positions of both man and woman (26-27). He and his male cohort will even attempt to visibly affirm that masculinity, most notably in two simulations of masturbatory ejaculation during the meeting in which Darcy is introduced and first addresses the “team.” Though when Nick acquires the ability to perceive Darcy and other women’s thoughts – mainly Darcy’s recognition that Nick needs his masculinity corroborated, followed by another woman’s demand for him to “grow up already” – he realizes that the masculinity that previously secured his superior position has been detected and dissected. Moreover, he becomes conscious of the fact that most female validation of that masculinity, affirmation that he very

---

<sup>25</sup> Quote: “Ok, I’m a broad; I’m a broad,” followed by Nick turning to his large window, staring and pointing and his reflection, and telling himself: “You go girl!”

much needs to secure his subjective stability, is now being compensated with a meaningless and irritated form of acknowledgment that occurs as a means of quelling his own anxiety regarding his manhood. This perhaps becomes most explicitly clear to Nick when he hears Darcy's response to his tardiness to the second meeting, exposing both her hollow affirmation of his masculinity that occurs in the film's diegesis and the emasculation her overheard thoughts represent: "Last one to arrive, wants me to know I'm not his boss. Okay. You're a star. I get the message."

To give himself the ability to maneuver professional and personal endeavors according to woman's terms, Nick tries to replicate a feminized psyche on "his" terms and "think like a broad." Failing at his first attempt in producing a campaign idea that might appeal to women, he reiterates an idea underway in the mind of his female colleague – reflecting on the many times she has faked a headache to avoid sex with her husband – as his own advertising pitch for Advil pain medication. Darcy offers another seemingly empty compliment about his attempt to "think like a woman," but follows by telling him that every woman will hate his idea. At the same time, the woman who he subsequently interrogates about the "truth" behind "his" idea (pilfered from her own mind) grinds his foot with her heel, as Nick hears her inner-voice exclaim: "What an asshole!" Taking into account the empty compliments regarding Nick's masculinity that now extend outside the limits of the screen to the film's intended audience and Nick's failure to comprehend the feminine psyche, Nick, at this point, has entered into a mass culture version of a postfeminist world. Moreover, he realizes it. Within this commodified postfeminist world, Nick is overwhelmed by the obsessive introspection of the women that surround him, suggesting again feminine neurosis, and his colleague has to advise him to "pull it together and [let's] go to our sorority meeting." In a subsequent scene, trapped amidst a mob of women in a cosmetics

department where he goes to test his success in electrocuting himself out of the surrounding feminine pandemonium, Nick's facial expression suggests a realization that, in feminist-run world, he faces utter doom if not total loss of sanity.

In the beginning, he sees his new femininity as a sign of insanity, as do the men around him who revere his credibility as the "ultimate man's man." Furthermore, he, as well as the men around him, connects his newborn femininity to weakness. He feels both confused and displaced in his new subjectivity. But while his first response to Darcy as creative director is a rejection of his subjective crisis altogether and his second is blind defeatism, Nick begins to realize that, as discerned by Newfield, "hegemonic patriarchy [. . . cannot] survive without feminization," and thus he dives into the process himself and does so with abandon (Modleski 7). But Nick will also reject the femininity he sees developing in himself as he attempts to use his ability to hear what women think to reestablish his phallogocratic dominance over woman.

As a result, Nick seeks professional psychiatric advice from a woman (Dr. Perkins) who he previously visited for marital counseling, confessing to her: "I'm afraid to go to work, afraid of my doorwoman, afraid to get a cup of coffee." Nick's phobic relationship with this pseudo postfeminist world, expressed here, results from the expressions of women regarding his own body and mind, as becomes apparent when Nick tries to describe to Dr. Perkins the horror he perceives in the world around him. Dr. Perkins' initial refusal to listen to Nick or attribute any veracity to what Nick is saying places Nick more deeply into alignment with Modleski's depiction of the feminized male subject in that Nick's fears come to represent what Modleski calls a "cunning ruse of male power [that] masquerades as *inexpressivity*" or "melancholy

inexpressiveness”<sup>26</sup> (9). But when Nick finally convinces Dr. Perkins that he is telling the truth – unsurprisingly by tapping into her thoughts while she mentally deliberates fibbing about her age – Nick gains some ground in his subjective instability, which he has in many ways himself prompted.

In the events that follow in this scene with Dr. Perkins, what Modleski describes as the proclamation of male “‘losses’ at the expense of the female subject” becomes perceptible (9). Though Dr. Perkins first tries to turn Nick away because she is repulsed by him, when she finally realizes that he can, in fact, hear what women think, she encourages Nick to realize that his power is a gift, telling him:

“Freud died at eighty-three still asking the question: ‘What do women want?’ Wouldn’t it be strange and wonderful if you were the one man on Earth able to answer that question? You must learn from this. The world can be yours. You could be the luckiest man on Earth. If you know what women want, you can rule!”

Dr. Perkins is perhaps the only female representation of a consciously postfeminist persona within the film, if she is not something beyond postfeminist. Seemingly unconcerned with the shift in gender relations that made her entrance into the medical profession possible, she is the only woman aware of Nick’s ability and the only one who would convince him to use his ability to skew the amount of gender equality that has been gained in her favor, as is evident in light of Nick’s comment toward the film’s conclusion explaining that a woman would not have used his ability in such a way against another woman. Accordingly, Nick is not only granted the gift of hearing what women think and thus also what women desire but also is rewarded (and by a

---

<sup>26</sup> Nick’s paranoia is framed by Dr. Perkins as melancholia as opposed to psychosis.

woman whom he disgusts) with a woman's comprehension of what this gift means and how it can be used,<sup>27</sup> suggesting, importantly, that Dr. Perkins is implicated in facilitating the restructuring of gender hierarchies in the film that allows Nick "to rule." In fact, it is through the knowledge that Dr. Perkins supplies to Nick that he does, in some ways, achieve his goal of "becoming a woman," which he must do to become a believable character. Interestingly, at times Nick loses his more masculine self in the abandon of his own performance of femininity.

In a supplementary rendering of what Modleski describes as the assimilation of female-derived knowledge, Nick leaves Dr. Perkins office as if he has finally authored a philosophical logic through which men might realize that the newly evolved capitalistic world (in which Nick wants to be primary figure and of which he is attempting to rule) requires a certain amount of feminine insight in order to manipulate a strengthening, no longer marginal, female consumer circle. In other words, within the parameters of his own branded system of truth and knowledge, Nick recognizes man's lack of and need for a vagina, or at least the ability to figure out what one wants. In doing so, he discovers that the image of the female figure, particularly the female sexual organ used as the vehicle for the transport of need and desire in modern advertisement, has become an increasingly erotic and supreme focal point, but one that needs to be carefully navigated as opposed to being randomly and inconsistently poked and prodded like a science specimen.

Nick completely nails the shift in the producer/consumer system that places the focus more so on fulfilling the desires and needs of the "woman's psyche" rather than paying heed to the phallus (almost insinuating that this was the desired effect of the Women's Rights Movement

---

<sup>27</sup> This construction of knowledge, moreover, resonates Modleski's account of the way "female subjectivity and *feminism* itself are assimilated to the 'feminine' mind of the male philosopher" (9, my emphasis). See also Modleski's critique of Nicholson and Fraser (14-22) and Baudrillard (p. 30-34) in *Feminism Without Women*

and therefore the true definition of gender equality). As Nick explains quite fervently to his always present colleague Morgan, “men are stupider it’s true,” suggesting both the simplicity of the male intellect in its inability to understand a woman’s psyche without assistance as well as his own ignorance in not perceiving the transformation within consumer sphere and thus perpetuating his false assumption that all women should desire what men desire. In yet another challenge to Nick’s masculinity, Morgan asks Nick in a half disturbed, half frustrated tone of voice: “They? What are you officially a woman now?” In response, and representing of Nick’s few moments of subjective abandon in relation to masculinity, Nick places every ounce of blame momentarily on man being obsessed with his own equipment:

Oh I wish [I were a woman]. A woman wouldn’t have screwed over the woman she loved. They don’t think that way. And another thing, you know this whole thing about penis envy? Not true. They don’t envy; half of them don’t even like it! [a statement expressed with an element of surprise] You know who has penis envy. We do. That’s why we cheat and screw up and lie, because we’re all obsessed with our own equipment. That’s why.

His colleague stares at Nick as if he were crazy, refusing to accept Nick’s newfound reading of “reality.” However, Nick’s ability to both determine and accept the new role that alterations in the advertising/capitalistic sphere has forced him to occupy allows him to surreptitiously regain the dominant position (even if his newfound femininity will ultimately result in ruin in the resolution of the film, presuming it does). In yet another phase of male crises outlined within *Feminism Without Women* wherein “the problem of misogyny becomes [. . .] a problem of *self-loathing*,” Nick eventually begins to be repulsed by his former phallogocentric self, thus entering with ease the subjective signifier that would later be identified as the “metrosexual.”

The flip side, delineating the position women hold in postmodern capitalistic society, is construed in a different and somewhat oblique manner in *What Women Want*. Woman, in the beginning and ending of the film, reigns in a sphere previously dominated by patriarchal rule, but she is not exempt from male-executed oppression. Darcy is limited in a world where the male body and mind still overpower the female. Though Dan places Darcy in the position of creative director instead of Nick, claiming, basically, that she has the vagina and operative skills to work it, she is, nevertheless, hired by a man and easily dismissed once man learns to operate the vagina himself. Conversely, this poses an interesting question about women's ability to operate and dominate the phallus, a phallus seemingly requiring nothing in the way of improvement. While Nick must answer the long-standing question of what women want and figure out how to give it to them, both emotionally and sexually, Darcy is displaced as a female figure influenced by the Women's Rights Movement's struggle toward equality, who, instead of working to satisfy her own needs, is still attempting to operate the phallus and still searching, as a member of the consumer majority, to have her needs satisfied by an outside source. As a result, when Nick certifies a newly transformed system of knowledge and logic wherein the vagina is viewed as being in desperate need of special focus and a careful hand and the phallus is deemed irrelevant, Darcy's undertaking – her attempt to operate and dominate the phallus – and her masculine performance are not only superfluous but also will never generate any capital within the modified terrain of consumer advertising.

The film remains hazy in terms of absolute dominance, but as it epitomizes society and women's role in the capitalistic system, male dominance is safely reestablished. Darcy, hired to "lead us [Dan and Nick] into the twenty first century," is continually put in her place throughout the film, beginning with the opening description of her character and continuing throughout with:

Nick's ability to see her "feminine" weakness, Dan's compliment to her on the décor (rendering her merely able to fulfill a feminine role after Nick's first underhanded triumph), her claim that she has paid the price as a successful woman (which has caused, after all, the disintegration of her marriage due to her success at work and which she sullenly seems to find not worth the cost), and her dismissal from her position because Nick has stolen credit for her ideas without Darcy becoming even suspicious. Darcy enlarges her already established lack by identifying the misery that ensues as "the" price of equality, and at the same time, she concedes to her desire to be rescued from this presumably postfeminist state of being. Nick's last moment of crisis, then, when he confesses his crime to Darcy, is situated as both a moment in which Darcy is rescued and one in which the postfeminist schema of the film is reversed. Darcy becomes the figure who needs her masculinity to be substantiated, and Nick is at hand to provide her with the same meaningless affirmation that she once offered him, as he tells her that he feels embarrassed that he told her that he needed to be rescued. In a clichéd fairytale kiss, Darcy, self-confessed "knight in shining armor" rescues Nick, and as she kisses him, he calls her his "hero" and "prince," only to be followed by Nick's repositioning of Darcy below him in a long, drawn out kiss in which he creepily hovers above her almost mauling her into obliteration from the camera's gaze.

In the cessation of Nick's subjective crises, then, he does in fact resecure his power and subjective stability at the expense of many of the women who surround him. The postfeminist presumption of equality under which both Darcy and Dr. Perkins function, coupled with Nick's complicity in perpetuating that presumption by presenting himself as inferiorized and in crisis and his conscious circumvention of any dialogue that might reveal a very concrete inequality between himself and Darcy, together become representative, at least within the film, of what Modleski identifies as postfeminist processes that are "engaged in negating the critiques and



undermining the goals of *feminism*” (3, my emphasis). What the resulting injuries entail for the women being undermined is as difficult to locate and/or isolate within the film as the broad-spectrum of subjugation is within American society, not to mention that the film attends less to the consequences that result from Nick’s use of his ability than it does to what women think about Nick and how much they think about how men perceive their own performances, Nick in particular. But in mapping the injuries that are at least implicitly revealed within the film’s extradiegetic dialogue – those that Darcy’s thoughts attest to – it becomes evident that *What Women Want* is the kind of postfeminist text in which, as Modleski fears, women are “[delivered] back into a prefeminist world” (Modleski 3). But, quite different from Modleski’s assessment of the feminized male’s role in this time warp, it is notably in the name of women’s advancement and through their own words that this occurs.

#### Writing Feminisms into Gendered Subordination

*What Women Want* is not only a text that gyrates around the tactics and targets of contemporary mass media but is also one that demonstrates both the structure of what Modleski refers to as postfeminist texts and, within that, what she has identified as a feminized form of male power and hegemony that has pervaded many sociopolitical and cultural spheres during the continuing backlash against feminisms. In addition, the film grapples with a number of important paradigms (and paradigm shifts) within America’s perpetually evolving cultural realm, each of which seem potentially interesting to feminists. Though I have my suspicions that the title of the film was more an advertising ploy than a “question of the ages,” the organization of the narrative as one that answers the question it raises – “What do women want?” – is such that the film’s

resolution of its own inquiry becomes both a question and answer for certain feminist (st)ages – What do women want in terms of feminism(s)?

This second, implicit question asked in *What Women Want* constitutes one of the fundamental underlying questions of this thesis, neither because it is a question that I want to ask nor because it is one that I think I can answer. Rather, the question of what women want in terms of feminisms is important because this question **is** the driving force of what Modleski refers to as the current postfeminist moment. While Modleski's places her emphasis in *Feminism Without Women* on documenting and calling into question a process of male feminization occurring on both page and screen (and this emphasis seems to be the aspect that is troubling for most of her critics), Modleski's underlying concern seems to lie, instead, in the way this question of feminisms is being answered within these postfeminist texts through dialogues between women and men. This is why Modleski's title *Feminism Without Women* does not have to be read only as a conspiratorial case regarding the displacement of women to the margins of feminisms by feminized men. It also could be interpreted as suggesting that the answers being provided within postfeminist contexts in response to this fundamental question might leave feminisms with no women to invest in their import.

Providing tangential critical analyses of *What Women Want*, "Social Criticism," and the texts analyzed in the following chapter is critical because each text exists as what could be called the last instance in mass-mediated and theoretical terrains where women engage in answering the question of what women want in terms of feminisms on such a large scale and within presumably postfeminist contexts. While I more closely examine what those answers comprise in the following chapter, I will focus within the remainder of this chapter on the potential political implications that arise when female subjects formulate these answers within a postfeminist

narrative structure, especially when a specter of the male gaze can be located within the female voice articulating those answers. In doing so, I will outline some of the key points of comparison between the role of Darcy in *What Women Want* and that of Nicholson and Fraser in “Social Criticism,” using that comparison to establish the dialectical relationship between “Social Criticism” and postfeminist discourses.

Similar to the theoretical weakness couched within Modleski’s presumably exclusive emphasis on a process of male feminization that erupts as a means of “dealing with the threat of female power,” the reading of Nick’s character in the previous section of this chapter as one that illustrates the structure of postfeminist texts and the composition of the feminized male subject is limited in its lack of attendance to what Nick hears Darcy thinking. While Modleski, more or less, infers that women are no longer necessary in her interpretation of the current “postfeminist moment,” both on the home front and in carrying on the projects of feminisms (at least in the texts under investigation in *Feminism Without Women*), Darcy’s character emerges as one of importance in *What Women Want*, one who seems to be attempting to prove her value in a postfeminist milieu and often by illustrating how her feminist perspectives can be articulated within and alongside an emerging postfeminist patriarchy. This can be most explicitly ascertained in the voiceover that follows Darcy’s acknowledgment to Nick that she is presumed to be the “man-eating bitch, Darth Vader of the ad world” after which she almost pleadingly exclaims: “But that’s not who I am at all.”

As Darcy’s voiceover constitutes this trajectory of legitimation (and validation) within the film, Darcy is overheard writing the narrative of what women want in relation to feminisms, thus providing the answer to the film’s implicit question. Her answer is dually composed. The first part of her answer can be ascertained in her attempt remove the bitter, power-hungry and

inhuman connotations of feminisms that are attached to her subjectivity (especially in the abovementioned label that constructs her as half praying mantis, or sexual cannibal, and half sci-fi alien monstrosity), and she does so through a process of disavowal in which she professes that the benefits of her position of power (necessarily feminist gains) have not been worth the consequences (namely the loss of male companions who cannot deal with her success as a woman). The second portion of her answer is rendered through the form of escapism offered in the Nike campaign that originates in Darcy's mind, where the image of a woman running on the road by herself represents the opportunity to escape the pressure and stress of the workplace and enjoy "the one place she can be herself," suggesting, as Darcy's comment above also implies, the inauthenticity of female subjectivity in the public sphere.<sup>28</sup> Looking at the image on the page of the Nike advertisement, Darcy exclaims: "Look at her. God, I want to be her. She looks so *free*" (my emphasis).

If Darcy's voiceover indicates that the only feminism worthy of engaging in is one that grants freedom from the "so-called" achievements of feminisms past, then it is Darcy's own narrative that writes the male/female binary into this postfeminist narrative and women into a position of subordination. Male dominance, hence, can appear to be a product of female desire. But it is important to draw attention to what seems to give rise to Darcy's need for escape, namely the fact that her perception of both herself and her decidedly feminist actions are measured according to the (phallogocentric) standards of the men who surround her. Because Darcy's thoughts rarely stray from Nick and Dan's assessment of her work and her character, the

---

<sup>28</sup> This is another instance in which gendered roles are reinscribed in the film.

delineation of any form of feminism within Darcy's voiceover occurs by summoning a specter of the "male gaze" who helps her map out a feminism according to its terms.<sup>29</sup>

The structure of "Social Criticism" can be interpreted as embedded within and informed by the same kind of postfeminist narrative structure outlined in the above analysis of *What Women Want*, where Lyotardian postmodernism is set up by Nicholson and Fraser as a feminized male discourse within both their essay and the debate it inspires. "Social Criticism" certainly does not emerge as the same kind of postfeminist text as *What Women Want* in that there is no displaced male subject overtly attempting to reassert his dominance through a process of feminization and in that Nicholson and Fraser do not proceed to write feminisms unequivocally into extinction as Darcy's character seems to do. However, a few key elemental components remain that are disconcerting in the potential they have to write feminisms into a subordinate gendered position in relation to postmodern theories: the feminization of a decentered male subject (postmodernisms), the critique of feminisms through phallogocentric norms (primarily the anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist tenets of postmodernisms) and the female authorship of a feminism for the present moment (*postmodern feminism*) in which a specter of the "male gaze" can be located as a defining force within that authorship. While I would not dare to suggest that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* represents the same kind of backlash against feminisms "carried out in its [sic] very name" that constitutes Modleski's understanding of a current postfeminist moment, it does, on the other hand, emerge within the same historical intersection and as a response to the same theoretical fissures and sociopolitical shifts.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, "Social Criticism" cannot escape the influence of other discourses within its

---

<sup>29</sup> It should also be noted here that this internalization of the "male gaze" satisfies the heteronormative male fantasy of being the object of women's thoughts and desires.

<sup>30</sup> The complex dynamics of this historical juncture is outlined in the introductions of Chapters One and Two.

social setting – postmodernist, postfeminist, or otherwise. But as will be exhibited below, its authors do not anticipate the regulation of their own voices within the power structures of those discourses, and this lack of reflexivity is the utmost reason, I would suggest, that “Social Criticism” is susceptible to being impinged upon and relegated by postfeminist discourses.

Additionally, just as “Social Criticism” can be demonstrated to maintain a rather close dialectical relationship with a postfeminist narrative discourse, it can also be shown to produce a chillingly similar set of consequences, specifically in the way gender hierarchies of postfeminist narrative discourses are carried over through the process of authorship into their *postmodern feminism*. Within “Social Criticism,” to be more specific, Nicholson and Fraser suggest that feminisms “need” postmodernisms because, alone, feminisms have been incapable of overcoming or escaping the binding impediments of foundationalism and essentialism, seemingly suggesting that, with postmodernisms as a scrutinizing partner (husband), feminisms will be complete. But as Laura Kipnis suggests in “Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism,” though she is referring to the “unhappy marriage[s]” of *Marxism* and *feminism* and *psychoanalysis* and *feminism*, the feminist denial of male-authored master theories as “a prescription for patriarchy” and of their creators as “patriarch personified” “yielded to what might be called a homeopathic approach – poison in small doses as a temporary remedy, one whose curative powers, however, run the risk of producing in the healthy the symptoms of the disease” (149). Thus while critiquing feminisms through discourses of postmodernisms may lessen the underlying essentialist and foundationalist tendencies of second wave feminisms, a different set of theoretical encumbrances typical to postmodernisms, as exemplified in Chapter One, develop into obstacles also for feminist theories, one of those being postmodernisms

predisposition towards the phallogocentric discursive structure of the metanarrative (discussed in greater detail below). As Kipnis goes on to say:

The narrative of the *mésalliance* turned true love is, of course, a powerful one in our culture. [...] (And it hardly needs pointing out that the tale of the feminist romance with Lacan itself strongly suggests the Harlequin formula: the hero may be, on the surface, rude, sexist, and self-absorbed, but it is he alone who knows the truth of the heroine's desire.) (150)

Disregarding others' analyses regarding how postmodernisms function as male-headed, overarching discourses, Nicholson and Fraser erect the precise relationship that Kipnis describes above with Lyotard and postmodernisms in "Social Criticism," and it is their lack of retrospectiveness regarding this question of power in employing *postmodernism* as a remedy for feminisms (also explained in Chapter One) that seems to harvest "in the healthy the symptoms of the disease."

When Nicholson and Fraser trumpet Lyotard as *postmodernism's* archetype, they situate him (and postmodernisms) within the same subjective space that Nick receives in *What Women Want*. Lyotard not only maintains the masculinized position of a "god's eye view" in relation to the shortcomings of a whole category of feminist theories, as Nick does in relation to Darcy's thoughts about her feminist actions, but Lyotard also inhabits a feminized subject position in relation to philosophy, one in which "Philosophy with a capital P," as Nicholson and Fraser argue, "is no longer a credible enterprise" but "undergoes an explicit devaluation," "is cut down to size, if not eliminated altogether" (21).<sup>31</sup> With the proviso that Modleski is correct in her

---

<sup>31</sup> The emasculating rhetoric here regarding philosophy bears resemblance to the emasculation of Nick that occurs in the beginning of *What Women Want* in both his demotion and the premature ejaculation represented by the untimely popping of the champagne cork.

conjecture that the desired product of male feminization is a recognition by the margin of the expertise and authority of the feminized male subject, then it becomes possible to speculate, first, that the Nicholson and Fraser grant that recognition in their authorization of postmodernisms as a remedy and prosthesis for second wave feminisms and, subsequently, that this authorization transpires because of the feminized position that Lyotard and postmodernisms seem to inhabit as a result of this philosophical self-devaluation (Kipnis 165).

Outside of the positioning that postmodernisms receive in Nicholson and Fraser's "encounter," postmodernisms encompass a few other characteristics that allow for a more thorough connection to Nick's feminized subjectivity and his ability to hear what women think, dynamics that are necessarily brought into the *feminism/postmodernism* debate and Nicholson and Fraser's essay through this reliance on postmodernisms. In speaking generally here of postmodernisms, I am referring to the collection of postmodern discourses postdating 1968, namely those of Rorty, Jameson, Baudrillard, and Lyotard, and I choose to classify postmodernisms this way because the overlap of the central theses of these theorists appears to represent the "idea" of *postmodern theory* presented in Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism," though the only two postmodern theorists mentioned in their essay are Rorty and Lyotard.

When categorized in relation to this collection of theorists, the *postmodernism* invoked in "Social Criticism" can be read as a discourse arising from an "intensified state of [male] crisis," particularly a theoretical and subjective crisis that occurs as a reaction to the failed anti-establishment movements of the 1960s. It is in response to this theoretical and subjective crisis (explored more fully in the introduction of Chapter Three) that postmodernists began to surmise that the project of Enlightenment has failed and that the Marxist metanarrative is either



outmoded or implicated within fascistic tendencies of the modern era, ultimately disavowing metanarrative all together as a totalizing (and tyrannical) discourse of oppression. The postmodernist recognition of metanarratives as despotic and repressive thus parallels Nick's recognition of the focus on the phallus within advertising as one that is not best suited to sell to a presumably feminist consumer majority given the accompanying impetus to objectify and debase women and render them utterly defective.<sup>32</sup> But like Nick's character who is less interested in the power-ridden construction of his own subjecthood than how his own objectives and authority are undermined within the larger system of advertising that he once "ruled," it seems possible to suggest that the postmodernist responses to the failure of anti-establishment movements of the 1960s might also be identified as being invested in their own subjective displacement and/or collapse rather than in the marginalization of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual subjectivities traditionally displaced within and by hegemonic discourses. In either case, the postmodernist revulsion to the fascistic tendencies of the male subject within modern discourses parallels Nick's disgust with his former masculine self and his (quite homophobic) repulsion to his obsession with the male sexual organ.

Notwithstanding any hypothetical motives behind this kind of postmodernist response to crisis and/or defeat, the postmodernist abandonment of metanarrative and occupation of a peripheral space within philosophy becomes a symbolic desertion of the power inherent within modern discourses, discourses that seem to be constructed within this equation as necessarily gendered male. It would appear, therefore, that Nicholson and Fraser's almost unqualified implementation of *postmodern theory* as a non-hegemonic discourse could suggest an underlying

---

<sup>32</sup> One might also conjecture here that the similarity between Nick's realization of a need to acquire the operative skills to appeal to the vagina and to women's psyche and the postmodernist appeal to and occupation of a theoretically marginal space might warrant further investigation.

reliance upon essentialist paradigms in “Social Criticism”: that if postmodern theories reject phallogocentric discourses, then postmodern discourses must be gendered female and, as follows, must be non-hegemonic discourses as well.<sup>33</sup> But similar to the unlocatable (all-but-absent) power that Nick acquires in *What Women Want* through his ability to hear women’s thoughts and construct a new set of norms regarding female desire, the erection of a set of norms within the limits of postmodern theories that deem themselves to be without power, as Judith Butler argues, also creates a “powerful, forceful conceptual practice which sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power through recourse to the tropes of normative universality” (39).<sup>34</sup>

Despite the postmodernist claim to abandon metanarrative structure, however, it seems that this collection of postmodern theories, together, construct their own metatheory – representing what Kipnis describes as a “neomodernist desire” – by demarcating the conditions of postmodernity and the interpretation of a postmodern reality through the loss of distinction between appearance and reality (165). Thus, postmodernisms can be said to map out a reorganization of knowledge and logic - i.e. signification is rendered to a state of indeterminacy, transcendental reason is decentered, etc. – similar to the restructuring of the logic of advertising that Nick’s persona simultaneously initiates and signifies within the film. By this, I mean that the term “postmodern theory” represents a restructuring of modern logic in the same way that Aristotle’s *Poetics* represents a restructuring of Platonic logic in that there is a change in the way

---

<sup>33</sup> This is important in illustrating that Nicholson and Fraser’s implementation of postmodern theories as a theoretical savior for feminisms does not produce the desired result and is significant, as well, in reinforcing Diana Fuss’ argument that to avoid essentialism is fundamentally impossible.

<sup>34</sup> Another interesting line of investigation would question what is done to the revolutionary power of gender bending and/or the dissolution of gender binaries. One might suggest in conducting this kind of analyses that these mediated texts rupture gender binaries as both an admonition and as a means of reinforcing prescribed gender roles.

subjects, objects, societies, and concepts like 'truth' and 'reason' are either interpreted or, in the case of postmodernisms, deemed indecipherable.

Together, the characteristics of postmodern theories that can be read into the postfeminist narrative structure of Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" represent what Kipnis calls a "hysterical blindness to the fact that the periphery has forced itself upon the attention of the center," and it "maintains this blindness [by] reinvent[ing] and reinvest[ing] in the centrality of that center" (165). This is true to the extent that postmodern theories can be said to maintain a level of authority and legitimizing power over habitually marginalized discourses while using those discourses to historicize and regulate the altered sociopolitical environment that those voices helped to call into being. This statement is verified further when postmodern theories can be said to leave those marginalized voices out of its historical narrative if not, in fact, silence them altogether, as Seyla Benhabib implies in making the case that the central theses of postmodernisms actually undermine their corresponding feminist endeavors.<sup>35</sup> If Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* reiterates some of the central theses of already articulated feminist theories, and if Modleski is correct in her assessment of the emergence of a postfeminist moment, then the postmodern theories that Lyotard is called upon to epitomize in "Social Criticism" could be interpreted as one of the first theoretical examples of the male appropriation of feminisms that Modleski sees as a defining aspect of postfeminist texts. This appropriation is substantiated in more general terms in Kipnis' supposition that the postmodern critique of Enlightenment is, indeed, "the margin, the absence, the periphery, writing the rules from it's own

---

<sup>35</sup> See the section entitled "Already Postmodern Feminisms: A Rejection of Nicholson and Fraser's categorical assessment of *feminism* in "Social Criticism" in Chapter One of this thesis (pp. 16-18).

interest.”<sup>36</sup> Under the stipulation that postmodernisms represent a crisis in what has otherwise been the phallogocentric canon of philosophy, it follows that Nicholson and Fraser, like Darcy’s character, are right there to rescue it and help return it to that centered position, relegating feminisms again to the periphery.

Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism” and the merger between feminist and postmodern theories that becomes their *postmodern feminism*, then, can be compared to *What Women Want* because “Social Criticism” can be interpreted as an attempt to reassert the value of feminist theories within the phallogocentrically defined parameters of postmodern theories. This becomes clear when postmodernisms are understood as discourses that, to an extent, render a large number of feminist theories illegitimate, as Nicholson and Fraser indicate in their essay, through critiques of social criticism, grand narratives of legitimation, essentialism, foundationalism, and the list goes on. Nicholson and Fraser’s effort to legitimize a feminism within and through postmodern theories transpires much in the same way that Darcy attempts to demonstrate that her feminist perspectives can be expressed in correspondence with (and not contradictory to) an emerging postfeminist patriarchy. In fact, Nicholson and Fraser could be said to almost suggest as much in claiming that there is “self-contradictory in the idea of a postmodern theory” or in the idea of a *postmodern feminism* that emerges when critiquing feminisms according to a set of postmodern theoretical norms. Moreover, when taking into consideration their attempt to elaborate on what *feminism* and *postmodernism* have to offer to

---

<sup>36</sup> I believe what Kipnis is suggesting here is two fold: First, that what has come to be known as the postmodernist critique of Enlightenment was originally articulated by “the margin, the absence, the periphery, rewriting the rules from its own interest” as a colonized subject. And secondly, that the Western, autonomous, bourgeois subject (or rather, the postmodern theorist) has come to inhabit the this colonized subjective position (and he sees himself because of the decentering that occurs as a result of the failed anti-establishment movements at this historical juncture), and within this subjective space, the postmodern theorist also can be said to be “rewriting the rules from its own interest.”

each other, it becomes difficult to decipher whether Nicholson and Fraser's attempt to justify feminisms and postmodernisms as conciliatory discourses might be an appeal to postmodern theorists rather than feminist theorists. What remains problematic here, nonetheless, is that Nicholson and Fraser's answer to the question of what women want in terms of feminisms consists of writing postmodernisms into a superior discursive position and resurrecting the male/female binary within the walls of academia, though they perhaps do both inadvertently. But it is precisely their insistence upon the legitimizing power of postmodernisms and their suggestion that, without postmodernisms, feminisms of the future would be not simply retrogressive but unviable that positions "Social Criticism" as a postfeminist narrative.

In reading "Social Criticism" and Nicholson and Fraser's facilitation of the *postmodernism/feminism* debate as implicated within and informed by a postfeminist discursive structure, one element yet to be mentioned remains perplexing: If Nick is imposing his own ideas upon Darcy and hypothetically maintaining ownership of her thoughts through his ability to "overhear" them, who or what is imposing postmodernisms on Nicholson and Fraser in "Social Criticism"? I would like to suggest, here, that this question can be answered (though not completely) by comparing their own lack of attendance to the power and phallogocentricism that remains intact in postmodern theories to Darcy's ignorance to the skewed power relations in the presumably postfeminist world that surrounds her. In Darcy's attempt to remove the negative connotations that have been imposed upon her subjectivity by the men who surround her – the label of man-eating bitch, most specifically – she assumes that the anger directed towards her results from her acquisition of a position of gender superiority (a classic backlash feminist argument). Therefore, she imagines that the process of removing those negative connotations involves proving herself as the equal she is supposed to be. Most importantly, Darcy fails to

recognize that this self-initiated critique does not occur on her own terms but according to the normalizing standards prescribed by the men and culture that surrounds her, standards that do not appear far removed from those of the immediately preceding history.

Nicholson and Fraser's attempt to critique feminisms through postmodern theories and define feminist theories through a new set of phallogocentrically determined theoretical norms also involves an assumption that the negative consequences of essentialism and foundationalism must be removed entirely from feminist theories and necessarily through a process in which feminisms can be shown to be equally "postmodern." But Nicholson and Fraser, too, fall short of realizing that their own self-initiated critique of feminisms does not occur with any consideration of gendered relations, and not because they do not intend to do so because they claim to do as much in the section on postmodernisms in their essay.<sup>37</sup> Rather, similar to the way Darcy's disavowal of feminisms leaves her with only the specter of the male gaze as a point of reference in her assessment of her feminist subjectivity, Nicholson and Fraser's critique of feminisms neglects a consideration of postmodernisms with respect to gendered relations because they abandon the only modes of feminist critique available to them due to the essentialist and foundationalist tendencies of those methodologies. Consequently, in thoughtlessly discarding feminist theories with essentialist and foundationalist underpinnings, which for Diana Fuss means abandoning all feminist theories, Nicholson and Fraser, like Darcy, incorporate instead the specter of the male gaze (because it is necessarily the specter of Lyotard and postmodern theories that is developed within their essay) who seems to perform their critique of feminisms

---

<sup>37</sup> Despite this claim, as explained in Chapter One, Nicholson and Fraser's attempt to reveal the limitations of postmodernisms is not only insufficient in their failure to explain why those limitations do not need to be applied to a postmodern feminist critique but also in their incapacity to prevent those limitations from impeding upon their *postmodern feminism*.

for them. Because of this, the male gaze becomes a central component in Nicholson and Fraser's voices too.

Exploring the ways in which Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" and their facilitation of the *feminism/postmodernism* debate seems to be complicit with a postfeminist discursive structure furnishes an opportunity to examine both sets of texts outside the comforts of an isolated academic terrain and in relation to the sociopolitical locale for which it purports to supply a mode of postmodern feminist critique. Such an analysis helps to understand their *postmodern feminism* from a different perspective and thus reveals some rather different limitations than those attended to in Chapter One. It also points toward a shift within postfeminist narrative structure in the way the female subject emerges as one adorned with the agency and autonomy to reject feminisms as a flawed aspect of her subjectivity, whether this rejection is a categorical rejection of feminisms, as it appears to be in *What Women Want*, or a (supposedly) partial rejection as it could be described in "Social Criticism." But the reason that these self-initiated, introspective critiques of feminisms that seem to occur at this historical juncture without the reflexivity to make them valuable remains, like Nicks' power in *What Women Want*, somewhat unlocatable. This is perhaps one of the reasons that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* never materializes as one sufficient to the present moment.

Nonetheless, analyzing Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* and the essay that provides definition for it as shaped by and susceptible to impinging postfeminist discourses seems to suggest that there is something deeper at this historical juncture that neither postmodernisms nor postmodern feminisms have completely excavated or are able to fully articulate. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that, as Sandra Lee Bartky astutely observes, the power that institutes the requirements in terms of the female image has done an about face

(79). The power that prescribes both continual and changing female images, Bartky contends, no longer remains in complete control of external entities; rather, the control now resides inside the individual, as she sees herself. Certainly, Bartky maintains, the source of this preoccupation with the self is anonymous. “The power is everywhere and nowhere” (Bartky 79). Inasmuch as this comparison between “Social Criticism” and *What Women Want* points towards a unconscious submission to anonymous forms of power within postfeminist texts and more specifically to an unconscious capitulation to the normative structures of phallogocentric discourses, it suggests the importance of returning to previously articulated feminist theories to ask when and how this occurs and what the aftershock entails. This is why I understand this project as an attempt to be reflexive about what seem to be valuable concepts in feminist theories that deal with the conditions of and theorizations regarding postmodernity when temporal and spatial distance allows for that reflexivity. What the reflection comprised by this chapter seems to reveal in relation to the *postmodern feminism* proffered in “Social Criticism,” as Kipnis surmises in the final statement of “Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?,” is that:

To the extent that a feminist theory discovers these crucial spaces in textual rather than in political practice, it indicates the resistance of first-world feminists to the dangerous knowledge that in a *world* system of patriarchy, [...] we first-world feminists too are also the beneficiaries. (165)

In the next chapter, I turn again to a similar set of mediated texts that could be identified, structurally, as postmodern, postfeminist texts in order to consider how Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* might manifest as a realistic subject position within these postmodern, postfeminist discursive structures. The female characters within these fictional texts – primarily *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* – are also allocated the



agency to reject feminisms, almost unequivocally, as defective aspects of their subjectivities. One of the most compelling aspects of these mediated texts, and the one that generates the impetus to analyze them in relation to “Social Criticism,” is the way these female subjects partake in the skewed historical revision of the history of feminisms and author the answer to the question of what women want in terms of feminisms through a fictionalized mode of postmodern feminist critique that is not far removed from the one demarcated in “Social Criticism.” While the version of postmodern feminist critique enacted by these characters constructs a similarly constrictive definition of a viable *feminism* for the present moment, allowing the comparison being drawn between “Social Criticism” and these texts to become more plausible, they reveal, more importantly, the way the beneficiaries of second wave feminisms – the white bourgeois female subject – can employ feminist theories articulated from the margins to unconsciously write themselves again as the central subject of interest within both feminist theories and the camera’s gaze.

CHAPTER THREE: FORGETTING LYOTARD<sup>1</sup>: INVESTIGATING *POSTMODERN FEMINISM* IN PRACTICE IN POSTMODERN, POSTFEMINIST AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS

What matters is the form. What matters is that the operative word *can't*, and that virtually no aspect of everyday life is not subject to relegation and review, and that in modern love acceding to a mate's commands is what constitutes *intimacy*, and that the "better" the couple the more the inhabitants have successfully internalized the operative local interdictions. What were once commands are now second nature. But once again, it's your choice. Or would be if any of us *could* really choose not to desire love. [. . .] And thus you have the psychological signature of the modern self: defined by love, an empty vessel without it, the threat of love's withdrawal shriveling even the most independent spirits into complacency (and, of course, *ressentiment*).

-Laura Kipnis, *Against Love*

The emergence of feminist discourses engaged in discerning the importances of postmodernisms, postfeminisms, and resistances to both that have been outlined in the preceding chapters suggest that the position the female subject occupies within the late twentieth century is, to an extent, a fundamentally different position from that of the 1960s and 1970s. Situated alongside shifting political environments, emergent media forms and media alterations, and an increasingly "globalized" economy, critical theoretical perspectives emerging in the 1990s have produced a number of increasingly fine-tuned assessments that gauge the beneficial and debilitating aspects of postmodernity and postmodern theories. Only with the imperative temporal distance that has allowed for this theoretical tweaking can an evaluation of the *postmodern feminism* advocated by Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser from 1988 to at least 1999<sup>2</sup> be produced with such a wide-ranging understanding of its motion and aftereffects.<sup>3</sup> In

---

<sup>1</sup> First randomly generated at [www.elsewhere.org/pomo](http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo)

<sup>2</sup> Nicholson has done the majority of the advocating here, but I include Fraser because I am primarily attending to the endorsement that occurs through the reprinting and defense of "Social Criticism without Philosophy."

fact, many of the extensive critical analyses that point toward the critical naïveté and the flawed aspects specific to this theoretically intricate *postmodern feminism* that were outlined in Chapters One and Two have been intermittently catalogued by a variety of feminist thinkers during the nearly twenty years that have transpired since the original publication of “Social Criticism.”<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Nicholson and Fraser’s seeming thirst for theoretical intimacy and companionship with *postmodernism* cannot be identified as something of “second nature” in feminist theory, as it was in Chapter Two, noting what feminist theorists have indicated as the complacency demanded in other theoretical “marriages” and the “*ressentiment*” produced in relation to some feminist appropriations of psychoanalytic and Marxist theories. Nor is this to absolve Nicholson and Fraser’s silencing of other feminist perspectives, their rewriting of those perspectives neatly within the paradigmatic structure of *postmodern feminism*, and their tendency to use their own theoretical work as evidence against arguments that bring its shortcomings into view. The most compelling example is Nicholson’s essay “Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism” (1992), which footnotes only six outside references (two of which are references to Lyotard) as opposed to the eleven footnotes that either cite or explain hers and Fraser’s work on their *postmodern feminism*.<sup>5</sup> But as Kipnis’ suggests in the above epigraph,

---

<sup>3</sup> Even with this nearly twenty-year distance, the evaluations offered in Chapter One cannot be conceived of as complete. In addition to noting the (in)adequacy (or rather, the lack of ability to reach completion) within my own examination of their work, as well as my indebtedness to feminist thinkers who have made that analysis possible, I would also note the importance of Nicholson and Fraser’s work. Their steadfast commitment to what they have viewed as a valuable project, together with my long-term engagement with that work, has only added to the production of thought within this project.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that most of Nicholson and Fraser’s critics have published work dealing with “Social Criticism” or their *postmodern feminism* within collections edited by Nicholson.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholson’s “Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism” appeared in a 1992 issue of *Duke’s boundary 2* (19:2). In this article, Nicholson claims to “try to uncover some of the reasons behind this passion [in the relationship between feminism and postmodernism/poststructuralism]” and to “attempt to resolve some of the conflicts.” Within the first two footnotes, she cites Lyotard in her attempt to “elucidat[e] the meaning I give to postmodernism.” This is followed by seven footnotes that reference hers or Fraser’s articles (four of which are “Social Criticism Without Philosophy), two explanatory footnotes, two footnote references to an essay in her *Feminism/Postmodernism* collection, and four citations of outside texts. Though Nicholson’s tendency (thus not simply in this essay) to

such a pact is “the psychological signature of the modern self” (94). As I have indicated previously, the essays Nicholson and Fraser compose regarding their *postmodern feminism* and its theoretical paradigm are together symptomatic of the modern theoretical structure that they reject in “Social Criticism.” But this paradigm, in fact, does appear to become postmodern after the fact, manifesting in mediated postmodern texts in a relatively similar form that signifies in a diametrically opposed manner. This chapter looks at the way a number of these audiovisual texts – *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* primarily – construct their own postmodern feminisms in a way that is strikingly similar to the *postmodern feminism* put forward in Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism.” This comparison, I propose, underscores the possibility that Nicholson and Fraser may have instituted a postmodern feminist methodology in which it is possible that feminisms might emerge not as discourses essential for “overcoming the oppression of women” but rather as discourses that can be written into oblivion.

It is what Kipnis refers to as the “psychological signature” of modern knowledge and logic structures that seems to mark the importance of returning to Nicholson and Fraser’s initiation and command of this precise “encounter between *feminism* and *postmodernism*.” As feminist theories approach more thorough understandings of the female subject and her subjectivity within modified contexts that are ostensibly evocative of an interstitial space that straddles modern and postmodern structures, conditions, and commodity forms, it remains fundamentally important to ask what might be valuable within critical feminist theories that

---

reference hers and Fraser’s work and “Social Criticism” specifically is indeed troubling given the purpose of this essay, what becomes odd is the way in which there is little reflection on work spanning back to the original publication of “Social Criticism.” This becomes clear not only in this essay but also in a fairly representative 1997 collection edited by Nicholson *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, through which much of her own perceptions of Second Wave feminisms carry over from “Social Criticism” and in which she frames the last section of the collection “The Question of Essentialism” with another notion that follows from “Social Criticism” by using Linda Alcoff’s essay that is cited in footnote number eight and Fraser’s “Structuralism or Pragmatics,” taken from Nancy Fraser and Sandra Bartky’s edited collection *Revaluing French Feminism* (1992) that is cited in footnote eleven.

attend to postmodern specificities and particularly female representations within the postmodern recesses of mainstream American mass media. To assess the limitations and adverse aspects of Nicholson and Fraser's theoretical position is not to eclipse the importance of a feminist understanding of postmodernity. Rather such extensive reflection suggests that feminist questions regarding postmodernity and postmodernisms are imperative to feminist theories. As Angela McRobbie writes in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994): "In short, the strength of *feminism* lies in its ability to create discourse, to dispute, to negotiate the boundaries and the barriers, and also to take issue with the various feminisms which have sprung into being" (73, my emphasis).

In addition to the insights produced in analyzing "Social Criticism" discursively, the transferal of their conception of *postmodern feminism* from modern to postmodern signification becomes a distinct source for exploration in two respects. First, it allows for an inquiry into what feminist questions regarding postmodernity might entail, and second, it answers the question of what the "postmodern" version of feminism put forward by Nicholson and Fraser might look like when viewed through a mediated and popularized postmodern lens. Looking at their theoretical paradigm outside of academia seems an important move to make if one is to gauge what their *postmodern feminism* represents in practice rather than what it entails as philosophy.<sup>6</sup> This chapter's investment in such an exploration is, foremost, an attempt to nuance the so-called "feminist" subtexts of mediated, women-centered romantic comedies and dramas from the 1990s

---

<sup>6</sup> This seems especially important in regard to Nicholson and Fraser's positive outlook on the reduced import of philosophy that Lyotardian postmodernism seems to supply. As Nicholson claims in "A Response to My Critics" (*Hypatia* 2001): "But the point I would like to make here is that we should stop thinking about this issue (with Nicholson and Fraser's reading of Lyotard) as a philosophical one" (86). "I reiterate my belief that we best approach the issue of consensus and dissension in second-order justifications of social and political claims not philosophically but sociologically, politically, historically. I suggest similar approaches for dealing with the question of meaning. This move signals an endorsement not of indifference but rather of commitment and humility" (86).

to the present, “feminist” subtexts whose function seems to become buried below the texts’ postmodern overtones. But in analyzing some of the similarities between Nicholson and Fraser’s theoretical position and this emerging mainstream audiovisual construct, it becomes possible to also make apparent Nicholson and Fraser’s inability to project how *postmodernism* or *postmodern-feminism* would later signify. As a result and constituting the secondary claim of this chapter, Nicholson and Fraser’s seemingly modernist presumption of and dependence upon the determinability of meaning in “Social Criticism” (and specifically the meaning of *postmodernism* and postmodernity) signals a negligent consideration of the appropriation and redefinition of these theoretical terms by the mainstream. In other words, Nicholson and Fraser overlook the possible (mis)appropriation and (mis)classification of the term “postmodernism” within and by the American realm of mass media, wherein the conditions of postmodernity might be manipulated to operate as tools for the relegitimation of hegemonic discursive and sociopolitical structures that postmodernisms hope to dissolve. Before initiating my examinations of these mediated texts, it is important to consider the shifting significations of the term “postmodernism” since the 1960s both within and outside of academia and how this variability insinuates the impossibility of assigning a static meaning to the term.

## An Enigmatic Term: The Vulgarization of the Term “Postmodernism” within Popular American Consciousness and Its Consequences

In a 1993 *October* article, Hal Foster inquires as to how *postmodernism* has become the “darling of journalism” while at the same time the “Baby Jane of criticism” (3). For Foster, postmodern theories like those of Lyotard and Jameson once seemed to offer a revolutionary if not Utopian potential for “lower classes” and “inferior peoples” and the promise of being a “new barbarism” to be “shunned [. . .] at all costs” by the American mainstream (3). But instead, *postmodernism* encountered what Foster calls the “worst” of all possible consequences, as the meaning of the term became “not only banal but incorrect” (4). “Treated as a fashion,” Foster laments, “postmodernism became *démodé*” (3). Its meaning “emptied by the media,” its politic “critiqued within the left,” and its massacre of master narratives deemed “the latest proper name of the West” (Foster 4). The revolutionary potential that *postmodernism* seemed to acquire in the 1960s, Foster despondently suggests, became instead a revolutionary loss in the 1980s, paralleling the passing of the feminist intensity and force also on the wane during that decade.

Despite his disappointment and even facing his own suspicion over the current signification of the term, Foster concludes as a final remark in his essay that the postmodern frameworks of specific events occurring in the 1990s reveal the potential for “moments when impossible identifications become possible,” offering the Clarence Thomas hearings and Rodney King ruling as opportunities for white, middle-class, heterosexual men to come to terms with their sexism and racism (20). Foster’s allusion towards what might be postmodernisms’ new revolutionary power here is certainly curious. But his desire to remove the “Baby Jane” aspects of *postmodernism* within academia points toward what have been the continual attempts of intellectuals to more fully grasp the locale, structure, authority, and enigmatic significations of

both the term “postmodernism” and the conditions of postmodernity, proving the longevity of determined interests in and curiosities toward postmodernisms within academia.

Foster’s subjective appeal to the uses of postmodern theories and the complexities of postmodern sociopolitical milieus is not far removed from Nicholson and Fraser’s conception of creating a diversity-friendly *postmodern feminism*, outlined in Chapter One, as signaled through his appeal to reforming America’s hegemonic social conscience through postmodern mediated representations of race- and gender-discriminatory events. Although his acknowledgement is much more suggestive of the consequences of these events (and the consequences of their mediated framing) than Nicholson and Fraser’s,<sup>7</sup> Foster still seems to privilege these events without fully addressing the continuous detrimental effects that these events inflict upon culturally inferiorized subjects and subjectivities. However, notwithstanding this final comment that he offers in an attempt to somewhat resuscitate *postmodernism* for the white hetero-male members of the American Left, Foster does offer an interesting understanding as to how *postmodernism* has been differentially defined since the 1960s in opposition to those minoritized voices and bodies.<sup>8</sup>

Borrowing from the Lacanian understanding of “the mirror stage” wherein subject formation depends upon an “armour of an alienating identity” and Freud’s notion of “deferred action” as a method of subject formation, Foster reads the constitution of *modernism* and *postmodernism* as being similar to the process of creating a universal and unified subject by defining that subject in opposition to a marginalized subject that is deemed lacking and dissolute.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nicholson and Fraser merely lump together, in one paragraph, a selection of women’s voices who they interpret as being excluded in essentialist and foundationalist feminist discourses, while Foster actually explains these events with more detail and subjective reflection.

<sup>8</sup> Foster does not necessarily altogether fail to address these consequences, but the way he approaches the effects of these situations seems to eclipse the importance of those consequences, as the consequences are only addressed as an element of his own subjective anguish.



In other words, like Nicholson and Fraser's attempt to marshal a *postmodern feminism* by renouncing modes of feminism previously identified as inattentive to other forms of marginalization (those with essentialist and foundationalist underpinnings to be specific), Foster suggests that attempts to theorize the postmodern (before the postmodern has become itself overwritten by yet another structure of feeling or a historic alteration of sociopolitical and social spaces) engage in a "continual process of anticipation and reconstitution." Moreover, Foster explains, this process relies upon the same fascistic colonizer/colonized dichotomy that posits a self-identificatory practice (*postmodernism*) against a cultural other (*modernism*):

Every epoch dreams the next, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, but by the same token it also (re)constructs the one before it. There is no simple Now: every present is nonsynchronous, a mix of different times. Thus there never is a timely transition, say, between the modern and the postmodern: our consciousness of a period not only comes after the fact; it is also always in parallax. (5-6)

This process of "anticipation" and "reconstitution" seems, as well, a symptom of what Kipnis describes as the "psychological signature of the modern self," a symptom that underlies Nicholson and Fraser's development of their *postmodern feminism* and also the alternately signifying *postmodern feminism* found in the mediated texts examined in this chapter (94). The construction of each postmodern feminist paradigm within these differently motivated texts hinges on a revisionist account of feminist histories that predate these texts and foretells a *feminism* of the present moment in contradistinction to that history.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, each of these attempts to define postmodern feminisms seems to suppress these feminist histories instead of probing how current modes of feminisms might interact with

---

<sup>9</sup> It is undoubtedly present in this thesis as well.

and inform those histories. As an exploration of previous attempts to fill moments of crises in feminist theories would reveal, there is an evident tendency within feminist histories to avoid the difficulty of theorizing the subject in extreme “*parallax*,” where parallax signifies an intricate connection of overlapping and contradictory modes of being, social systems, discursive formations, and what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling.” The difficulty that appears to linger within these attempts to theorize the postmodern, then, is a dependency upon what Foster recognizes as a “subjective armour” that obliges a definition of the present self through an absolute severance with past selves and through a self-declared adherence to a projected mode of subjectivity that has yet to be made “real.” If this tendency within feminist theories corroborates Foster’s speculation here, and I am suggesting that it does, then the subjective armament indicative to Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* is promptly a rejection of the notion multiple or split subjectivity that has seemed invaluable to feminist theories, to their own theoretical paradigm, and to postmodernisms more generally. This rejection of multiple/split subjectivity can also be located within these mediated texts as well.

Like the understanding of masculinity offered in relation to *What Women Want* where masculinity is always somewhere between crises and restoration, threatened by a constantly impeding femininity, Foster understands American social and discursive arenas as situated in a perpetual move towards the postmodern. Foster is correct in suggesting that a “subjective armour” is employed as a means of surmounting extreme parallax inasmuch as new theories regarding postmodernity like Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism* seem to procure the ability to locate subjective agency in a distinctively postmodern framework and accurately define its parameters. For Foster, perceived insights into postmodern subjective interpretation and definition claim to provide a new line of penetration into the cultural logics and knowledges of

the surrounding postmodern world. Each change contained in those spatial locales (such as the move toward the inclusion of Othered voices within Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminist theory*) seems to demarcate a seemingly absolute understanding of both postmodern subjectivities and theorizations regarding the conditions of postmodernity as those changes become recognizable, more evidently connected, and fathomable. Moreover, to the extent that postmodernisms are conceived as revolutionary terrain, these theorists assign a certain potential to these new theoretical positions as a means of envisioning new methods in the great move toward social equality, at least to the extent that one can understand how subjecthood is being "affirmed in the destruction of other bodies." This important qualification offered by Foster is illuminating in regard to the propensity of Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* to marginalize other feminist theories and feminist voices for the sake of becoming thoroughly postmodern (even the white heterocentric voices of feminisms' second wave). It is important, then, to ask whose subjecthood is being affirmed in "Social Criticism" and whose bodies are being destroyed, and I address these questions in relation to centered and marginalized female voices in both sets of texts analyzed in this chapter (20).

I would like to suggest, here, that it is not coincidental that Foster locates "significant shift[s] in discourses on the subject, the cultural other, and technology" around the same historical junctures that are mentioned suggestively in Chapter Two during which postfeminist discourses and discussions of theoretical mergers within feminisms were also emerging: the mid-1930s taking Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and Benjamin as examples of the "end of great modernisms"; the 1960s offering Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Barthes, Fanon, Debord, and McLuhan as illustrations of the dramatic shift to the "full advent of postmodernisms"; and the 1990s as the moment in which the theories of both the 1930s and 1960s can be better understood as only

tangentially speaking about each respective “present” (6-7).<sup>10</sup> Likened to the postmodern feminist and postfeminist projections of future forms of feminist critique and identificatory practices, Foster examines the move beyond *modernism* within these theoretical shifts as a “reconstruction of past moments (when these changes are said to have begun)” and an “anticipation of future moments (when these changes are projected to be complete)” (7). Foster’s attention to these historical junctures demonstrates the breadth of this theoretical resistance to states of parallax, thus extending the predisposition to resist moments of parallax beyond feminist theories. It also reveals that any theorization that specifies itself as postmodern might benefit from both a concurrent investigation and subsequent reinvestigations in relation to what causes this resistance to parallax in the first place: What, for example, causes Nicholson and Fraser to project a future essentialist-free feminist discourse without examining the complexities of the present moment, and what causes them to both override investigations of those complexities carried out by other theorists and continue to insist upon the manifestation of this future postmodern feminist discursive structure?

For Foster, these theoretical shifts, likewise, indicate that each “reconstruction” and “anticipation” is embedded within the sociopolitical environments of their contextual surroundings – the rootedness of Lacanian subject formation in the 1930s understanding of the fascistic subject, a shift toward a subject with revolutionary potential in the 1960s, and a shift toward a subject in the 1990s who is attempting to deal with the revolutionary loss that her or his

---

<sup>10</sup> Though my consideration of feminist mergers in the 1960s was abbreviated in Chapter Two, the 1960s are very important in relation to the historical junctures (1920s and 1980s) that Chapter Two calls attention to because of the many attempts made during that decade to understand how other theoretical interpretations and modes of analyses such as Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis might be beneficial to deepening and expanding feminist critique. I suggest the similarity between postmodernisms and feminisms to these historical junctures because both postmodernisms and feminisms have much to lose within the sociopolitical climate and are both searching for a theoretical perspective that might remove them from the bind in which they find themselves.

own body simultaneously inhabits and disavows (8-11). The embodiment within the field of feminist theories of these larger surrounding crises in the 1980s, crises that occur as a result the sociopolitical landscape, suggests that one potential motivating factor for “Social Criticism” (as Nicholson and Fraser suggest within this essay as well) might be a response to what Toril Moi describes as a waning interest in or a dissociation from feminisms within the American social conscious that occurs during this historical moment. But at the same time, “Social Criticism,” as previously illustrated, uses this motivating factor to procure a free-willed abandon of this crisis, an abstention that necessarily entails relinquishing the contributing factors (second wave feminisms) that appear to constrain them to that dilemma.

Accordingly, Nicholson and Fraser’s response in “Social Criticism” could be read into the historical narrative that Foster offers here, and they too become the objects of the questions he raises in relation to the fascist subject of the 1930s, noting as Foster does that “suggesting such a historical referent [. . .] is no doubt offensive”: “Has this fascistic reaction not in part returned? Did it ever go away? Does it not rest potentially within us all? Or is to generalize it in this way to normalize it over much?” (8-9, fn 10).<sup>11</sup> Understanding this return or the potential presence of this kind of “fascistic reaction” is important because it is also tied into the question of what might cause a resistance to parallax within feminist theories at this juncture. The tendency to not acknowledge this latent motivating factor, or perhaps more accurately to simply not be aware of it, seems to imply that one of the underlying causes of the loss of revolutionary

---

<sup>11</sup> The question and location of the residual fascistic elements of subject formation and reformation, even in part, seems a question to be always and repeatedly asked in theories that undertake the project of social equality, given: Nicholson and Fraser’s derision regarding authoritatively and exclusionary modern feminisms, their own exclusionary model and appeal to diversity in establishing the necessity of their *postmodern feminism*, and Foster’s suggestion that racist and sexist events allow white, heterosexual males to recognize their own discriminatory practices. I would be sure that similar tendencies to exclude can be located somewhere within my own discourse (despite all attempts to prevent such),

power and resistance among postmodernisms (and by default Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism*) can be located within the attempt to constrain the term "postmodernism" to exceedingly one dimensional definitions. This seems roughly the dilemma of this historical impasse in feminist theories, as well, given the simultaneous challenge to feminist theories by feminist speakers and by feminist backlash advocates and the attempts by both sides to regulate the definition of the term "feminism" within its sociopolitical present. The stakes are too high, for radical theorists and their presumed adversaries in the mainstream. To not render these terms determinate is to lose control over their meaning altogether.

Foster's reading of the 1990s appears to indicate that beginning in the 1970s academics attempted to hold on to the radicality and resistance that *postmodernism* seemed to possess in the 1960s, even as the term lost that power and gained new meaning. Though Nicholson and Fraser have been quite adamant in their assertion of *postmodernism's* revolutionary potential, Foster, while certainly trying to recover the displaced meaning of the term, implies that the now lacking revolutionary potential must perpetually be recuperated from sectors that repeatedly appropriate, popularize, and redefine the term. This chapter is, in part, an attempt to reveal how this term has been appropriated, popularized, and redefined as a tool of oppression rather than one of revolt. But it is, as well, an attempt to reveal how the lack upon which Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* is founded seems to also manifest in these commodified forms of postmodern feminisms. This lack is threefold: a lack within second wave feminisms that Nicholson and Fraser inevitably cannot fully purge from their *postmodern feminism*, a lack that is carried over from postmodernisms into their *postmodern feminist paradigm*, and a lack that is created in placing feminisms within a subordinate gendered position in relation to postmodernisms. Correspondingly in these mediated texts, women dissociate themselves from

second wave feminisms by engaging in a process that defines a so-called feminist mode of female subjectivity for the present moment by imposing a male-defined and thus acceptable mode of agency on the female subject as a means of removing the female subject from the feminist crisis that surrounds her.

In the same way that feminist questions of subjectivity are displaced by filling the just opened theoretical void with the patriarchal orders of psychoanalytic and Marxist theories in the 1960s, for Foster, theoretical attempts to move beyond the modern within these then present moments are likewise complicated by their bold assumptions and rashly marshaled remedies. These theoretical impediments rest primarily upon a declaration of the “full advent of postmodernisms,” an assertion that becomes a residual factor within “Social Criticism” and other feminist theories as well. Furthermore and similar to the historical revision of feminist movements and feminisms by presumably free “postfeminist” subjects both in the 1920s and from the 1980s into the new millennium, these attempts often are dependent upon and never defined by anything other than a redefinition of a previous moment by already hegemonic discursive speakers who rely upon a projection of what they promise will be a more egalitarian future. The similitude between the construction of a new feminist discourse and mode of feminist subjectivity within “Social Criticism” and these mediated texts points at once toward the privilege of these hegemonic discursive speakers and listeners as well as the potential consequences that result when authorial license underlines these corrective, future-oriented calculations.<sup>12</sup> Yet the purposes behind these discursive shifts and prognoses of anticipated

---

<sup>12</sup> I point toward this in reference to Kipnis’ article “Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism” when I insinuate at the end of Chapter Two that the beneficiaries of second wave feminisms – the white bourgeois female subject – can employ feminist theories articulated from the margins to unconsciously write themselves again as the central subject of interest within both feminist theories and the camera’s gaze. I return to this supposition at the end of this chapter when exploring the positioning and function of marginalized bodies within these mediated texts.

cultural logics remain hidden, similar to those Nick inscribes within the diegesis of *What Women Want*. Moreover, the answer as to for whom this super-democratic social space will transpire can never be guaranteed, as I attempt to make evident in my analysis in Chapter One of Nicholson and Fraser's facilitation of the *feminism/postmodernism* debate and the construction of their *postmodern feminism*.

Foster too relies heavily upon this past/future theoretical structure when inquiring of the present moment "whatever happened to *postmodernism*?" This most specifically occurs at the end of his essay at which point he gauges the potential complacency that a postmodern terrain might evoke (through his analysis of "the splittings of the subject that occur with a new postmodern intensity") for the purpose of determining a mode of engagement that might "not render one politically autistic" (20). Foster thus marshals a new mode of subjective engagement and interpretation that is set against his reading of previous reactions to these "radical splittings," one that he proposes would deter political complacency and produce "moments when impossible identifications become possible" (20). Yet the specificities within his analysis of this contemporary mode of postmodern subjectivity and the detailed similarities that he identifies as a reinscription of subjective armor within American hegemonies occurring after the 1960s (that also had been documented in the 1930s in relation to Lacan's "mirror stage") become useful in investigating the present moment (3). Outlining residual theoretical frameworks that necessarily impede any attempt to make a "clean break" from the modern, Foster marks, here, not only the lingering of psychoanalytic discourses even in what he suggests are postmodern theories but also the presence of the Marxian notion of history's importunate undercurrent of repetition. This suggests that, as Chapter One surmises, Nicholson and Fraser cannot simply avoid the theoretical

---



traps of essentialism and foundationalism through the invocation of postmodernisms, or rather, through a self-avowed conformity to an anticipated mode of postmodern subjectivity that has hitherto not been made “real.”

These two indications thus complicate understandings of postmodernity in which subjectivities, contemporary contexts, sociopolitical structures, or cultural strictures are rendered through ahistorical analyses in attempts to move into a “thoroughly *postmodern feminism*.” The use of the term “ahistorical” in relation to these theoretical positions is not intended to suggest a lack of historical memory or a lack of attention to historical events. “Ahistorical,” especially in relation to Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism,” implies rather that these historical points of orientation are little more than historical markers referenced principally for the purpose of moving beyond problematic moments in knowledge formation, as suggested by Kipnis, and not for the purpose of dealing with or altering the oppressive structures and processes within that history. In other words, Nicholson and Fraser call into question the bulk of second wave feminisms and document critiques of marginalization within those discourses only for the purpose of defining a *postmodern feminism* as second wave feminisms’ anti-thesis. In doing so, they reveal their tendency toward ahistorical analysis and perpetuate this past/future theoretical structure. It seems unsurprising that this use of ahistorical reference and this past/future dichotomy are present also within mediated representations of *postmodern feminism*, texts that could also be identified as second wave feminisms’ anti-thesis.

Contradistinctively, from his suggestion of the historical connectivity between these junctures and his marking of the significances of these shifts, Foster puts forward an undertaking that at least requires dealing with the notion of postmodern subjectivity historically and with few attempts to foretell a future of the postmodern subject. Even though he suggests the possibility of

specific types of future engagements within and in relation to postmodern territories, he emphasizes the impossibility of moving into a “fully postmodern” moment and marks the existence of disproportionately developed spatial and temporal locales. In the understanding of postmodern subjectivity that he offers, the postmodern aspects and dynamics that Foster outlines function as points of measurement and potential foundations for analysis, none of which prescribes a unitary understanding of postmodern subject formation and all of which signify modernity and postmodernity simultaneously.

In his reading of contexts that both signify and manufacture postmodernity within these three historical periods, suggesting that the sociopolitical sphere in America has been engaged throughout the twentieth century in a process of always approaching but never reaching a “postmodern” state, Foster points toward an amplified and deepened “splitting at the level of body-image” that has been “in process” from the 1930s to the 1990s (20). During this most recent historical point in time, Foster explains, this increased “dis/connection” that had been “in process” consummated in the 1990s a “new level of oxymoronic pain-and-pleasure” that “connects and disconnects us simultaneously,” situating one “both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them” (19). This simultaneous connection and disconnection could be likened to attempts within feminist theories to explore and understand women’s experiences across the globe by reading, watching, and interpreting non-Anglo writing, film, television, or even experiencing another spatial local. While potentially valuable and certainly forward moving, however, any such exploration that does not acknowledge the lack of understanding that is necessarily intrinsic to its own historical and spatial localities blurs the distinction between the distance in space, knowledge, and experience that inevitably exists. “Social Criticism” and the mediated texts in this chapter also blur this

distinction in their reductive accounts of feminisms past and present. The obscuring of these spatial and temporal distances and of cultural differences in “Social Criticism” thus becomes problematic when voices begin to speak from within the abyss that has been created, curtailed, and enclosed within Nicholson and Fraser’s facilitation of the *feminism/postmodernism* debate. This abyss is a product of their insistence on the validity of their *postmodern feminism* and the invalidity of feminist theories that have not adequately divested themselves of essentialist and foundationalist underpinnings.

It follows that postmodern subjectivity is accordingly socially constructed, at least for Foster, by these manufactured splittings between body and image. The sociopolitical consequences of subject formation that occurs through this body/image rift within the early 1990s seem to offer some insight into what Sandra Bartky describes as an unlocatable source of power (a power that is everywhere and nowhere). Foster’s differentiation between subjective agency and the source of control and authority procured by these radical subjective splittings on screen supplies one potential site for analyses of new or evolving ideological constructs that are at once technologically produced and transpire with what he calls “a new postmodern intensity,” or rather:

a spatiotemporal splitting, the paradox of great immediacy produced through extraordinary mediation; a moral splitting, the paradox of disgust undercut by fascination, or of sympathy undercut by sadism; and a splitting at the level of body-image, the ecstasy of imaginary dispersal rescued by the confirmation of ego armour. (20)

These splittings, Foster concludes, contain the potential to trigger a voluntary surrender and sometimes even a renouncement of subjective agency. Before rendering a perhaps less obvious

reading of this “imaginary dispersal” and body/image splitting within mediated texts that proceed Foster’s essay by more than ten years, it might be beneficial to take Foster’s case in point – “the real CNN Effect of the [first] Gulf War” – as he explains that he “can only develop this notion of postmodern dis/connection anecdotally from his spatial and temporal locale” (19).

Noting his disgust toward the politics behind the images on the screen, Foster admits to being enthralled, perhaps even mesmerized, by the “psycho-techno-thrill that locked [him] in, as smart bomb and spectator locked in as one”:

A thrill of technomastery (my mere human perception become a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my own subjecthood. Of course when the screens of the smart bombs went dark, *my* body did not explode. In fact, it was bolstered: in a classic fascistic trope, my body, my subjecthood, was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies. And again, I do not think I was alone in this awful affirmation. [. . .] Is it any wonder that this subject is often so dysfunctional? Is it any wonder that when it is able to function it often does so on automatic, given over to fetishistic responses, to partial recognitions syncopated with complete disavowals? (I know about AIDS, but I cannot get it; I know racists, but I am not one; I know what The New World Order is, but my paranoia embraces it anyway . . .) (19-20)

Though finding this kind of self-reflexive consciousness in most of those who joined Foster in this thrill might be unlikely, Foster offers quite a compelling account here (focusing on the disordered and untenable present-day terrain of the United States) as to how understandings of postmodernity must depend upon deepened understandings of mediated representations

surrounding a subject who inhabits a chaotic postmodern world. Under the proviso that Foster is correct in understanding agency at this juncture as being affirmed in the destruction of other bodies, then agency is established by the postmodern feminisms presented in both Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism" and these mediated texts through the destruction of feminisms and feminist personas that occurs on page and screen.

By subjecting the body to representations of extreme or seemingly infinite subjective dispersal and representations that signify a hyperbolized version of the disarray that fully surrounds the all but dismembered subject, the viewers' subjectivities, Foster suggests, remain intact or "forever cut off" from these representations through the subjective denial that the very absurdity of the screen enacts. In other words, the absurdity on screen solicits viewers' participation in applying mainstream cultural logic in counteracting the absurdity surrounding the mediated and dismembered body being watched. As Foster suggests, this possibly leads to both a limiting of agency in the act of viewing and/or the application of the enacted mainstream cultural logic to the non-mediated world that the viewing subject inhabits. Within these postmodern, postfeminist mediated texts, that absurdity is *feminism* itself, a particular form of feminism, needless to say, delineated by mainstream American media. Of course, an additional qualifier should be added to Foster's understanding of this process: the "normality" of the "intact" subject and the "abnormality" of the images she or he looks upon most certainly are socially constructed and are perhaps more damaging than any internal or external "chaos." As Foster suggests when footnoting a quote from "The Nazi Myth": "The ideology of the subject . . . is fascism" (9, fn 10)

For a better understanding of how this "imaginary dispersal" might signify in relation to postmodern, postfeminist mediated texts in the 1990s and 2000s, one might look at the four

primary female protagonists of the HBO series *Sex and the City*. Three of four female protagonists – Carrie, Miranda, and Samantha – regularly participate in a process of rejecting the normalized feminine life targets of “marriage, babies, and a house to call one’s own” as a means of securing individual “sanity” and a form of subjective stability judged appropriate by their “feminist” peers (“Change of a Dress”). In the episode “Where There’s Smoke,” when Charlotte tells her three friends that “women really just want to be rescued,” the viewer overhears Carrie’s thoughts: “There it was – the sentence independent, single women in their thirties are never supposed to think let alone say out loud.” Despite Carrie’s suggestion to Charlotte that “maybe we’re the white knights, and we’re the ones who have to save ourselves,” this agency filled proposal is called into question through Carrie’s voiceover narration of her column: “I couldn’t help but wonder – inside every confident single woman is there a delicate fragile princess just waiting to be saved?”<sup>13</sup> In the episode’s finale Carrie answers her question quite conclusively – “So I guess sometimes a woman absolutely has to be rescued and sometimes a woman absolutely has to rescue a man.”<sup>14</sup> Carrie’s voiceover thus simultaneously calls attention to what she perceives as a mandated conformity to acceptable forms of feminist speech, claiming that women “are never supposed to think these thoughts,” while insinuating, at the same time, that women are thrust into the “booby-trapped silence” of feminist discourses and, consequently, their “true” desires become unspeakable desires (Cixous 234). While these texts appear to construct female subjectivity as a unified and thus intact “feminist” subjectivity, I propose quite oppositely that a refusal to participate in normalized heterosexuality, as Kipnis too seems to imply in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, is promptly a rejection of the modern self and thus also of the

---

<sup>13</sup> This is echoed in Mary Alice’s voiceover in *Desperate Housewives*

<sup>14</sup> In this episode, Miranda, to whom the idea of being rescued was an insult, gets saved by her boyfriend Steve after having eye surgery.

unified subjectivity that these characters are supposed to espouse. This becomes more obvious when these varied feminist, postfeminist, and anti-feminist assertions are considered in relation to each other and the female subjects upon which they are written.

The supposedly “feminist” subjectivities of Carrie, Miranda, and Samantha are further complicated by their juxtaposition to Charlotte, a character who regularly confesses her desire to meet the life targets required of normatively feminine subjects. While Charlotte’s subjectivity is perhaps more intact than the other three female protagonists, it is, nonetheless, also not unified. As Charlotte’s subjectivity is dependent upon a mediated version of femininity and heterosexual suburbanhood characteristic of filmic and televisual representations of the 1950s, her subjectivity is subject to being measured against altered (or contemporary) ideological norms as well. Although the error, as suggested in *Sex and the City*, lies in Charlotte’s dependency upon the other extreme – an idealized femininity of the past.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the primary male characters within *Sex and the City* are allowed to inhabit unified subjectivities (Mr. Big, Harry, and Alexander Petrofsky, each of whom signify previous mediated representations of appropriate masculinity as opposed to the feminized masculinity that Nick represents in *What Women Want*). Yet the four female protagonists remain incapable of locating a subjectivity that successfully negotiates an appropriate median point between June Cleaver, Madonna, and Brittany Spears, or rather between representations of 1950s styles of femininity and supposedly feminist-rooted representations of females who personify “free” sexual expression that are interspersed throughout 1960s to 2000s mass media. Thus, these female characters’ subjectivities end up signifying as a mismatched array of conflicting subject

---

<sup>15</sup> As *Sex and the City* often insinuates, Charlotte is simply not “slutty” enough, a categorization she tries to eschew later in the series in her attempt to seduce her sexually impotent husband Trey, who can only get aroused by images in pornographic magazines – images of women over which Charlotte superimposes her face so that she is included in Trey’s masturbatory fantasies.

positions. But more than anything else, these female characters end up confused rather than liberated by their multiply signifying subjectivities, posing questions as to “who” they are “supposed” to be and most often finding that who they are supposed to be is not really who they “are.”

Trapped in this dilemma, the intact and internalized ideological constructs built upon female submission to men that underlie these “feminist” articulations chafes at and erodes the abjuration of normative femininity that often leads the three sexually “freed” characters to both declare and question their “cynicism” towards the romance that mass culture for so long has afforded to women and also toward the romance genre in general. The disavowal of normative femininity is thus rendered a visible subjective peculiarity. At the same time, the declared “cynicism” within these texts is always juxtaposed to the cultural disavowal of *feminism* (signified by the Charlotte in *Sex and the City* and Bree in *Desperate Housewives*) and similar disavowals made by the so-called “feminist” personas in these texts. In fact, as the female protagonists in *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* contentiously affirm, any such fictional female “cynicism” toward the heteronormative paradigms of this sociocultural romance is in fact only imaginary. As Kipnis surmises, “[w]hat were once commands are now second nature. But once again, it’s your choice. Or would be if any of us *could* really choose not to desire love.”

Rather, in many media portrayals and as suggested in *What Women Want*, women indeed do want these to relocate themselves within the field of heteronormative femininity but are trapped within the plastic contours of a kind of postfeminist Stepford domain. In *Bewitched*, for example, the leading female character all but claims to be forced by society to perform this feminist identity. This assertion is paralleled by two of the main female protagonists in the



remake of *The Stepford Wives*, both of whom remove themselves from this feminist “hell” and one of whom attempts to remove all other women from it as well. In contrast, the more recent television series *Desperate Housewives* could be read as a text that parodies the attempts of feminist women to return to the domestic sphere and the obstacles they encounter due to physical and psychological impediments – primarily their feminist inclinations – a culturally induced condition resulting from growing up during or shortly after the Women’s Rights Movement.

What one reading of Foster’s essay might suggest, then, is that by creating an abhorrence to feminisms within non-fictional mainstream media while culturally exalting the normalized feminine roles of mother and wife, female viewers might look at the chaos surrounding these fictional representations of feminists and identify these representations as forms of subjectivity that they themselves do not want to embody or signify. The “imaginary dispersal” that Foster illustrates occurs through these female representations as they all but crumble under their own psychoses and in the face of the repetitive predicaments and impasses they encounter. The viewers indeed are propositioned by these texts to make sense of this chaos – an evocation of viewer response similar to the expectation that a female character will fall down while being pursued by a slaughterer in a horror film and the foreseeable desire for her to not trip or the groan that acknowledges the fulfillment of this expectation. In *Sex and the City*, for example, Miranda - a partner at a law firm and a single mom who tries on lesbianism and biracial dating – escapes the pandemonium of the city by moving to the suburbs during the show’s sixth season. The most sexually free character Samantha discovers she has cancer and is forced to reevaluate her equation of monogamy with monotony. Lynette, in *Desperate Housewives*, who as a working mother of four young children forces her husband into the undesired role of “Mr. Mom,”

becomes afflicted with breast cancer and is forced to relinquish her public role and return to domesticity.

If Foster is correct, the pleasure of signification (and the agency therein) is thus latently deferred to the pleasure of viewing this signification,<sup>16</sup> and as Foster argues, the subject relinquishes her or his agency in this process. Undoubtedly, not all women participate in this process or become subject to the same submission that this body/image splitting solicits, although not becoming at least implicated within that process is not effortless or failproof, as Chapter Two attempts to demonstrate. Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* makes this labor and defeat all too evident in the essentialist underpinnings of "Social Criticism," its postfeminist narrative structure, and its construction as a metanarrative. If Foster's understanding of the construction of this particular form of postmodern subjectivity is useful, and I propose that it is for the texts to be addressed here, "the ecstasy of imaginary dispersal" of feminisms into states of hesitancy, ambiguity, and doubt has the potential to secure a normalized feminine ego within an "appropriately" feminine body on screen, if not off screen as well. What is a viewer to make of the final season of *Sex and the City* in which all four women are either married or clearly on the verge of becoming fictional wives?

But if and when female subjectivity is constituted in these texts through the disavowal of *feminism* (as term, label, and belief system), female agency becomes dependent not upon moving towards equal gender statuses but rather upon distancing oneself from any such endeavor. As Foster explains:

---

<sup>16</sup> It seems worthwhile here to draw attention to the "new generation of avowedly feminist critics" that Modleski documents as "hold[ing] a preceding generation of feminist critics responsible for depriving them of the enjoyment of much mass culture," "insisting on the right to the pleasures promised to women by the culture industry" (ix).

It has become common to refer to such recognition-*cum*-disavowal as cynical reason, a state in which agency is not so much cancelled as it is relinquished – as if agency were a small price to pay for the shield that cynicism might provide, the immunity that such ambivalence might secure. (20)

The female characters in these texts not only reference their own cynicism toward romance, but more importantly, some of these characters (the four protagonists in *Sex and the City*, for example, and even more explicitly Marin in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003)) reveal that while this cynicism may provide immunity it also prevents them from experiencing all the phenomenal sensations that heterosexual relationships would otherwise provide them if only they would allow themselves to submit to normative feminine roles – vulnerability, passivity, and the abandonment of their own freedom and equality. Within this configuration, then, agency is twice relinquished, which complicates further Foster's understanding of the abandonment of agency as a potential price to be paid for participation in this body/image splitting. The question of what kind of agency remains within what many are calling their "postmodern" identities or more and more recurrently the "postmodern era" is precisely the question I explore in the second portion of this chapter, and sometimes, even, the question of whether agency can exist according to previous understandings of the term.

Within the remainder of this chapter then, I revisit the terrain of American mainstream media, particularly the facets aimed toward women viewers, to investigate the similarities between Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* and the postmodern feminisms that gain representation in these mediated texts. I locate this signification within these texts at the points in which "feminist" characters critique a seemingly monolithically signifying *feminism* against branded notions of postmodern, postfeminist identities and social structures. This fairly recent

turn within feminist theories towards theories of postmodernity, as outlined by Fraser and Nicholson's call for a thoroughly *postmodern-feminism*, suggests that postmodern theories uncover a new line of sight through which *feminism* and women's subjectivity can be conceived theoretically, certainly marking an important move within feminist theories toward examining female bodies and subjectivities within the rapidly shifting and interminably volatile terrains of recent history, which are often, in addition, at variance with each other. What remains problematic is not simply "which" limited aspects of their formulation acquire impromptu signification within these mass-mediated women-centered texts. The more consequential element within this nearly mimetic transfer from theory to mass culture is "how" it begins to signify. Often replicating Fraser and Nicholson's attempt to move toward (and ultimately establish) a *thoroughly postmodern feminism*, these "feminist" characters are embedded in what seems their own feminist-initiated and introspective analysis of *feminism*, demarcating the domains and limitations of femininity, sexuality, race, age, and ethnicity in this process.

So to not confuse this subsequent signification with the self-introspection of *feminism* in which Nicholson and Fraser implicate themselves in "Social Criticism" – a scrutiny measured against an internalized Lyotardian mode of postmodernism – I suggest understanding these all but the equivalent copies within American mass media as simulacra. These female representations signify at once ahistorical (if not entirely absent) points of historical reference and anything but *feminism*, even taking the term in its most minimal definition as a belief in social equality and especially considering their interpretations of and allusions toward second wave feminisms. As simulacra, I am suggesting that simulations of Fraser and Nicholson's model of a *postmodern feminism* within these mass-mediated texts lack existent historical points

of origin. Certainly no absolute line of connection can be drawn from these simulations back to “Social Criticism.”

This is not to say, however, that both do not have similar points of origin, that they do not surface because of their implication in sociopolitical contexts of close proximity, or that they do not evoke the same consequences. From this historical perspective (circa 2008), these elements are precisely what allows for this connection to be drawn and what, moreover, enables postfeminist and of anti-feminist representations of female subjectivities to acquire signification as feminist representations (as some of my students have been quick to indicate, some noting the way the characters in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* embody a seemingly “complete” spectrum of female personas, others focusing on the texts’ engagement with the topics of abortion and single motherhood, clitoral pleasure, the female orgasm, and being able to “have sex like men”). Moreover, the tendency within these texts to rewrite and rearrange the historical points of origin to which they allude provokes the illusion that 150 years of women’s progression toward equality<sup>17</sup> can be made densely precise and ordered in terms of importance within the limits of each text. At the same time, these texts, because of their postfeminist narrative structure, insinuate that complete equality is achieved at the point at which their bodies enter the framework of the screen. As Laura Kipnis has suggested and as I argue, the postmodern feminist formulation within Nicholson and Fraser’s work and these mediated texts through which female subjectivity can be explored (whether or not that subjectivity is identified as feminist) eclipses the question of subjectivity and subjective agency altogether. As these supposedly feminist representations participate in introspective critiques of the *feminism* within themselves and in self-referential critiques of *feminism* in others (men and women alike), “the logical

---

<sup>17</sup> See especially *Mona Lisa Smile*

terminus proves to be classic patriarchy,” even as these texts suggest that the locus of this examination is the female subject herself (Stacey 574).

Because non-Anglo, non-upper/middle class, and non-heterosexual representations are rarely addressed in these texts as feminist characters and often maintain rather different locations within these questions, I examine those representations briefly in the prologue to this chapter.<sup>18</sup>

As Bonnie Dow observes:

Television’s representations of *feminism* are almost exclusively filtered through white, middle-class, heterosexual, female characters,’ creating ‘a racially, sexually, and economically privileged version of *feminism*, that, for the American public, has come to represent *feminism* in toto. (quoted in Henry 69, my emphases)

The prologue therefore provides a limited analysis of *how* these “Othered” characters are positioned in these texts to provide assistance in returning Anglo feminist women to the normative feminine sphere. I also suggest that these “Othered” characters function in a way that is disconcertingly similar to the placement of “diversity” within Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism,” or rather as a tool in creating these postmodern feminisms rather than “the” female subjects for whom these postmodern feminisms are generated.

After a discussion of how these mediated texts become indicative of postmodern texts, I initiate an inquiry into the way in which these mostly middle- to upper-class, Anglo-American, heteronormative female bodies become involved in a process of examining, redefining, and often

---

<sup>18</sup> A more thorough examination of the function of these Othered characters in each text is important not simply because of what they have to say about the signification of diversity within mediated texts aimed toward mostly white heterosexual female audiences but also what they reveal about the function of diversity within Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism.” Though I am not able to investigate this line of thought as comprehensively as I would like in this thesis, I do intend to pursue this line of thought in future projects

eradicating their feminist characteristics. This erasure often occurs by way of a female-initiated introspective routine of examining “feminist” actions by invoking a specter of the “male gaze,” or rather a lingering set of male-defined standards of femininity and female subjectivity that seem to have obtained permanence within the female mind. Moreover, the redefinition of feminisms according to male standards manifests in a characteristically postmodern form that seems to have become one of the staple visible markers of romantic comedies and dramas aimed toward female audiences during the late 1990s and early twentieth century – a predominantly hi-def intertextuality within singular filmic or televisual units that incorporates a selected mix of cultural texts and media: standard news and other print media, women’s magazines, soap operas, fairytales, relationship myths, previous generations of male-authored texts ranging from novels and films to television series, previously radicalized locales (such as the lesbian art community and film theory), alternative modes of identity that involve thrift store shopping, modes of identity based in celebrity culture and elite fashion circles, pornography, and sometimes even the Internet. I take the television series *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* and the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2004) as the primary texts for my analysis, while some of the supplementary texts include the television series *Ally McBeal* and *Commander in Chief* and the films *Down With Love*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Bewitched*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, and *Something’s Gotta Give*.

As a prominent feature in so many of these texts, female authorship is a primary site in establishing female agency and feminist identification. This feature provides an almost continuous signification of agency across both the primary and secondary texts in my analysis, whether as literal “authors,” symbolic authors, or authors of the future (as in controlling the outcome of events): Carrie Bradshaw as sex columnist and narrator of other women’s lives in *Sex and the City*; Mary Alice as postmortem narrator of the lives, loves, and motivations of the

residents of Wisteria Lane and Susan as author of children's literature in *Desperate Housewives*; Joanna Eberhart as writer of award winning reality television series in *Stepford Wives* (2004); Barbara Novak as author of book and rewriter of feminist history in *Down with Love*; and Isabel as author of the future in *Bewitched*, who as a witch not only has the ability to alter the present moment but also the ability to rewind real time to a previous point in history, as the triangular rewind signifiers within the framework of the screen signal time as controlled by audiovisual machine and Isabel as controller of the remote.<sup>19</sup> Yet, while the writing and speaking female body has long held the potential to disrupt normative prescriptions of femininity and has continued to maintain a prominent position in feminist inquiries, my examination instead focuses upon the way these modes of female authorship are framed by the female voiceover. Using Kaja Silverman's analyses of gendered voiceovers and voiceoffs in classic cinema, I ask to what extent these female voices signify a faux-feminist form of female agency while at the same time inscribing hegemonic definitions of femininity on the site of the female body. To dig deeper into my analysis of how these variant postmodern feminisms signify through the female voiceover, it seems important to first examine how these texts can be read as postmodern, postfeminist texts and how they are constructed, as Foster suggests, to some extent as texts that constrain the potential to resist or even refuse critical viewership.

---

<sup>19</sup> These rewind signifiers, along with the lack of frame distortion lines specific to VCR technology, together signify the images' inscription upon DVD technology and location within a specific historical framework



## Tone, Intertextuality, and Discursive Implosion: The Construction of Women-Centered, Postmodernist, Postfeminist Texts around the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

One of the foremost elements of these texts that facilitates the establishment of these women-centered mediated texts as postfeminist rather than anti-feminist or simply phallogocentric texts is the tone that both underlies the texts' narrative structure and intertextuality and helps to anchor these texts rather firmly within a postmodern space. The particular tone that these texts appear to transmit, as Foster notes, introduces one of the primary structural impediments that facilitates an abbreviation of if not an eclipsing of critical viewership in postmodern texts. Yet a clear-cut illustration of that tone is difficult to pin down, especially given the rather recent emergence of this not yet identified romantic comedy category. Because some of these texts like *Sex and the City* and *Something's Gotta Give* splice the romantic comedy and drama audiovisual genres, the prevalence that this tone receives within these texts is more of an undertone, only locatable in moments and allowing the idyllic seriousness that previously defined the genre of romantic drama to permeate each text. Contrastingly, within *Stepford Wives* (2004), *Desperate Housewives*, *Down With Love*, *Bewitched*, and one of the first texts to engage strictly in this form of comedy *Ally McBeal*, this distinct tone is supposedly the element of the text that creates its humor and establishes its location in the comedy genre rather than the blend of comedy and drama that the other texts represent.

Though seemingly indefinable at the present moment, there is something riveting in this tone that makes feminist critics like Kathleen Collins conclude in relation the *Stepford Wives* 2004 remake: "If it weren't [a comedy], it would be a documentary" (30). Collins' commentary leaves the question of whether it might be a documentary about the symbolic robotization of women in recent years through women's increasing participation in plastic surgeries or the self-

objectification that occurs when women attire themselves in t-shirts with declarations like “Fit Chick Unbelievable Knockers.”<sup>20</sup> Collins implies, still, that the specificities of comedy and tone within these texts create a new audiovisual construct that remains unbelievable for some feminist thinkers, expressly in the way these texts appear to mock the follies of female subjects who cannot escape the normative feminine paradigms that ultimately trigger their failure as feminist subjects in the public domain. One consequence of what has become the staple tone of romantic comedies is that this tone serves to truncate any reference to feminisms within the text and to conceal the fact that the reality behind these “hyperfeminine” bodies, as Mary Douglas Vavrus explains, is that they symbolize “really nothing but a male producer’s fantasy of *feminism*, which manages simultaneously to exploit and to deplore, to arouse and to moralize” (171, my emphasis).

While this tone could certainly be identified as a “resort to the historical pastiche or parody” that Tim O’Farrell identifies in relation to the postmodern filmic comedies *Wayne’s World* (1992), *Austin Powers* (1997), *Zoolander* (2001), *Shrek* (2001), and one film that could be included in my analysis *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* (1997), this only begins to encapsulate the tone in these postmodern, postfeminist texts. If Jonathan Swift’s *misunderstanding* of parody as mockery and scorn were applied here, this might bring a depiction of this tone a little closer to accuracy, particularly in the way these texts seem to mock and show contempt towards the insinuation of any form of feminism. But the only illustration that seems to come close to delineating a way of more fully identifying this tone is one that linguist Geoffrey Nunburg offers in relation to political talk commentaries of Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter, calling this discursive move “the great rhetorical achievement of our time.”

---

<sup>20</sup> See especially Rosalind Gill’s “From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women’s Bodies in the Media in the Spring 2003 issue of *Feminist Media Studies*.

As Nunburg explains, “satire and irony seem pretty far from the mark.” Referring to the labels of satire and irony as “just another sign of the modern triumph of tone over substance,” Nunburg suggests that the closest one could come to “a name for this rhetorical maneuver is ‘smut.’” Nunburg’s description of what the term “smut” signifies in relation to these texts deserves lengthy quotation here:

In the strict sense, of course, smut is the sort of leering innuendo that veils sexual aggression. But in a broader sense, you could think of smut as any kind of nastiness that pretends to be mere naughtiness. It might be a sexual vulgarity, a racial epithet, or simply a venomous insult. What makes it smut is that its tricked out as humor, so that if anybody claims to be offended, you can answer indignantly: “Touchy, can’t you take a joke?” [ . . . ] However offensive a remark might sound in the abstract, it’s all in the spirit of entertainment. And as Coulter and other masters of the genre understand, the effect is to aggravate the insult, not alleviate it.

Nunburg’s designation of this new discursive exercise in texts that “pretend” to be or are “tricked out” as comedies evokes an understanding similar to those of feminist critics like Collins in relation to these texts. Moreover, Nunburg’s attention to the performance of humor by Bill O’Reilly or Ann Coulter as a means of denying any kind of piqued reaction and to the “triumph of tone over content” reveals what I am describing here as the way in which these texts resist or refuse critical reception. Considered in relation to the intertextuality within these texts and the positioning of the female voice over that intertextuality, this negation of critical reception becomes more acutely demarcated.

The more basic elements of intertextuality are rather straightforward and more or less clearly identifiable due to these texts’ self-awareness to their own pilfering of previous mass-

mediated texts and mediated forms. Isabel's father (a witch) in *Bewitched*, for example, speaks to her during her excursion at the supermarket from the boxes and cans of Gorton, Green Giant, and Newman's Own products, his animated face superimposed over the character spokesperson of each product, appearing in the same style of drawing as the otherwise lifeless images on the boxes and cans themselves. Stylistically, in its hi-def composition and brightly colored backdrop, *Sex and the City* is a film reel that connects a seemingly endless strand of *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* cover-image frames. *Stepford Wives* (2004) intermingles a portion of the storyline from the original 1975 film but nostalgically looks back upon a popularized version of the 1950s and prods the cultural memory of this decade during the opening credit sequence through the commercial-like film-within-film in which June Cleaver-esque women are often seen in the kitchen, cooking, preparing, and inspecting food and of course scrutinizing themselves.

And while the town of Stepford is identified as being founded by George Washington in the remake, thus recuperating what the film suggests is the "American way" and most specifically in terms of gender that had been maintained until the Women's Rights Movement, *Desperate Housewives* is a nothing more than a Stepford adaptation of the soap-opera that, like the *Stepford Wives* remake, has warped into a perverted comedy. But in as much as the original *Stepford Wives* (1975) might come to be identified as a postmodern text – after all Joanna is finally ensnared when the voices of her children who are calling her are later shown to be the product of a reel to reel (not to mention the text's robotization of women) – the combination of postmodernist intertextuality and postfeminist discursive structure within the texts identified here suggest that something more is entrenched in this complex framework of tone, sound, and image.

A few trends within recent women-centered television series and films indicate an identifiable shift beyond the three televisual modes of female representation that Andrea Press

distinguishes as “prefeminist family television” such as: *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, and *Mama*; “feminist television” such as *The Martha Raye Show*, *The Loretta Young Show*, and *Hill Street Blues*; and “postfeminist era television” such as *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *L.A. Law*, and *Cagney and Lacey* (29-42). However, many of the texts central to this project incorporate a number of the themes and aspects from each of these differently identified forms of women-centered television, pointing toward only one aspect of intertextuality in these 1990s and 2000s audiovisual texts. This integration can be documented in Miranda’s decision in *Sex in the City* to raise a child as a single, working mother (a partner in a law firm), where support from her friends is represented within this text alongside a repeated derision of her “choice” that replicates similar extratextual responses to *Murphy Brown*’s decision to become a single mother (“Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda”). Not only are Miranda and *Murphy* similarly depicted as being harsh, but also in confronting the choice of single motherhood, Miranda is faced with criticism that parallels that leveled at *Murphy Brown* by Vice President Dan Quayle in his 1992 “Restoring Basic Values” speech in which he claimed that *Murphy Brown*’s character belittled ‘the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice’” (Fiske 69).<sup>21</sup>

A rather different fusion of a recent text-within-a-text within one of these previous eras, also from the series *Sex and the City*, is one that merges Carrie’s character with the narrative of Sydney Pollock’s romance and period film *The Way We Were* (1973) and Barbara Streisand’s Jewish character Katie Morosky. *Sex and the City* only references this film to explain Carrie’s infatuation throughout the six seasons with her love interest “Mr. Big” – like the character Hubbel Gardiner in *The Way We Were*, Mr. Big chooses not to marry Carrie because she is “too complicated.” This realization ostensibly allows Carrie to let Mr. Big go by replicating the 1973

---

<sup>21</sup> Miranda, unlike *Murphy Brown*, marries the father of her child during the sixth and final season of the show.

film's finale where Katie brushes Hubbell's hair aside and tells him: "Your girl is lovely Hubbel." However, upon returning to *The Way We Were*, the synthesis between Carrie and Katie becomes more evident. Katie and Carrie are both writers, journalists nonetheless, whose careers and writings are devalued within prestigious literary circles; they are both involved in long-term relationships with men who repeatedly criticize these women's zeal and passion, interspersed with moments in which these men leave because of these women's "complexity"; and they must both, without appearing melancholy, express their happiness towards each man's incapacity to deal with what has been declared as Carrie and Katie's subjective psychoses. Moreover, the similarities between Carrie's and Katie's facial expressions, poses, body language, and tones of voice are striking to say the least.

The narratives revolving around the characters in both texts are overwhelmingly similar. However, the political seriousness and underclass status of Katie's character in *The Way We Were* as a female outspoken Jewish anti-war protester against the political events preceding World War II is not simply lost in *Sex and the City* but completely disavowed. Whereas Katie overtly declares her membership to the Young Communist Party, Carrie demands that neither politics nor *feminism* are of any value to her, as she declares in the episode "Politically Erect" that politics are a "good way to meet men" but about as "relevant as a new Erica Jong novel." Carrie, dressed up like Jackie Kennedy in this episode, is only willing to play the part, and as abovementioned, this performance of feminist subjectivity is one that is addressed as an impediment to female characters within these texts.

In yet a different recasting of previous modes of film, television, and feminist theories, the films *Bewitched* (2005), *Stepford Wives* (2004), and *Down With Love* represent a complete overhaul rather than what could be described as coincidental replication and modification of

1960s, 1970s, and 1980s texts. Based upon the premise of producing a television remake of the 1960s classic, though rarely showing even a clip from the text-within-a-text version of the new show, *Bewitched* reimagines the character of Samantha through the character Isabel, the “real life” witch within the 2005 film who has been cast to play the role of the original Samantha in the television remake. This cross-over is confirmed at the end of the film when Jack, the actor who has been cast to play the role of Darren, asks Isabel to marry him, followed by his declaration: “I love you Samantha.” However, unlike the character Samantha in the 1960s television version whose husband Darren is always demanding that she stop casting her spells, Isabel is represented as the only character in the film who desires what she describes as “being normal,” or rather being able to stop the compulsive habit of using witchcraft for what she describes as “total instant gratification.” But when Isabel begins narrating her definition to her father of “being normal” – “I want a man who needs me because he is a completely hopeless mess” – her understanding of normality becomes clearly representative of normative femininity, and what Isabel describes as the “total instant gratification” achieved by witchcraft becomes the iconic mainstream representation of *feminism* in the 1990s.

Pressing together the female collectivity of the all-woman brunches in *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Stepford Wives*, and a number of other recent women-centered texts, Isabel tells her father that she “want[s] to be like everyone else,” by which she means, as she explains: “I want to have friends, and go to the Coffee Bean, where we all discuss our problems, which are absolutely unsolvable.” Reminiscent of a number of fairytales, Isabel sees herself as “pressed against a glass window” able to “see” but not “touch” or “feel” that which is “right there on the other side,” suggesting not only that she is Snow White in the glass case waiting for a prince whose lips she may feel and touch but also that she has been cast in the role of witch (read

feminist) as required by Hollywood standards and cannot escape the limits placed upon her literally by the film screen. Later, seated at the coffee bean with her newfound female friends, Isabel's desire for normative femininity is confirmed. After rewinding through the timeframe in which she took her friends' "feminist" suggestion to demand equality on the television set (and thus in the public sphere) and used witchcraft to gain that equality by making Jack fall in love with her, Isabel, distraught that Jack has ended their romantic encounter, rather encouragingly pronounces: "We're at the coffee bean and there is no solution."<sup>22</sup> Isabel is pleased.

With a few major exceptions, the narrative of *Stepford Wives* (2004), on the other hand, holds largely to the narrative of the 1975 film in which a Joanna, Walter, and their children move from Manhattan to the town of Stepford, where the scenery and wives are a little too perfect for Joanna's taste and where husbands, as Joanna later discovers, turn their wives into robots. However, while the 1975 version ends with a blank-eyed, robotic Joanna walking through the supermarket, establishing its categorization within the horror film genre, *Stepford Wives* (2004) is streamlined as a form of postmodern comedy, not understood as by Christopher Beach in *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* (2002) as a mode of satire and irony offered in the works of Woody Allen, Ethan Coen, Hal Hartley, and Jim Jarmusch, but more in the way that Geoff Nunberg illustrates it when describing the "great rhetorical achievement of our age" as the tendency to "aggravate the insult not alleviate it." In the remake, Joanna is the creator of the "ultimate battle of the sexes" reality television shows *Balance of Power* and *I Can Do Better*, which position wives as the dominant gendered subject in heterosexual marriages. Differing from the original film, however, Joanna declares her own disorientation, suggests moving out of

---

<sup>22</sup> By the end of the film, she has absolved herself from the harmful aspects of her witchcraft habit, is married to Jack, and six months later enters into the domain of the 1960s *Bewitched* and she and Jack move into the suburbs.



Manhattan, and attempts to fit in with the Stepford “ladies” exercise and book groups. At its greatest disparity, however, it is the leading lady of Stepford, Claire Wellington, who is changing both the men and women into robots in her attempt to set the gender divide “straight” again.

In quite a different revisionist project, the film *Down With Love* creates an imaginary author of one of the first historically “feminist” books titled *Down With Love*, a text that seems thoroughly symbolic of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*. *Down With Love*, the film, represents a recent and more overt preoccupation within women-centered television and film to rewrite the history of the Women’s Rights Movement in the 1960s, as can also be seen in the film *Mona Lisa Smile*, set in the 1950s, during which a feminist art professor attempts but fails to convince her students that they can have both marriages and jobs. But what is particularly indicative of the kinds of texts addressed in this chapter is that Barbara Novak’s book in *Down With Love*, which convinced women on a global scale to be “down with love,” is revealed toward the close of the film as only a ploy to get her former boss – “ladies’ man, man’s man, man about town Catcher Block” – to fall in love with and marry her. While she maintains her faux persona as Barbara Novak for the sake of the women who see her as their savior, rather than small town “not a down with love girl” Nancy Brown who she later exposes as her “true” identity, the film revises feminist history in such a way that confirms the mainstream media assertion that the Women’s Rights Movement was founded by a horde of unattractive women who became embittered over their inability to find a man who might marry them.

Tracking within these texts the cross-references to and the undertones of the multitude of preceding mass culture texts presents an overwhelming task, but focusing simply on the way feminisms or the oppression of women is amended through the intertextuality within these texts reveals one way in which disentangling meaning from the convoluted blendings of sound, image,

and inaccurate historical reference becomes possible. Along this line of analysis, then, what Roland Barthes depicts as a text's "stereographic plurality" – "its weave of signifiers" – and the "unique combination" of hegemonic and thus established discursive codes that "cut across it [the text] and through and through in its vast stereophony" is both indispensable and yet inadequate (1472-73).

According to Barthes, the text is an "*irreducible* (and not merely acceptable) plural" that "answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination," and its plurality is not dependent upon "the ambiguity of its contents" but upon this "weave of signifiers":

The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas. The work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy (we know that there are opposing examples of these); for such a philosophy, plural is the Evil. [. . .] The plural demoniacal texture which opposes text to work can bring with it fundamental changes in reading, and precisely in areas where monologism appears to be the Law [. . .] [I]nterpretation of works, so far resolutely monistic, will be able to materialize itself more by pluralizing itself. (1472-73)

Though this particular observation proposes a valuable idea regarding the kind of radical readership in relation to expectations within feminist circles of non-hegemonic readership, this

model seems particular to an attention paid to the plurality of what are otherwise recognized as monologic discourses and texts.

When contemplated in relation to the postmodern, postfeminist texts under consideration here, the plurality that Barthes identifies is proliferated, or rather is taken to another level, through the very self-referential intertextuality that can be distinguished within those texts, as they are both knowing and unaware of their own ahistorical references. The complexity created by the broadening of what Barthes calls textual “explosion” or “dissemination” is additionally disrupted not by what Barthes discerns as the “anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*” sources (though this element certainly remains) but through an intentional blurring of those origins by the text itself. In other words, these texts situate their own allusions to these origins within what Barthes calls “inverted commas,” marking the citation of historical moments for the viewer/reader. Carrie, for instance, announces that the reason she cannot sustain a relationship with Mr. Big is for the same reason that Katie cannot sustain her relationship with Hubbel in *The Way We Were*.

At the same time, the language of these texts often distorts these histories and the meanings attached to those histories until the historical origin is no longer recognizable as such. Histories of 1960s feminisms as referenced in these texts are spoken through 1990s anti-feminist or postfeminist discourses, for example, where the Women’s Rights Movement is not read as a break from patriarchal oppression but is read instead, as in the case of *Mona Lisa Smile*, as an antipathetical and undesired deterrent of heterosexual relationships and female ecstasy. Moreover, when the indication of *feminism* is relocated to the “uncompelling” work of authors such as Erica Jong, reallocated as simply the right to “choose” in *Sex and the City*, represented by one lone woman ostensibly speaking on the behalf of a very slim majority of female voices

(mostly herself) in *Mona Lisa Smile*, or rehistoricized as a one woman's scheme to attain a man in *Down With Love*, the historical moment to which these texts allude begin to signify so differently that actual historical references lose desirability and believability. Thus, in one of the few instances in which historical film footage is incorporated in the framework of the screen in *Commander in Chief* (a speech by Betty Friedan being covered within a television news story on the Equal Rights Amendment), the footage is positioned alongside the responses of the teenage son and daughter, the son asking if he can turn the channel and the daughter requesting that the television be turned off. In addition, the daughter contends that the content of the news is preventing her from hearing herself think, only to be followed by her declaration: "I mean, I'm no feminist!"

Finally, the textual facet that seems not simply to complicate Barthes' understanding of textual plurality but instead to render it inadequate in relation to these texts is the transcension of the female voice beyond the text as a means of regulating the chaos that is viewed and listened to within the intertextuality that lies beneath or behind the screen. Presumably, this interposed female voice punctuates the text as both author reborn and reader designate, as both origin and destination of the text, a text both in its proximity and upon which it stares down "from above." Like the intrusion of Nicholson and Fraser's voice in the plurality of feminisms that their *postmodern feminism* purports to embody, the plurality of the text is as well singularly reinscribed by a monolithically speaking voice. The first-person confessional genre of women-centered books that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and the rather passé notion within feminist theories of the speaking and writing female voice as "truth-speaking subject" for women's experiences is thus revived within mass media, and accordingly, the mere sound of her voice obscures any of the patriarchal substrata from which her voice might speak (Gunew 115).

Sneja Gunew's analysis of the imperialism specific to the reception of women's writing as "a chorus of women's voices blended in undifferentiated sisterhood" is significant in relation to this contemporary mass-mediated signification of female voice as the maker of meaning and Truth (115). As Gunew postulates, "the way in which they [female writers] are read is often derived from familiar and Eurocentric perspectives" and often "consolidate[s] the genre of the first-person confessional novel" (114-15). Correspondingly, these transcendent female voices often "read" the experiences of the women within these texts from what Gunew calls a familiar, Eurocentric, and patriarchal perspective. Following this supposition, Gunew proposes that: "The more women's writing there was, the less our claims to being silenced or textually absent rang true, so that new witnesses to oppression were required" (115). To examine this subsequent observation through an analysis outside of feminist writings and to somewhat invert the significance of this line of thought in relation to these popularized female speakers,<sup>23</sup> the transcendent female voice to some extent delegitimizes and silences forms of oppression that do not correspond to the hegemonic structure of its discourse. Like Nicholson and Fraser's overarching command of dialogues, this voice reinterprets those oppressions within its own framework, suggesting their immaturity, immorality, psychoses, and ultimately their illegitimacy under a ruse of ironic humor and intertextual satire. Any "new witnesses to oppression" are

---

<sup>23</sup> Gunew offers the following statement to reveal the importance of a continued effort to increase the amount of women's writing as a means of speaking to and emphasizing the multitude of oppressions being faced by women: "Woman as Truth has returned in the guise of working-class, black, lesbian and other varieties of minority women, and has been constructed in opposition to hegemonic women as much as to hegemonic men. The delineations of oppression and silencing contained in these texts served to reinforce, renew and legitimate the original claims for promoting women's writing which were offered in the 1960s and 1970s. The more women's writing there was, the less our claims to being silenced or textually absent rang true, so that new witnesses to oppression were required." Though I think that my own application of Gunew's observation somewhat reorders its significance by changing the locale and purpose of analysis, I believe that what I am suggesting in relation to the hegemonic female voices that overlie these mass-mediated texts is implicit in Gunew's observation as well – that these hegemonic women speakers are delegitimizing claims of oppression and are silencing the voices that can speak to oppressions not already enunciated.

essentially silenced through the deference paid to the first-person, confessional female voice that maintains a position both within and beyond the textual diegesis, though this position is not without its own complications.

### Female Voiceovers, Voiceoffs, and Uncontrollable Speech: The Authoring of Feminisms in Postmodern, Postfeminist Audiovisual Texts

Female voiceovers and voiceoffs<sup>24</sup> are achieved on various levels within these postmodern, postfeminist audiovisual texts. They simultaneously function to explain the experiences and thoughts of characters within the texts and create uncertainty in relation to normative femininity and “appropriate” female actions and reactions (often in regard to heterosexual relationships). Yet despite the voiceover’s role in calling into question normative feminine roles and women’s captivity to the domestic sphere, the female voiceovers in these texts have a subsequent tendency to reconfirm the same established feminine confines they bring into doubt, almost as if this questioning occurs only to render the questions asked ineffectual. Thus these texts dichotomize and demarcate the differences between female experience and female thought. Female thought, constituted concurrently by female voiceovers and female authoring in many of these texts, signifies rather contiguously with second wave feminist paradigms, allowing the female subject to investigate and prove that her experiences as a woman are not limited to prescriptive gender roles. Nonetheless, once this point is proven, those paradigms can be discarded for a less prescriptive *feminism* of the present moment. In contrast, female experiences in these texts are constructed as events occurring within a social domain that

---

<sup>24</sup> The voiceover is a moment in which a character’s voice (sometimes an omniscient onlooker but not always) speaks beyond the text’s diegetic framework or, rather, beyond the images and sounds captured by the filmic or televisual apparatus (the camera). A voiceoff consists of a character speaking directly to the camera, although this speech is not literally present within the film’s diegesis since it is not heard by any of the other characters within the film.

is decidedly postfeminist, suggesting that the mode of feminist questioning represented by the female voiceover is not simply outdated but retrogressive and a waste of time.

The female voiceover is one of the most prominent features in *Sex and the City* (1998), *What Women Want* (2000), *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), and *Desperate Housewives* (2004), but this now standard self-referential/deferential female voiceover can be traced back to the spontaneous fantasy sequences that occur in perhaps one of the first women-centered, postmodernist, postfeminist television series *Ally McBeal* (1997). As this authorial dialogue erupts from a character within the text (whether alive or dead), it serves both as a thread that holds the narrative together and as the legitimate source of interpretation for the underlying blend of sounds and images in relation to these women. But the female voiceover's foremost preoccupation in these texts appears to be not an analysis of the female subject's experiences but rather the use of such an inquiry to produce a testament to her disavowal of second wave feminist paradigms. Analogous to the renunciation of second wave feminisms in Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism," the female voiceover defines a *feminism* of the present moment by setting it against what it describes as degenerative feminisms of the past. The feminisms that transpire are also ones seemingly aligned with Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* as they are individually determined in relation to each character's spatial and temporal locale and rendered legitimate by each character because she has exercised feminist agency in "choosing" her "feminist" subject positions.

Though the female voiceover is one of the most powerful apparatuses within this emerging facet of women-centered romantic comedies, the female voiceoff is comparatively frequent within recent contributions to this genre, ascertainable in texts such as *Whipped* (2000), *Down With Love* (2003), and *Bewitched* (2005). On the other hand, texts such as *Lovely and*

*Amazing* (2001), *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *Stepford Wives* (2004), and *The Swan* (2004) fall somewhere in between, as seemingly uncontrollable speech erupts within the diegetic soundtrack, often resembling the verbal manifestations of Tourette's syndrome. On one hand, the inner subjective language engendered by the female voiceover and voiceoff remains removed from the space of accepted discourse and thus seems trapped within the female body on account of its extradiegetic positioning. However, this uncontrollable discourse, similar to the Foucauldian notion of "mad speech," erupts instead from within this female-specific discursive "void" and out onto the screen. Similar to the threat of fissure within the cinematic male body, examined in Chapter Two, that occurs when the "feminine" is imposed on otherwise masculine subjectivities, each of these types of "unarticulatable" and yet "overheard" female voices signals the potential rupture of female thought into some type of discursive *real*, or a breach of diegetic casings.<sup>25</sup> This discursive void, then, comes to represent a space reserved for female thought from which the female voice should not be dislocated and establishes the reprehensibility of moments where female speech punctures the diegetic boundaries, especially when these articulations contain what could be identified as second wave feminist underpinnings.

Amplifying the *dislocation* of the female voice from the normative aural site of each audiovisual diegesis through the voiceover and voiceoff, these internal female voices are often positioned over (or within some proximity to) silenced female bodies. The juxtaposition of the female voiceover to the silenced female body suggests the division between female subjectivities and social reality. In other words, the female voiceover effectively bifurcates the normative boundaries of female thought and those of actual female articulation. Thoughts that are antithetical to the female character's feminist positionality, indicated for example by the question

---

<sup>25</sup> For Kaja Silverman, the film's diegesis also appears to represent a masculine space.



in Carrie's voiceover in the episode "Politically Erect" of whether "women just want to be rescued," are described as thoughts that the female subject cannot help but to consider but should not dare speak aloud. Nonetheless, the female voiceover's attestation to the imposition of feminist norms onto the female subject's subjective consciousness that is indicative to these texts establishes female thought as a symptomatic consequence of both the Women's Rights Movement and the "postfeminist" world that these women inhabit. Within literal female articulations, on the other hand, in this case Carrie's column at the end of "Politically Erect" that suggests that women do want to be rescued, the predisposition of the female subject toward normative subjective interpretation is not simply preferable but necessitated, if not more accurately the only authentic verbalization regarding female gender and sexuality. Therefore, while "thoughts" about normative femininity are inappropriate but tolerated in these texts, feminist "articulations" are utterly reprehensible, and the female subject is forced to negotiate the dilemma that is created when female thought and articulation intersect. The renunciation of second wave feminist paradigms within these audiovisual texts, then, is a response to this subjective crisis, much in the same way that Nicholson and Fraser's disavowal of second wave feminisms in "Social Criticism" is a response to a similar subjective crisis within academia.

As Kaja Silverman contends in her analyses of the female voice within classical cinema, these female voiceovers and voiceoffs are corporealized through the visible presence on screen of the female from which this voice originates, most obviously illustrated here within *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Desperate Housewives*. But none of these voiceovers are "purely embodied" as are those within Silverman's analyses of female voiceovers within classical cinema. Notably in *Desperate Housewives*, Mary Alice's voiceover is corporealized either through silent filmic scenes or still photographs of her once living self and

rarely in relation to her actual living body. Her voiceover is thus both intensely embodied in relation to a female body that will never speak again and disembodied as it is superimposed over her visibly lifeless female image. *What Women Want* is indeed also an interesting case of only partial embodiment as the embodiment of Darcy's voiceover is disrupted through Nick's ability to overhear and own the thoughts that Darcy is unaware to be already articulated. More often within these texts, however, female voiceovers remain only partially embodied because they are rendered visual and become concrete as they manifest in the form of female-authored writings (for instance, a newspaper column in *Sex and the City* and a diary in *Bridget Jones' Diary*).

Moreover, these text-within-text writings are often read and commented upon by other characters within these texts, lead methodically to moments of crises for the speaking subject, and as a result compel a reconsideration or revision of previously articulated thoughts by that speaking subject. In *Bridget Jones' Diary*, Bridget lucidly verbalizes her thoughts about Mark Darcy in her diary, who subsequently reads a passage about himself, causing Bridget to run out into a snow covered street in her underwear to find Mark and tell him that her words were "rubbish." It is Mary Alice's voiceover in *Desperate Housewives* that offers a reconsideration and correction of each female character's thoughts and actions and usually when those actions and thoughts are "in progress" within the show itself. But this compulsion towards the female subject's renunciation of her own thoughts that is typical to these texts is rendered to an exponential degree in *Sex and the City* in relation to Carrie, whose voiceover often supplies the text for her "Sex and the City" column in *The New York Post*.

After the publication of her book *Sex and the City*, a collection of her *New York Post* articles, Carrie's entire oeuvre is called into question in Michiko Kakutani review of her book in *The New York Times* ("Critical Condition"). But more consequential than Kakutani's review of

Carrie's work is Kakutani's review of Carrie's subjectivity that occurs when Kakutani suggests that Carrie's book ultimately deems men "disposable," and throughout "Critical Condition," Carrie is forced to confront this subjective censure on a number of levels. It is when feminist thoughts escape into the diegesis of these texts that they are considered by the female speaking subject in relation to men in their proximity, and it is often at this point that the female subject judges her own thoughts as categorically "wrong." Thus, female thoughts within these texts are not simply rendered inappropriate through their location within the extradiegetic space of the female voiceover but are twice delegitimized in their disavowal by the female speaking subject herself.

This corporealization of the female voice that would otherwise emerge from an unlocatable source outside the audiovisual diegesis, Silverman argues, positions this voice within a secondary, recessed space that radiates not from some omniscient "outside" but from "the center of the story" (53). But within these texts, this secondary, recessed space appears to be not simply the center of the "story," as Silverman suggests, but rather the inside and center of the female body itself. In representing female thought as that which is in need of remedy or that which should not be "heard," these texts provoke an association between psychoses and female thought and indicate the need for a kind remedial modification of those thoughts according to normative social paradigms by the self-disciplining female subject. Bridget Jones' diary or Carrie's sex column, for example, center upon female thoughts that contradict social norms, but the locus of their subjective investigation attends to amending rather than coming to terms with that contradiction. As the feminist substrata of female voiceovers are prohibited from or "repaired" in relation to the hegemonic aural space in which they become "textualized" or "articulated," "feminist" thoughts and "feminist" articulations are thus also inscribed into the

psychosis of the female mind. The signification of second wave feminisms within these female voiceovers, therefore, can be said to be invoked “in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it [feminisms] are no longer needed, it is a spent force” in relation to the contemporary female subject (“Postfeminism and Popular Culture” 255).

The remedial modification that occurs within these texts, then, is one that originates within the female mind and one that results in the mending of multiple or split female subjectivities written upon the female subject into a more perfect, singularly signifying feminine form by removing their second wave feminist underpinnings. But because this reparation results from a moment of subjective crisis, where the female subject is forced to reconcile the disconnect between her feminist thoughts and her postfeminist experiences and articulations, the locus of this transformation can be identified as one that occurs only in relation to the “listening” male subject. It is important to note also that this “tuned in” male subject appears to cause this crisis in the first place. As Silverman suggests, the “autobiographical” and “self-revealing” nature of the embodied female voiceover “turns the body ‘inside-out,’” “anchors it to the order of the spectacle of the gaze,” and becomes “a precarious hook on which to hang the phallus” (52-53). Like Nicholson and Fraser’s initiation and execution of a critique of feminisms according to a set of theoretical norms mapped out by the male figurehead Jean-François Lyotard, the female-initiated critiques of feminisms within these texts, too, invoke a “specter of the male gaze.”

Female voiceovers and voiceoffs within the texts examined here, mostly ranging from the mid-1990s to 2006, complicate some of the analyses Silverman offers in relation to texts that precede by forty to fifty years. However, the underlying premises of her argument are largely confirmed; at a minimum they represent one acute and compelling interpretation. In examining the role of the voiceover in relation to *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* and its

absence in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), three defining formulas within these emergent postmodern, postfeminist, audiovisual texts can be identified, each of which seems to be participating in what Angela McRobbie describes in “Postfeminism and Popular Culture” (2004) as “a well-informed and well-intentioned response” to feminisms that provokes quite oppositely “all the more dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal” (255-56).

On the surface, Carrie’s voiceover in *Sex and the City* declares her and her friends’ ownership of feminist agency, one that corresponds to the type of agency produced through critiques of prescriptive gender roles in second wave feminist theories. To establish this agency, Carrie often highlights each female protagonist’s choice among compound alternatives in relation to issues such as heterosexuality, abortion, sexual autonomy, and other issues related to gender equality and the female subject’s control over her own individual body. In the episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl,” for instance, Carrie’s voiceover simultaneously interrupts and shatters the male/female gender binary, and this explosion of gender roles is, in fact, the primary focus of Carrie’s voiceover, newspaper column, and subjective investigation throughout the entire fifth season. In “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl,” Miranda’s boyfriend Steve destabilizes Miranda’s femininity by declaring, “Jesus, Miranda, it’s like you’re the guy sometimes”; Charlotte, posing as a man for an art photography shoot, is instructed by the photographer, “forget Charlotte, you’re a man now,” to which Charlotte responds, “I think I need a bigger sock”; and Samantha fires her assistant because he attempts to assert himself as the “alpha-dog” in her business and then puts him in his place by having sex with him and demanding control over the escapade. Carrie’s voiceover hovers above the text, examining her friends’ involvement in these various gender

bendings and her own engagement in a relationship with a bisexual man, and concludes that maybe “the opposite sex has become ‘obsolete.’”

Carrie’s voiceover in the beginning of this episode seems to insinuate that these gender bendings and the “lack of sexual orientation” they signify are a progressive “wave of the future”: “If women can transform into men and men can become women and we can choose to sleep with everyone, then maybe gender doesn’t even exist anymore.” But throughout the episode, Carrie and her friends proceed to intensify the negative connotations already attached to non-heterosexual labels. As a final insult, Carrie turns politics into a game, as she does quite frequently throughout the six seasons of the *Sex and the City* series, and suggests that choosing to be anything other than heterosexual is not about “choice” but rather “confusion”: “Gay, bi, straight, this party was a veritable pu-pu platter of sexual orientation [. . .] I was in Alice in confused sexual orientation land [. . .] I realized they could do whatever they wanted, but deep down, I was too old to play this game.” Carrie voiceover, therefore, delimits the range of alternatives it brings to the discussion in *Sex and the City* and draws a distinct division between legitimate “choices” and foolish “diversions.”

*Sex and the City*’s characters range from Charlotte, the prim and proper Cinderella figure who is overly invested in fairy tale myths of princes and love, to Miranda the relationship cynic and Samantha the city whore, with Carrie, providing the extradiegetic narration, falling somewhere in between. Carrie’s existence between these extremes helps to generate the context of her voiceovers as well, suggesting the voiceover’s function in mediating discussions of both feminine and feminist norms as well as prescribing the eventual answers to questions about normalized female roles raised within those discussions. Designating *Sex and the City*’s purportedly progressive assessment of feminisms and female agency within these in-text

discussions and voiceovers, the show has been documented as “tackl[ing] socially relevant issues, such as the status of women in society,” and the perspectives of the female protagonists therein have been deemed “all decidedly feminist” (wikipedia.com; Henry 67). However, each of *Sex and the City*’s main characters find themselves at some point in the series becoming women with too many years in the singles-market, too many sexual partners, and too much security, both in their careers and in relation to their status as property owners. Their indignant attitudes towards marriage and men, coupled with the ability to support themselves through high-status careers and the threat of impending middle-age, put each of these women at risk of being the potentially forever *single* spinster that the film *Bridget Jones’ Diary* puts on display. Exposing the magnitude of this risk, Miranda, the character portrayed not only as the woman with the most cynicism towards “love” and relationships but also as the woman most insistent upon self-reliance, suffers a series of panic attacks and paranoid fantasies about having her dead body eaten by her cats because she has convinced herself that she is “going to die alone” (“Old Dogs, New Dicks”).

With Charlotte warning the other three women that property ownership dissuades men from marriage because “it’s emasculating” and “men don’t want a woman who’s too self-sufficient,” this series, a supposedly positive and pleasurable representation of single women’s lives in New York, persistently brings the preference of remaining single into doubt (“Four Women and a Funeral”). An episode that begins with the four characters celebrating their single status, “They Shoot Single People Don’t They?,” quickly shifts towards the censorious question mark positioned over Carrie’s chest in a news expose about her single status – “Single and Fabulous?” – prefiguring what becomes the series’ preoccupation with marital doom and its related disdain towards the single white female. Reading the article about Carrie outloud over

their weekly Sunday brunch as if to say “I told you so,” Charlotte’s words underscore her earlier forewarning that celebrating being single was “bad luck” and emphasize the newspaper’s censuring of their prior night of celebration: “Single was fun at twenty, but you want to ask these women how fun will all-night club hopping be at forty [. . .] filling their lives with an endless parade of decoys and distractions to avoid the painful fact that they are completely alone” (“They Shoot Single People Don’t They?”)

Initiating a repudiation of the article’s insinuation that female agency is only a “decoy” used by women to evade any acknowledgement of their inescapable misery and thus generating a dialogue between contemporary “feminist” perspectives and 1980s backlash media, Miranda responds, telling her three friends: “Every couple of years, an article like this surfaces as a cautionary tale to scare young women into marriage. [. . .] This piece of trash is nothing, I repeat, nothing to do with us.” Despite the merit of Miranda’s observation and the four women’s disavowal of the article’s portrayal of singledom as an indiscretion – a renunciation conveyed through their collective statement, “Fuck them” – Carrie’s voiceover, which directly follows, implies instead the four women’s “denial” regarding the grief and apprehension that their single status habitually wreaks upon them: “I had a sneaking suspicion that they didn’t quite believe it. Somehow, the question mark had leapt off my cover and onto each of them.” Rather than questioning the “feminist misery” portrayed in both the 1980s news media and by the fictional article “Single and Fabulous?,” the voiceover punctuates Miranda’s negation of the connection between singledom and martyrdom, concluding that perhaps single women were only “pretending to be happy with being single.” This deduction is fortified by yet another voiceover at the end of the episode that indicates that Miranda had “left Denial,” but it is ultimately confirmed throughout the sixth and final season of the *Sex and the City* as Carrie, Miranda, and



Charlotte become happily married, with Samantha seemingly following in what is her first “monogamous” relationship.<sup>26</sup>

The postmortem female voiceover of Mary Alice in *Desperate Housewives*, on the other hand, frames and interprets Lynette, Susan, Bree, and Gabrielle’s attempt to relocate themselves in the realm of heterosexual domesticity and normative femininity, often explaining the way these attempts are impeded by each character’s tendency toward feminist responses and actions. While the parody of suburbanhood enacted within *Desperate Housewives* might alone suggest a continued need for second wave feminisms and a rather piqued response to feminist backlash media, it is Mary Alice’s voiceover that pushes the interpretation of this supposed parody in the opposite direction as Mary Alice insinuates that she and the filmic apparatus are more familiar with these characters’ “true” desires than they themselves. In “The Sun Won’t Set,” Mary Alice’s voiceover instructs the viewer to privilege her interpretation of the images and sounds captured by the camera as the reality behind the façade of each character’s emancipated performance: “Yes, cameras are tools designed to capture images, but in truth, they can capture so much more. [...] Cameras can quietly and clearly reveal to us our dreams, dreams we didn’t even know we have.” Unlike Carrie’s voiceover in *Sex and the City* which establishes each character’s “feminist” agency, Mary Alice’s voiceover in *Desperate Housewives* instead acknowledges “feminist” agency as a prior subjective position that each character has disavowed in one way or another, one seemingly so difficult to evade that its persistent reinsinuation of itself onto Mary Alice’s normative subjective formation brings her to take her own life. Mary Alice’s voiceover is thus aligned with what Silverman describes as a “temporal regression, a

---

<sup>26</sup> It seems that Samantha’s lesbian relationship with Maria is forgotten if not completely disavowed by the sixth season.

move back to a prior moment in the speaker's life" to expose the root of the present subjective position of the female subject so that that which is "inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible" is revealed (52-53).

In *Desperate Housewives'* dissection of the occasion at which female agency and domesticity meet, the female characters exemplify a scope of traits parallel to those available in *Sex and the City* while similarly magnifying the perils that plague women who cannot relinquish enough of their self-centered agency to secure and sustain a blissful state of matrimony. Susan, a hopeless divorcee who is also hopeless for the love of a number of men, is relentlessly infantilized to the point that it becomes clear that her daughter Julie is the adult of the family. But even Julie, who regularly coaches her mother toward socially "appropriate" actions and responses, cannot help Susan achieve adulthood status within the show. Bree, whose perfected domestic role is exposed as a means of subverting her "feminist" desires and emotions to the realm of the unconscious, fails to fulfill her role as mother and wife, even if the other women on Wisteria Lane, as the postmortem narration makes clear, are almost completely deceived by her nearly immaculate portrayal of domesticity. Despite her virtually flawless masquerade, Bree precipitates her husband Rex's death by delaying his transportation to the hospital in the midst of his heart attack so that she can first "make the bed" and is seemingly responsible for her son's homosexual orientation and her teenage daughter's unwed pregnancy as well. Lynette, in opposition, a woman who in the beginning of the series has given up her career to raise three unruly sons and one infant daughter, is never regarded by her peers as anything more than a "bad mother." This sentiment is exaggerated by the number and frequency of admonishing glares she receives from neighbors staring into her yard from a distance in addition to the maternal

instruction delivered to her by everyone from school teachers and police officers to nameless strangers, all of which become intensified when she returns to work later in the series.

Mary Alice's postmortem voiceover seemingly underlines for the audience what her death is supposed to reveal to the other women of Wisteria Lane: neither adherence to female agency nor fabricated desires to fulfill the domestic roles of mother and wife are enough to produce female satisfaction. By positioning the disorder of each character's domestic space alongside the "secret desires" that produce what the text describes as these women's "desperate" actions, *Desperate Housewives* alludes to presence of both a hidden commitment to female agency and a revulsion towards domesticity within the female body. But as Mary Alice's voiceover works to disentangle the meanings behind the chaos that these females contain within, it becomes clear that these women's failure to achieve "proper" forms of domesticity occurs because they have been falsely convinced of their feminist desires and not because they have arrived at those desires on their own terms. This attempt to negotiate a social interpretation of *feminism* in the present moment is thus not simply confined to the female mind in its positioning within the female voiceover; it is more importantly restricted within a state of death, symbolized through its positioning in the mind of a dead narrator who claims to have only taken her "memories" with her. Mary Alice's empathetic descriptions of these characters' struggle to cope with the subjective divide between agency and domesticity, therefore, brings the voiceover closer to an articulation that speaks from the "memory" of feminisms bygone, indicating that the still living female characters may also reach a point at which dying becomes preferable to living with the misery that these feminist tendencies yield.

Moreover, instead of constructing multiple or split subjectivity as radical modes of subject formation as they are developed at least on the surface in *Sex and the City*, Mary Alice's

voiceover in *Desperate Housewives* determines the notion of multiple or split subjectivity to be a liability, one that plays the leading role in perpetuating the chaos that surrounds Susan, Lynette, Bree, Gabrielle, and herself:

Everyone has a little dirty laundry. When I was alive, I maintained many different identities: lover, wife, and ultimately victim. Yes, labels are important to the living. They dictate how people see themselves. Like my friend Lynette. She used to see herself as a career women (image of Lynette doing laundry) and a highly successful one at that. She was known for her power lunches (image of Lynette feeding kids and yawning), her eye catching presentations (image of her kid's artwork on the fridge), and her ruthlessness in wiping out the competition (image of Lynette windexing chocolate handprints off the window). Lynette gave up her career to assume a new label – the incredibly satisfying role of full-time mother. But unfortunately, for Lynette, this new label fell short of what was advertised. It suddenly occurred to Lynette, her label was about to change yet again, and for the next few years, she would be known as the mother of the boys who painted Tiffany Axelrod blue. (“Who’s that Woman?”)

While Mary Alice’s postmortem narration of Lynette’s subjective struggles brings into doubt the mainstream contention that motherhood is “the” foremost “incredibly satisfying role” for women in American society, the voiceover speaks in the past tense about the labeling of Lynette as career woman that occurs prior to bearing children and not about the label which she would acquire upon returning to work postpartum – “bad mother.” Mary Alice’s voiceover thus alludes to the difficulty of navigating the dual labels and responsibilities of career woman and mother. Nonetheless, Mary Alice’s voiceover concludes, quite opposite of existing feminist analyses

regarding this dilemma, that the ability to successfully navigate this split/multiple subjectivity is, in fact, a delusion and that Lynette more specifically is deluding herself about the nonexistence of her own “dreams” of motherhood and domesticity. Insinuating that her primary focus is on Lynette in the beginning of her voiceover, Mary Alice extends her reading of multiple or split female subjectivity and contradictory subject positions to all of the women in the series who she looks down upon (in her figurative disdain of and pity for these characters in the voiceover and from her literal position above the text): “Lynette had been struggling to balance her career and family. [. . .] We make believe that work won’t come in the way of family. Yes, the game of make believe is a simple one. You start by lying to yourself, and if you can get others to believe those lies, you win” (“You’ll Never Get Away From Me”). Mary Alice thus equates these female characters’ attempts to escape domesticity as part of a feminized childhood pastime – “the game of make believe” – a game that can be won if the female subject is capable of convincing others of her success in managing the subjective splitting that occurs in trying to occupy both public and private spheres. Nonetheless, one problem remains: these women are not capable of convincing anyone, especially themselves.<sup>27</sup>

*The Devil Wears Prada* is also a text that initiates an inquiry into the relevance of second wave feminist paradigms in relation the construction of both normative femininity and the female agency, paradigms that are similarly rendered inadequate for female subjects within the text in relation to its temporal setting, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, it is the lack of the voiceover within *The Devil Wears Prada* that confines Andy to the tenets of second wave feminisms forced upon her within the public sphere. Second wave feminisms and postfeminisms are symbolically juxtaposed within this text through their inscription on Miranda and Andy’s

---

<sup>27</sup> See especially Gabrielle’s adjustment to and loss of her pregnancy in the episode entitled “Color and Light.”

bodies respectively. But because Andy cannot find an outlet for her thoughts, signified in her inability to acquire a job as a journalist, she is forced to take a job at *Runway* magazine and initiate her own subjective transformation to avoid being fired by her boss Miranda, who utterly loathes Andy upon her arrival. Andy, thus, appears to have no attachment to feminisms until she comes into contact with Miranda. Accordingly, the agency Andy arrives at does not signify Andy's ability to think for herself but instead suggests her obedience to Miranda, as Andy is seen repeatedly abandoning her life and her perspectives to fulfill Miranda's every command. Given Miranda's symbolic connection to the feminist figure portrayed within feminist backlash media, Andy emerges as a character potentially ruined by the feminisms that Miranda represents and imposes on Andy, and Andy's character can only be redeemed when she decides that she is nothing like Miranda and forsakes her. Andy's agency is thus defined through her determination to shed her agency, which occurs figuratively as well when, at the end of the film, Andy strips of the garb that the fashion industry both provides to her and requires her to display.

The disparity between Miranda as a passé feminist persona and Andy as a character who is swayed by Miranda's belief system but uncertain about the way this influence effects her decisions and life becomes most visible within one of the film's concluding scenes. This scene, the film's climatic point and the second of the only two real discussions that occur between Miranda and Andy within the film, becomes the crux upon which contemporary female subjectivity can be explored within the film in relation to the second wave feminisms that Miranda represents:

MIRANDA. You thought I didn't know. I've known what was happening for quite some time. Just took me a little while to find a suitable alternative for Jacqueline. [. . .] So, I just had to tell Herb that Jacqueline was unavailable.

Truth is, there is no one who can do what I do, including her. [. . .] Especially because of the list. The list of designers, photographers, editors, writers, models, all of whom were found by me and nurtured by me and promised me they will follow me whenever and if ever I choose to leave *Runway*. So he reconsidered. But I was very, very impressed by how intently you tried to warn me. I never thought I would say this Andrea, but I really, I see a great deal of myself in you. You can see beyond what people want and what they need, and you can choose for yourself.

ANDY. I don't think I'm like that. I couldn't do what you did tonight, Miranda. I couldn't do something like that.

MIRANDA. You already did – to Emily

ANDY. That's not what I . . . No that was different. I didn't have a choice.

MIRANDA. Oh no, you chose. You chose to get ahead. If you want this life, those choices are necessary.

ANDY. But what if this isn't what I want. I mean, what if I don't want to live the way you live?

MIRANDA. Oh don't be ridiculous Andrea. Everybody wants this. Everybody wants to be us.

If Miranda can be read as synonymous with the media's rendering of *feminism* throughout the previous quarter century, then Miranda's observation here suggests not only that she finds very few feminists in her social proximity (seemingly only Andy) but also that Miranda believes that all women want to but are incapable of becoming feminists for reasons not explained.

But as Andy throws her phone in a fountain in the next scene, designating her decision to separate herself from Miranda's imposing and exhausting demands, Andy attests to Miranda's deluded perception regarding the society that surrounds her, similar to Mary Alice's revelation in *Desperate Housewives* described above. It is also the moment in the film when Andy obstructs Miranda's predisposition to speak for Andy and locates agency within her own speaking voice. As the film concludes, Andy, sitting at a café with her then ex-boyfriend Nate, tells him: "I wanted to say you were right about everything. I turned my back on my friends and my family and everything I believe in, and for what? [. . .] Nate, I'm sorry." Andy therefore confirms that Miranda's life is worthless, or rather as Nate says, worth not much more than "shoes and shirts and jackets and belts," and validates the media's designation of *feminism* as a choice that ignores everyone else's wants and needs, Andy's included, but most importantly Nate's. The film ends here with the indication that Andy will follow Nate to Boston where he has finally obtained a real occupation and Andy a position as a journalist. But notably, only when Andy obtains the ability to articulate the necessity of disowning the second wave feminist paradigms written upon Miranda's subjectivity (and Andy's too) is her voice rendered permissible for public consumption. Thus Andy, as a postfeminist character, successfully navigates her way back to a more normatively feminine role, one that fiercely rejects the *feminism* that Miranda both represents and has tried to impose on Andy.

What Silverman identifies as the "loss of discursive potency" for the female voice in classical cinema encounters a challenge in the types of women-centered, postmodern, postfeminist texts represented by *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* (55). As Silverman writes in *The Acoustic Mirror*:



Hollywood dictates that the closer a voice is to the “inside” of a narrative, the more remote it is from the “outside,” i.e., from that space fictionally inscribed by the disembodied voiceover, but which is in fact synonymous with the cinematic apparatus. In other words, it equates diegetic interiority with discursive impotence and lack of control, thereby rendering that situation culturally unacceptable for the “normal” male subject. [...] “Inside” comes to designate a recessed space within the story, while “outside” refers to those elements of the story which seem in one way or another to frame that recessed space. (53-54)

Female voiceovers within these texts do appear to signify the social prohibition of certain forms of female thought, especially those with second wave feminist underpinnings. These social prohibitions thus leave the female subject discursively impotent when she attempts to use what these texts suggest are retrogressive modes of feminist critique to analyze the presumably postfeminist social space in which she is implanted. However, these recent renderings of the female voice also allow it to masquerade as a voice that speaks from what Silverman identifies as the “transcendental auditory position” of omniscient narrator, a narrator who delineates a new form of *feminism* for her spatiotemporal locale (55-57). The female voiceover is the primary textual apparatus that vests the female voice with this authority because of the power relinquished to the voiceover to interpret and reframe the experiences of the women in its scope. (Notably, female voiceovers within these texts remain almost utterly incapable of dissecting or explaining the actions of the men in their proximity.) But the secondary textual mechanism of female authorship, explained earlier as founding an almost universal line of connection between these postmodern, postfeminist texts, guarantees the female voice an audience for these articulations, not to mention the televisual and filmic audiences themselves. But as this voice is

positioned within the soundtracks of these texts, and thus not isolated as being equivalent with and part of the filmic apparatus (the camera and the operator of that camera), the female voice is simultaneously legitimized as speaker for the experiences of Woman through its connection with female-authored confessional literature and delegitimized through its interaction with its binary antithesis, the “male gaze.”

Because these texts are dependent upon discarding second wave feminist paradigms, specifically those that universalize women’s experiences and instruct female subjects to make “correct” feminist choices (such as having an abortion or rejecting heterosexual matrimony), the female voiceover’s circumscription of new feminisms within these texts inches towards being the mediated counterpart to Nicholson and Fraser’s *postmodern feminism*. Within these mediated texts, in other words, the female voiceover seemingly opens up female subjectivity to allow for multiplicity, fragmentation, and contradiction, all the while suggesting that the more appropriate form of feminisms for these female characters is one that is “nonuniversalist,” “cross-cultural,” “comparativist” and one that treats “gender as one relevant strand among others, also attending to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation” (“Social Criticism” 34-35).

The female as fragmented self is perhaps nowhere more evident in these texts than in the female voiceover, the voice that frequently and repeatedly solidifies the female subject’s subjective atomization. Like Marie Alice’s voiceover in *Desperate Housewives*, Carrie’s voiceover in *Sex and the City* reveals and in some ways is the source of a constant splitting of female bodies throughout the series as these female characters find themselves hard-pressed to “choose” from the range of options that arise within the text in relation to the questions posed by Carrie’s voiceover, a voiceover always approximate to the dialogues in which these options are established. For example in the episode “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda,” when faced with an

unexpected pregnancy that is the result of a one time “mercy fuck” with an exboyfriend (Steve) who has recently lost a testicle, Miranda’s subjectivity is caught between her lack of desire for children (“I’m not having it”), how a child might impede on her ability to perform effectively at her job (“This is not in my plans right now”), the improbability towards future opportunities to have children (“What if *this* is my baby?”), and the possible providence involved in conception between a woman with a lazy ovary and a man with only one testicle (“It’s like the Special Olympics of contraception.” “My stupid egg found its way to the three sperm he had left.”). In addition, Miranda is faced with her ultrafeminine friend Charlotte’s inability to conceive a child (“We’ve had sex without a condom “73 times. Have you any idea how much perfect fine semen that is?”), the disdain for children that her atypical, afeminine friend Samantha expresses (“Don’t even!”), Samantha and Carrie’s understanding of abortion as customary (Samantha has had two and Carrie one), and the guilt that is precipitated by Steve’s friend and Carrie’s beau Aiden who demands that a father has a right to know and should be part of the decision (“It’s his baby too. So what, it’s all her decision? It seems like the guy gets the shit end of the stick.”).

Though fans and feminist critics alike often peddle *Sex and the City*’s seemingly frank, uninhibited discussion of abortion as one of its most progressive aspects, these points of perception mostly overlook the context in which the term “abortion” is set. In decontextualizing the topic of abortion from the discussion that actually ensues, such analyses imply that simply mentioning the term “abortion” is evidence of evolution toward equality or that it at least suggests women’s control over their bodies. Notwithstanding the limited regulations placed upon this series by the HBO cable network, these analyses neglect to consider that the subject of abortion has received representation in television and film. Moreover, they fail to observe that the available collection of televisual and filmic discussions of abortion all point toward a fixation

within these mediated texts not on a woman's right to "choose" but upon how men are implicated in that choice and how much that choice strays from social norms. In an 1992 *Melrose Place* episode entitled "Leap of Faith," to offer only one example, twenty-three year old Jane, a woman who also discovers her unexpected pregnancy and is determined to terminate it, is chastised throughout the episode for not telling her husband Michael, a man who has claimed to not want a child but later threatens her with divorce because she withheld this secret from him.<sup>28</sup>

When considered in relation to Carrie's initial positive response to Miranda's "choice" to have an abortion and Carrie's subsequent suggestion to Miranda, following Aiden's lead, that the father has the right to know, the pattern within mainstream televisual discussions of abortion becomes quite clear. Reflecting upon her own decision to have an abortion without telling the father and the lie she tells Aiden ("No, I've never had one ... Thank God"), Carrie's closing voiceover suggests that not telling the father might have been a mistake indeed:

So many roads, so many detours, so many choices, so many mistakes. As we drive along this road called life, occasionally a gal will find herself a little lost. And when that happens, I guess she has to let go of the coulda, woulda, shoulda, buckle up, and just keep going. ("Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda")

Though Miranda reaches the decision to have the abortion and proceeds to her appointment with the determination to carry out that decision, it is seemingly Carrie's suggestion to Miranda that Steve might have a right to know (if not a right to choose for her) that causes Miranda to not go through with the procedure. Thus while Miranda seems to have navigated her own contradictory subject positions and reached a conclusion that was satisfactory to her and her current

---

<sup>28</sup> Jane is later punished for her deceptive consideration of abortion in the episode "A Promise Broken" when Jane is told at a doctor's appointment that her baby has died, only to be followed by Michael's suggestion that Jane's mere consideration of abortion caused her to lose the baby.

circumstances, Miranda's decision is called into question and deemed inadequate by Carrie. Because Carrie instructs Miranda not in relation to what Carrie would do or has done (or what Miranda wants to do) but in relation to how she presumes this action would be judged by the men in their proximity, a specter of the "male gaze" is called upon to make sense of Miranda's fragmentation, and Carrie and Miranda are ascertained to be unfit to make the decision "appropriately." Despite fragments of the feminist pre-text that, as Carrie says, "it's the reviews you give yourself that matter," when woman speaks to herself or for herself in these texts, it's clearly the man behind the curtain who speaks for her ("Critical Condition").

In moments like these that pervade *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*, the "male gaze" can be isolated as the connective tissue that keeps the female subject in tact. Moreover, in relation to the questions that these female voices raise on the subjects of "feminine" and "feminist" spaces and subject positions, these female voiceovers are implicated in delegitimizing their own voice as "they" position "themselves" within the focus of the "male gaze." Inasmuch as the questions raised within the voiceover explore the constructedness of both femininity and female agency, they also reveal that the self-initiated, introspective critique of feminisms (and primarily tenets of second wave feminisms), like Nicholson and Fraser's in "Social Criticism," implores this specter of the "male gaze" (seemingly an internalization of patriarchal standards) to draw the final conclusions for them. However, unlike the fragility of male subjectivity outlined in Chapter Two in which the male subject is always impeding an encroaching femininity and symbolic castration, the female subject within these postmodern, postfeminist texts seems to face, instead, the interminable fear that the "male gaze" will be deterred from its focus upon her body. What these texts seem to suggest is that, at the point in which "male gaze" is diverted from the female subject, she might

face total subjective dissemination and symbolic annihilation, a dread that actually culminates in the fantasy sequences in *Ally McBeal*. Lingering in the female voiceover, therefore, the “male gaze” is more than relegitimated as “proper.” It is demanded as primary, necessary, and constitutive – the adhesive for and pulse of the shattered female body.

At this point, the female voice moves back into a position identified within the underlying argument of Silverman’s analysis, and the authority seemingly assigned to her voice can be revealed to be “reinvested in the male voice,” a male voice that, as Silverman asserts, “is shown to orchestrate the fictional drama from behind the scenes” (57). Within these differentiated voiceovers and voiceoffs, the female voice in fact becomes, as Silverman conjectures, the hook upon which the phallus can be suspended, and through this deferral of location, the male gaze is again rendered appropriate, as in socially accepted, and more often than not desirable to the female subject and crucial to her survival, subjective formation, mental stability. She does not want to remove herself as the object of the “male gaze”; rather she wants to be consumed by the male gaze entirely. The “male gaze” is the thread that holds the female body together, solidifies her subjective stability/unity, and helps to dislocate her from the feminist crises in which she finds herself. But because locating the male gaze behind this female voice is a rather difficult and complicated undertaking, the masquerade of the female voice as transcendent authorial voice contributes to the seeming absence of the phallus, withholding access to the vacuity between female representation and the origin of the male gaze and thus adding to the mounting textual refusal of critical viewership.

Consequently, the simulated versions of postmodern feminisms that arise from the introspective critiques of second wave feminisms located within these female voiceovers can also be identified as byproducts of the “male gaze.” To the extent that the disavowal of second

wave feminisms and the creation of postmodern feminisms in these mediated texts parallel Nicholson and Fraser's "Social Criticism," the male gaze is called upon as a remedy for feminist inclinations, feminist inclinations that have left these white female subjects scarred and miserable. These mediated texts demonstrate that Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* does not simply contain the potential to function as a metatheory but is imbued with the power to write any feminism into oblivion that is not compatible with or acceptable to its contemporary male counterpart (Lyotard in "Social Criticism" and the "male gaze" in these mediated texts).

#### The Discursive "I": Questions and Definitions of Femininity and Feminisms

In search of moments where significations of female agency and gender equality might emerge in these texts, though finding mostly that these significations habitually become first enveloped in ambiguity before being finally renounced or as suggested by Foster *relinquished*, *feminism* appears to be constructed in these texts as neither a political position nor as a status marker of gender equality. Instead, the way these postmodern, postfeminist mediated texts repeatedly define *feminism*, as Astrid Henry explains in reference to *Sex and the City*, is primarily as a subjective belief that is specific to the individualism of the commodity culture within which these subjects *bound* themselves and, as follows, is founded upon the individual's right to "choose" (71). This definition is personified by the Cinderella-esque character Charlotte in *Sex and the City* who, almost in a tantrum, screams before storming away from her friends: "It's my life and my choice! [ . . . ] I chose my choice! I chose my choice" ("Time and Punishment").

Nevertheless, the "choices" that these women make within these texts are rarely free of ramification, and the circumference of those choices lacks the breadth of the choices actually

available to women. Through these introspective critiques of supposedly “feminist” subjectivities that, as each text progresses, increasingly limits “appropriate” choices, the texts’ focus on *feminism* as “choice” slips incessantly away from representing each woman’s right to “choose” and toward the punishment inflicted upon these characters because of those “choices.” Even when a “choice” seems to compliment certain elements of normative femininity such as a female character’s desire for marriage, it becomes clear that even “correct” choices must be executed “correctly.” For instance, Charlotte’s marriage proposal to her first husband Trey and Trey’s subsequent impotence suggests that a woman must be asked to marry rather than propose marriage herself.

It is important to note that, while the female subject is propositioned to listen to the “male gaze” within these mediated texts, none of these female characters succeed in “correctly” hearing the male voice veiled within their own articulations and are punished for their acoustic lack. This punishment is seen nowhere more abysmally than in *Sex and the City’s* last season and *Desperate Housewives’* third season when Samantha and Lynette, women with perhaps the most agency in these shows, suffer from breast cancer, a punishment aimed at their sex and sexualities. In examining how the appropriateness in choice is explored in questions that are frequently raised by the female characters or female voiceovers within these texts, it becomes clear that the questions regarding appropriate female response that are both raised and answered by female characters, female voiceovers, and female authorship in these texts point toward much more than each text’s status as postfeminist or even rigorously anti-feminist text. More importantly, this questioning and answering process often designates the limitations of the agency that women are allowed to possess (if it does not deny that agency altogether) and subsequently positions feminist women (and often *feminism*) as those responsible for the



consequences that these women face and the pain (both psychological and physical) that they endure within these texts.

A few of the first questions in relation to my analysis of what I am describing here as simultaneously postmodern and postfeminist texts might likely involve viewership, most specifically: “Who” identifies these characters as feminists or as exhibiting feminist qualities? “Which” feminist viewpoints are being identified? And “who” can speak to how viewers respond to these “feminist” qualities or demonstrate that they will react to these representations at all? While I have put a great amount of time in sifting through viewer responses on network hosted Internet discussion boards, reading other feminist critics’ discussions with women who identify these characters as feminists, and speaking with many young women and many of my students (female and male) about what these female television personas signify, none of this research qualifies me to answer these questions assertively or even assumingly.

Most of the responses that I have received or reviewed have focused on the range of occupations and subject positions represented between the characters on these shows, particularly in relation to *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* – their limitless “choices” and their “free” sexualities. Yet many of these reactions have been from women with little to no knowledge of feminisms and, likewise, a modest amount if any knowledge of feminist theories. When I have inquired specifically whether or not these characters represent feminist points of view (careful to not suggest the “feminist” label as to avoid the “I’m not a feminist” response I received the first time I asked this question and on occasion when I posed the question of “label” subsequent to the question of “point of view”), most responders said, yes, these characters do personify feminist points of view to the extent that they represent gender equality (the answer to the second question was varied and often required a little urging before a yes or no answer was

supplied). So though I can provide no definitive answer to these questions regarding viewership, I will suggest that these characters do, in the narrowest style, signify as feminists to a number of viewers, again taking the term at its most nominal definition – a belief in or demonstration of social equality.

Many of these texts mark the emergence of female representations on screen that have never before been addressed on television as feminist in this manner, most evident in the male and female nudity set within a variety of sexual acts in *Sex and the City* wherein the female subject can be viewed exercising control over the encounter and either enjoying the moment or faking orgasms for the sake of termination. They choose when they have or do not have sex; when and how to demand for sexual pleasure; whether to “try on” lesbianism, bisexuality, a man with a large or small penis, or the teenage lawn boy; and whether to insert or remove themselves from patriarchal order by either participating actively within it or by refusing to participate at all. Within this project, the number of over-sexualized or overly feminized images in these texts are not the problem, though the contradictory elements in “how” these images might signify are important here as well. They are problematic to the extent that they imply that a woman is the person responsible for her own “choices” and that such choice emerges from a feminist body while always suggesting that these choices should be considered foremost in relation to the “male gaze.” This becomes especially clear when Samantha ends her first monogamous (and first lesbian) relationship with Maria in *Sex and the City* shortly after a number of male suitors arrive at her door in the middle of the night expecting sex and cast judgment upon Samantha’s new sexual orientation (“Ghost Town”).

But inasmuch as these characters represent feminists who are critical of theirs or others’ genders and sexualities in their supposedly progressive outlooks on life and society, I take Toril

Moi's definition of what she calls the "principle objective of feminist criticism" as a means of clarifying the discrepancy between what might be an apolitical simulacra of feminist criticisms on screen and the often politicized feminist criticisms within academia (xiv). "The principle objective of feminist criticisms," Moi maintains, "has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices" (xiv). In contrast, these mass-mediated texts appear to partake in an often explicitly apolitical practice of exposing and yet participating knowingly within patriarchal practices, even as they maintain a discursive distance from those practices through the questions about normative femininity raised in these texts. These female representations thus "appear" to move beyond previous assumptions regarding femininity, similar to Nicholson and Fraser's postmodern positioning of *feminism* in relation to the modernist feminisms denounced within "Social Criticism." Nevertheless, even in their bold and unencumbered sexual presence, these representations become a symbol of a regression from this emergent form of female embodiment rather than a progression toward a less restrictive definition of the feminine or a reduced emphasis on feminine rectitude.

A subsequent concern specific to this project and to these questions of viewership is the division that is created by the question of "who" that seems to set apart women who do view these characters as representative of feminist qualities (or social equality) and those who see beyond the façade. One might take, for example, Susan Bordo's flippant response to *The Swan* – a reality television series in which desperately miserable women express self-hatred toward themselves to qualify as needing to undergo numerous plastic surgeries, diets, workouts, and psychological therapy and then convey self-love toward themselves, found supposedly within the month of "transformation," in order to qualify for the show's beauty pageant finale. When asked "What's the deal [with *The Swan*], Bordo responded:

I don't really think there's much new to say. The alliance of consumer capitalism, cosmetic technology, and media culture – aided by the good old-fashioned lust for spectacle – already went around the bend with *Extreme Makeover: The Swan* just tinkers with and combines the formulas that have worked on other reality shows [...] The sexism is nothing compared to the creepiness of how alike and standardly, boringly “glamorous” they all look. I've been ranting and raving about this stuff for 15 years. At this point, now that everyone else is suddenly realizing that we're living in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, I find myself unable to get too exercised. (22)

Bordo's inability to get “exercised” about the “twilight zone” aspects of the show is just one example of how serious critiques of these texts can be easily dismissed. This is especially clear if one is familiar with Bordo's work on female body image in *Unbearable Weight* and how *The Swan* verifies, to a great extent, the analyses therein. Even though the suggestion of a “twilight zone” world is critical in its own right if one is familiar with *The Twilight Zone* television series, Bordo's comment eschews the complexity of the text itself, wherein these obvious instances of women buying into patriarchal definitions of femininity at the turn of the century in *The Swan* are buried beneath a text whose representations of women parallel the feminist “misery” that the mainstream media repeatedly locates within American society.

Similar to Nicholson and Fraser's assumption that feminists in American society can simply move beyond essentialist, foundationalist, modern discourses and become postmodern, the insistence on this division between these two modes of reception fails to consider the necessity of the interaction between the past and present that these texts enact in their postmodern tease between female objectification, normative femininity, feminist agency, and

second wave feminisms. To be more specific, one does not dive into Lyotard or Kristeva's theoretical work without some background in structuralist and psychoanalytic theories, and along these lines, one does not begin identifying the differences between modes of representation that entail notions of equality between "the sexes" without first understanding how the male/female gender binary enables gendered oppression and subordination. Moreover, as Foster highlights in relation to the move toward the postmodern where the subject seems powerless in reaching the final moment of the process, one does not simply invoke the fully postmodern; nor does one, through abrupt declaration, enter into an entirely "feminist" subjectivity.

Yet, within these assumptions – of the ability to become truly postmodern, reach equality in society, or occupy a non-objectified and agency-filled female subject position – the similarity between these differently signifying *postmodern feminisms* can be found – that to know about the totalizing structure of modern discourses or about patriarchal oppression and to believe oneself to have moved beyond either is to be altogether exempt.<sup>29</sup> While using Bordo's response to *The Swan* is to take into consideration a feminist response to the most obvious (and, yes, most horrifying) text, a text that many would not identify as feminist, it suggests an expectation for audiences to undertake the task of reading/watching texts in a non-hegemonic manner and if

---

<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that feminist theorists believe themselves to be exempt from producing modern discourses in advocating postmodern critiques or to be exempt from patriarchal oppression because of a commitment to gender equality and a desire to fight against female subordination. It is more of a comment upon the naivety of women who have been told that they can be anyone and anything they want to be, who, like the characters of *Sex and the City*, seem to believe that if they knowingly participate in the objectification of their bodies or in patriarchal culture, they have agency and will not be subjected to its forces. To suggest a different understanding, one cannot simply participate in a study that tracks acts of violence such as torture, rape, prisoner abuse, starvation, or any other detrimental action against another human and claim without difficulty to be unaffected. In preparing for the composition of this chapter, including 5 days and around 50 hours of viewing these texts, I found myself slipping into a relatively depressed state of being. Even after four years of watching these texts critically, the constant interplay of present knowledge and past experience continues to evoke these negative responses. It seems important to any project that involves a desire for social equality to maintain a fairly close proximity to the experiences of the various and overlapping inequalities.

necessary to read them against the grain. The impediment within the division between these two types of viewership then, and the challenging aspect of this expectation of critical engagement, is that the texts described here as postmodern and postfeminist are constructed as texts that are critically engaged with women's issues. In other words, these texts are structured to fulfill a viewer's desire to espouse a liberated self, and through simple reference of or allusion to *feminism* and women's equality, they evoke the insinuation of activist participation in the act of watching/mirroring the text. Finally, in their construction as postmodern texts, the lines between feminist and feminine, agency and submission, and margin and center is artificially blurred to such a great extent that patriarchal significations can be identified as connoting gender equality and feminist significations can be interpreted as oppressive, as is clearly demonstrated through the regulation of these significations by the female voiceover itself (as well as the various modes of female authorship within these texts).

These mediated texts thus point towards the importance of a feminist understanding of postmodernity, especially in locating a mode of feminist critique that might attend to both the framing that feminisms receive within these at least partially postmodern frameworks and the extent to which the term "feminism" itself is destabilized. But these mediated texts also point towards what seems to be most lacking in Nicholson and Fraser's construction of their *postmodern feminism* – a rigorous reflection on the questions that Angela McRobbie raises in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994): who is "the discursive 'I' which speaks or writes, to whom and with what purpose?" (63). While postmodernisms seem to open upon an opportunity for what McRobbie calls "interrogating rather than assuming the relations between who is talking to whom," both Nicholson and Fraser's *postmodern feminism* and the postmodern feminisms being defined in these mediated texts close themselves off from any such

investigation and render those questions irrelevant (71). But the questions of who is talking to whom, what they are assuming, and what boundaries (both social and subjective) they are defining and constricting in the process of speaking are precisely the forms of inquiry required if any understanding of marginalization and oppression within these ostensibly postmodern parameters is to transpire, and this is precisely why these questions are asked in this thesis. What the three inquiries performed in the chapters of this thesis seem to reveal is that the dissemination that is purported to be occurring across these supposedly postmodern texts (both theoretical and mediated) in regard to feminisms does not really represent a multiplicity of feminisms. Instead, these texts create the illusion of a democratic space while ultimately controlling its parameters and necessarily excluding many of the feminist expressions that fall outside its tightly regulated and narrowed boundaries.

## AFTERWORD: POSTMODERN FEMINISMS AND THE ROLE OF THE EXPONENTIALLY “OTHERED” FEMALE SUBJECT

As a final note of commentary within this thesis, I would like to turn momentarily to the fact that the primary texts under investigation within these thesis – Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism,” *What Women Want*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* – are primarily invested in the self-regulation of white female bodies. Across these texts, second wave feminisms are problematically represented as signifying a subject position occupied by white female subjects exclusively,<sup>1</sup> a mimetic reproduction of what bell hooks describes in *From Margin to Center* (1984) as the notion that “the women’s movement was theirs [white women’s]” (11). I find it important to include this prologue not because this issue is less important to my thesis than how the “male gaze” becomes part of the process of defining postmodern feminisms. Rather, I include this prologue because I have found myself without the time to fully address this issue in its own chapter and because I consider the way that diversity functions within these texts in relation to the “male gaze” to be too imperative to not at least offer a brief consideration. What I will suggest in this section is that white female subjects within these texts are portrayed (or portray themselves) as incompetent in the task of removing their second wave feminist underpinnings, and it is precisely during these crucial moments of transformation that the exponentially Othered body enters the text or screen to provide external instruction to the white female subject in completing this task. I will offer a few readings of the dynamics surrounding the representations of and intimacy shared between black and white female bodies in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* and then offer a few concluding comments about the function of “diverse” bodies in Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism.”

---

<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that these texts seem to establish postfeminisms and the postfeminist narrative structure too as experiences specific to whiteness.



Rather than embodying the self-corrective roles written on white female bodies in these mediated texts, black female bodies are portrayed as being only implicated in the weekly cycle of redefining the femininity of white bodies, or to be more accurate, their lack thereof. Thus, after *Sex and the City's* Miranda threatens to abdicate her maternal duties, lamenting – “I’m doing everything I can, but I can’t please him; if he was 35 this is when we’d break up” – Kendel, a black woman with a two scene cameo, arrives at Miranda’s door at 2:30 in the morning, reproaching Miranda’s disregard to other mommies in her building and Miranda’s lack of maternal skills (Brady – Miranda’s baby – has screamed incessantly for two weeks) (“Critical Condition”).

Because she has not immersed herself in the “mommy” community, a “jury” of peers who later sneer at her, Miranda is portrayed as the sole cause of her lack, a lack that hinges upon her refusal of both the maternal role and their expertise. When Kendel reappears, she teaches Miranda that she does not have to break up with her man to please him (words that resound over a now complacent and silenced baby), and she assuages Miranda’s hopelessness by telling her: “Miranda, you’re not a bad mother” (“Critical Condition”). As the scene continues, Miranda discovers that Kendel, too, had to learn to be a good mother, suggesting an emergent female “barrenness” that supersedes the intrinsic, socially expected, nurturing quality of all “worthy” mothers. Such learning, nonetheless, requires knowledge gained from already “maternalized” women, as opposed to Miranda’s single friends who leave her (as Kendel says) “screwed,” and particularly women within the domestic parameters of the home as opposed to the work-related and “social” spheres.

Fortifying this adherence to domesticity in *Sex and the City*, an elated black bachelorette, who appears for only one momentary scene, convinces Charlotte, pouting in response to the

bride-to-be's celebration, that she need not surrender her life-long, Cinderella-bride fantasy to the realm of fiction. Mollifying Charlotte's fear that her second wedding might not be as special as the first (a scene reminiscent of teenage "girl talk" about "the first time"), the unidentified bachelorette underscores the gravity of entering the space of heterosexual wifedom, especially considering Charlotte's self-confessed, fast-approach to "past-prime" sexuality. As a result, this scene effectively shifts former social norms regarding femininity to integrate the image of Cinderella as an overripe divorcee looking for a less impotent, and thus more masculine, prince.

Aside from characters with little to no dialogue, few other African American women appear in the 6 season series.<sup>2</sup> As Kendel and the unidentified bachelorette function mostly as catalysts for the restoration of Miranda and Charlotte's blighted womanhood, relationships between black and white female bodies are depicted as parasitic rather than symbiotic. Furthermore, they reveal a cultural tendency to portray black, female bodies as "mammy figures" in relation to white counterparts. This portrayal is intensified when contextualized in relation to network descriptions of African American characters in post-9/11 texts such as *E-Ring*'s Jocelyn Pierce, branded an "unofficial den-mother," and *The Unit*'s Molly Blane, the key figure in helping the newest *Unit* wife grow "acclimated as she struggles against the level of control the Unit has over her personal life." If the "male gaze" is read as the "master" in these texts, then correspondingly, white, female bodies are repositioned within dominant patriarchal order "by" black female bodies, bodies that, in Yarbrough and Bennett's explanation of the mammy figure, Mammy, everyone's favorite aunt or grandmother, sometimes referred to as 'Aunt Jemima,' is

---

<sup>2</sup> A more thorough examination would look at the character Adeena who explains to Samantha that there is a reason that white women should not date black men and the limo driver who takes Carrie out to "celebrate" after her book release party.

ready to soothe everyone's hurt, envelop them in her always ample bosom, and wipe away their tears. She is often even more nurturing to her white charges than to her own children" (635-636).

More disturbing is the representation of Betty Applewhite in *Desperate Housewives*, a black woman who not only provides instruction for those trying to maneuver what they experience as the "psychosis" of domesticity but who also affords a point of deviance that diminishes the magnitude of that "psychosis." Portraying Betty as an extreme thus dichotomizes the subjective schizophrenia that these different characters' public/private representations signify – Betty's psychoses is permanent while white female characters can be redeemed, and most specifically they can be set right by Betty. Ruthless, and thus irreparable, as her private madness escapes literally into the public sphere (first the noises of her son and eventually his body), Betty helps resecure other women's mother-child relationships and their public personification of "appropriate" femininity (the concealment of Bree's alcoholism provides a dual example here). Thus their mental defects are rendered surmountable. However, Betty inevitably comes to embody the characteristics of the "sapphire" – evil, bitchy, stubborn, hateful, and, on top of this, deceptive. The sapphire figure, "the wise-cracking, balls-crushing, emasculating woman," as Yarbrough and Bennett explain, "is usually shown with her hands on her hips and her head thrown back as she lets everyone know she is in charge" (636). These characteristics are shaped by the fact that Betty consents to domestic favors only to hide a secret kept, not behind closed doors as the white female subjects' secrets are, but in the basement, her almost sadistic treatment of her supposedly deranged son Caleb, whose alleged assault of a white girl remains uncertain until the last episode before Betty and her family are removed from the show.

While the postmortem voiceover to some extent blurs the surmountable/irreparable binary separating Betty and the white female characters, often ambiguously alluding to "some

women,” “other women,” or simply “we,” it nevertheless contextualizes the symbolic nature of Betty’s explicit representation, as the extradiegetic dialogue overlaps Betty’s situatedness in the camera’s gaze. Betty becomes a woman who “could not forget her past,” a statement that references *her* past, and possibly, due to the ambiguity, African American history in general, reverberating the poetic lines: “we are told over and over again/to forget about it/get over it/get on with it/stop/rehashing ancient history” (anonymous). This voiceover’s meaning is reinforced by the portrayal of her son’s alleged “crime” as an all but rewritten simulation of the case of 14-year-old Emmett Till, a case that 50 years later is still “under investigation.” (And this is a moment where an oppositional reading might hint toward the immanent danger that African Americans face in deranged suburbia). Still, it is no insignificant matter that in March 2006, the *New York Daily News* maintained that “Betty Applewhite and her problem child proved utterly disposable” (Guthrie).

Lastly, because Betty imprisons both of her sons, resulting in an ongoing conflict between her own interests and her sons’ freedom, her character further personifies the “sapphire” figure, not only because of the marked ongoing “verbal duel” between the sapphire persona and the men in her proximity, but also because of the occasion that this situation provides – the emasculation of both men achieved by Betty’s obstruction of any attempted sexual encounters. Inasmuch as her portrayal represents a threat to suburbia, Betty, the visually “inappropriate” prototype that others try so desperately to escape, becomes not only a body that disciplines but also one that is disciplined into her stereotypical role.

In “Social Criticism,” the exponentially “Othered” female subject also is mentioned rather briefly although she seems to be called upon to play a similarly momentous role in providing the impetus for white feminist theorists to abandon the debilitating impediments of

second wave feminisms – essentialism and foundationalism. Examined in relation to the positioning of black female bodies (and one could add Hispanic, Asian, and queer female bodies as well) in these postmodern, postfeminist mediated texts, Nicholson and Fraser’s reference to the exponentially “Othered” female subject in “Social Criticism” (which receives only a one paragraph “mention”) is disconcerting. Nicholson and Fraser seem to suggest that their *postmodern feminism* would be most beneficial to these particular “Othered” subjects, as though this postmodernization of feminisms were for “them” rather than to alleviate the guilt of white female theorists, theorists who have tended to, as Nicholson and Fraser explain in this paragraph, “elide differences among women and among the forms of sexism to which different women are differently subject” (33). But like the positioning that black female subjects receive in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, Nicholson and Fraser appear to cast “working-class women, women of color, and lesbians” in the role of helping to repair the white female subject (33). Moreover, because Nicholson and Fraser insinuate that the exponentially “Othered” female subject would be the greatest beneficiary of their postmodernization of feminisms, Nicholson and Fraser effectively align these “Othered” subjects with the “male gaze” of Lyotard, analogous to the aligning of the black female subject with the “male gaze” in these mediated texts. Thus, the “male gaze” is also granted the authority to speak for these exponentially “Othered” female subjects as well.

In drawing this comparison between the positioning of the exponentially “Othered” female subject in “Social Criticism” and these mediated texts, it becomes clear that Nicholson and Fraser commit the error of “masking” the “implicit reference to white Anglo women” in their own “classic feminist text” (33). Therefore in asking the question of “to whom” and “for whom” are Nicholson and Fraser speaking, it does not seem to far from the mark to suggest that

they are speaking for these exponentially “Othered” female subjects and instructing their white feminist theorist contemporaries as to how these “Othered” female subjects can be spoken about in the future. What this seems to suggest is that Nicholson and Fraser’s construction of their postmodern feminism is not about coming to terms with the racism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia inherent to a number of second wave feminisms. Rather, it suggests that the beneficiaries of second wave feminisms – the white bourgeois female subject – can and sometimes do unconsciously exploit the margins to write themselves into a centered subject position.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Introduction. "Postmodernism and Postcolonialism." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 117-18.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 119-24.
- Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001. 1470-75.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Benhabib, Seyla. "Epistemologies of the Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 107-132.
- . "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance." *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1995. 17-34.
- Bewitched*. Dir. Nora Ephron. Perf. Nicole Kidman, Will Ferrell, Shirley MacLaine, and Michael Caine. Columbia Pictures, 2005.
- Bordo, Susan. "Love it/Shove it." *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Popular Culture*. 25 (2004): 22.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*. Trans. Elizabeth Guild. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Bridget Jones' Diary*. Dir. Sharon Maguire. Perf. Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth, Hugh Grant, Gemma Jones, and James Faulkner. Little Bird, 2001.
- Brooks, Ann. *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Buker, Eloise A. Review of *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Postmodern*, by Linda Nicholson. *American Political Science Review*. 95.4 (2001): 983.
- Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism." *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1995. 35-58.

- “Change of a Dress.” *Sex and the City*. Dir. Susan Seidelman and Alison Maclean. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, John Corbett, James Remar, and Willie Garson. HBO, Season 4. Episode 63.
- Cixous, Helene. “Sorties.” *Feminisms*. Ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 231-35.
- Collins, Kathleen. “Suburban Blight: The Battle of *The Stepford Wives*.” *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Popular Culture*. 26 (2004): 29-31.
- “Color and Light.” *Desperate Housewives*. Dir. David Grossman. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria Parker, Alfre Woodward, Nicollette Sheridan, Ricardo Chavira, and Brenda Strong. ABC, Season 2. Episode 32.
- Cott, Nancy. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
- “Critical Condition.” *Sex and the City*. Dir. Michael Patrick King. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, and Kristin Davis. HBO, Season 5. Episode 72.
- “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda.” *Sex and the City*. Dir. David Frankel. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, John Corbett, Kyle MacLachlan, and David Eigenberg. HBO, Season 4. Episode 59.
- “Boy, Girl, Boy Girl.” *Sex and the City*. Dir. Pam Thomas. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, David Eigenberg, Willie Garson, and Alanis Morissette. HBO, Season 3. Episode 34.
- The Devil Wears Prada*. Dir. David Frankel. Perf. Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway, Emily Blunt, Stanley Tucci, and Adrian Grenier. Fox, 2006.
- Down With Love*. Dir. Peyton Reed. Perf. Renée Zellweger, Ewan McGregor, Sara Paulson, and David Hyde Pierce. Epsilon Motion Pictures, 2003.
- During, Simon. “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today.” *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 125-29.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Daily/Doubleday Press, 1981.
- Fiske, John. *Media Matters: Race and Gender in United States Politics*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996.
- Flax, Jane. “The End of Innocence.” *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W Schott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 445-63.



- . *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. Berkeley: California UP, 1990.
- Foster, Hal. "Postmodernism in Parallax." *October* 63 (1993) 3-20.
- "Four Women and a Funeral." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Allen Coulter. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Michael De Vries, and Chris Noth. HBO, Season 2. Episode 17.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell, 1963.
- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- "Ghost Town." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Michael Spiller. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Sonia Braga, John Corbett, David Eigenberg, and Kyle MacLachlan. HBO, Season 4. Episode 53.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Authenticity and the Writing Cure: Reading Some Migrant Women's Writing." *Grafts*. Ed. Susan Sheridan. London: Verso, 1988. 111-24.
- Guthrie, Marisa. "In Its Second Season, 'Desperate Housewives' is at a Dead End." *New York Daily Press*. 30 March 2006.
- Henry, Astrid. "Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and Third Wave Feminism." *Reading Sex and the City*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: I. B. Tauris, 2004.
- hooks, bell. "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexual Oppression." *Feminisms*. Ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 22-26.
- . *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- . "Postmodern Blackness." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001. 2478-84.
- Kipnis, Laura. *Against Love*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.
- . "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism." *Social Text*. 21 (1989) 149-66.
- "Leap of Faith." *Melrose Place*. Dir. Bethany Rooney. Perf. Josie Bissett, Thomas Calabro, Amy Locane, Doug Savant, Grant Show, Andrew Shue, Courtney Thorne-Smith, and Vanessa Williams. FOX, Season 1. Episode 5.

- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2002.
- McRobbie, Angela. "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: *Bridget Jones* the New Gender Regime." *Feminist Media Studies*. 4.3 (2004): 255-64.
- . *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Modleski, Tania. *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Moi, Toril. "'I'm not a Feminist But ...': How Feminism Became the F-Word." *PMLA*. 121.5 (2006) 1735-41.
- . *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Mona Lisa Smile*. Dir. Mike Newell. Perf. Julia Roberts, Kirsten Dunst, Julia Stiles, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Marcia Gay Harden, and Ginnifer Goodwin. Columbia Pictures, 2003
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley. New York: Routledge, 1988. 57-68.
- Nicholson, Linda J. Introduction. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 1-18.
- Nicholson, Linda J. and Nancy Fraser. "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 19-39.
- "No Ifs, Ands, or Buts." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Nichole Holofcener. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, John Corbett, David Eigenberg, and Willie Garson. HBO, Season 3. Episode 35.
- "Old Dogs, New Dicks." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Alan Taylor. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Chris Noth, and David Eigenberg. HBO, Season 2. Episode 21.
- "Politically Erect." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Michael Patrick King. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Elizabeth Banks, David Eigenberg, Willie Garson, and John Slattery. HBO, Season 3. Episode 32.
- Press, Andrea L. *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*. Philadelphia: Penn UP, 1991.

- Sangari, Kumkum. "The Politics of the Possible." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 143-50.
- "Sex and the City." *Wikipedia.com*. 2008. The Free Encyclopedia. 09 August 2007  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex\\_and\\_the\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_City)>
- "Sigmund Freud." *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. Ed. Elizabeth Wright. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992. 127-33.
- Simpson, Mark. "Meet the Metrosexual: He's Well Dressed, Narcissistic and Obsessed with Butts. But Don't Call Him Gay." *Salon.com*. 22 July 2002. Salon. 8 November 2006.  
<<http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/feature/2002/07/22/metrosexual/>>
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Something's Gotta Give*. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Perf. Jack Nicholson, Diane Keaton, Keanu Reeves, Frances McDormand, Amanda Peet, and John Favreau. Columbia Pictures, 2003.
- Spivak, Gayatri. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York, Routledge, 1988.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Patriarchal Poetry." *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. Ed. Cary Nelson. New York, Oxford UP, 2000. 55-83.
- Stepford Wives*. Dir. Bryan Forbes. Perf. Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss. Columbia Pictures, 1975.
- Stepford Wives*. Dir. Frank Oz. Perf. Nicole Kidman, Matthew Broderick, Bette Midler, Glen Close, and Christopher Walken. Dream Works, 2004.
- The Way We Were*. Dir. Sydney Pollack. Perf. Barbra Streisand, Robert Redford, Diana Ewing, and Murray Hamilton. Columbia Pictures, 1973.
- "The Sun Won't Set." *Desperate Housewives*. Dir. Stephen Cragg. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria Parker, Alfre Woodward, and Brenda Strong, ABC, Season 2. Episode 31.
- "They Shoot Single People, Don't They?" *Sex and the City*. Dir. John David Coles. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and Willie Garson. HBO, Season 2. Episode 16.
- "Time and Punishment." *Sex and the City*. Dir. Michael Engler. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Ted King, and John Corbett. HBO, Season 4. Episode 55.

“Touchy, Aren’t We.” By Geoffrey Nunberg. *Fresh Air*. Natl. Public Radio. WMFE, Orlando. 29 June 2006.

Vavrus, Mary Douglas. *Postfeminist News: Political Women in Media Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.

“Voices from a Postfeminist Generation.” *New York Times Book Review*. 17 October 1982, final ed., sec. 6: 29+.

“Where There’s Smoke.” *Sex and the City*. Dir. Michael Patrick King. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and David Eigenberg. HBO, Season 3. Episode 31.

“Who’s that Woman.” *Desperate Housewives*. Dir. Jeffrey Melman. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria Parker, and Brenda Strong. ABC, Season 1. Episode 4.

Wiegman, Robyn. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

*What Women Want*. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Perf. Mel Gibson, Helen Hunt, Marisa Tomei, Alan Alda, and Delta Burke. Centropolis, 2000.

Yarbrough, Marilyn with Crystal Bennett. “Cassandra and the ‘Sistahs’: the Peculiar Treatment of African American Women in the Myth of Women as Liars.” *Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice*. (Spring 2000) 626-57.

“You’ll Never Get Away From Me.” *Desperate Housewives*. Dir. Stephen Cragg. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria Parker, Alfre Woodward, Nicollette Sheridan, Doug Savant, and Brenda Strong. ABC, Season 2. Episode 27.