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# Retrograde Returns of the American Housewife: Reimagining an Old Character in a New Millennium

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RETROGRADE RETURNS OF THE AMERICAN HOUSEWIFE:  
REIMAGINING AN OLD CHARACTER IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

by

Ruth Wollersheim

A Dissertation Submitted in  
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December 2015

## ABSTRACT

### RETROGRADE RETURNS OF THE AMERICAN HOUSEWIFE: REIMAGINING AN OLD CHARACTER IN A NEW MILLENIUM

by  
Ruth Wollersheim

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Professor Patrice Petro

This dissertation explores the immensely popular return of the housewife character in the twenty-first century. From films like *The Stepford Wives* (2004), to television dramas like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) and *The Good Wife* (2009- ), to reality shows like *Wife Swap* (2004- ), Bravo's *The Real Housewives* franchise (2006- ), *Basketball Wives* (2010- ), *Mob Wives* (2011- ), and most recently on the blogosphere with personalities like The Pioneer Woman, Ree Drummond, the housewife character has reentered our imaginations on a mass scale. This anachronistic character trend is in stark contrast to the urban, working superwoman ideal of the 1980s and 1990s portrayed in characters like Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw. Arguably, reimagining the housewife in the new millennium is both a part of a larger project to nostalgically return to earlier periods of US history while trying to redefine womanhood and motherhood today, post 9/11. Chapter one links the rise of the housewife as an American stock character to American nationalism in anywhere from early advice books in the nineteenth century, such as Lydia M. Child's *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829), into cinematic narratives such as Cecil B. DeMille's sex comedies like *Old Wives For New* (1918) and, later, to the classic 1950s June Cleaver television character in *Leave it to Beaver*. Chapter two analyzes

the 2004 film remake of *The Stepford Wives* and its relationship to second-wave feminism and the 1970s popular horror novel by Ira Levin and film directed by Bryan Forbes. Chapter three describes how the television show *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) was the first to bring the character of the suffering housewife imagined by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* back to life. Chapter four examines the pervasiveness of the housewife character on reality television, as it explores the relationship between so-called real housewives and real feminists within neoliberal constructions of postfeminist and post-racial identities. Chapter five concludes with a brief discussion of new trends in hip domesticity that are popular on the blogosphere, ultimately revealing how the housewife character has been historically aligned with articulating American feminist identities and concerns.

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## CHAPTER ONE- INTRODUCTION

### Reimagining the Housewife Today

The quintessential housewife we imagine is a white, middle-class woman from the pages of advertisements or television shows from the 1950s. She stands in the kitchen with a small-waisted, flared dress and an apron tied around her back. Her hair is shiny and cut just above the shoulders or tied up neatly behind her head. She may be standing by the stove or holding a Jell-O mold or a vacuum. She's lovely, polite, smiling, and serene. The popular image of the American housewife emerges at her most televised moment. In the 1950s, the American housewife becomes a classic stock character, a living doll, perhaps a figure that we have never quite taken seriously.

This character, while certainly a pervasive 1950s media construction, is itself a slight misremembering of the 1950s televised housewife. In *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (2001), Lynn Spigel discusses the impact of television reruns on our imagination of the housewife.<sup>1</sup> Nick at Nite and other syndications, through the process of exclusion, has created a one-dimensional character by choosing to air shows like *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) more frequently than other sitcoms that feature more working-class or ethnic characters (363).<sup>2</sup> In turn, this influences our nostalgic perception of (and even longing for) the past. Spigel calls this "popular memory" which is a way of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture of the present by self-consciously mixing the fiction and science of the past (363-4). For Spigel, popular memory serves to create a sense of our progress. For example, we believe that women have come a long way from the 1950s housewife.

She says that “television engages in a kind of historical consciousness that remembers the past in order to believe in the progress of the present” (362). Spigel’s book, published in 2001, however, was not yet aware of the return of the housewife character in the twenty-first century. Where exactly is the “progress of the present” in our current nostalgic revisions of the housewife in contemporary popular culture, especially on film and television?

Although she doesn’t quite have the same dress code,<sup>3</sup> the twenty-first century housewife fills up our screens once again. From films like *The Stepford Wives* (2004), to dramas like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), *Army Wives* (2007- ) and *The Good Wife* (2009- ), to reality shows like *Wife Swap* (2004- ), *The Real Housewives of ...* (2006- ), *Basketball Wives* (2010- ), *Baseball Wives* (2011-2012), *Mob Wives* (2011- ), *Sister Wives* (2010- ), etc, the housewife character has reentered our imaginations on a mass scale. Initially, this trend seems anachronistic and strange. Why would an outdated character with an outmoded lifestyle obtain such popularity in a post 9/11, postfeminist world? Why would Americans want to watch a bunch of housewives take the stage again? Spigel might say that reimagining the housewife is “bound up with its use value in the present” (374). Of course, these are not just any housewives. These are desperate housewives, Stepford housewives, celebrity housewives, wealthy housewives, housewives with “real” problems. The discontented housewives emergence in popular texts suggests that underneath the contented, happy, picture perfect wife lies a mix of unseemly, dark, and anxious emotions. These new housewives appear more like Betty Friedan’s unhappy housewives than the serene June Cleaver. Even though we cannot help but associate this new housewife with old characters, this twenty-first century housewife is a character of her own, a new reiteration in a series of clichés.<sup>4</sup> Her reemergence is in contrast to the working woman, superwoman ideal of the 1980s and 1990s. While the superwoman ideal may have merely hid underlying inequality

between the sexes, it nonetheless seemed to represent a more positive image of womanhood than a housewife. Although the professional homemaker was once the embodiment of the modern woman, the housewife in the twenty-first century seems like an anachronism and the antithesis of progress.

Looking at how and why the housewife stereotype has been used to define women's roles is critically important to understanding American women's history.<sup>5</sup> Francoise Thébault, in her opening essay to *A History of Women* says, "It must be emphasized that the history of women is unthinkable without a history of representations, that is, a decoding of images and discourses shaped by the male imagination and masculine social norms" (2-3). Furthermore, an analysis of the role of the housewife can act as a lens to see the shifting relationship between femininity and feminism. Television scholar Bonnie Dow additionally argues that commercial entertainment television "needs to be taken seriously as a player in cultural debates over the meaning of feminism" (Dow 113). Taken together we might view the troubled housewife character's reemergence in American media culture as a sign of a new concern over feminism, or at the very least over feminist concerns.

A housewife is a wife with certain connotations, a married woman who is chained to her abode. As an important iconic figure, or at least a critical stereotype or caricature, it is important to look at the housewife as a cultural symptom, continuously repeated, yet shifting to fit into its own time. The housewife's status as a recognizable caricature both sentimentalizes domestic labor and imbibes it with a timeless abstraction of Woman. As an abstraction, Woman is often synonymous with whiteness. Yet, changing trends in the representation of the housewife must be read in conjunction with the socio-political movements of its day. How is the retrograde housewife character used in today's cultural contexts and in comparison to real housewives

today? Even 1950s housewives, as feminist historian Elaine Tyler May and others have argued, expressed discontent with their roles. Some suggest that in the aftermath of 9/11, the renewed popularity of the housewife was part of a larger project to reimagine and return to earlier periods in US history, particularly during the Cold War. Although, like Spigel suggests of popular memory, the public's memory of the Cold War seemed more linked to an imaginative past they gleaned from television.

In the 2008 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May includes a new post 9/11 epilogue that attempts to explain why and how the nation's leaders, pundits, and citizens used the vocabulary and historical precedents of the Cold War to make sense of the War on Terror. Among many examples, she cites the ways in which the response to the War on Terror echoes the emphasis on consumer freedom and the "American way of life" in Cold War propaganda. The epilogue begins with a quote from George W. Bush on December 27, 2001, "Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots [...] Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed" (qtd. in May 217). What President Bush and others tried to push for after the terrorist attacks was an imagined return to the 1950s nuclear family which was defined by its patriotic consumerism of American goods and ideologies. This new emphasis on consumerism and the family after 9/11 was also discussed in length in Susan Faludi's *Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* (2007) where she suggests that in the new millennium, Americans turned their attention to the 1950s Cold War in an effort to look to the past to make sense of 9/11. Faludi says, "In the aftermath of the attacks, the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness,' redomesticated femininity and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood" (3-4). For example, "security moms" were staying close to

home and stocking their pantries while both moms and dads were “stockpiling guns in their families’ linen closet” (Faludi 4, May 228). Working moms “opted out” for the “protected suburbs,” while requests for marriage licenses went up (Faludi 4, May 227). Tellingly, feminist perspectives faded away from the media in attempt to “rein in a liberated female population” as women’s independence became “implicated in our nation’s failure to protect itself” (Faludi 20-1). Men, it seems, embraced a new John Wayne masculinity by framing the invasion of Iraq in terms of cowboys and Indians. Faludi suggests that instead of interrogating our trauma, we reacted to it by “cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom’s childhood” (4). Additionally, in the absence of images of female victims at the ground zero, the media shifted the threat of terror to focus on the fear of disturbing homemakers in the suburbs and the white picket fence (5-6). The threat, George W. Bush emphasized in his speech on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, was to our very American domestic hearths, “We face an enemy determined to bring death and suffering into our homes” (qtd. in Faludi 5). These domestic discourses about the War on Terror served to revalue 1950s domesticity and thus, revise women’s proper roles as American citizens within this new context.

In *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (1999) film scholar Kathleen McHugh notes, “Domestic discourses have served an array of conflicting social forces and positions, all involved in some way with the articulation of feminine identity and women’s proper place” (10). By looking at the revalued and revised character of the housewife within these new contexts, we can see how our lives and desires have changed historically while following the ways in which feminism and feminist rhetoric has also changed, although always with contradictory perspectives especially in media. For example, the housewife character that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century seemed to serve a feminist purpose for white middle-class

women by establishing a public moral voice for women; in the mid-twentieth century the June Cleaver housewife character became a symbol of the anti-feminist. Indeed, second-wave feminists deliberately devalued housewifery as an obstacle to progress (Munford and Waters 74). In the twenty-first century, the housewife reemerges as contradictory, complex, a ghost of housewives past, perhaps to tell us that feminism did not, if fact, die.

Obviously, we cannot interrogate this new housewife character without thinking about what it means to be a contemporary wife. Although to be a *housewife* seems outdated, to be a wife, to be a woman married to a man, is a timely conversation surrounding the gay marriage debates. To examine the housewife now is to examine marriage and the imagined female role prescribed to the institution, particularly when the institution seems to be changing, although not without pull back. In part, the gay marriage controversy has a role in putting traditional marriage back on the cultural radar. Marriage has always been dependent on patriarchal systems of order and binaries. As a compulsory step of heterosexuality, marriage also has been an issue important to feminist movements, even though marriage remains, according to gender studies scholar Stevi Jackson, “the linchpin of institutionalized heterosexuality” (12). While the housewife character herself is not exactly a deviant of traditional marriage, her current “desperate” iterations showcase that all is not well on the home front in suburban America. The very use of a troubled and fraught housewife character in popular texts scrutinizes the ideology of marriage and the gender relationships within it.

While the bulk of this dissertation’s intent is to look at contemporary twenty-first century representations of the American housewife’s character in popular film and television, it would not be possible to do so without looking beyond the current moment to see how the role of the housewife has come to be popular now and how she is defined today. Crossing disciplinary and

historical boundaries, in this case, is necessary to put into perspective the changing appearance of such a dynamic character and its relationship to feminist discourse.

### **The Rise of a Stock Character and the Politics of a Nation**

The 1950s is not where the stock character of a housewife began in America. In historian Glenna Matthews' book "*Just a Housewife*": *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (1987), she details the emergence of a housewife from the humble, private role in the colonial American home in the mid-1700s to the public, civic role (the so-called cult of domesticity or cult of True Womanhood) it became in the mid-1800s and, finally, to its emergence to the culture of consumption in the 1950s and 1960s. Matthews traces how the role of the American housewife changed and evolved with the particular social and political movements of their times, demonstrating how the rise and fall of a stock character is linked to the political and social strife of the moment. She notes that in the mid-seventeenth century the father was still considered the authority in the household as both moral arbiter and decision maker, while the mother's role was merely a domestic (4). However, much of that changed during the American Revolution, particularly because of the housewife's role in boycotting British-made goods which gave them a reason to enter political discourse (6). In *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (2013) journalist Emily Matchar suggests that this boycott gave "women a public role in supporting the fight for independence by weaving their own cloth and making soap for the troops"; in fact, she states that "homespun clothing became a 'badge of patriotism'" (Matchar 31). Lynn Spigel confirms in *Make Room For TV* (1992) that the eighteenth century family was bound together as an economic unit working on a farm. Spigel says that with the shift to the world outside the home to an urban environment "the family took on a more overtly ideological landscape" (12). While the public sphere contained the hardships of working in urban



life, the private sphere of the home represented a site of “comfort and rejuvenation” (12). With this, Enlightenment’s rise of the Self-Made Man was only made possible through the construction of the cult of the True Woman (Coontz *The Way* 53).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, along with the invention of technologies such as the stove and the employment of servants to white, middle-class families, this created a new identity and status for the role of mother and housewife.

Matthews uses Linder Kerber’s term “Republican Mother”<sup>7</sup> or the “ideology of Republican Motherhood” to describe how the role of as housewife and mother in a home became very important to the success of the nation and how the role of the housewife moved out of the private sphere and into civic culture (Matthews 7). This ideology, expressed in best-selling cookbooks, domestic novels, advice books, alongside of political texts challenged mothers to be educated “so they could train good citizens” (27). In this way, they gave “the home an expressly political function” (27). Interestingly, Matthews imagines the home as the “front line of action to produce virtuous citizens” (21). Her use of the term “front line” conjures the image of the housewife as a soldier on the battlefield fighting a war. Thus, Matthews situates the emergence of housewifery as deeply rooted in national politics before her latter appearance in consumer culture. Matthews notes that Republican Motherhood “enhanced the likelihood of female activism outside the home both indirectly- improved education for women- and directly- giving women a role in civic culture” (64). McHugh in *American Domesticity* confirms that in the United States “nineteenth-century formulations of domestic labor made possible constructions of a seemingly classless domestic femininity, a gender entity that helped forge a coherent democratic nationalization” (McHugh 5). The housewife, to claim herself as an American (universalized) citizen, had to subsume individuality in favor of humanist universals like home, family, and maternity (16). Additionally, during the tumultuous Jacksonian Age of the 1830s

(new church denominations, mass immigration, industrialization, western expansion) the home became an important symbol of both stability and pathos (Matthews 10). New patterns in living and thinking promoted sentimentality in the home and housewife. For example, because of texts like John Locke's *Education*, people became more interested in childhood (9). Additionally, because of the shift in attention on creating an optimal environment for children, a new pattern in companionate marriage and the function of emotion within it began to take shape (9). This initial construction of a civic housewife who also maintains a moral haven in the home is interesting in contrast to her later role as a public housewife who ventures out of the home and into the marketplace.

The changing civic role of the housewife made its way into popular press of the day and thus, through its discourse, created a character of the idealized and sentimentalized housewife. An entire genre of the domestic novel arose wherein the heroine housewife demonstrates initiative by creating and organizing a home and imbuing it with morality and sentimentality. Similarly, the tradition of women's writing increasingly emphasized the housewife's "pleasing appearance" in discussions of women's domestic labor (McHugh 5). McHugh describes, "If she labors, [...] she must appear *not* to labor. Thus these writings wed the importance of women's appearance to mystifications of household labor" (5). Housework is labor, but domesticity connotes, as McHugh describes, "a set of experiences, possessions, and sentiments" like "home, family, maternity, warmth, hearth" (6). The domestic novel shifts further in the 1850s to become "a highly politicized genre" whose "heroines could barely be contained within conventional roles" (Matthews 71). Matthews suggests that "the figure of the New England housewife was singled out so often for special mention that it is clear that she was becoming a stock character in American literature as well as the standard of excellence in manuals" (33). Along with Christian

morality, the housewife character exhibited a strong independence, yet she did not intrude too heavily on the male sphere, except when trying to change men's behavior outside the home, such as done so during the temperance movement. The novels as well as the new advice manuals even affected the birth rate, decreasing the family size from an average of seven children per married white woman in 1800 to three and a half in 1900 (28). The attempt to curb their husbands' "sexual appetite" by using the housewives' domestic credentials was later coined "domestic feminism" by scholars in the 1970s (28).

One of the most influential texts that initially established the character of the American housewife was Lydia M. Child's domestic advice book *The American Frugal Housewife*, first published in 1829. Its huge success, selling more than 6,000 copies in its first year and subsequently going through 35 editions before 1850, established her as a "national authority on homemaking," and thus she was coined "the first woman of the republic" by William Lloyd Garrison (McHugh 17, 19).<sup>8</sup> McHugh notes that Child's book constructed a "particularized version of 'womanhood' as a category that transcended class, race, [and] region" while also contributing to the "formulation of a national character, consisting of American idiosyncrasies and attitudes that she located within a nascent and resistant private sphere – that of frugal housekeeping" (17). This formulation of character largely derived from the position of a white, New England, Calvinist woman, McHugh argues, is important in understanding the disciplining of American domesticity (17-8).<sup>9</sup> In other words, not only was the housewife character's particular gendered knowledge shaped by the symbolic values of place (for example, Child cites Benjamin Franklin's notion of "time is money" in her second paragraph (Child 3)), but she was also shaped by religious forces which cultivated family values (McHugh 24-5). Nonetheless, at that time, Child's emphasis on frugality showcased that she was writing for the middle class, not

for the class of women that could afford servants. As the economy was on the brink of a depression in the early part of the nineteenth century, many Americans began reconsider their desire to imitate European aristocracy (Ogden 54). Child's book came at the perfect moment to set up a distinct American housewife persona that was separate from the British. In *The American Frugal Housewife*, which reads mostly like a series of "how-to" or Do-It-Yourself (DIY) instructions, Child manages to include cautionary advice against the "price" of associating with "influential and genteel people with an appearance of equality" and dedicates a section titled "Reasons for Hard Times" which claims that extravagance "is sapping the strength of our happy country" (Child 110). This distinction "identifies frugality as a uniquely American virtue" inasmuch as the middle class represents America (distinct from England) (McHugh 18-9). Furthermore, Child's construction of the frugal American housewife met with qualities of newly forming (not yet masculinized) American virtues of "independence, industriousness, and self-reliance" (31). The timeless quality of American womanhood imbibed within the housewife character remains today even though this emphasis on the frugality of the American housewife would change with the advent of a consumer culture.<sup>10</sup> It would not, however, be lost. During times of American hardship such during the most recent recession in the twenty-first century, frugality would again return as an important characteristic of an American housewife.

Far more famous than Child's book, Catherine Beecher's writings on American domesticity were also extremely influential in generalizing early constructions of the cult of domesticity, especially within her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* published in 1841. Overlapping with feminist and abolitionist discourses to rationalize the sentimental values of the cult of domesticity, Catherine Beecher argued that "the housewife's importance lay at the heart of American democracy" in her role in the development of future American citizens (McHugh

36).<sup>11</sup> In other words, as Spigel suggests, Beecher insists that the tenets of True Womanhood and the woman's ability to make the family adhere to a Christian doctrine could serve as an example for American democracy and a model for civic life (Spigel *Make Room* 13) Beecher's *Treatise of Domestic Economy* is 40 chapters long and written like a textbook which facilitated its relationship to schools and promoted the utility of the housewives' knowledge as disciplinary knowledge (McHugh 42). However, unlike Child's book, more than just delineating the cleaning duties in the space of the home, the *Treatise* instructs housewives in their value in caring for herself and her family members, thus showcasing how housework can serve a spiritual function. This spiritual sentimentality surrounding the laboring body of the white, middle-class housewife, unlike the laboring body of the white, middle-class husband, remains a big part of her character today. McHugh notes,

This mapping of the spiritual onto basic physical needs explains the contradictory representations of housekeeping and motherhood, familiar to us even today, as both the most transcendental and important of all endeavors and the most trivial, boring and banal. It also explains the confusion of moral and economic issues that the cult of domesticity levies on the (middle-class white) housewife-mother's body. (46)

Interestingly, the rise of the sentimentalized housewife character coincides with universal white manhood suffrage, wherein white men were allowed to vote regardless of how much property they owned. Because of this rise, the cult of domesticity fabricated the housewife's personality at the same time suffrage laws changed from being contingent on property to being contingent on personality (52).<sup>12</sup> This shift had a profound effect on how the American housewife was envisioned alongside of race narratives.

Arguably, some of the most notable fictionalized housewife characters come from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in 1852, which celebrated, often in melodramatic fashion, the moral authority of the housewife and her civic role in speaking out against slavery. The novel abounds with descriptions of how housewife characters perform housework which ultimately reflects on their moral character. These descriptions of the good housewife and mother are linked to the success of the pathos of the novel and its ability to reorganize culture (Matthews 51, Tompkins 124, 144). As Jane Tompkins and E. Ann Kaplan have argued, Stowe transforms female values into a political agenda (Kaplan 128, Tompkins 131-5, 145). In other words, Stowe creates recognizable characteristics of housewives who become powerful agents of change in society. Matthews says, "Stowe's housewives, in their vividly rendered settings, were so memorable as to constitute a category of their own" (Matthews 52). This is interesting because it demonstrates that not only were housewives becoming a distinct character in popular texts, but that the housewife character came in different, but recognizable versions. The housewife's role as the moral center of American democracy, of course, was said to affect war and history, as Lincoln's famous remark is often cited: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

Later, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement and the popular press of the day would have its own effect in changing how the nation viewed the housewife as venturing into the public political sphere. For example, the popular press painted Uncle Sam as an "old bachelor" who needed some good "national housekeeping," proclaiming that votes for women will help remedy the bad housekeeping of the male government (Matthews 88). Another example of how housewifery was used politically is Jane Addams' argument in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1910 that "the American city was in a bad way precisely because it lacked domesticity" (89). Political

reform in education, child-labor laws and other social problems that affect women would involve the kind of cleaning up of government that only a good housewife can do.<sup>13</sup> This sentiment that promoted effective citizenship as an extension of women's domesticity would also later be utilized in suffrage serials and feature films produced by the National American Women Suffrage Association and Women's Political Union (Stamp 179). A close analysis of these texts and others demonstrate how the narratives of the day make big attempts<sup>14</sup> to link the role of women, and specifically the housewife, to the national agenda.<sup>15</sup>

Even though American women were "relegated to a separate domestic sphere in 1850, it was a sphere that was central to the culture;" however, this centrality changed with new technologies and shifting values (Matthews xiii). Matthews notes that as the "home changed, as domesticity declined in cultural value, women's moral nature, identified as different by women themselves, could once again be trivialized as it had been in earlier periods of American history" (90). Politicizing the home<sup>16</sup> could have, in part, created the backlash against the sanctity of the home (91). Additionally, increased industrialization, which created new technologies such as the sewing machine and refrigeration, changed the conversation about the home to one about productivity and efficiency (94). These changing technologies additionally made it possible for the white middle-class woman to find some relief of "the servant problem."<sup>17</sup> However, instead of finding some relief from the drudgery of housework, the housewife continued to find herself spending just as much time doing labor with her new commodities. Capitalism gave the white, middle-class housewife new, less-skilled tasks, which would ultimately lead to further her debasement and to the erasure of her identity as a laborer (McHugh 7).

Another important development that shaped the character of the housewife in the popular imagination was Darwinism. In promoting the secularization of America, Darwinism affected the

degradation of the role of the good, Christian housewife. Matthews writes that “Darwinism tended to be reductionist with respect to women, making reproductive capacity the chief criterion of female excellence” (117). She goes on to cite Darwin and other Darwinian sources that claim that male work outside the home is an instrument in changing the species, whereas the home is irrelevant, even disdainful (121-2). Finally, drawing upon authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Matthews demonstrates how domesticity was devalued and how the home actually leads to women’s underdevelopment (131). In “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the protagonist descends into madness as a result of the horror of the mundane domestic details of her existence. Spigel notes that the Victorian True Woman domestic ideal carried so many contradictions that it was impossible for the housewife to live with its principles “calling for a schizophrenic malleability that no woman could hope to maintain” (Spigel *Make Room* 19). Gilman would go on to write *Women and Economics* (1898), which hoped to use contemporary Darwinian logic to make a case for the economic independence of women when she points out that humans are the only species where the female relies on the male for survival.<sup>18</sup> Gilman argues:

Thus we have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully maintain among us an enormous class of non-productive consumers- a class which is half the world, and mother to the other half. [...] We have made for ourselves this endless array of “horse-leech’s daughters, crying, Give! Give!” To consume food, to consume clothes, to consume houses and furniture and decorations and ornaments and amusements, to take and take and take forever, - from one man if they are virtuous, from many if they are vicious, but always to take and never to think of giving anything in return except their womanhood, - this is the enforced condition of the mothers of the race. (118-9)



In making this argument for economic equality using Darwinism, however, Gilman criticizes women's consumptive habits, degrading mothers to the status of whores. While she is trying to make an argument for change, she nevertheless positions the housewife's evolution in a negative light, calling them "horse-leech's daughters," nothing like the housewife's previous status as a virtuous Victorian.

With Darwinism and the "culture of professionalism" that valued male-oriented work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, "the home began to seem like a sentimental embarrassment, not to be taken seriously" (Matthews 141-2). This led to a major shift in what became known as the science or discipline of home economics in the Progressive Era, whereby the "authority of science had gone a long way toward replacing the authority of religion" (150). The new task of the housewife, espoused by American's love of efficiency, was now the intelligent consumer. To be isolated like the housewife, such as mentioned in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," was to be isolated from progress (154). Instead, the Progressive Era housewife could become educated in the domestic sciences, pulling her out from isolation in the home into the dignity of science. The role of the housewife as a lab assistant and efficiency expert who tested and bought the latest scientific products positioned her as a moderator between public and private spheres (Spigel *Make Room* 22, McHugh 70). The supposed liberating effects of modern machinery and time-saving methodologies promised to give the housewife more leisure time in her day to attend to other things, such as the aesthetics of her appearance. In some ways, home economics as a scientific discipline gave way to the academic careers of many educated women who were otherwise discouraged from careers in other sciences; however, because of its insistence that the scientist was an expert of the household, it failed to give actual

housewives much agency or authority in their domain. In other words, the housewife no longer generates products or knowledge forms of her own, she now just consumes them.

The early part of the twentieth century experienced the development of consumer culture and mass cultural entertainment. The advent of cinema especially brought about key changes in how women were represented and defined. Indeed, many scholars have written about the function of movies in negotiating the meaning of women's roles. Even though the formation of the identity of the American housewife obviously predates movies and television, one cannot underestimate the impact that movies have had on her construction, presentation, and transmission. Notably, the cinema was able to challenge the Victorian notion of the housewife's private sphere since early film depicts the home as a site for mass consumption. In other words, in making visible the details of private life, the cinema was able to alter the social construction of Victorian virtues. For example, many of the very first films depicted housewives in scenes from everyday life. That cinema transformed everyday scenarios into spectacles played a large part in how the housewife character was seen and imagined. Feminist scholar Constance Balides in "Scenarios of Exposure in the Practice of Everyday Life: Women in the Cinema of Attractions" addresses the new cinematic visibility of women in early cinema (up to 1907). She primarily focuses on comedic films that seem to sexualize women in scenes of everyday life. She says, "That women should be constructed as sexual spectacles [...] is not itself surprising" (20). Instead, what is surprising is the nontheatrical, everyday setting of their sexual objectification. Among others, Balides analyzes the 1907 film *A Windy Day on the Roof* where a housewife is hanging laundry being watched by a painter looking up her skirt. Balides notes that the film enacts "a conflict over the legitimate use of space (looking or domestic labor) and who will have the authority to define this use (the painter or the housewife)" (28). While the film allows for the

space of everyday life, it is overridden by the painter's sexualized look which abstracts and isolates her. Importantly, Balides emphasizes that the ordinariness of the housewife and the space of the house or housework easily becomes sexualized even in early cinema, or perhaps because of early cinema.<sup>19</sup> This is markedly different than the sentimentalized version of the housewife before the advent of cinema.

So-called scientific changes in housework appliances, along with pre-packaged and frozen food and the rise to the advertising industry in the 1920s, particularly targeted the housewife. This caused a different kind of self-consciousness about how well the housewife could meet the needs of her family. Being a traditional Victorian housewife was viewed as dull.<sup>20</sup> Spending money was desirable, encouraged by industrial capitalism. At least, white, middle-class housewives were being encouraged by advertisers to get into the public sphere. Especially with the invention of the automobile, housewives were driving themselves and their children around and, of course, and shopping. However, not only did the "culture of consumption militat[e] against their being producers of anything of substance," it gave them "little rationale for speaking out publically," since the home "was no longer a moral beacon" (Matthews 192). As another consequence of the changing role of the housewife, older, more traditional housewives were painted as irrelevant since their wisdom was based on old craft practices rather than on the latest science (193).<sup>21</sup> Women's magazines were not always quite sure how to characterize the good housewife except to discourage frugality in order to encourage consumption and to listen to scientific experts of subject matters pertaining to her domain. Similarly, as McHugh notes, domestic handbooks "reveal that many of capitalism's most provocative and seductive phantasms relay on the appearances represented by a particularly gendered and presumably leisured body, and on the class privilege of that body absorbed into its

feminine and feminized biology” (McHugh 76). In other words, as a housewife’s body became more visible, a housewife’s work became more and more invisible.

Of course, narrative film gained popularity over documentaries over the course of the 1910s. While documenting everyday life would remain a key component of cinema, classical Hollywood narrative was in place, according to many scholars, by about 1909 or even as late as 1917. Progressive reformers along with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) profoundly transformed cinema to align more with a middle-class perspective and to avoid its identification with other urban problems. In other words, cinema attempted to shift its function from seedy (working class) to morally uplifting, capable of gaining a social influence. D.W. Griffith, for example, played a big role in transforming film into a moral discourse about women’s proper roles by using cinematic techniques in parallel editing and close ups. For instance, in Griffith’s 1913 film *The Mothering Heart* he juxtaposes the good wife with the so-called idle (or sexually promiscuous, unmarried) woman. By doing this, he instructs his viewers on the moral qualities of being a good wife. Thus, Griffith’s film and other early melodramas demonstrate how formal film techniques in the formation of narrative cinema were utilized, like earlier etiquette or advice books, to instruct women how to behave as wives.

In looking at films with the word “wife” or “wives” in the title from the first half of the century, a few trends in the role of the housewife are noticeable. These trends largely align with what is usually seen in the so-called woman’s pictures of the day, but specifically address the role of the housewife and the institution of marriage to which she must uphold. Although markedly different than her domestic fiction counterparts from the late part of the nineteenth century, the housewife remained a key character in many narrative silent films, especially in the late 1910s and 1920s.<sup>22</sup> For example, films like Lois Weber’s *Too Wise Wives* (1921) and Erich

von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives* (1922) borrowed the tone from etiquette books to scold and inform how a good wife should behave. Weber's *Too Wise Wives* juxtaposes two very different wives to ultimately teach wives that the most successful wives are those that flirt with their husbands more so than those who labor around the house. This shift in the filmic portrayal of the wife role also notably coincides with the years leading up to the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and thus the wife character in early film is shown in relationship to first-wave feminism, although not always in a feminist light since, as Shelley Stamp in *Movie Struck Girls* (2000) notes, films of this era tended to mock suffragists (Stamp 154). In von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives*, the foolish wife, Helen Hughes (Miss Dupont), is, at key moments, seen reading a book titled, *Foolish Wives* by Erich von Stroheim. Viewers see a close-up of few pages of this text twice, both times giving advice to wives everywhere. Thus, it literally sets up the film's purpose as an instruction manual from the film director to wives everywhere. At one point, Helen addresses her husband "and please, Andrew, don't try and chase my friends for me- remember- I'm free- white- and twenty one!" Here, the main character declares her freedom foolishly. She is applying face cream, dressed in her night gown; her hair is disheveled, piled up at the top of her head. Young foolish wives with the freedom to vote was certain to create anxiety.<sup>23</sup> It is clear from looking at films during this time that the housewives' position in the public sphere required guidance and discipline by her husband.

Other films functioned to teach wives ways in which to keep their husband's happy and conform to an appropriate domestic role in an increasingly consumer culture. However, unlike earlier films, the 1920s brought about a rejection of sentimentality and the overly moral housewife. In other words, a wife on screen in post WWI America was increasingly touted as a new woman, antithetical to the Victorian wife. Additionally, her labor as a housewife was largely

erased by her new role as a consumer in the public sphere. For example, both *Old Wives for New* (1918) and *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920) are part of a trilogy of Cecil DeMille's sex comedies that attempt to discipline the housewife's appearance while simultaneously encouraging consumerism. (The 2<sup>nd</sup> in the trilogy is called *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919).)<sup>24</sup> In both films the frumpy wife is rivaled by a fashionable (new) woman who works in a department store. The wife is eventually divorced for her lack of upkeep and replaced by a modern shop girl. In the end, the dowdy or "blue-stocking wife" must physically and fashionably transform into a stylish new woman in order to end up married again. In a film review for *Picture Play Magazine* published in June of 1920, the film reviewer refers to Gloria Swanson's character as a "blue-stocking wife" in *Why Change Your Wife?* In using this term, the reviewer is likely painting her character as old-fashioned, a feminist (intellectual), and distinctly un-American. The Blue Stocking Society was an eighteenth century literary women's movement in England. For example, in order to situate the modern housewife in the audience into a relationship with the undesirable housewife onscreen, *Old Wives for New*, begins with this intertitle:

It is my belief, Sophy, that we Wives are apt to take our Husbands too much for granted. We've an inclination to settle down to neglectful dowdiness – just because we've 'landed our Fish'! It is not enough for Wives to be merely virtuous any more, scorning all frills: We must remember to trim our 'Votes for Women' with a little lace and ribbon – if we would keep our Man a 'Lover', as well as a 'Husband'!

The intertitle reads as though wives in the audience, "we Wives," are directly scolding the main character, Sophy Murdock (Sylvia Ashton), wife of oil king Charles Murdock (Elliott Dexter), for letting herself go. As film scholar Sumiko Higashi writes in *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture* (1994), the sermon of the film "addressed to female spectators enjoined [them] to

embrace the delights of the consumer culture if only to retain their marital status” (147). Notably, the intertitle trivializes the first-wave feminist movement’s push for “Votes for Women.”

Although the film does not interrogate this further, the intertitle also seems to suggest that feminist wives are antithetical to the modern consuming woman. Stamp writes, “That films assumed such a prominent place in suffrage debates demonstrates the rhetorical sophistication and cultural prominence cinema had achieved in the early teens, enabling it to engage national issues on this level” (155). Even though the modern consuming woman has arguably benefited from the public sphere afforded her from suffrage, she must reject the Victorian sensibilities that got her there (Desjardins 109). However, DeMille’s films suggest that the new woman must still eventually marry. She cannot remain a shop girl forever. Interestingly, movie stars, themselves working women/wives, participated in this debate. Stephanie Coontz quotes Mary Pickford’s declaration that she was “proud to be one of ... the girls who make their own living” (Coontz *A Strange* 41). Higashi in her later (2002) essay “The New Woman and Consumer Culture” explains that DeMille’s postwar films update the sentimental Victorian wife to a new woman who becomes a “sexual commodity symbolizing the reification of human relations, especially marital ones, in a consumer culture. A spendthrift, she was now exposed, unlike the sentimental heroine in a privatized domestic sphere, to the moral dangers inherent in narcissistic consumer behavior” (303). The films in the trilogy condone the act of divorce, leaving the housewife character initially without a husband. While divorce may have been new and modern, DeMille and other directors ultimately dramatize the “reification of marital relations” in the exchange of one spouse for another (Higashi “The New Woman” 307-8). In other words, marriage remains a necessary modern goal, even if modern husbands and wives are exchangeable like any

commodity. Films of this time demonstrate that a new, consuming and voting wife, must also still be under the protection of marriage.

In the decades before the picture perfect June Cleaver housewife imprinted itself in our collective imaginations, the housewife character continued its downward spiral in popular media. After the vote had been won, the feminist movement lost some momentum without such a dominant unifying cause (Coontz *A Strange* 46). The Great Depression and the War made it impossible to afford the frivolity of the previous decade. Appliances were hard to maintain. Food was scarce. In the 1930s, publications like *Ladies Home Journal* instruct wives to stay out of larger issues, be of service to one's husband, and become dependent on him (Matthews 198-9). Stephanie Coontz points out that the Depression "undermined the allure of work outside the home for women" (*A Strange* 44). Furthermore, she notes that employed women found themselves working longer at home trying to save money by sewing, canning, and baking from scratch (44). Not surprisingly, contradictory views of the housewife seemed to appear in American consciousness. On the one hand, the American housewife was in a "crisis state" due to the "fundamental loss of moral stature," and only her husband could rescue her from this serious state of being (Matthews 200). On the other hand a major theme that emerged in literature and film was the "predatory housewife" who was portrayed as "sexually cold, emotionally immature, and spoiled" (201). The predatory housewife in Depression Era media was also tied to class privilege.

This conflicting drama, along with other caricatures of the housewife, played itself out most heavily with films like *Craig's Wife* based on the Pulitzer Prize winning play by George Kelly published in 1925. The play was adapted for film three times and once for radio. In 1928 the film, now presumed lost, was directed by William DeMille, starring Gloria Swanson. It was



remade into a movie in 1936 directed by Dorothy Arzner starring Rosalind Russell and again in 1950 starring Joan Crawford titled *Harriet Craig* directed by Vincent Sherman. The radio play was produced by Orson Welles and aired in 1940. In *Craig's Wife* the housewife spends too much time obsessing about the cleanliness of her home and is therefore characterized as a bitch. For example, she won't let her husband smoke in the house and gets upset if her prized vase is slightly off center. However, Harriet Craig does not do much of the cleaning herself, but effectively orders her maids around so much that they are frightened of her wrath. Harriet marries her husband for his house and "to be independent," not for love. Childless, she deliberately lies about her fertility. Additionally, since Harriet has such power over her husband, Walter Craig can be read as the object of a kind of "momism" (Kaplan 160). In both 1936 and 1950 versions, the films juxtapose a young woman that wants to marry for love (Harriet's niece in Arzner's film and cousin in Sherman's) against Harriet's desire to marry for security and control, thus like many modern films, they advocate for a certain kind of housewife who is a love interest for her husband rather than a housekeeper. Craig's wife becomes a *housewife* rather than a lover to her husband (Wallace 398). So damning was this characterization of the cold housekeeper that Joan Crawford was featured in 1950s magazines mopping floors and giving interviews about child rearing in order to distance herself from her character (Coontz *The Way* 28). Like the "Stepford wives" term later became known to describe a certain kind of wife, "Craig's wife" seemed achieve social resonance as a recognizable stereotype and insult. Again, this not only is markedly different than Catherine Beecher's sentimentalized housekeeping, but it also stresses that romantic and sexual love should be the primary role of a housekeeper. In fact, the act of housekeeping can make a housewife seem positively frigid.

The role of the housewife and mother especially became a scapegoat during WWII. A 1945 *Ladies Home Journal* article titled “Are Moms a Menace?” criticizes older moms for being too idle, wasting time playing bridge (Matthews 208). Stephanie Coontz writes in *The New York Times* op-ed piece “When We Hated Mom” that by the 1940s the popular opinion portrayed the overbearing housewife mother (known as momism) as “a threat to the moral fiber of America on par with communism.” While some non-working mothers were being blamed for the “emotional instability” of soldiers, working mothers were being blamed for “juvenile delinquency” (Matthews 209). Even though 26 states had laws prohibiting married women from working, during WWII, nearly six million women went out into the workforce (Zeisler 27). Coontz points out that by the end of the war, “the female labor force would increase by almost 60 percent, with married women making up three-fourths of those newly entering the workforce” (*A Strange* 47). However, many were apprehensive of mothers working, even temporarily. For example, J. Edgar Hoover stated that a mother’s “patriotic duty is not on the factory front. It is on the home front!” (qtd. in Coontz *A Strange* 47). This anxiety about the amount of women entering the workforce caused mothers and wives to be characterized as suspicious. For example, the 1945 film *Allotment Wives* starring Kay Francis portrays bad wives who marry GIs just to collect their pay or their life insurance if they are killed in action. Although these negative stereotypes shifted when the War ended and men came home to reestablish their role in the family, the housewife never seemed to gain back her moral and instructional credibility she had a century before. Most popular opinion had convinced women to stop seeing themselves as “guardians of societal and familiar morality” (Coontz “When We Hated”). After the War, the solution for the housewife seemed to lie in depending one’s husband, staying at home, and working toward becoming a content housewife. Historian William Graebner suggests that the second half of the 1940s was

characterized by a patriotic duty to become “blissfully domestic” mostly by purchasing things with the newest consumer goods (qtd. in Coontz *A Strange*). Although there had never been so many full-time housewives after the War, this retreat from public life was not always freely chosen (Coontz *A Strange* 64 and *The Way* 31). The television wife that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, although markedly different than real wives’ experiences, was used to persuade the cultural imagination of the perfect housewife. Despite having gone through many previous iterations, this television housewife is the character we think of as embodying all that we love and hate about the housewife today.

### **Television and the 1950s Housewife**

As has been much documented, the social circumstances of postwar America promoted domesticity as the “central preoccupation of the burgeoning middle class” (Spigel *Make Room* 33). For example, historian Dolores Hayden points out that the two national priorities in the post War period were moving women out of the labor force and building more suburban housing which would promote “a mid-nineteenth century ideal of separate spheres for women and men” (qtd in Haralovich 75). Lynn Spigel in *Make Room for TV* argues that while postwar domesticity was not exactly a return to Victorian notions of True Womanhood, it was an updated version of the family ideal that still promoted women’s traditional roles within the many contradictions of new technologies and spaces in the home. Spigel’s book documents the repetition of the housewife image in 1950s popular media asserting that even though her realities might be different, her essential function was still that of “caretaker, mother, and sexual partner” (42). Her image as such was utilized as a site of new consumer identities. Indeed, even the space of the postwar suburban home was designed to display the housewife’s new, albeit retrograde, status. A well-known housing designer at the time, Robert Woods Kennedy, described the task of the

housing architect, “to provide houses that helped his clients indulge in status-conscious consumption ... to display the housewife ‘as a sexual being’ ... and to display the family’s possessions ‘as proper symbols of socio-economic class’” (qtd. in Haralovich 76). These idyllic images of the housewife and the family in their suburban home might have served to ease anxieties caused by social and political upheavals of the time, but they were only temporary consumer solutions that promised to revive domestic life with the purchase of a consumer goods, especially a television (Spigel *Make Room* 43-4). Nonetheless, the images of the American housewife that emerged in advertising and television in the 1950s were carefully designed to sell products to a specific consumer.

The American housewife was heavily targeted as an avid viewer of daytime television, coined “Mrs. Daytime Consumer,” whose job consisted both of chores and shopping for her family (Spigel *Make Room* 82-3). The media producers, armed with their demographic studies of daytime viewers,<sup>25</sup> pictured the ideal housewife in ways they felt it would appeal to her consumerist fantasies, a mix of “upper-class fantasy with tropes of averageness” (84). These ideals were “rooted in abstract conceptions about women’s lives” and seemed to schizophrenically characterize the housewife as both the “lady of leisure and the domestic servant” (86, 89). For example, images of laboring housewives were shown to be easily transformed into leisured women with the help of a time-saving consumer product. Additionally, the housewife was sold images of herself doing a chore while simultaneously watching television, thus both laboring and leisuring at the same time.<sup>26</sup> In *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (1995), Susan J. Douglas suggests that the housewife, then, had to oscillate between a consumer ethos and a producer ethos (Douglas 18). On the one hand, she was expected to be a model of productivity, efficiency, and self-sacrifice; on the other hand, she

had to be self-indulgent, “to gratify [herself] immediately, and to feel entitled to plenty of leisure time” (18). Even though the 1950s housewife did not exactly find herself in the same position as the Victorian True Woman, her role was still fraught with similar feelings of contradiction and schizophrenic malleability.

This ideal white, middle-class housewife was used as a part of the construction of a larger suburban home life that was meant to resituate the American family after World War II. In film and television historian Mary Beth Haralovich’s essay, “Suburbs and Sitcoms: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” she also discusses the contradictions that defined the 1950s housewife as both central and marginal. The housewife was central to the economy because she was the target of consumer product design and marketing; yet, she was marginal in her position in the home “constituting the value of her labor outside the means of production” (Haralovich 70). With the promise of consumer goods, the housewife was sold a kind of temporary leisure from housework within the contained and private space of the house. The irony was, of course, that the amount of time the housewife spent on housework actually increased during the 1950s despite the proliferation of consumer products designed to reduce labor (Coontz *The Way* 27). This white, middle-class, private and leisured life was naturalized, then, with the help of the family sitcom.

Early television merged from vaudeville-like programs to situation comedies for both practical reasons and to accommodate a nationwide, increasingly suburban, family audience (Spigel *Make Room* 147). It did, however, maintain some vaudeville-like qualities such as the sense of presence that had been important in live shows. Spigel suggests that in contradictory ways, the sitcom was expected to give viewers a sense of domestic naturalness and suburban intimacy while maintaining a vaudeville-like theatricality (157). Television sitcoms attempted to encourage viewers to believe that characters like the housewife were real people living their lives

out on their screens like neighbors. Yet the artifice of the space, particularly revealed in selling products sponsoring the sitcom, came to also be a key part of its representation as well. For example, at the beginning of each episode of *The Goldbergs*, housewife Molly Goldberg leans out of her window to deliver the sponsor's message into the camera (168). The television housewife's dialogue carefully weaves the sponsor's message into her own story about what she did that day and what she thought about that would warrant a discussion of the product. Perhaps because of its compellingly seductive and intimate format, the 1950s and 1960s television sitcoms still have a strong hold on how we imagine and situate the housewife today.

In feminist and co-founder of *Bitch Media* Andi Zeisler's book *Feminism and Pop Culture* (2008), she suggests that "more than any other pop culture product, the sitcoms produced from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s are responsible for how Americans think about the role of women in the era" (35). However, even though we imagine the 1950s as the decade of the quintessential housekeeper, her image in the family sitcom didn't proliferate until the late 1950s and early 1960s (Haralovich 70). While the working-class (urban) housewife may have appeared unhappy in her housekeeping duties in the early 1950s in shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), and *I Married Joan* (1952-1955), by the end of the 1950s she was replaced with a middle-class housewife who seemed cheerier. These careful and deliberate constructions of an idealized American life were in stark denial of the actual and increasing diversity in America.<sup>27</sup> The working-class housewife in her small apartment was replaced by a seemingly realist suburban family sitcom that dealt more with generational rather than gender conflicts (Spigel *Make Room* 178). Expressly, sitcom plots shifted to center on raising children in suburbia in shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963). Not surprisingly, the popularity of the domestic sitcom also coincides with efforts

made by the women's movement to change the definition of women's roles as housekeeper as well as a recognition by media outlets of the growing dissatisfaction of housewives who tried to conform to postwar domestic life.<sup>28</sup> Haralovich writes, "This 'nostalgic' lag between the historical specificity of the social formation and the popularity of the suburban family sitcom on the prime-time schedule underscores the sitcom's ability to mask social contradictions and to naturalize women's place in the home" (71). These contradictions and contradictory expectations, as Douglas suggests, "reflect a complex struggle between feminism and antifeminism that has reinforced and exaggerated our culture's ambivalence about women's roles" (Douglas 12-3). The carefully constructed mise-en-scène on the television sitcom contributed to the positioning of the television housewife in relation to her family members and ultimately, to real women.

In the family sitcom, the housewife character's place in the home is indicated by the way the space of the home set is designed, how she moves around the space, and how she is costumed. For example, while workrooms and garages are exclusive spaces where male members of the sitcom family appear, the kitchen is the space for the entire family, with the housewife spending the majority of her time there (Haralovich 81). In *Leave it to Beaver*, June often interacts with the family in the kitchen making dinner or unpacking groceries, while Ward's movement is more fluid throughout the house (81). In *Father Knows Best*, Margaret is able to move into other domestic spaces like the patio and the living room, largely because she has an older daughter and is able to turn the space over to her (81). Indeed, women on TV were often featured on the sidelines, unlike the women's pictures in the 1940s and 1950s (Zeisler 36). Zeisler suggests that this was a part of a postwar effort "to assure men's authority, husbands and fathers were made linchpins of the shows, judging and scolding their wives and providing the

moral fiber of family life” (36). The way housewives were costumed also suggest their relationship to femininity and their position in the home. June is typically dressed in cinch-waisted dresses, stockings, and pearls. Margaret also wears dresses or skirts, even though she is more casually dressed than June. Both June and Margaret appear to keep their house effortlessly tidy without appearing to labor too heavily. Although this is partly due to the promise of consumer culture, as shown earlier, the housewife character’s job as a laborer had long ago gone out of fashion. Although June and Margaret are not idle, they are not especially troubled by the little chores viewers see them do, such as preparing meals, ironing, and sewing, all while maintaining perfectly coifed hair and stain-free clothing. As Haralovich notes, the housewife characters in family sitcoms of this era are “well-positioned within the constraints of domestic activity and the promises of the consumer product industry” (84). This rather limited position, however, made a big impact on the way the housewife is remembered today.

Because of the success of the family sitcom and subsequent and frequent reruns, the housewife in the 1950s became the imagined quintessential American housewife. Zeisler points out that “from a mass viewpoint, the defining characteristic of the sitcom housewife of the 1950s was perfection, either real or hoped-for” (36). Perhaps because this was not the reality for most housewives, the late 1960s and 1970s produced a backlash against the mediated role of housewife. Divorce rates spiked twice after WWII, and in the mid-1950s, more American women held jobs outside the home than at any other point before then (Zeisler 37, May 24, Coontz *The Way* 36). Even though the housewife imprints herself happily in our imagination in television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, the housewife was far from happy. In chapter 1 “The Problem that Has No Name” in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan notes that by the early 1960s, women were getting psychiatric help for suffering from



anxiety and depression. This trend or problem began making its way into the popular press and “burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife” (Friedan 17). Friedan’s book profoundly changed and challenged the image of the happy housewife. After its publication, the character of the smiling housewife began to take on desperate connotations. In *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan declares,

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness, in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core or self or “I” without which a human being, man, or women, is not truly alive. For women of ability, in America today, I am convinced that there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who “adjust” as housewives, who grow up wanting to be “just a housewife” are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps – and the millions more who refused to believe that the concentration camps existed. (293-4)

That Friedan compares the conditions of the American housewives to those that lead to concentration camp victims walking around like “corpses” is telling (294). Famously, Friedan’s thesis is that the problem is a problem of identity, and that the expectation of feminine fulfillment “fed to women by magazines, television, movies, and books” does not permit women to “grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings (69-70). Friedan says, “By 1962 the plight of the trapped American housewife had become a national parlor game. Whole issues of magazines, newspaper columns, books learned and frivolous, educational conferences and television panels were devoted to the problem” (21). For Friedan, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman

in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the solution to this problem was largely tied to economic independence and fulfilling employment. The housewife must become a worker. Although the intent was probably not to condemn the housewife herself, many second-wave feminists looked critically at the role of housewife and especially her representation on television. While they were advocating for change, they were also distancing themselves from many of the women for whom they were advocating. Specifically, the housewife began to serve a feminist purpose in that she became a symbol of the anti-feminist.

The second wave's reaction to the housewife changed the housewife character again. Whereas in the just 100 years before the housewife was depicted as feminist, fighting for her civic duties, the popular texts of the 1960s and 1970s portray the housewife as decidedly anti-feminist, or at least a role that was undesirable. Famously, Simone de Beauvoir, whose *The Second Sex* (1949) became an essential second-wave feminist text, writes extensively about how housewifery defeats women's advancement. She writes, "A woman's work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing" (475). Essentially, de Beauvoir likens housewives to parasites, "Women are 'clinging', they are a dead weight, and they suffer for it; the point is that their situation is like that of a parasite sucking out the living strength of another organism" (805). This parasitic sentiment continues in *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) when Helen Gurly Brown characterizes the housewife as "a parasite, a dependent, a scrounger, a sponger or a bum" (212).<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the housewife had a problem. And one of the ways to fix the problem was to leave the house, or even leave the husband, and return to work. The new prototypical way the housewife was imagined in the 1970s was a Stepford wife, a role that was undoubtedly objectionable.

The following chapters intend to explore what happened to the mediated representation of the housewife character since her Stepford characterization in the early 1970s. Since the housewife role was zombified with Stepford discourse, her role on popular films and television either remained denigrated in that way or completely disappeared until her reappearance in the twenty-first century. Of course, the economy also played a role in that disappearance. Emily Matchar points out that the inflation “got so bad” in the 1970s that “it was impossible for a family to survive on one income” (43). In the 1980s and 1990s the housewife character was largely replaced by the single, urban, working woman, or at least the overly ambitious career woman, who was also a wife and a mother. The housewife character’s pervasive return to television and popular discourse in the twenty-first century signifies a shift in the popular imagination of women’s roles, which is tied to current politics, feminism, class, and race.

Chapter two explores the 2004 film remake of *The Stepford Wives* and its relationship to the 1970s popular horror novel by Ira Levin and film directed by Bryan Forbes. Mainly, while the 1970s construction of the character of a Stepford wife was meant to criticize patriarchy, the use of the term and idea in the twenty-first century has shifted into a criticism of women, or when used ironically, a campy identity. This shift in meaning reflects a change in popular feminist discourse. Since the idea of a Stepford wife was largely a 1970s construction meant to engage with the politics of feminism in its day, the revival of the identity through the 2004 film and its use in popular discourse suggests a new engagement with an old idea. However, the new revival of the Stepford wife is not exactly a call to action. Instead, it seems to be more of a fashion statement, an identity anyone, although particularly white female or white gay male, can choose with the purchase of a large suburban house, some Xanax, and beautiful clothes.

Chapter three specifically looks at the television show *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), which through its enormous popularity, was the first to bring the character of the suffering housewife imagined by Betty Friedan back to life. This chapter analyzes how *Desperate Housewives* references the feminist revelation of unhappy housewife of the past and reimagines and revives it in a postfeminist context. The craze surrounding *Desperate Housewives* showed that Americans wanted to talk about the mystique surrounding the suburban identity again. However, while *Desperate Housewives* may have been successful at resonating a postfeminist mystique, its solution to desperation was largely tied to consumption.

Chapter four examines the pervasiveness of the housewife character on reality television, as it explores the relationship between so-called real housewives and real feminists within the neoliberal rhetoric of postfeminism (in postracial America). First, in considering the reality television housewife's class position, this chapter reflects on the new ways in which femininity is disciplined via the bourgeois housewife identity. This new characterization, in turn, has sparked some interesting conversations about feminism and femininity that are really happening between reality television housewives and real feminist scholars. Additionally, this chapter examines the racial politics of the televised housewife character by primarily examining Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the only housewife reality show to feature a mostly African American cast. In compelling ways, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* showcases how postfeminism works (or doesn't work) in a supposed postracial society. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* capitalizes on the housewives' African American identities by isolating them in their own show and creating storylines that provoke discussions of race. The economic status of Atlanta's housewives is meant to showcase the progress of the Civil Rights era by featuring such financially successful women. Yet strangely, their position as housewives often undermines their success. Reality

television housewives are not exactly to be taken seriously as emblems of elite status. Their gendered hysterics, typical of the new reality television housewife genre, are often presented as racialized, which has the unfortunate result in higher ratings.

I conclude with a brief discussion of new trends in hip domesticity that are popular on the blogosphere and among my own peer group, 30-something feminists with kids, a surprising number of whom have decided to quit their jobs and stay home. Interestingly, this new trend in housewifery is being revised as radical feminism, seemingly antithetical to both their desperate suburban counterparts as well as the working girl before that. The new housewife positions herself as a feminist, a radical homemaker who is opting out of corporate culture (and often a career of her own), in favor of re-learning the domestic skills of her great, great grandmothers. This new frugal housewife appropriates vintage aprons, learns to can food and sew buttons, and rejects the overly corporatized healthcare and education systems. While her noble pursuits are often framed in radical feminist terms, they run the risk of ascribing to neoliberal regimes.

It seems like a feminist analysis of retrograde housewives should have died with the supposed death of feminism. Housewives, like feminists, were *\*so\** mid-century. However, the return of the popularity of the housewife character in films, television shows, and on the blogosphere has also brought some feminist concerns back to life. In planetary science, retrograde motion is an illusion that occurs when a planet appears to change direction or move backwards in the sky just when the Earth passes it (Crockett). While time appears out of joint, perhaps the reappearance of the housewife character is not indicative of a lack of progress. Instead, it appears as though this retrograde character has a major role in inciting a new popular feminism. Who knew that the housewife and the feminist could be so aligned again?

## CHAPTER TWO- STEPFORD WIVES

### Stepford Discourse

In 1972 Ira Levin published the satirical thriller novel *The Stepford Wives*, in which wives in the fictional town of Stepford were turned into submissive robots by their husbands. The book was adapted into a film in 1975, directed by Bryan Forbes and starring Katharine Ross. Since the book's release, and spurred further by the film's cult status, a Stepford wife has become a popular term that is widely used to describe a submissive housewife as well as to provoke some commentary on the role of women when the phrase is used in conversation.<sup>30</sup> Using the Stepford wife as a derogatory phrase to describe submissive women who aim to achieve domestic perfection was probably not the original intent. A closer look at the 1970s use of this character type reveals, instead, that a Stepford wife is really an insult against anti-feminist men that wanted women to remain in the kitchen, scrubbing their floors, and fulfilling their every need.<sup>31</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (both novel and film) released during the second wave of feminism was not so much about the banality of the housewife, as much as it was about the anxieties of the straight, white male (Talbot 28).

Since its inception in the 1970s, using the adjective Stepford has shifted meaning with time. This is interesting, in part, because the 1975 film seemed like, as film critic and scholar Kathi Maio calls it, "a domestic horror film that is very much a picture of its very precise seventies cultural moment" (117). In addition to many references in popular culture,<sup>32</sup> the Stepford adjective has been used in approximately three made-for-TV movies/series throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A made-for-TV sequel was produced in 1980, entitled *Revenge of the Stepford Wives*,<sup>33</sup> another made-for-TV sequel was produced in 1987 called *The Stepford Children*<sup>34</sup>, and a 1996 made-for-TV movie was made called *The Stepford Husbands*.<sup>35</sup> The film

*The Stepford Wives* was remade again in 2004 into a satiric comedy starring Nicole Kidman and Bette Midler, directed by Frank Oz.<sup>36</sup> It is only one of the many films and television shows in the first decade of the 2000s that provoked and imagined the role of the “wife” in the new millennium. But in many ways the 2004 film *The Stepford Wives* represents the beginning of a new craze in the well-established housewife discourse.

Although the Stepford wife is not a new character type, its recent popularity, even just within the titles of film and television shows, is both interesting and telling. The recent re-release of the 1975 film into a “Silver Anniversary Edition” further demonstrates this trend. Like the 1970s Stepford representations, to provoke Stepford wives again in the 2000s is to signal a new feminist correspondence with the old 1950s ideal. However, a wife, and especially a Stepford wife, seems like an antiquated figure to need reimagining in the new millennium. A close analysis of the novel and subsequent films will show that the new 2004 *The Stepford Wives* is not exactly like the 1970s more liberatory counterparts. The shift in its meaning from anti-men to anti-women follows growing trends in postfeminism. This could mean, as *The New Yorker* staff writer Margaret Talbot writes in “A Stepford for Our Times” that through the workings of misogyny, “any parody of male behavior eventually becomes [...] a parody of female behavior” (31). Or, as Talbot prefers, it could signal that the role of a Stepford wife does not seem so “chilling now because it is not so salient” (31). This chapter will look at how Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* and its subsequent film adaptations speak about earlier feminisms and imagines new ones related to the current climate. I will look at how *The Stepford Wives* novel and films and the cultural phenomenon surrounding them reflect and participate in unresolved feminist debates, especially in the new millennium.<sup>37</sup>

In *Media Matters* John Fiske analyzes real and imagined “figures” such as Murphy Brown or Anita Hill as embodying cultural politics. He suggests that while it is not necessarily the creation of character Murphy Brown, for example, that caused the social discourse concerning “today’s woman,” the character “figured” this discourse, or gave form and presence to, and by doing so “strengthened the public presence of that identity, inflicted it in certain ways, and [...] made it more powerful in people’s imagination” (Fiske 11). He says that figures such as this are always enmeshed in a body of discourse where circulating meanings become visually and audibly public and their momentum increases (74). Fiske, of course, is discussing real bodies, or specific real characters in his analysis. In this case, a Stepford wife (like today’s woman) is the discourse that gets figured into celebrity, political, or reality television stars. However, unlike Fiske’s analysis of Murphy Brown or Anita Hill, the character’s name in *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna Eberhart, never became a household name. Instead, it is the character type or role that is important in the articulation of a certain feminine mystique in the 1970s and a rearticulation of that role in the 2000s.<sup>38</sup> The novel and two films *The Stepford Wives* are the impetus for this discourse event, a continual struggle over the meaning of wives and their role in American culture. In the 1970s a housewife became synonymous with an anti-feminist; in other words, a housewife *is* a Stepford wife, regardless of how she actually defines herself. The 2004 film *The Stepford Wives* further uses and alters the memory of its 1970s counterparts. Ultimately, the discourse around the Stepford wife aligns itself with discussions about feminism taking place in popular culture.

### **Second-wave Feminism, Maidenform Bras, and *The (1970s) Stepford Wife***



Ira Levin's 1972 short novel, *The Stepford Wives*, was regarded as "a chilling parable about men's fears of feminism" when it was first released (Talbot 28). The novel begins with an epigraph from the conclusion of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go. (qtd. in Levin epigraph)

Levin's quotation from de Beauvoir is certainly an interesting choice, not only to begin his novel, but to begin it with a quote from "Book Two: Woman's Life Today" in part VII called "Toward Liberation" in which de Beauvoir ultimately makes the case for liberty. By including this epigraph, and other references to real feminists, Levin makes clear that his book is engaging with second-wave feminist discourse. In the passage cited by Levin, de Beauvoir describes the combat between men and women today, otherwise referred to as the battle of the sexes. By beginning his book with this quote, Levin historically situates his book within second-wave feminism by provoking and popularizing the combat today from *The Second Sex* in the fictional Stepford, even though *The Stepford Wives* was published almost 20 years after de Beauvoir's book. For Levin's readers in 1972, this is the imagined current conversation around feminism. Elyce Rae Helford, professor of Jewish and Holocaust Studies, notes that although "it did not originate in the 1970s, the rhetoric of a gendered battle increased in popularity at this time at least in part as a response to the concept of sisterhood central to second-wave feminism ("It's a Rip-Off" 29). At the very least, the novel attempts to popularize some of concerns of the

women's liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. This is "combat," albeit one of a "different shape."

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir sets up a dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. By immanence, de Beauvoir refers to the historic situation in which women have been placed, closed-off from the world and rendered passive. Transcendence, alternatively, is historically a male domain, exterior, and active. Rightly, de Beauvoir believes every human must have an interplay of both immanence and transcendence; however, women have been shut out of transcendence, forced to give up their existential rights, and thus, accept a kind of imprisonment. De Beauvoir in her introduction to *The Second Sex* explains that a woman's specific body parts, her ovaries and a uterus, "imprison her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" and that man regards the body of a woman as a prison, "weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (de Beauvoir xviii). In the passage Levin cites, de Beauvoir describes a shift in the battle of the sexes when she imagines that in changing her situation, woman does not want to relegate man to the same imprisonment she had to endure. All she wants is to experience her own transcendence. Liberation ultimately, de Beauvoir concludes, must come from a "brotherhood"<sup>39</sup> between men and women (de Beauvoir 814). It is not that simple, of course, and the passage ends on a bad note. Men have a bad attitude. They "let her go" into transcendence with a "bad grace." It is with this bad grace that begins the novel. Stepford men are resentful of their feminist wives. (The Stepford wives were all, at one point before their transformations, members of a women's club which hosted Betty Friedan at one of their meetings.) In Stepford, man is not willing to "let her go." In this way, the novel sets up its interaction with second-wave feminism as a battle between the sexes, fought in the pages of a second rate horror novel that can only end violently.

Simone de Beauvoir is not the only second-wave feminist mentioned in Levin's novel. When Joanna criticizes her neighbor, Carol Van Sant, for not wanting to come over for a coffee because she is too busy waxing the family room floor, Joanna remarks to her husband, "Next to *her*, my mother is Kate Millett" (Levin 9). Again, Levin invokes one of the most influential second-wave feminists best known for her 1970 publication *Sexual Politics*. In *Sexual Politics*, Millett announces, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett 33). Invoking Kate Millet, of course, is meant to demonstrate how desperately archaic the Stepford wives are. In Stepford, it is so bad that even Joanna's mother looks radical in comparison. But it's also intended to place the novel in the discourse of second-wave feminism's critique of the nuclear family. It suggests that family life has been integral to women's subjugation (Munford and Waters 138), and indeed, in Stepford, their murders.

Later, when the men from the Men's Association are over at the Eberhart house for a New Projects Committee meeting, Joanna takes pride in her ability to contribute to the conversation. Levin writes, "[A]nd they nodded and agreed with her, or thoughtfully questioned her, and she felt very good indeed, meeting their questions with wit and good sense. *Move over Gloria Steinem!*" (Levin 27). Once again, the main character likens herself as a real feminist when she imagines herself like another seminal second-wave feminist, co-founder of *Ms. Magazine*, Gloria Steinem. These lines are slightly amusing since Joanna's ability to engage the men causes her to think herself as *more* feminist than *the* ultimate feminist, Gloria Steinem. At this meeting, one of the men, Ike Mazzard, a famous illustrator, draws Joanna's portrait, which causes her some discomfort. On the next page Joanna says, "Try being Gloria Steinem when Ike Mazzard is drawing you!" (28). Although Joanna aligns herself with Steinem, Joanna admits she has a hard time maintaining her feminist status when she is being drawn by the famous

illustrator. Being watched, an object to be drawn, makes it difficult for her to transcend, so to speak. It is significant that not only is Joanna a photographer, but Joanna's illustrator, Ike Mazzard, is famous for drawing beautiful illustrations of women in women's magazines that affected Joanna in her adolescence. She says to him upon meeting him for the first time, "I'm not sure I like you; you blighted my adolescence with those dream girls of yours!" (25). Thus this encounter between Ike Mazzard, representing media's oppressive effects on young women, and Joanna (as Gloria Steinem) represents second-wave feminism's relationship with popular culture, especially its critique of beauty culture.

*Ms. Magazine* was first published in 1972, the same year *The Stepford Wives* was published. As well known, *Ms.* featured articles on a variety of topics important to women of its generation, marriage, abortion, domestic violence, politics, and housework (Munford and Walters 1). Even more so, its publication's aim was to counteract the effects of mass media and change media coverage of the feminist movement. Like co-founder Letty Cottin Pogrebin once said, the *Ms.* writers translated a "movement into a magazine" (qtd. in Munford and Walters 1). Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters in *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (2014) write that "[t]he magazine's dual identity facilitated the dissemination of a feminism that could not only coexist with, but was enabled by, consumer culture" and its launch in the 1970s "announced by the formidable body of Wonder Woman, thus marked a seminal moment in the evolution of 'popular feminism'" (2). Not only is *The Stepford Wives* also part of this evolution of popular feminism, its mention of Gloria Steinem within this fictional setting signals the combat taking place between real wives/women and mass media.

Finally, and most importantly in the novel, Joanna discovers that not only was there a Women's Club in Stepford, but that Betty Friedan came and spoke to them at a meeting. There is

even a photograph published in the local *Chronicle* of the Stepford wives standing next to Friedan. Joanna reads, “Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, addressed members of the Stepford Women’s Club Tuesday evening in the Fairview Lane home of Mrs. Herbert Sundersen, the club’s president. Over fifty women applauded Mrs. Friedan as she cited the inequities and frustrations besetting the modern-day housewife” (Levin 37). Again, Levin is placing real feminists next to fictional characters in his novel. Here, it is enormously delightful to imagine Betty Friedan, the one who popularized and ousted the plight of the unhappy housewives, next to women who will become the ultimate housewives after their transformations from women to robots.<sup>40</sup> The novel clearly utilizes Friedan’s critique of middle-class marriage and domesticity. Friedan and many other second-wave feminists spent a good deal of time analyzing and criticizing the role of housework in women’s lives and the time and robotic monotony it takes doing endless domestic chores, such as what the Stepford wives seem to love doing. Housework is indeed a political issue since it reinforces women’s relegation to the private sphere.

None of these real feminists are mentioned in Bryan Forbes’ 1975 adaptation *The Stepford Wives*. Although William Goldman, the screenwriter, set out to make the film a “feminist diatribe” by interviewing famous feminists such as Betty Friedan,<sup>41</sup> the film largely plays out its link to feminism by citing popular trends such as consciousness raising and bra burning. For example, in one scene Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross) and her friend Bobbie Markowe (Paula Prentiss) are sitting on the front steps of the house chatting after Carol Van Sant (Nanette Newman) has just apologized for being drunk at the previous day’s party. The women are upset because they don’t think that an apology was necessary, and furthermore they believe that the men persuaded her to come and apologize to them. After Joanna exclaims that Carol

could use some help, she confesses to Bobbie, “I told you that I messed a little bit with women’s lib in New York.” To which Bobbie replies, “Didn’t we all.” Joanna goes on: “I’m not contemplating any Maidenform bonfires, but they could certainly use something around here.”

Joanna glibly refers to the protest outside a Miss America pageant on September 7, 1968 by the New York Radical Women in which about 200 women held a mock mini-pageant. A sheep was crowned Miss America and protesters threw “instruments of torture” into a “Freedom Trash Can” including “girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, cosmetics, issues of *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, and bras” (Shaw and Lee 221). While the protestors planned to set the trash can on fire, they complied with local fire regulations and decided against it. A couple weeks later *The New York Times* referred to the incident as “bra-burning,” and media promoted the myth of the bra burning feminist that has been with us ever since. That Joanna refers to the myth (or myths, since she seems to imply that there have been several bonfires) situates the film within feminist discourse differently than the novel. In other words, Forbes signals the feminist movement by citing popular myths of feminism rather than established feminist texts or leaders. Susan G. Douglas in *Where the Girls Are* suggests that burning bras and burning draft cards were comparable in the eyes of the media. She says,

It fit into the dominant media frame about women’s liberation and equated the women’s movement with exhibitionism and narcissism as if women who unstrapped their breasts were unleashing their sexuality in a way that was unseemly, laughable, and politically inconsequential, yet dangerous. Women who threw their bras away may have said they were challenging sexism, but the media with a wink, hinted that these women’s motives were not all political but rather personal: to be trendy and to attract men. (160)

Both the film and the novel seem to make light of or mock certain aspects of the movement. But the film is clearly working to appeal to a more mainstream audience. For example, Joanna distances herself from more radical feminists who would burn bras since she is *not* planning on any Maidenform bonfires and only messed around with women's lib *a bit*. Additionally, the bra Joanna refers to is a Maidenform bra, which would have signaled to the viewer a type of ad campaign popular in the 1950s and 1960s (and beyond) which featured women out in public places in their bras. The copy read (fill in the blank): *I dreamed I [...] in my Maidenform bra*. Again, the film is playing on popular imaginations and myths of "media-inspired fantasy images of feminine bodily perfection" (Helford "It's a Rip-Off" 36).

However, even though Joanna is not willing to burn any Maidenform bras, the viewer is acutely aware that neither she, nor Bobbie, is wearing one for much of the film. The film works to make bralessness visible. Katharine Ross's small breasts are quite noticeably uncovered most of the film, especially so when she wears a flesh-colored, sleeveless, body-hugging dress during the Men's Association meeting held at her house. This is, in part, what makes the characters' final transformation even more dramatic. Although the film tries to make a commentary about feminism through bras and bralessness (namely, feminists do not wear bras, while housewives do), nonetheless, the camera seems to gaze upon actresses' chest in objectifying ways at key moments. It is worth noting that feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published the same year as *The Stepford Wives* film came out. Much later, when Joanna goes to Bobbie's house to tell her about her recent accolades she received for taking photographs of the children, she notices Bobbie has changed. Not only is Bobbie wearing make-up and a frilly dress,<sup>42</sup> but also, and notably, Bobbie is wearing a bra. In a medium shot, Bobbie turns her body to the side and grabs her breasts. "How about the shape!" she exclaims.

“Padded uplift bra. It’s true what they say in the ads. Oh Joanna! Dave turned me loose in Bergdorf’s, and I went mad!” In the shot-reverse-shot conversation between them, it is, again, painfully obvious that Joanna is not wearing a bra over her small breasts. This scene turns violent



when Joanna tries to get to the bottom of Bobbie’s transformation. Joanna picks up a knife laying on the counter and cuts her fingers to prove that she’s human because she bleeds. Joanna then takes the knife and plunges it into Bobbie’s lower stomach (her uterus or vagina, perhaps). Bobbie looks down and pulls out a clean knife. She then begins a fit of repetitious behavior regarding coffee.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the scene enacts a battle between a domesticated housewife and a liberated woman with violence. In one of the final scenes of the film, when Joanna sees her robot double sitting on the chair in a see-through gauzy robe, the viewer notices that the robot version of Joanna has much larger breasts. This is significant because up until this point, Joanna’s feminist statement has been made by baring her small breasts. Her transformation from visibly small breasted to visibly large breasted positions her nostalgically backwards to a pre-second-wave feminist ideal, namely post-WW2 mammary madness. Although *The Stepford Wives* was filmed before the plastic surgery craze decades later, Joanna’s body double’s transformation also hints at the future possibility of this seemingly antiquated objectification of the female body.



Symbolically, her new body double, representative of male beauty culture's ideal type, kills the small breasted Joanna by strangling her with a pair of pantyhose, another "instrument of torture."



The film uses another key component of the second wave, consciousness raising groups, to signify its alignment with the movement. Consciousness raising groups allowed women space to come together and talk about their lives in order to realize that they were not alone in their experiences. Jane O'Reilly's classic 1971 article "The Housewife's Moment of Truth" describes the "click!" of recognition in consciousness-raising groups, "the moment that brings a gleam to our eyes and means the revolution has begun," when "the women in the group looked at each other, and click! The shock of recognition... One little click turns on a thousand others."

O'Reilly describes,

I cannot imagine anything more difficult than incurring the kind of domestic trauma I describe. It requires the conscious loss of the role we have been taught, and its replacement by a true identity. And what if we succeed? What if we become liberated women who recognize that our guilt is reinforced by the marketplace, which would have us attach our identity to furniture polish and confine our deepest anxieties to color coordinating our toilet paper and our washing machines? What if we overcome our creeping sense of something unnatural when our husbands approach "our" stoves? What if we don't allow ourselves to be treated as people with nothing better to do than wait for

repairmen and gynecologists? What if we finally learn that we are not defined by our children and our husbands, but by ourselves? Then we will be able to control our own lives, able to step out into the New Tomorrow. But the sad and solemn truth is that we may have to step out alone.

Joanna and Bobbie attempt to “click!” the Stepford wives into recognition when they try and get a consciousness raising group together in Stepford, much to the resistance of the wives. Joanna has to blackmail one of the husbands to get a meeting going, but finally they manage to sit down together. Joanna tries to get them to discuss their relationships with their husbands. But the Stepford wives only complaints are related to housework. One housewife, Kit (Carole Mallory), says, “I didn’t bake anything yesterday. It took me so long to get the upstairs floor to shine that I didn’t have any time to bake.” Another

housewife, Marie (Toni Reid), whispers the solution in her ear, “Easy On Spray Starch. It must save me a half an hour a day at least. You’ll never run short of time again. I



guarantee it.” Even though the film does not mention Friedan, this seems an obvious reference to *The Feminine Mystique* where Friedan writes about women’s feeling of shame and dissatisfaction at doing household chores, “What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor” (Friedan 19). This scene not only details the horror of the amount of time housework takes, but offers a critique of the fetishization of housework when the housewife whispers her solution, a cleaning product, Easy On Spray Starch. This scene is also meant to critique the cult of advertising and consumption among housewives in post-War suburbia.<sup>44</sup> Marie’s solution to liberating Kit from her time problem is a consumerist

one. Marie, in trying to convince the other housewives of Easy On Spray Starch's value, seems to become a commercial for the product, "Well if time is your enemy, make friends with Easy On, that's all I can tell you," and proclaims, "It's so good that if ever I became famous and the Easy On people asked me if I would do a commercial, not only would I do it, I'd do it for free! That's how good it is." Pre-robot Bobbie critiques commercial culture too when she exclaims, "Given the complete freedom of choice, I don't want to squeeze the goddamn Charmin!" and refers to Stepford as "Ajax country." The critique is clear since the consciousness-raising meeting was a disaster; the Stepford wives are so domesticated that they attach their identity to waxing their floors. The viewer is in on this joke too, since the audience is meant to baffle at the "cultural dupes" (Helford "It's a Rip-Off" 35). Not even the wifebots can live up to the ideals of housewifery. Kit (a consumer product herself) cannot both bake bread and shine her floors (Johnston and Sears 82). However, even though the film does attempt to popularize feminism by filming a consciousness raising session, it ultimately capitalizes on the popularity of consciousness-raising groups "while trivializing their goals" (Helford "It's a Rip-Off" 33). Even the rhetoric of "choice" is reduced to toilet paper.

In "It's a Rip-Off of the Women's Movement: Second-Wave Feminism and *The Stepford Wives*," Elyce Rae Helford tells the story of a screening session of the film followed by an "awareness session"<sup>45</sup> as reported in *The New York Times* article called "Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them" (24). Reports of "groans, hisses, and laughter rang out from the audience" (24). Although Levin's book is in part a rewrite of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*,<sup>46</sup> Friedan herself did not seem to appreciate Brian Forbes' film adaptation (Silver 60). Some have argued that, like Levin's novel, the popularity of *The Feminine Mystique* partly has ties to Gothic and detective genres (Munford and Waters 175).<sup>47</sup> After viewing the film adaptation (which does

not mention her name as the novel does) at that same screening, Friedan announced, “I think we should all leave here. I don’t think we should help publicize this movie. It’s a rip-off of the women’s movement” (qtd. in Silver 60 and Helford 24). Friedan may be criticizing an oversimplification she sees of women’s liberation issues highlighted in the film, or perhaps she may have seen the film as even parodying feminist issues. Clearly, *The Stepford Wives*’ vision of popular feminism was decidedly different from activist feminism which arguably tries to focus more on issues of rape, domestic violence, and pornography, rather than the plight of the suburban housewife (Elliot 33). But nonetheless the film adaptation was met with mixed reviews by many feminists despite the film’s supposed intentions to appeal to feminist women. Some reviewers did like it. Eleanor Perry, screenwriter of *Diary of a Mad Housewife* said, “The film presses buttons and makes you furious- the fact that all the Stepford men wanted were big breasts, big bottoms, a clean house, fresh-perked coffee and sex. I thought Betty Friedan would stand up and say, ‘Yes, this is just the way that men treat women’” (qtd. in Helford 24). However, much more typical of the comments were like writer Linda Arking’s, “It confirms every fear we ever had about the battle of the sexes, and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives” (qtd. in Helford 24). In the DVD commentary of the film, Bryan Forbes tells the story of being hit on the head by a “manic libber’s” umbrella at the premiere held at the New York Press show. On the one hand, some were pleased at the film’s willingness to address popular feminist concerns, on the other hand, others were upset that the film was insulting to both men and women. These reactions represent, in part, popular responses to feminism in 1970s media culture that was mostly spear-headed by white men (Helford 25). Not surprisingly, ultimately the film does little to provide a unified feminist statement. It does, however, provide an interesting look at how feminism and feminist concerns of the second wave

became popularized and exploited at the same moment another genre gained popular ground, the horror genre.

### **Housezombies, Wifebots, and the Gothic Horrors of Feminism**

“There’s something here, Joanna! I’m not kidding! This is Zombieville!” (Levin 54)

“They never stop these Stepford wives,/ They work like robots all their lives” (Levin 61).

American Studies scholar Gary Hoppenstand describes the rise in popularity of the horror genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “Prior to the 1960s, the American commercial publishing scene had rarely witnessed a horror novel enter the realm of best-seller status. Instead, horror fiction was generally delegated to the pulp magazine, or to the small press publisher which seldom released more than several thousand copies of a particular book” (35).<sup>48</sup> Although Hoppenstand is mostly concerned with analyzing Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, his comment seems to also ring true of not only horror texts, but feminist texts as well. In other words, at the same time the horror genre witnessed a mass popularization, so did second-wave feminist texts, especially after *The Feminine Mystique*. As mentioned, some have likened Betty Friedan to a “good gothic heroine” who “reads coincidence as signs of conspiracy” (Murphy *The Suburban Gothic* 92). It is no surprise then, that Levin, and subsequently Bryan Forbes, felt compelled to join the two genres and, especially by making the film, popularize them. Even though Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* was an immediate best seller, *The Stepford Wives* film did not receive a long theatrical release or much critical acclaim. Yet both represent “a synthesis of genre formula with social observation” (Boruzkowski). It does not so much scare its audience, but rather addresses issues that are currently pressing. *The Stepford Wives*, like many other horror novels and films of

the time period depicts violence against women as well as “gross violations of sacred American institutions and traditions” and the idea that what looks “harmless and banal” may be evil (Hoppenstand 35-6). *The Stepford Wives* is both a critique of a bourgeois, patriarchal society as well as a modern day classical horror film (Boruzkowski).<sup>49</sup> It treats the depiction of traditional femininity horrifically (Metz 117). Thus, *The Stepford Wives* perfectly merge the popularity of popular feminism with popular horror conventions.

Although both novel and film versions of the 1970s *The Stepford Wives* feature women reduced to objects, the two texts treat the wives’ transformations slightly differently. In Ira Levin’s novel, the Stepford wives would be considered “tech zombies,”<sup>50</sup> according to Kevin Boon in “The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age.” When technology alters the body, depriving it of its *essential* self, this is called tech zombies (Boon 58, emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> Levin’s tech zombie housewives, then, seem like the embodiment of de Beauvoir’s woman who is not allowed transcendence. In the “Introduction” to *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir is concerned that humanity is male, and woman is not regarded as an autonomous being (de Beauvoir xviii). She writes, “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the *inessential* as opposed to the *essential* (xviii, xix, emphasis added). In this sense, de Beauvoir’s description of an inessential woman is a (tech)zombification of woman.

On the other hand, Bryan Forbes’ Stepford wives are created anew from natural materials and turned into androids after the real wife has been murdered. As *Jump Cut* writer Lilly Ann Boruzkowski in “The Stepford Wives: The Re-created Woman” notes, “The physical recreating of a monster has remained a staple of the horror genre since Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.” Thus, the film *The Stepford Wives* uses “the creation myth” mode of discourse. However, unlike

in *Frankenstein*, the Stepford wifebots do not turn against their human creators. Most notably, the chief creator and president of the Men's Association, Dale Gribble (Patrick O'Neal), is nicknamed Diz, after his previous job at Disneyland. Interestingly, Ira Levin was inspired to write *The Stepford Wives* during a trip to a Disney theme park in the midst of a relationship breakup (Maio 115). As Boruzkowski notes, Disneyland is "a fantasy world where mechanical dummies exist for the spectator's gaze, amusement and pleasure." Feminist scholars Jessica Johnston and Cornelia Sears in "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary" detail the comparison between Disneyland and Stepford:

[B]oth Disneyland and Stepford replicate and exploit existing social relations in their constructions of the artificial. Both practice surveillance techniques as "neutral" observers of people. Both promote technological, political, and economic progress based on manipulation and control. Both have the "magical power" to lose all trace of their history in the creation of ahistorical projects and contestable representations of the real. Indeed, Stepford is a Disneyland for patriarchy, complete with homogenized mechanical women to cater to every male whim and fantasy. (87)

In the film and novel there is a scene where Diz walks into the kitchen while Joanna is making coffee for the men in the Men's Association. He says to Joanna, "I like to watch women doing



domestic chores" (Levin 30). Additionally, like in *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1967), the appearance of the Stepford wives is very important for the pleasurable gaze of the men.

When Joanna sees her android double in one of the final scenes of the film, she notices that the body has bigger breasts, a smaller waist, and

slightly rounder hips. Elyce Rae Helford in “*The Stepford Wives* and the Gaze: Envisioning Feminism in 1975” writes, “[T]he robot Stepford wives are perfect examples of physically beautiful, passive, fetishized objects of the male gaze” (149). Interestingly, it is not the Stepford robot wife who is the monster, but its creator, the man who, ironically, wants to use the latest in technology to keep women in the past. Yet perhaps as Johnston and Sears argue, “The replacement of a woman with a Disney-inspired robotic alternative is progress, perhaps even a new phase of gendered relationships,” and “through technoscience, she is now cast in her proper role as an ethereal feminine object of the masculine gaze” (87, 90). As an object of his gaze and his creation, the housewife remains an ahistorical vision of the future.

*The New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael dubbed the film as “the first women’s lib Gothic” (qtd. in Quart 28). Indeed, in *The Stepford Wives*, technology is presented as a gothic horror of feminism. Female gothic texts have been traditionally analyzed by feminist theorists as “expressions of women’s fears within the domestic and within the female body” (Smith and Wallace 1). While there have certainly been variations and contentions around the term “Female Gothic,” it is still a recognizable way in which to talk about female subjectivity within gothic texts. Gothic scholars Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace in “The Female Gothic: Then and Now” note that “twentieth century female gothic heroines are more likely to be trapped in domestic spaces than semi-ruined castles” (5). While the Men’s Association in Stepford is housed in an old Victorian gothic mansion, much of the horror of *The Stepford Wives* takes place in the modern suburban house, therefore exposing the horrors of domestic life. In one of the final scenes, Joanna finds herself inside a room of the Men’s Association that is a replica of her bedroom at home, thus literally subsuming the suburban house within gothic spaces. This scene, in fact, reads much like a horror genre film where the heroine runs through a dark mansion



during a thunderstorm, being “chased by a menacing man until she is killed by her double” (Helford 146).

As in many horror films, the Stepford husband is the creator who justifies his selfish act in the name of science, logic, and ultimately, patriarchy. Ironically, bucolic Stepford is home of many hi-tech companies. The men of Stepford work for these various science, engineering, and chemical companies, making them modern creators of old fashioned ideals. After Bobbie confides in Joanna that she thinks there is something in the water that turns the women of Stepford into “hausfraus, drones,” she takes Joanna on a drive past the businesses in Stepford. From the perspective of the car, viewers watch Joanna and Bobbie drive past Stepford’s “technoscience” industries, General Electronics, Coba Biochemical Associates, and CompuTech. Stepford husbands’ practices of masculine supremacy get built into their housewife machines, as Donna Haraway famously theorized (Johnson and Sears 75). In “Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford,” media scholar Bliss Cua Lim argues that Joanna’s downfall is that she mistakes patriarchy as outmoded and feminism as contemporary. Lim notes, “Instead, Stepford’s homicidal husbands employ cutting-edge technology to reprise old-fashioned notions of femininity, embodying a temporally discrepant patriarchal ethos, at once futuristic, coeval, and deeply nostalgic” (164). Lim reminds readers that “patriarchal discourses are never simply retrograde” (184). In fact, it seems as though the suburban location of Stepford and businesses housed there allow the men in the Men’s Association to create a world without “real” women (Johnston and Sears 77). Joanna and Walter’s move to the suburbs from New York City mimic post WWII white flight and the “nostalgic escape back into the imagined past” and “re-institution of separate spheres” (78). Johnston and Sears note that the fictional Stepford was not so different than where many of the United States’ technoscientific industries grew within suburban

American universities and “hi-tech corridors” (78). Thus, the space of the suburbs fuels the “technological expression of male-interpreted and male-focused consumer culture” (89). The Stepford wives they create are both nostalgic and futuristic, much like the space of the suburbs used to create them.

As many scholars have discussed, suburbia and the dehumanizing effects of post-War life led to the erosion of identity for both men and women (Murphy 128). Stepford, as Joanna’s friend Bobbie announces, is “the town that time forgot” in its effort to stave off modernity and halt the changes being brought by the women’s rights movement (128). Bernice Murphy writes in “Imitation of Life: Zombies and the Suburban Gothic” that zombies appear in popular texts when there is an attempt to “recreate or hang on to an idealized yet bygone way of life” (119). The zombie, like suburbia, can never be anything but “inauthentic imitations of life” (120). Murphy suggests that Cold War anxieties and the uneasiness of the nation’s changing landscape were a part of the rise of zombie films and “Creature-Features” of the 1950s and 1960s, where dangers were much closer to home (121, 123). She states, “Time and time again the depiction of zombie or zombie-like figures in texts that deal with suburban mores is associated with inherently problematic efforts to recreate a way of life that has either disappeared already or never quite existed in the first place” (137). Murphy cites Betty Friedan’s notion of the psychic stress brought on by conformity: she becomes “an anonymous biological robot in a docile mass” (qtd. in Murphy 128). In other words, the horror of suburbia is the same horror that feminism describes, when a woman is no longer an individual, just an automaton and inessential. The wifebot’s repetitive cleaning practices illustrate “the repetitive nature of idealized gender identity constructions” (Sears and Johnston 85). *The Stepford Wives* dramatizes the fear of many women in the 1970s, that despite the women’s movement, many would “still find themselves drawn into

the ‘trap’ represented by motherhood, marriage, and a nice house in the suburbs, and according to this logic could therefore hold themselves in no small way responsible for any unhappiness that resulted” (Murphy 136). Despite their best effort to raise consciousness, they would still find themselves like the living dead.

This “trap” is reexamined in Frank Oz’s 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*. Although the remake of *The Stepford Wives* has significant changes, it still features a society that tries to use modern technology to turn back time.

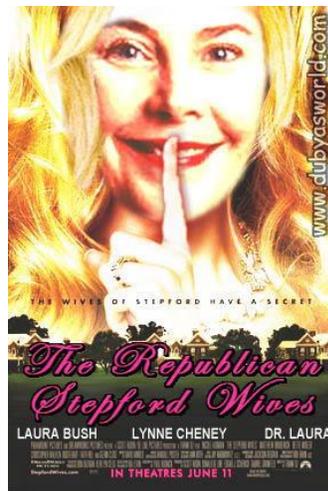
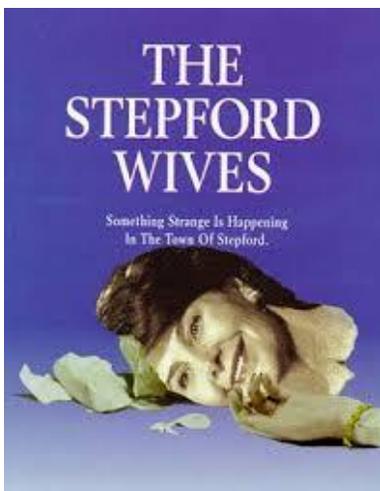
It is strangely unclear in Oz’s film what kind of monsters have been created.<sup>52</sup> The Stepford wives mostly seem to be androids like in Forbes’ film. The wives come with



remote controls that can blow-up their breasts, they can function as an ATM machine, and they can put their hands on a hot stove without burning. But yet, there is a “how-to” cartoon advertisement for the Stepforization of wives that show the process of putting a computer chip in the brain, more like Levin’s tech zombies. The mastermind behind the wives’ creation is not a man, but a woman. This certainly complicates the kind of horror of patriarchy that seemed clear in the original texts. In fact, *The Stepford Wives* in 2004 is not really a horror film. Any horror characteristics are treated comically. Yet, the film still heavily critiques suburban consumer capitalism, suggesting the unease of suburbia and lack of individuality still haunt us during the War on Terror.

## The New Stepford Century: Repetition, Choice, and Fate in the Third Wave

Applying the term Stepford wife to a real or celebrity wife is certainly not new in the twenty-first century. For example, *The New York* published an article about Hillary Clinton's performance in the Democratic National Convention in 1996 called "Stepford First Wife: Hillary Gets Mommy-Tracked" wherein they criticized her speech because "every third sentence included the words *my husband*." The writer comments: "Hillary now comes off like a stifled, overachieving prefeminist housewife- the type whom all the neighbors fear and revile even as they all admit that nobody can organize a bake sale the way she can" ("Stepford First Wife"). Similarly, Clinton's involvement with health care reform caused such outcry that she began sharing cookie recipes on television shows to help preserve her husband's good name (Forrest). Although clearly the term is meant to criticize Hillary Clinton's behavior, Clinton's perceived change from powerful role model to submissive wife is not a desirable change in the 1990s. Later, in the twenty-first century, however, the role of the Stepford wife shifts. Although it is not exactly a compliment to be called a Stepford wife, it is embraced by popular culture as a little bit campy, kitschy, and even a nostalgic, fashionable choice. Especially after the film *The Stepford Wives* was released in 2004, just about every third celebrity or politician's wife was accused of being a real Stepford wife. Some even welcomed the title. Just doing a quick internet search of



Laura Bush, for example, can reveal many articles and political cartoons



depicting her as a Stepford wife. Not only was Laura Bush frequently accused of being a Stepford wife, she actually personally likened herself with one when she called herself a “desperate” housewife. Mrs. Bush told the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner in 2005, "I said to him the other day, 'George, if you really want to end tyranny in this world, you're going to have to stay up later,' At 9 o'clock, Mr. Exciting here is sound asleep and I'm watching *'Desperate Housewives'* - with Lynne Cheney. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a desperate housewife." The crowd laughs, and her comment reveals a kind of pride at aligning herself with the role. Perhaps the most interesting use of the role in degrading political women is



an ad actually used for the movie *The Stepford Wives*. It included an image of Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice morphing into Stepford Wives. Rice appears nude from the waist up (summons Levin’s vision of the Stepford playboy

bunny) and Clinton sports a pearl necklace and a scoop-necked dress while holding a pan of cookies with oven mitts. It is not clear if the ad is meant to criticize Rice and Clinton themselves or instead, to make the commentary, that even the most powerful women are just a bunch of kitschy (and sexually available) Stepford wives at heart.<sup>53</sup> Celebrities like Katie Holmes were also frequently being called a Stepford wife in the new millennium. For example, in a *National Ledger* article titled “Katie Holmes Called ‘Stepford Wife,’” the author describes an interview where Katie Holmes “wore a large diamond engagement ring. She seemed dazed, passive and vacant. She never stopped smiling.” However, even though they may be domesticated, celebrity wives are implicated in their own Stepfordization.

Newspaper commentator Maureen Dowd in *Are Men Necessary?: When Sexes Collide* (2005) notes that of the 2004 *The Stepford Wives*, “husbands turn their mates into glazed fem-

bots. Now women do it to themselves, with drugs or domesticity” (260). Dowd reminds us that Martha Stewart, whom she calls “a haywire robot if there ever was one,” started her business in Wesport, CT, “the model for the fictional town of Stepford” (260).<sup>54</sup> As *The Nation’s* Katha Pollit explains, “Domestic goddesshood is definitely back, and if only as a fantasy: It wasn’t men who made Martha Stewart a multimillionaire” (13). In other words, modern men are probably not pining away to transform their wives into Martha Stewart. Instead women are choosing to imitate the Stepford lifestyle. Interestingly, the 2004 release of the film was the same summer that saw Martha Stewart convicted and sentenced to house arrest in that suburb.<sup>55</sup> Dowd also cites Nigella Lawson, the self-proclaimed “domestic goddess,” as a modern day Stepford-like male fantasy “always in the kitchen purring hot home economics advice” (Dowd 261).

Several writers have argued that mass-marketing of products like Xanax and Botox are successful in encouraging contemporary housewives choose to be a little more Stepford-like.<sup>56</sup> This mimics the trend in the late 1960s when women were “twice as likely as men to use tranquilizers, and most consumers of ‘mother’s little helper’ were white and better educated than average” (Coontz *A Strange* 73). For example, another Maureen Dowd column headlined “Stepford Wives Remake No Match for Today’s Botoxed Reality” argued that men didn’t need to murder their wives, they just needed to wait three decades until women turn themselves into Stepford wives. In the 2004 film *The Stepford Wives* pill-popping becomes part of the conversation when Roger (played by Roger Bart, the new gay Stepford househusband) asks Joanna (Nicole Kidman) and Bobbie (Bette Midler), “You ever done Zolof?” Bobbie answers, “Xanax, I worship Xanax. I’m old fashioned.” Roger reveals, “I like Viagra with a Prozac tracer. You’re up and you’re up!” Even though this is perhaps the success of marketing, rather than male supremacy (Talbot 31), it speaks to a shift in the tone of the Stepford wives rhetoric. It is

worth noting that tranquilizers were developed in the 1950s “in response to a need that physicians explicitly saw as female” (Coontz *The Way* 36). Stephanie Coontz in *The Way We Never Were* says that although virtually nonexistent in 1955, “tranquilizer consumption reached 462,000 pounds in 1958 and soared to 1.15 million pounds merely a year later” (36). This is, perhaps, another way in which the current trends mimic those seen in the 1950s. However, while pill-popping was popular in the 1950s, it was subsequently painted as the fault of patriarchy. Conversely, today, is not men turning their wives into zombies, women are doing it to themselves with a little help from consumer products.

The Stepford craze of the new millennium was further signaled with a reissue of Levin’s book in 2002, updated to cater to current beauty standards. On the front cover of the book two large blue eyes stare vacantly ahead while red lips slightly part on the back cover. While the reissue of the book may not have been big monetary success, the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* film was “released to much fanfare” (Dow 114) and took in \$22.2 million on opening weekend, \$5 million more than most analysts anticipated and “was particularly impressive considering Stepford’s competition” (Bowles). Audiences seemed ripe for Stepford again. Fashion and lifestyle blogs were trending toward Stepford style in the early 2000s. For example, just one year before the film’s release, in 2003 *The New York Times* featured a “Stepford Spring” fashion supplement (Quart 28).

However, even though everyone seemed crazy about the Stepford wives as a campy, fashionable concept, the film did not get rave reviews from the critics. Most accused the film of being too scattered. Katha Pollitt called it a “confused satire of its original premises [...] the characters seem to utter all their lines as if they are speaking in scare quotes” (13). The most confusing part of the 2004 film might be the way in which the film quotes feminism.<sup>57</sup> Unlike the

1970s novel and film that directly quote from feminist texts and feminist practices, the 2004 film is not exactly a “feminist diatribe.” Its feminist statements, rather, seem jumbled. Science fiction scholar Sherryl Vint concludes that while *The Stepford Wives* purports women’s equality, it simultaneously “undermine[s] feminism through the denial of structural gender discrimination” (162). Do the Stepford wives now choose to stay at home in their gated communities, after their children are born and their careers prove too demanding? In the new millennium, do they still need feminism to save them from their suburban zombiehood? After all, as Pollitt explains, “Women have learned to describe everything they do, no matter how apparently conformist, submissive, self-destructing or humiliating, as a personal choice that cannot be criticized because personal choice is what feminism is all about. Women have become incredibly clever at explaining these choices in ways that barely mention social pressures or male desires” (13). In “The Town that Hollywood Couldn’t Forget” Kathi Maio argues that the most intriguing thing that the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* film explores is “women’s ambivalence toward social power and familial relations. It’s not always angry white guys who want to keep women down. These days, it might actually be a deranged active ‘choice’ by a woman” (119). Engaging with choice in this way puts the new Stepford wives within the rhetoric of postfeminism.

Sarah Projansky’s much cited *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (2001) delineates five different strains of postfeminist discourse emerging in popular texts. In her third category, “equality and choice postfeminism,” Projansky notes the pervasiveness of narratives about feminisms’ “success in achieving gender equity” by giving women “choice, particularly with regard to labor and family” (67). The choice rhetoric around the Stepford wife rarely has to do with the most contentious use of choice, pro-choice; instead, the Stepford wife in the new millennium is about whether or not one chooses to be a housewife,



or not. Film reviewer Natasha Forrest critiques the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* film as playing up to society's worst fears about feminism. She says, "By reducing the feminist movement to a struggle between psychotic executives and obsessive cookie bakers, the film is rendered meaningless" (Forrest). In fact, in the twenty-first century *The Stepford Wives*, gay men can even choose Stepford. The town welcomes the new gay neighbors, Roger Bannister and his long-time partner Jerry. After Roger transforms into a robot, he runs for state Senate as a conservative gay Republican. In an earlier, but also much cited work on postfeminism's use of the word choice, Elspeth Probyn in "Choosing Choice: Images of Sexuality and 'Choiceoisie' in Popular Culture" states that "choice seems to be coming from both sides" on the Right and Left (278). It is at once "perfectly at home within a liberal feminist platform" and can alternatively "be used to articulate various antifeminist stances" (278). But the most compelling use of choice is to "sum up a certain articulation of agency" (278). Probyn uses the example of ads that feature well-dressed middle-class women in their thirties with their children at home, signaling that "the right choices have been made" (279). In the twenty-first century, women (or men) can simply choose domesticity, much like they choose their hair color (279).

In the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* the rhetoric of choice is interesting when viewers learn that it is not the head of the Men's Association, Mike Wellington (supposedly Diz's equivalent from the 1970s texts), who is responsible for the zombification or robotization of the Stepford



wives (or partners). Instead, audiences learn that Mike's wife, former successful geneticist Claire Wellington, is the mastermind behind it when Joanna grabs a metal candle holder and whacks Mike's head off. The head rolls to the floor,

wires dangling from his neck buzz and short circuit. While “[t]he motif of women being decapitated is not unusual in the horror genre,” the decapitated male in the 2004 film is not necessarily equally horrific (Boruzkowski). The horror expressed in the film is not that a man has died; instead it is that a woman is in charge of trying to turn back time to when, as Claire cries, there was “a better world, when men were men and women were cherished and loved.” This is obviously a nostalgic reimagining of pre-second-wave feminism, but its message is that modern overworked women may not be so antithetical to re-becoming hausfraus. Bliss Cua Lim in “Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford” suggests that “if *Stepford Wives* has entered popular vocabulary as a cautionary tale for conformity, it is because its figure of feminine doubling [...] hints that the heroines are not entirely antithetical to the compulsive hausfraus that replace them” (180). In other words, the film makes note of how certain upper-class women may play a role in choosing their own subjugation, doubling over and over again. Bonnie Dow calls this move by Claire “post-(post)feminism” or “post patriarchy” or “patriarchy is female” (128).<sup>58</sup> When Joanna asks Claire, “How could you do this to us?” She responds with a speech to the entire ballroom of Stepford wives and husbands, “I was just like you. Overstressed, overbooked, under loved. So I decided to turn back the clock to a time before overtime, before quality time, before women were turning themselves into robots.”<sup>59</sup> Claire’s statement most describes the “new traditionalist postfeminism” which “appeals to a nostalgia for a prefeminist past as an ideal that feminism supposedly destroyed” (Projansky 67).<sup>60</sup> In other words, Claire’s choice is prefeminism, before “women were turning themselves into robots.” She chooses to turn modern robots back into Stepford robots. Her choice seems fundamental when Claire attempts to connect to every woman; she describes the supposed circumstance of working women everywhere, “overstressed, overbooked, under loved.” This articulates, as feminist scholars Rebecca Munford

and Melanie Waters explain, the postfeminist “post-liberation challenge” which foregrounds “women’s weariness with equality” when they arrive at the conclusion, “it is time to give up on having it all and go back home” (Munford and Waters 90-1). Yet her decision to turn back time, seems less like a conscious choice and more like an inevitability. Probyn would call this a winking image, one that says “you think you’re choosing this (nod, nod –nudge, nudge- wink, wink), but actually we know the choice is already made- ‘what’s fundamental hasn’t changed’” (285). Claire’s choice to revise Stepford, it seems, is fatefully fundamental.

Joanna’s fate, too, is decided by choice. After a montage of vintage commercials featuring 1950s housewives practically waltzing around their shiny appliances, the 2004 film begins with what looks like a television awards ceremony meant to honor successful television executive, Joanna, for her achievements in keeping the network at the top of the ratings by specializing in battle-of-the-sexes reality television where the women always win. Joanna walks out dressed in severe black. Her dark, short hair is pinned back behind her hair. By her career focus and her costume, Joanna is coded as a successful contemporary feminist, and she is a stark contrast to the vintage housewives smiling next to their appliances in the opening sequence. She thanks the audience, waving her arms like a politician, before showing the audience what the new fall television line-up will look like. One show, “I Can Do Better!” features a happily married couple flown to tropical island paradise, where they will be “completely surrounded by professional prostitutes.” At the end of the week, they have to choose whether or not to remain married to their spouses. In the clip, dowdy Barbara chooses to “do better” and leave Hank, her husband, for the myriad of prostitutes standing behind her. This is, of course, the wrong choice. Hank, from the show, crashes the television awards ceremony just as Joanna comments, “The battle of sexes, as old as time.” Haggardly-looking Hank steps down the aisle stating that he has

an idea for another show called “Let’s Kill All the Women,” as he takes out his gun and tries to shoot Joanna. This incident ultimately gets Joanna fired and is the impetus for her and her husband choosing to move to Stepford. In other words, Joanna’s success as a producer of so-called feminist television shows about choice, get her thrown back into the past again.

Notably, even though Joanna does not become a wifebot like her fellow Stepford spouses (since, her husband, Walter, ultimately cannot do it), by the end of the film she has made a few different choices about her appearance that seems to combine her feminist self with her postfeminist self. Early on in the film Walter remarks, “Only high-powered, neurotic, castrating Manhattan career bitches wear black. Is that what you want to be?” Feminist Joanna responds, “Ever since I was a little girl.” This line is meant to be funny, but at the same time, her failed marriage becomes clearly linked to her career and her appearance, her feminist codes. However, later in the film, she makes a different (arguably postfeminist) choice about her appearance to appease her man and save her marriage. Joanna complies and walks out of the kitchen in the morning with a pink dress and a flowery apron. Bobbie and Roger comment that she looks “kind of like Betty Crocker [...] at Betty Ford.” Although she doesn’t quite keep this same look by the end of the film, she does compromise her old feminist look with her new postfeminist one. In one of the final scenes in the film, Joanna has dyed her once dark hair blonde and wears a red suit instead of black.

In fact, the costuming choices of the 2004 Stepford wifebots are very different than their 1970s counterparts. While the Stepford wives in the 1970s film wore floor-length cotton floral print bohemian-inspired dresses, the 2004 Stepford wives look a little more like the 1950s television commercial housewives in opening sequence to the film with full skirts, waist cinches, and other “references to midcentury suburban complacency” (Bellafante). *The New York Times*

writer Ginia Bellafante notes, “If the images from ‘The Stepford Wives’ seem to lack a sense of irony, it is because fashion has been insistently putting forth the notion of a woman sublimely content in her domestic ambition. The bright garden-party dresses on display are no different from the kind offered by Derek Lam or the sort that fill J. Crew.” That the new Stepford wives’ costuming fits with recent trends in fashion demonstrates that prefeminist fashion has been incorporated into postfeminist iconography. In other words, the lovely and desirable look of the 2004 Stepford wives makes it difficult to discern exactly what statements it tries to make about women today. After all, the Stepford wives in 2004 were all former severe-looking CEOs, judges, and scientists instead of the NOW members of 1970s Stepford. Feminism had already happened, and it doesn’t do a wife any good to dress in black. In the new millennium, the wives must embrace a little femininity. The message is that while one would not want to choose to be a robot, one may choose to dress and act a little more conservatively in the name of love and a better marriage. Sherryl Vint calls this a shift in the new strategy of backlash which realizes it is unlikely that women will be forced en masse into the home, yet it still tries to “distance women from feminism and convince them that their lives should be focused around the heterosexual family” (162).

It seems that the new strategy of backlash might also be about distancing not just women, but everyone from any kind of radical or liberal ideologies. Gay Stepford husband Roger, too, has transformed politically. As a Stepfordized robot, Roger shifts politics from liberal to conservative when he runs for a Log Cabin Republican seat in the State Senate. However, in the final scene, audiences learn that Roger ran and won a seat in the State Senate as an Independent. In other words, even though the fate of these new millennium Stepford wives/husbands turns out

a lot better than their 1970s counterparts, to be successful, they must ultimately choose a less radical and more mainstream gender and political identity.

Key here is that the Stepford wives character remains an abstraction, continuously repeated, recycled, and reincorporated into its own time.<sup>61</sup> Repetition, in fact, is a cue that the housewife is just an automaton when in the original film neighbor Carol Van Sant malfunctions at the garden party, repeating the phrase, “I’ll just die if I don’t get this recipe.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in the 1972 novel, Joanna feels “a sense of beforeness” when she hears that Bobbie is going to go away for a weekend with her husband. When Bobbie transforms into a Stepford wife that weekend, Joanna tries to gather her children and leave, fearing her own fate, thus, Lim notes “epitomizing folktale motifs of pre-destination” (172). Indeed, the rhetoric of choice was part of the original criticism of the 1975 film. *The New Yorker’s* film critic Pauline Kael dismissed the film, “If women turn into replicas of the women in commercials, they do it to themselves [...] if they go that way, they’re the ones letting it happen... I dislike [*The Stepford Wives*] for the condensation implicit in its view that educated American women are not responsible for what they become” (qtd. in Williams 87). As writer Anne Williams in “*The Stepford Wives: What’s a Living Doll to Do in a Postfeminist World?*” argues, “Kael’s disdain for the film is clearly based on a liberal feminist assumption that women are responsible for their own fates and must admit it” (89). It is also, as Bonnie Dow argues that a “depoliticization of feminism in reaction to feminist popular culture, a move that transforms feminism’s political claims into ‘a vision of feminism as women’s self-improvement’” (120). Dow continues, “This move toward assigning women responsibility for their fate under patriarchy was a necessary precursor to the emergence of postfeminism in the 1980s” (120). Interestingly, the simultaneous rhetoric of fate and choice is familiar to both second-wave liberal feminist texts and postfeminist imaginings.

Projansky's *Watching Rape* begins chapter two by asking what kind of feminism is perpetuated in postfeminism and quotes Judith Stacey's 1987 definition that postfeminism is the "simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticalization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism" (qtd. in Projansky 66). As previously argued, both 1970s *The Stepford Wives* novel and film already succeed in incorporating, revising and depoliticizing second-wave feminism. If the 1970s Stepford texts are already a revision of feminism, what, then, is the 2004 film revising about the already popular revision of feminism? In other words, the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* is a revision of a revision of feminism. Tania Modleski's 1991 important work *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* argues that "texts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism- in effect delivering us back to a prefeminist world (3).<sup>63</sup> The 2004 *The Stepford Wives* and subsequent celebrations of the new domesticity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to be a part of that deliverance with its celebration of and kitschy longing for a kind of campy Stepford fashion.

### **Stepford Camp**

Some may suggest that the comic treatment of the recent Stepford film undermines the seriousness of the original. But it is clear from the 2004 DVD commentary that both writer and director were not trying to remake the original in the same way most remakes are done. Director Frank Oz and screenwriter Paul Rudnick realized that the 1975 texts were very much a part of the precise sexual politics of the moment. Instead their 2004 remake "mutated into a campy comedy" (Williams 86). While some have argued that comic hysteria has always been a part of the gothic tradition<sup>64</sup>, perhaps the shift from gothic horror to camp<sup>65</sup> is not so surprising since

“[t]he [1975] film developed a cult following, especially among gay male filmgoers” (Metz 116). Susan Sontag, too, in her seminal essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” published in *Against Interpretation* in 1964 recognizes that the origins of Camp taste are to be found in Gothic novels. Indeed, some might conclude that the original 1975 film was a bit campy itself. After all, as Sontag notes, “In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.” Arguably, the seriousness of the 1975 film failed in its attempts at a serious feminist statement. Although perhaps redeemably, the original film had the ability to “spin camp into genuine regret” (Quart 29). While the 2004 film is a self-reflexive parody of the first, to put it in Sontag’s terms, it, “want[s] so badly to be campy that [it’s] continually losing the beat.” Additionally, the 2004 film’s attempt at a camp sensibility through a love of consumerism demonstrates its failure as an adaptation and as a potentially feminist statement about marriage equality in the twenty-first century.

It is clear from the opening credits sequence that what audiences are about to see something campy in the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*. With a swirling waltz-like sound track, a montage of vintage 1950s and 1960s advertisements for appliances appears next to the names of the creators and actors. The women are twirling, swooning, and smiling next to their new technological innovations, stoves, toasters, vacuum cleaners, and hand mixers. It is pleasurable because it is pure artifice and exaggeration. It is also significant because the women in the advertisements are just as shiny and robotic as the machines they are advertising. Stepford wives become like these women and the appliances in the advertisements, artificial and exaggerated. Thus, the film begins with acknowledging the performance of gender and the promise of campy consumption. The camp sensibility here and what follows is all about the love of the shiny, happy, artifice of the look of Stepford; its particular mode of aestheticism and



stylization comes from the vulgarity of consumption. Although Sontag notes that vulgarity is a part of Camp, and while the intention of the film might be to take pleasure in its gay sensibilities, its over-alliance with brands and branding ultimately wrecks the message. The film painfully falls prey to capitalism with its barrage of brand names and product placements.

In 2004 the one black family in Stepford is gone and replaced with a gay couple. This alone seems significant. Perhaps the absence of people of color in the film speaks to the real absence of wealthy people of color in the suburbs and the continued problem with white flight. After all, most critiques of real Stepford wives in the twenty-first century seems reserved for affluent white women. It also speaks to the new class of rich, white, gay men that have fallen prey to the suburban, Botoxed, brand-name desires of their contemporary female friends. For Roger Bannister, played by Roger Bart, Stepford is a kind of consumer heaven, a stroll through an antique mall or an old department store. At the fourth of July picnic in Stepford, audiences are introduced to Stepford's first gay couple, Roger and Jerry, a lawyer, standing next to the bake sale. With his frosted hair and garish clothing, Roger is the perfect, stereotypical, flamboyant gay man. Roger seems to get a visible kick out of everything Stepford. Roger says, "Jerry! Jerry! It's a bake sale. An actual bake sale. It's like some kind of heavenly diorama at the Smithsonian. The hall of homemakers. Oh no. No. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. That is not cobbler! ... How do you ladies keep your figures? Is there just a huge vat of cobbler vomit somewhere? But worth it." Roger is responding to the bake sale because, as Sontag says of Camp, it is "old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*" which "arouses a necessary sympathy [...] What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic." While Roger can be critical of the perfectly quaffed Stepford wives (he is, after all, friends with pre-robot Joanna and Bobbie), overall his character demonstrates an affinity for them. He likes their style. Coming from him, Stepford is so gay.

Film reviewer James Bowman says, “Rudnick and Oz treat the story’s exaggeration of the 1950s ideal as a sort of gay in-joke” (64). He even loves the ultimate Stepford wife, Claire Wellington who not only chooses her Stepford wife persona, but is in charge of turning all the Stepford wives into robots. After Claire’s final speech reveals that she was in charge of creating the first Stepford husband and the rest of the Stepford wives, Walter asks her, “Are you a person or a machine?” Claire responds “I’m a lady.” Joanna asks, “A real lady?” Claire confirms, “Every inch [...] I may very well be the only decent human being left in the world.” As Claire stands over her broken Stepford husband attempting to put his head back on, the camera cuts to Roger, who sucks in his breath and whispers, “She’s fabulous!” Roger’s love of Claire does seem to critique the gender identification of “lady.” However, it does not do enough to critique this final revelation that men are no longer in charge of Stepford’s patriarchal ambitions.

In May of 2004 *The Advocate* published an interview titled “Welcome to Summer Camp” with Nicole Kidman and screenwriter Paul Rudnick that hoped to explain why the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* took on a gay character and a Camp sensibility. The interviewer, Alonso Duralde, called *The Stepford Wives* “the gay mafia’s response to the current debate about ‘protecting traditional marriage’ when ‘traditional values’ are scarier than ever.” Rudnick furthers this discussion by critiquing the suburbs. He says, “ I thought that certainly the urge to turn your partner into a robot knows no gender preference barriers [...] Because there is this urge toward the suburbs on the part of so many gay people [...] Does equality have to equal conformity and imitation?” Rudnick is speaking about the conflict in the relationship between the gay characters in the film. Jerry, the more conservative partner, wants to transform Roger into a Stepford husband because he is too flamboyant. After Jerry has transformed Roger into a Stepford husband, Bobbie and Joanna find themselves digging through Roger’s trash and are appalled to

see that he has thrown out his most gay items: a paisley pink Dolce & Gabbana shirt, bright fuchsia Gucci pants, something Versace, a framed picture of Orlando Bloom, a play bill from *Hairspray*, and a pink sweatshirt featuring Viggo Mortensen's face. The intentions of the screenwriter to critique traditional marriage are timely given the debates about gay marriage in the first years of the new millennium. But what the trash can scene reveals is that being gay means consuming expensive and garish fashion.

Indeed, even the gothic Victorian mansion that houses the Men's Association is turned fashionably gay. On the night before his robotic transformation, Roger seems like he is welcomed to the Men's Association with his partner Jerry. As they light his cigar with his pinky finger in the air, he looks around at the leather couches and the wood paneling and comments, "I love, love this space. It's very Ralph Lauren meets Sherlock Holmes. To me it says, 'I have taste and a scrotum.'" And to prove the Stepford men are willing to accept gayness, one Stepford man looks at Roger and says, "Girlfriend!" And other says, "Miss, Miss Thing." They all laugh and raise their glasses. While queering the space of the Men's Association is charming, it ultimately still remains the place where Roger is transformed into a Stepford husband and a Republican candidate for the Senate who has lost his flamboyant charisma and who believes "in Stepford, America, and the power of prayer, values I discovered thanks to my partner in life and in the Lord, Jerry Harmon." While this is obviously a critique of traditional marriage values, the real critique comes later when Joanna packs her bags in attempt to leave Stepford. What puts Joanna over the edge is that Roger is giving speeches wearing a Brooks Brothers suit. Gasp! Senior editor at *AlterNet* Lakshmi Chaudhry, in her review of the film, believes that "The yuppie gay couple has the effect, intended or otherwise, of changing the terrain of engagement from gender roles to consumerism [...] The desire for the perfectly acquiescent mate in the remake is no

longer about male anxiety.” Similarly, *The Advocate* interview quickly declines into a discussion of Kidman’s possible gay icon status and the fashions of the movie. Kidman admits that they made the movie with “a lot of fun and joy.” But part of the joy was in the “high heels, a lot of blonde hair, and some push-up bras.” While the attempt of the film’s creators might be to use campiness as a critique of conformity in traditional marriage, the use of consumption in that critique proves problematic.

Campiness in *Stepford* comes to a frenzy when Joanna, Bobbie, and Roger attend the *Stepford* book club with the rest of the *Stepford* wives. Joanna begins by announcing that she



just read the third volume of Robert Caro’s *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* when she is quickly waylaid by Claire who declares that they are going to discuss probably the most important book any of them will ever read. It is the *Heritage Hill Special Edition Golden Deluxe Treasury of Christmas Keepsakes and*

*Collectables*. All the *Stepford* wives cheer and clap with their white gloved hands. While Joanna looks around horrified, she notices Roger smiling and clapping his hands vigorously along with the wives. As they discuss a chapter about pinecone decorations, one *Stepford* wife proclaims, “I love the idea of creating a life sized Santa Claus all out of pinecones,” and Roger confirms, “Ok, I love that!” Finally the book club meeting comes to a close with a shot of Claire leading all the housewives in singing “Here Comes Santa Claus” with bells in their hands and Santa hats on their heads.<sup>66</sup> Roger is seated front and center with a Christmas scarf wrapped around his neck. Pure Camp. In some ways the scene is reminiscent of the consciousness-raising scene in the 1975

film. Instead of trying to get the Stepford wives to discuss their dissatisfactions with their husbands (the personal is political), 2004 Joanna tries to get them to discuss the politics of the 1960s Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson. In the 1975 film, the Stepford wives revert to discussing Easy On Spray Starch; in 2004 they discuss Martha Stewart-like Christmas decorations. Both end in ridiculous confirmation at how far gone the Stepford wives are. However, in 1975 there is incredulity. In 2004, there is a campy outburst of a Christmas song. With the flamboyant gay character seated front and center, the Camp sensibility allows for some celebration of obsessive holiday decorations. Vint reminds readers in “The New Backlash” that many “postfeminist texts are complicit with capitalism and consumerism rather than acknowledging that gender is one of the many systems of discrimination used by capitalism to divide and conquer” (168). In other words, because the film shows that there is something undeniably great about a Martha Stewart inspired life sized pinecone Santa Claus, the film compromises its critique of Stepford consumer culture.

The most incendiary aspect of consumption occurs in the obnoxiously pervasive product placements in the film. While Bette Midler’s performance of Bobbie is clearly meant to inspire gay affinities, her character is shown eating Haggen Daaz ice cream in her kitchen littered with discarded Diet Coke bottles and Hellmann’s Mayonnaise jars. Additionally, although it’s the men shopping in the final supermarket scene, film audiences are barraged with products: Alpha Bits, Mazola Cooking Oil, Sun Light, Snapple, Charmin, Purex, Hellmann’s Mayonnaise, Ziplock, Holly Sugar, Campbell’s Soup, Honey Comb Cereal, and Kingsford Charcoal. While the 1970s novel and film was blatant in its critique that patriarchy was all about gendered consumption, the twenty-first century film fails to provide the same critique. Regular contributor to *Film Comment*, Alissa Quart argues that the campiness of the Stepford wife term is used to

assuage contemporary Stepford-like housewives that all is well. She says, “While the Stepford Wife meme derives from a 1975 film based on Ira Levin’s 1972 novel, within a year of the film’s release the phrase had been taken up to describe a general phenomenon: it was the term for what middle-class women didn’t want to end up as, but with a camp accent, ensuring that those using it wouldn’t be mistaken for earnest” (28). All is not well. Camp is not liberation in the third wave. It seems that identifying with and loving Stepford fashion in the new millennium has, as Jane O’Reilly feared, not allowed women to recognize that “our guilt is reinforced by the marketplace, which would have us attach our identity to furniture polish and confine our deepest anxieties to color coordinating our toilet paper and our washing machines.” The click of recognition did not produce change. Identity is still attached to brands and wives still are unprotesting, if not avid, consumers, especially in suburban America.

### CHAPTER THREE- DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES

#### **Desperation Makes the Housewife Mad: Identifying with Postfeminism's Angry Ghosts**

*Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), ABC's Sunday night show that spanned eight seasons, takes pleasure in the moment when the housewife's desperation turns into angry revenge. This newly desperate and angry revision of the old, happy housewife recalls our televised memory of the 1950s housewife and her subsequent unhappiness revealed most famously in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The popularity of and response to *Desperate Housewives* showcases that the seemingly anachronistic role of the suffering housewife has returned to US culture, despite the widespread sentiment that feminism is somehow dead or no longer needed to save women from oppressive conditions. The premise of the show seems to tap into a contemporary (post)feminine mystique. Like Friedan's book suggests, after the war (WWII in Friedan's case and, arguably, The War on Terror today) women returned to re-inhabit and revalue the housewife role even after significant feminist gains were made because of a revalorization and re-mystification of femininity, primarily promoted by the media (Munford and Waters 9).<sup>67</sup> Looking at the characterization of the desperate housewife on *Desperate Housewives* can give us a sense of the changing face of popular feminism in current US television in the twenty-first century. This new housewife is both a throw back and uniquely contemporary.

In their book *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (2014) feminist scholars Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters define the postfeminist mystique as "ghost[ing] images and styles of femininity (and feminism) that belong to the past as a means of exposing what is missing from the present and – more speculatively – the future" (12). They argue that the postfeminist mystique "works by mobilizing anachronism" (10). Munford and Waters use Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993) to help make sense of the "spectre as a

form of anachronism” whose presence signals that “[t]he time is out of joint” both “out of order and mad.” The specter is “not straightforwardly an emissary of the past, but also potentially a spirit of the ‘future-to-come’” (11). With this analogy, they also argue that the housewife, feminism’s other, “embodies the logic of Derridean hauntology in that she ‘begins *by coming back*’” (82, emphasis in original). In many ways, *Desperate Housewives* engages in an intense project to reimagine and mythologize the housewife’s unhappiness throughout time, only to arrive at the present moment, still desperate. While America seemed to have declared the death of feminism, *Desperate Housewives* showcases a world where housewives still need feminism in the twenty-first century.

Although *Desperate Housewives* seems to tap into our longing for (and campy love of) the 1950s housewife, it is the show’s representations of outrage brought on by the postfeminist mystique that makes it pleasurable and relatable to viewers. The anger and suffering that the contemporary housewife exhibits places her in a unique position to her television predecessors in the 1990s. For example, whereas Murphy Brown was challenged by her independence, Ally McBeal was unhappy because of her independence (Kim 320). In other words, the 1990s portrayed single women as distressed, lonely, and miserable, suffering from a kind of *feminist* (rather than *feminine*) mystique (Busch 87).<sup>68</sup> In “*Ally McBeal to Desperate Housewives: A Brief History of the Postfeminist Heroine*,” American studies scholar Elizabeth Kaufer Busch argues that both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* “portray the *feminine* mystique as more desirable than the *feminist* mystique because the former is rooted in human nature, or the natural differences between the sexes” (95, emphasis in original). Susan Faludi in *Backlash* (1991) suggests that the reverse logic of the backlash tries to paint the successful woman as miserable because she is too independent, and the solution is to condemn feminism’s achievements (Faludi



77, Kim 320). However, if television's postfeminist solution to the miserable independence of the single woman was to marry her and move her to the suburbs, it didn't work. This new housewife seems unhappy precisely because she has given up her independence. To make sense of the return of this antiquated role, *Desperate Housewives* simultaneously utilizes, references, and critiques many aspects of contemporary postfeminism, suggesting that, even after its death, feminism continues to haunt us in the twenty-first century.

What is interesting about this climate is a certain nostalgia for and concurrent rejection of the historical figures and roles of the housewife. Munford and Waters say that the housewife is "marked by ambivalence" (72). The housewife characters on *Desperate Housewives* look traditionally feminine and are a product of a kind of "I have chosen to be a housewife" postfeminism, commonly called new traditionalism, where 1950s values seem to be in style again. For example, housewife Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher) calls a demonstration of 1950s patriarchy by her husband "sexy" ("Chromolume No. 7" 6:17).<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary housewives are clearly angry and desperate enough in their gendered roles to still need feminism. Obviously, there are many contested variations and confusions surrounding the idea of postfeminism. For example, *Desperate Housewives* stages the world after the supposed death of feminism when the new traditionalist (usually white, upper-class) woman has chosen family over work and can, from an ambiguous state of privilege and oppression, reject the feminisms of the past. In other words, (these) modern women are so past feminism that they can, with a little bit of camp sensibility, choose to identify with past femininities and inhabit the life of a modern day Stepford wife. However, through its desperation, the show conjures up an unclear merger between a few postfeminisms in order to converse about the untidiness of the genre and perhaps put the image of a secure postfeminist under scrutiny. Indeed, it uses aspects of popular US

feminism from the 1970s in that it works to expose the dilemmas of the white, middle-class, suburban housewife.<sup>70</sup> *Desperate Housewives* doesn't reject all past housewives or feminists, but re-consumes/re-commodifies some of them for us, showing us that angry ghosts of feminism's past are still haunting the seemingly over-confident postfeminists who are themselves desperately angry in their new posts. Discussing *Desperate Housewives*, as many housewives did particularly in its first few years on air, provides a cultural discourse with which to reconsider the memory of feminism in postfeminism and look for new spaces for feminism today. If some version of the old feminism did die, its ghosts have come back from the dead to haunt us. In other words, if the postfeminists wanted to kill off the feminists, they surely did not consider what kind of ghosts might disturb their own revisionist narrative.<sup>71</sup>

*Desperate Housewives* is narrated by the voice of a recently deceased (post-suicide ghost) housewife, Mary Alice Young (Brenda Strong). Mary Alice's suicide pushes forward the mystery of the narrative in the first season, especially as we see her husband, Paul Young (Mark Moses), dig up a toy chest from underneath the family's pool that we later learn carries the remains of another dead woman's body, her son's birth mother. Popular literature scholar Bernice M. Murphy locates this "compassionate, all-seeing voice from beyond the grave" as part of a trend in suburban haunting (in contrast to the "more traditional type of apparition") (Murphy *The Suburban Gothic* 134). Although the "all-seeing voice from beyond the grave" might be part of a larger trend, it is still rare for films or television shows to have a female voice-over. What might be happening when the show asks us to see Wisteria Lane through the voice of a suburban housewife (a postfeminist) who was so desperate as to take her own life? Many feminist scholars use the language of death and burial to talk about contemporary postfeminism. For example, feminist media scholar Mary Douglas Varvus in "Putting Ally on Trial: Contesting Postfeminism

in Popular Culture” explains that “this process of trying to publicly bury feminism is one that recurs with regularity in mainstream media” (419). Similarly feminist scholar Camille Nurka in “Postfeminist Autopsies” looks at the relationship between feminists and postfeminists by seeing feminism as the “corpse/dead matter upon which postfeminism performs its autopsy.” Working within these metaphors and analogies, we might see the character of Mary Alice as a feminist comeback—in this case, coming back from being buried/autopsied. However, we might alternatively see her as a dead postfeminist- thus commenting on the death of postfeminism rather than the death of feminism itself.

Not only is Mary Alice narrating from beyond the grave, but she has an off-putting, sing-song voice that often draws attention to the illusion of the narrative, the seemingly perfect setting and false happiness of the character’s lives. Mary Alice’s narration is perhaps a new, darker take on another female narrator often theorized within postfeminist textual readings, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (also sort of deceased since having settled down with Mr. Big, or at least no longer narrating after airing their last season before *Desperate Housewives*’ first season). Arguably, Carrie Bradshaw’s voiceover asks the viewer for identification and works as a guide to spectatorship that could place the viewer into the narrative, as though she was being addressed directly. If Mary Alice’s voiceover attempts a somewhat similar outcome, it also asks us to view this television world as from the position of a ghost. *Desperate Housewives* rarely allows us the possibility for to gaze at Mary Alice; we must look with her, because unlike Carrie Bradshaw, Mary Alice Young rarely appears in the narrative, and when she does, it is only as in a flashback or a dream. Film and digital media scholar L.S. Kim in her article “‘Sex and the Single Girl’ in Postfeminism: The *F* Word on Television” writes that a deflected look, as opposed to the gaze, “provides the opportunity for alternative sights/sites of

and for women” (325). This argument is within a larger context about the gaze theory in television studies, of which Kim says that “television is about the glance rather than the gaze” (324-5). In other words, the female spectator in television is acknowledged and targeted as a consumer (330). In this case, Mary Alice can be seen as effectively avoiding the “to-be-looked-at-ness” by largely being absent from the narrative taking place.

Additionally, we might read Mary Alice’s present/absent body as a comment on the state of feminism within postfeminism. Munford and Waters note that the repeated proclamation of the death of feminism has altered its appearance “within the popular imaginary; suspended somewhere between life and death, it is marked by both presence and absence” (18). The very first scene of the first episode sets the stage for Mary Alice’s presence/absence and alternative sightings during her narration when she describes the day that led to her suicide as an ordinary day. It is noteworthy that Mary Alice’s voice narrates her suicide while we watch a montage of her performing typical housewife duties. It is also important that this is the first scene of the series and a rare glimpse of her live body moments before she dies. After a sweeping crane shot of the clean, quiet, suburban street, the camera hones in on Mary Alice walking out of her house in an apron. Viewers watch as she performs ordinary chores (watering flowers, making breakfast for her family, doing the laundry, painting a chair, running errands), while her voice describes her day, “In truth, I spent the day as I spent every other day, quietly polishing the routine of my life until it gleamed with perfection. That's why it was so astonishing when I decided to go to my hallway closet and retrieve a revolver that had never been used” (“Pilot” 1:1). That the show attempts to make the ordinary day of housewife into an extraordinary (desperate) situation becomes part of the main convention of the show. The voiceover convention, along with other murderous scenarios, domestic settings (arguably, suburban gothic),<sup>72</sup> and female protagonists

seems to have more in common with 1940s films than it does with contemporary television shows about female friendship.

In her short essay, “Dying to Tell You Something: Posthumous Narration and Female Omniscience in *Desperate Housewives*,” film and television scholar Deborah Jermyn compares Mary Alice’s narration to what one typically finds voiceover narration in classical Hollywood’s film noir and, to a lesser extent, the women’s picture in the 1940s. While an actual female voice is rare,<sup>73</sup> the typical film noir’s male investigative voiceover “creates a mood of *temps perdu*: an irretrievable past” much like Mary Alice’s voice does (Jermyn 171). For example, at the end of an episode called, “Distant Past,” Mary Alice comments, “The past is never truly behind us. Ghosts lurk in the shadows, eager to remind us of the choices we made [...] Sadly, some of us refuse to look back, never understanding that by denying the past we are condemned to repeat it” (4:8). Given the circumstances, it is hard not to read this as a statement about the popular postfeminist “choice” women have made to return to a life of domesticity in the suburbs. Mary Alice’s voice sets up a strange mix of sentiment about the story, mostly a concurrent sense of nostalgia and regret for the setting and characters of Wisteria Lane, which itself tries to mimic a seemingly idyllic 1950s suburban street. Journalist and author Rosalind Coward points to connotations in the name, Wisteria, “nostalgia, hysteria, idyll” (Coward 35). However, unlike noir’s sense of “all-enveloping hopelessness,” Mary Alice’s voiceover suggests a “quirky humour and bemused meditation, which repeatedly point to the inherent ridiculousness and pettiness of suburban life” (Jermyn 171). Additionally, Mary Alice’s frame narration is omniscient, unlike many of the restricted narrations of noir or Carrie Bradshaw’s narration in *Sex and the City*, and therefore displays a superior knowledge into this specific time and place (172). (This disembodied female voiceover is so unusual that Jermyn can only find one other example

in the 1949 film *A Letter to Three Wives*, another title that specifically addresses “wives.”) While her voiceover is arguably part of “a larger commercial strategy,” Jermyn argues that Mary Alice’s voiceover “fosters and relishes women’s talk and a female/feminine subjectivity” that speaks to “the impact of post-feminism on popular culture” (177, 179). Although the housewife must die in order to speak, *Desperate Housewives* is at least suggesting that postfeminist housewives may have something to say about “choosing” a life in the suburbs in the new millennium.

*Desperate Housewives* also revisits angry ghosts of housewives past, taking up more recent phantoms of housewifery from both real and imagined texts (such as the Andrea Yates story, *The Stepford Wives*, *Knot’s Landing*, *Melrose Place*, *Twin Peaks*...), and merging them with more “classical” images of femininity and domesticity (such as Eve and June Cleaver). For example, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Marc Cherry, creator, writer, and executive producer of *Desperate Housewives*, links his real mother’s feeling of desperation to Andrea Yates, the Houston housewife who drowned her five children. Additionally, some of the major actors on the show seem to step right out of their previous roles on prime time soap operas in the 1980s and 1990s and onto Wisteria Lane. Before *Desperate Housewives*, Nicollette Sheridan (Edie Britt) was best known for her role as Paige Matheson on *Knot’s Landing*, and Marcia Cross (Bree Van de Kamp) was best known for her role as Dr. Kimberly Shaw on *Melrose Place*. Cross’s hair on *Desperate Housewives* is the same as it was on *Melrose Place*. Cross was also in *Knot’s Landing*. Doug Savant (Tom Scavo) who plays Lynette’s husband was on *Melrose Place* and *Knot’s Landing*.<sup>74</sup> Sheryl Lee, who played Laura Palmer on *Twin Peaks* was originally cast as Mary Alice; Brenda Strong (Mary Alice Young) got the part instead, although she also briefly appeared on season two of *Twin Peaks* (Murphy 185). Kyle McLachlan (Orson Hodge),

the male lead in *Twin Peaks* becomes Bree's husband in season three. The fictional town of Stepford is referenced in the very first episode when Bree's son, Andrew (Shawn Pyfrom), complains about dinner. He accuses her of running for the "mayor of Stepford," and wonders if "every dinner h[as] to be one of Martha Stewart's greatest hits," and later storylines seem to reference the more playboy side of the Stepford housewife imagined in Ira Levin's 1972 novel.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the anger of the housewife figure comes from soap operas,<sup>76</sup> cultural mythology, as well as real housewives themselves (such as Andrea Yates, writer Marc Cherry's mother, Martha Stewart, and viewers). As a result, *Desperate Housewives* was not only a hit show, but a mass produced/mass consumed and marketed recognition of women's desperate state within culture, women's subordinate positions particularly within the domesticated spaces of home and suburbs, and a response that locates itself within postfeminism.

The 1990s televised single women were rarely defined by domesticated spaces, but rather by urban streets or workplaces. In contrast, the housewife is defined by the suburban home. In other words, Wisteria Lane is not like the New York City streets of *Sex and the City*. This move from the urban career girl in the 1990s to suburban housewife in the 2000s interestingly mimics the move in women's magazines "from their career girl adventure roles in the late 1930s to the 'happy housewife heroine' of the postwar world (the woman who sacrifices career for marriage)" (Spigel "Theorizing the Bachelorette" 1214). In other words, on *Desperate Housewives*, the 2000s suburban housewife is positioned as similarly unhappy to her 1950s counterpart. Her suburban location is a large part of her misery. As Mary Alice said, "There's a certain kind of woman you see in the suburbs. She waits for the school bus in her bathrobe. She stops by the post office with curlers in her hair. She goes to the market in sweatpants and a t-shirt. This woman is a housewife, and she doesn't bother trying to be beautiful because it's a waste of time"

(“Never Judge a Lady by Her Lover” 6:3). Even the time of day in suburbia, defines the housewife’s persona, as Mary Alice indicates, “It was morning in suburbia, a time for women to attend to their husbands' needs” (“A Humiliating Business” 7:7). The show’s production designer, Thomas A. Walsh, remarks about the location of Wisteria Lane, “It’s a perfect American street, but it’s not so perfect” (Number Seventeen 151).<sup>77</sup> Walsh wanted the street and the homes to “connote the Eisenhower era and traditional American values, but in a contemporary way” (152). For inspiration Walsh looked at advertising from the 1940s and 1950s and watched old TV shows like *Father Knows Best*, *My Three Sons*, and *Leave it to Beaver* (152-3). Bautista notes that while the housewives on *Desperate Housewives* seemed to have been “dropped into 1950s suburbia,” her range of issues “were unlikely to have been confronted by June Cleaver and her 1950s television counterparts” (Bautista 157).<sup>78</sup> Instead, the suburban housewife in the twenty-first century is a kind of desperate prisoner, like Friedan’s metaphor of the housewife trapped in a concentration camp; as Mary Alice says, “What is the difference between the housewife and the inmate? The inmate knows the feeling won't last long” (“Not While I’m Around” 3:12).

In her opening and ending narration, Mary Alice persistently speaks about the feelings of imprisonment and the horrors of the suburbs, in what Murphy calls a Suburban Gothic tradition in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009). For example, in season one, episode six, Mary Alice says, “Suburbia is a battleground, an arena for all forms of domestic combat” (“Running to Stand Still” 1:6), and later in the season, at the end of episode 15 she says,

Yes, each new day in suburbia brings with it a new set of lies. The worst are the ones we tell ourselves before we fall asleep. We whisper them in the dark, telling ourselves we’re happy. Or that *he’s* happy. That we can change. Or that he will change his mind. We



persuade ourselves we can live with our sins. Or that we can live without him. Yes, each night before we fall asleep, we lie to ourselves in a desperate, desperate hope that come morning it will all be true. (“Impossible” 1:15)

*Desperate Housewives*' narration that suburbia is a battleground filled with lies is a common theme that “everyone” seems to experience. Specifically, suburbia is constructed as more of a universal idea or experience than a place (Murphy 168).<sup>79</sup> Mary Alice says, “There's a home for everyone in suburbia, and a realtor eager to find you exactly what you want. [...] Yes, everyone wants a home with a lovely exterior, Mostly so the neighbors will never suspect the ugliness going on inside” (“Home is the Place” 5:11).<sup>80</sup> Like Betty Friedan's analogy of a suburban concentration camp, Murphy says “the Suburban Gothic is a sub-genre concerned with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family has something to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident” (2). This clichéd trope “reflects the rapid change in lifestyles and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s” (2).<sup>81</sup> The suburban gothic's return, then, signals a discontent with the rapid change in lifestyles and (out)moded living taking place in the twenty-first century.<sup>82</sup> On Wisteria Lane, the housewives are portrayed as desperately unsatisfied with their lives and often keep secrets from their friends in order to maintain a false image of happiness. However, the show depicts how false happiness eventually erupts into outrage or “bad” behavior. Is getting mad a televised feminist response to unhappiness?

Feminist theorist Marilyn Frye in “A Note on Anger” explains that “It is a tiresome truth of women's experience that our anger is generally not well received [...] It is as common as dirty socks” (84). However, she also tells us that to get angry is to claim a domain of subjectivity. She

states: “Anger implies a domain—a claim that one is a being whose purposes and activities require and create a web of objects, spaces, attitudes and interests that is worthy of respect, and that the topic of this anger is a matter rightly within that web” (86). *Desperate Housewives* and its web of cultural chatter and merchandise makes us recognize the housewife’s anger as “common as dirty socks.” On the show, getting “mad” is referenced as a strategy for surviving the drudgery of domesticity. For example, in season five, after Gabrielle laments, “Look at my life, Susan. I’ve been beaten down,” Susan replies that she needs to “get mad more often” (“Kids Ain’t Like Everybody Else” 5:3). Off screen viewers identify with the anger by creating chat rooms and blogs, buying merchandise such as t-shirts that say “I’m a Bree” and appearing in episodes of *Dr. Phil* as “real-life desperate housewives.” However, although the housewives’ anger is commonly experienced, the anger is not portrayed on screen or received by viewers as common. On *Desperate Housewives*, the housewives’ anger is excessive. Characters throw things, plot revenge, sabotage relationships, cheat on their husbands, and even kill themselves—often while looking flawless and wearing lots of expensive clothing. The show also plays with the notion of common anger and dirty socks; its tagline “Everyone has a little dirty laundry” appears on TV commercials and magazine ads. There is even a *Desperate Housewives* trivia game called the “Dirty Laundry Game” where players keep a secret card in their diary. Players will try to guess each other’s secrets as the clues are revealed. By reiterating that housewives’ anger is common, her desperation becomes more than common and worthy of respect, or at least recognition. The secret desperation of housewives moves out of isolation. Ordinary laundry, in this case, becomes code for exciting, secret, personal baggage. Laundry, instead of inspiring domestic drudgery (desperation), spawns the drama and outrages of the show. On Sunday nights,

it seemed to be something worthy of respect that fits into the web of merchandise, TV time, viewer identification, and cultural chatter.

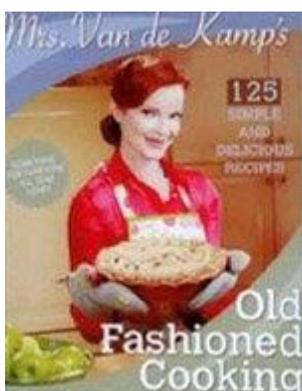
Of course, to consume desperation and anger is not necessarily to conquer or to quell it. Admittedly, there is a voyeuristic motive for sharing secrets, and certainly there is something disconcerting about the kitchiness of re-appropriating kitchens. For example, on ABC's *Desperate Housewives* website viewers could shop for and buy red *Desperate Housewives* oven mitts, a red apron that reads "Honey, the marriage counseling might not work. You need to get



used to bad cooking,” and a red apple kitchen timer. Fans can also purchase a cookbook called *The Desperate Housewives Cookbook: Juicy Dishes and Saucy Bits*. Each housewife has her own section divided up into further sections based on her personality so that a consumer following the recipes can imagine that she is cooking like her favorite character on the show. For example, Lynette has a section called “Kids’ and Family Meals,” while Gabrielle has a section called “Traditional Dishes” that includes Mexican dishes like tamales, Mexican hot chocolate, and Juanita Solis’s quesadillas.<sup>83</sup> While cookbooks are a staple in the housewife genre, this one is unique in that the “authors” are fictional characters rather than real cooks or chefs. The cookbook additionally compliments the narrative of the show’s first episode and subsequent seasons. When Mary Alice’s voiceover introduces the housewives as they are walking over to her house for the

reception after the funeral, she sets up aspects of their character and backstory based on the dish that they bring. For example, Lynette brings fried chicken that she didn't have time to make herself with four kids, Bree brings a basket of muffins that she bakes from scratch, Gabrielle brings spicy paella,<sup>84</sup> and Susan brings over her terrible macaroni and cheese that seems to have contributed to the downfall of her relationship with her ex-husband. Being a cook seems to be one of the three qualifications for being a successful housewife. In season four, when Susan's mother-in-law comes to visit, she brings her a scrapbook filled with her recipes. She says, "Oh, my meemaw always told me that a lady should be a chef in the kitchen, a maid in the living room and a whore in the bedroom. And Michael says you've only got one of those covered, so I'm gon' help you with the other two" ("Mother Said" 4:15).

Cooking becomes a part of a major story line in season five which opens with Bree as the star of her own cooking show called *What's Cooking Fairview?* The drama revolves around a companion cookbook called *Mrs. Van de Kamp's Old Fashioned Cooking*, which promises 125 simple and delicious recipes, something for everyone all year long. There is an image of Bree on the front cover with a very 1940s style hairdo, wearing an apron and oven mitts, and holding a



pie. When asked why "old fashioned cooking," Bree's character responds "Well, I think a lot of people miss the way life used to be-- Back when women had more time to cook" ("We're So Happy You're Happy" 5:2). When Lynette tries to sell her services as an advertising agent to sell Bree's cookbook, she pitches 1950s nostalgia as a way to market it. Lynette says, "I have really played up the whole nostalgia

angle. 'Let Mrs. Van de Kamp turn your oven into a time machine.' I see women really responding to that" ("Back in Business" 5:4). Interestingly, on the show, Bree links the sale of

her cookbook as a way to combat the unhappiness of housewives. When talking to a reporter who thinks Bree's "old-fashioned" cookbook and seemingly perfect 1950s persona is a "total sham," Bree responds, "I have fallen down more times than I can count just like so many other housewives out there. We're all just barely holding on, and we all think that we're alone. So maybe you're right. Maybe it isn't a cookbook. It's a lifeline from me to those other women, because I want them to know there's always a chance to get something right. Even if it's just a casserole" ("City on Fire" 5:8). Bree's use of "old-fashioned" cooking as a strategy of survival is interesting in that it concurrently celebrates an antiquated value system while simultaneously recognizing its need for a "lifeline." In *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done* (2010), feminist cultural critic Susan J. Douglas notes that "it is essential that feminism be repudiated as something young women should shun as old-fashioned, withered, humorless, repulsive. To do this, media must explicitly acknowledge feminism, point to it, and 'take it into account' in order to argue that it is no longer needed, a 'spent force' (Douglas 13).<sup>85</sup> While old-fashioned feminism may seem withered, old-fashioned femininity is positioned as desirable by Bree's marketing campaign. However, old-fashioned femininity's need for a "lifeline," especially as Bree's values later collide with her business success, suggest that feminism may not be entirely "spent." Similarly, as Munford and Waters suggest, the housewife, feminism's other, "embodies the logic of Derridean hauntology in that she 'begins *by coming back*'" (82, emphasis in original). Coming back through an oven-shaped time machine, Bree's 1950s housewife persona signals a need for a feminist response.

Of course, *Desperate Housewives* capitalizes on the desperation of housewives by making it commercially appealing. Commercialism is even suggested to be part of the reason for housewives' unhappiness (Varvus 424). Indeed, some feminists have argued that postfeminism is

nothing more than a marketing scheme aimed at selling more products to women (Tasker and Negra “In Focus” 107, Richardson 88). Arguably, by consumption or cooking, viewers are encouraged not only to make the troublesome role of the contemporary housewife visible, they also are invited to mythologize it, narrate it, and make it speak to their own experiences.

Television is a complicated space in the way female desire and pleasure are regulated through economic mechanisms, wherein the female spectator is acknowledged and targeted because of her role as a consumer. Although arguably this demonstrates how capitalism has succeeded in appropriating and commercializing feminism by constructing an illusion of liberation, in this case, we could also potentially see this mechanism as a negotiable site of struggle when viewers take hold of its forces and use it to their advantage. This is like Ann Brooks’ more optimistic version of postfeminism where she tries to reconsider it as a useful tool. She says, “We might say that postfeminism has a new currency?” (Brooks 2). Although Brooks may not be taking into account actual economics as a strategy, nevertheless it might be worthwhile to consider how it might work as a site of power struggle within feminisms.

Postfeminism is also often thought of as a power struggle between feminism and femininity. One example of this can be seen in *Desperate Housewives* by looking at the way the colors pink (femininity) and red (anger/feminism) are utilized in the mise-en-scène.<sup>86</sup> In the episode airing on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (Mother’s Day), each housewife, in her opening shot, is featured wearing a pink or red outfit (“Sunday in the Park with George” 1:21). Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), the only housewife wearing red rather than pink, has baby food stains all over her oversized shirt. In this scene she tells her husband that she feels sexually frustrated since they haven’t had sex in ten days. Her housewifely-haggardness is accented when her husband’s sexy, female co-worker (with whom she suspects her husband is cheating) arrives to pick him up for

work. When she walks in the door, Lynette takes a quick look down at the stains on her shirt. We, the viewers, can barely see the stains. What we notice, instead, is the redness and large size of the shirt. Red, the color we most associate with anger and Eve's apple, seems an obvious choice for Lynette's wardrobe in this scene. We recognize a standard (angry) feminist narrative of inequality. What is perhaps more complicated is the choice to clothe all the other housewives in pink (in addition, we notice other props on Wisteria Lane are pink or red including: a set of luggage, a car, a lawnmower, the gardener's t-shirt, one of the housewife's daughters' sweater etc.). Most notably, Bree Van De Kamp's (Marcia Cross) hair is always dyed a bright unnatural shade of reddish pink. Pink, a decidedly lighter shade of red, connotes femininity and a 1950s "pink think" (pre-second-wave feminist) mentality. This symbolic use of pink in the wardrobe of the characters seems nostalgic, suggesting a love of postfeminist new traditionalism. However, juxtaposed with the symbolic use of red, *Desperate Housewives* seems to suggest a need for a feminist response.

In her book *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons* (2002) Lynn Peril describes the attitude of the 1950s in terms of color. Peril states, "Pink think assumes there is a standard of behavior to which all women, no matter their age, race, or body type, must aspire" (7). Mamie Eisenhower, the nation's model housewife in the 1950s, was famous for her favorite color, a shade of pink named "Mamie Pink" which she used to decorate the private spaces of the White House, referred to as the "Pink Palace" by staff (Murphy, Kate). This shade of pink inspired 1950s fashion and notably, many pink bathrooms and kitchens ("Mamie Eisenhower").<sup>87</sup> Currently, pink bathrooms, like housewives, seem to be back in fashion (Murphy, Palmer, "Save the Pink Bathrooms"). Pink also became famously associated with actress Jayne Mansfield with her house, also dubbed the "Pink Palace" which she purchased in

1957 and painted her trademark pink color. Peril quotes Jayne Mansfield: “[Pink] is bright and gay. ‘Mansfield pink’ will become famous, I’d tell anyone who called it ‘Mansfield Madness.’ Now I had something to intrigue the photographers....I’d add I would be happy to pose for any layouts they’d like. I was desperate” (Peril 17). In *Desperate Housewives* pink could symbolize the postfeminist aspiration of a 1950s standard of behavior. This whole notion of the colors pink and red symbolizing attitudes conflicted within femininity and feminism in *Desperate Housewives* seems especially relevant since our ultimate reference point for the show is Eve’s red apple depicted in the opening credits. Similarly, these colors also become commodities on ABC’s *Desperate Housewives* website. Fans are sold emotional color-identifications when they can choose to purchase items such as the red oven mitts and aprons as well as pink t-shirts that say “I’m a Susan.”

Popular cultural studies scholar Anne Marie Bautista explains in “Desperation and Domesticity: Reconfiguring the ‘Happy Housewife’ in *Desperate Housewives*” that through its characters, *Desperate Housewives* explores “the complexities and contradictions behind the constructions of a women’s place in the home, particularly as they relate to women in the post-feminist era” (Bautista 161). The post-feminist era housewife is constructed using references from the 1950s suburban sitcom, but updates them to fit many twenty-first century discourses concerning domesticity and motherhood. For example, instead of appearing naturally disposed to motherhood and domesticity, the contemporary housewife is depicted in relation to her skills and abilities (160). Bree Van de Kamp, particularly, is the show’s reference point to the updated 1950s sitcom mother. She is perfectly pleasant, an excellent cook, a cleaning fanatic, and is frequently costumed in an apron, or at least a well-pressed skirt and sweater set. When season seven’s newest housewife Renee Perry (Vanessa Williams) searches through Bree’s closet



searching for an outfit to wear out at the bar, she declares, “I have never seen so many sweater sets. Are you sure this is a closet and not a portal to the 1950s?” (“Truly Content” 7:3). Similarly, when being interviewed about her cookbook in season five, a reporter asks Bree, “So this is legit? You're really this Donna Reed housewife from the '50s?” Bree responds, “I think that decade had a lot to recommend it” (“City on Fire” 5:8). McCabe calls Bree a “most enticing ideal of a well-managed feminine self” (“What is With” 79).<sup>88</sup> Munford and Waters point out that Bree’s perfectionism is both “mocked and glamorized” (Munford and Waters 92).

Specifically, Bree is a parody of the sitcom mother. She is at once campy and, arguably because of her affinity with the 1950s housewife, the most desperate. Munford and Waters argue that Bree’s domesticity is “veiled by layers of ‘postfeminist’ irony” which is a “staple feature in postfeminist culture” (80). They suggest that “through this layer of ‘ironic’ distancing [...] *Desperate Housewives* both co-opts and neutralizes Friedan’s critique of the ‘happy housewife heroine,’ implying that women who inhabit this role in the twenty-first century do so playfully, with a knowing, empowered, ‘postfeminist’ awareness of its social currency” (81). Similarly, because camp is an ironic performance of gender, queer studies scholar Niall Richardson links Bree’s ironic performance of the perfect 1950s housewife to camp in “As Kamp as Bree: Post-feminist Camp in *Desperate Housewives*” (Richardson 90). Richardson points to several key scenes in the first few episodes of the first season that demonstrate how Bree (and, thus, the audience) is aware of the performative nature of her housewife role. The difference between Friedan’s description of the housewife trapped in a “comfortable concentration camp” and Bree Van de Kamp is that Bree counters her performance by an awareness of her role (92). Richardson suggests that rather than just comic relief, Bree’s performance of the perfect

housewife is a survivalist strategy or a lifeline, employed in the face of the difficulty women face in a post-feminist era (93). In other words, “her campiness supports a feminist agenda” (94).

While perhaps this is true, particularly in the first season, it also is more complex. Because Bree is also the most politically conservative housewife on the show, her performance also supports an agenda that many feminists are decidedly against.<sup>89</sup> Later seasons more heavily characterize Bree as a self-described gun-toting Republican with a conservative value system. As the show progresses, storylines depict her giving advice about guns or church to her housewife friends. This conservative value system on the show, as McCabe suggests, “evokes the 1950s, another time of perceived firm boundaries when strategies of containment were key to foreign policy, and Republican conservative values of family and Church profoundly shaped the domestic agenda” (“What is it With” 82). Season four was particularly saturated with references to Bree’s affinity for guns and church.<sup>90</sup> For example, in season four, episode four, Lynette is trying to kill a possum in her yard. She goes to Bree to help her buy a gun. Lynette says, “I want a gun.” Bree responds, “Really? I thought you were one of those liberal gun haters. [...] Well, unfortunately, our bleeding-heart town council forbids us from using live ammo in our own backyards.” When Bree suggests Lynette buy an air rifle, she says, “Try Gun City on Route 6 by the Baptist church. Tell them I sent you, and they’ll give you a nice discount” (“If There’s Anything I Can’t Stand” 4:4). In the final episode of the final season, Bree moves to Louisville, where she joins a club for conservative women and, similar to Roger from the 2004 *The Stepford Wives*, eventually is elected to the Kentucky State Legislature, aligning her fate with other postfeminist political housewives espousing conservative values.

Like in the Victorian era, cookbooks become a document to display one’s values. Viewers see this when Bree tries to stand by her “old-fashioned values” espoused in her

cookbook. In season five, she says that she believes that the cookbook's sales were so good because her value system is "authentic;" "I actually believe in the old-fashioned values I wrote about. I believe in men opening doors for ladies and children respecting their elders. I also believe that sometimes women need to make sacrifices for their husbands" ("A Spark. To Pierce the Dark" 5:18). Bree's proclamation of conservative values is, of course, not without critique. Her business success comes at the expense of her marriage, and in this scene she is close to signing away her business over to a buyer to quell her husband's ego. Thus, it's hard to tell just what viewers should make of Bree's conservatism. It's neither in celebration of nor disdain for those values.

It is not surprising, then, how the show seems bound within and a reaction to the Republican conservative values espoused by the Bush administration during its first several seasons. The show responds to the culture wars during a time when America seemed deeply divided over issues of family, religion, and sexual politics (Lavery 18, McCabe and Akass 6, 8, Kahn 95-6). Casual references to the War on Terror pop up here and there. For example, Lynette declares "jihad" on a possum "attacking" her home ("Now I Know, Don't Be Scared" 4:6). While this is a metaphor for the cancer Lynette has, it can also be read politically, as George W. Bush tried to position our homes as under terrorist threats (see chapter one). These concerns about surveillance, privacy, and the suburban environment, like those of the Cold War, seem to have "resurfaced in the American cultural imagination in the wake of 9/11" (Gillis and Waters 191). Similarly, when a neighbor secretly replaces Bree's lemon meringue pie with her own to prove its superiority, Bree's husband declares "culinary terrorism." Bree responds that she must get that recipe "by any means necessary" ("Smiles of a Summer Night" 4:2). In season six, a plane crashes onto Wisteria Lane in an episode where audiences learn that one of the new

housewives, Angie Bolen (Drea de Matteo), (an Italian housewife from New York who seems like she could have been casted from *The Real Housewives of New York City* or *Mob Wives*) was involved with terrorism when her son accidentally reveals, “Ever since 9/11, the feds are hard-core on any terrorist stuff, even the old cases” (“Boom Crunch” 6:10). Later in the season, we see Angie building a bomb under duress from her ex-boyfriend, an eco-terrorist. In “Mother, Home, and Heaven: Nostalgia, Confession, and Motherhood in *Desperate Housewives*,” feminist scholars Stacy Gillis and Melanie Waters situate the politics of *Desperate Housewives* as being similar to those of the Cold War. Using Elaine Tyler May’s assertion that the home was regarded as central to issues of national security in American ideology of the 1950s, Gillis and Waters contend that the “threats that are mounted against the security of Wisteria Lane are located primarily within the circumscribed geography of that same suburban street,” and that “if the retroactive dimensions of *Desperate Housewives* allude to [the Cold War], they also work to imitate the socio-political dynamics of a post-9/11 United States, in which the threat of international terrorism has been constructed, in the most explicit terms, as a threat from within” (199). Not only does *Desperate Housewives* seem to respond within its narrative to the politics of the day, which are decidedly like the politics of the 1950s, but viewers and fans of the show try to situate these Bush-era retrogressive politics within their own lives.

Specifically, real housewives appropriate and respond to the conservative, retrograde politics of fictional housewives. Laura Bush described herself as a “desperate housewife.” The show inspired faith-based books such as *Not-So-Desperate: Fantasy, Fact, and Faith on Wisteria Lane* where Pastor Shawnthea Monroe uses the narratives on the show to spark conversations about Christianity with her readers. However, while the Bush family and other religious conservatives seemed to be fans of the show, conservative watchdogs worked harder to try to

police it (McCabe and Akass 6-7).<sup>91</sup> McCabe argues that Bree's "retro-chic" characterization and style, speaking through the conservative rhetoric, showcase the paradoxes of the policing process as described by Foucault ("What is it With" 80-1). McCabe says,

Her style is a symbol of middle-class affluence and success, her body pastiching social identity and historical 'place.' Classic cuts and defined (political) borders in the new Republican age speak of a (feminine) body politics concerned with self-esteem, self-reliance, self-mastery and personal discipline a female empowerment based not on political action and radical feminist ideology (especially as the style references pre-second-wave feminist times) but on taking control of, and increasingly policing, the image. (83)

McCabe suggests that viewers actually like Bree, despite the powerful hold her characterization has on normalizing female behavior. Her character and story lines help us acknowledge this hold and understand "only too well media-produced 'images and stories – representations of the 'real' – are as 'real' as it gets, because they make and are made by the social scripts that we live" (78).<sup>92</sup> Scholars often can't decide whether *Desperate Housewives* perpetuates the right-wing agenda or depicts empowered women by "winking subversion" (Pozner and Seigel).<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, the war over values, played out fictionally and in reality, demonstrate how 1950s television (and the housewife role within it) and climate played a huge role in defining American identity in the twenty-first century.

Marc Cherry appeared on daytime talk show *The View* (May 18, 2005) to talk about the way that reality and fiction negotiate themselves on the show. Barbara Walters asked Cherry about the scene in previous Sunday's show where perfectionist housewife Bree Van De Kamp (described by *San Diego Union Tribune* writer Karla Peterson as "a control freak with a raging

Martha Stewart complex and a closet full of June Cleaver sweater sets”) meticulously makes the bed before taking her husband, Rex (Stephen Culp), to the hospital. Meanwhile, Rex is having a heart attack sitting at the bottom of the stairs. Walters wants Cherry to tell the audience what she already knows to be true. That scene was an actual event from Cherry’s childhood! Cherry confirms the problems his mother and father had toward the end of their marriage. He says about his mother: “She’s a lovely woman, but she was mad. And she was going to make the bed, darn it!” (*The View*). This story, part of the cultural chatter surrounding the show, merges the anger of fictional housewife Bree Van De Kamp with the anger of real housewife Martha Cherry, thus making it that much more of a spectacle and worthy of notice, subjectivity, and gossip. Marc Cherry also describes how the storylines develop from real-life news stories or incidents from the writers’ experiences. For example, early in season one, Cherry asked the writers to describe the “worst thing their mothers had done” (Number Seventeen 149). Lynette’s ADD- medication addiction came from a magazine article about a suburban mother who became addicted to her kids’ pills, and the storyline about the suburban prostitute Maisy Gibbons came from a news story about an “Orange County soccer mom who was turning tricks” (149). That other media sources describe Bree’s character in terms of other recognizable (often smirked at) housewifely characters June Cleaver and Martha Stewart is also interesting. Newspaper columnist Karla Peterson provides us another example of an attempt to merge the fictional housewife, June Cleaver, with the criminal housewife, Martha Stewart (another example that the housewife is not always what she seems).

It is also interesting to note that our willingness to identify with and celebrate onscreen and newsworthy housewives seems markedly different than how second-wave feminists responded to their own representations of televised housewives. Film and television scholar

Charlotte Brunsdon in “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella” points to a “disidentity at the heart of feminism.” Brunsdon says, “What second-wave feminism said [to images of women they saw on television, in films, and in the media] was ‘We’re not like that’ and that kind of femininity is impossible” (Brunsdon 112). Brunsdon finds her students (and television’s self-proclaimed, domestic goddess Nigella) declaring disidentity with second-wave feminism, rather than with media representations. Where 1970s feminists distanced themselves from their own media mothers, this generation appropriates these images in complicated ways.

*Entertainment Weekly’s* 2004 “Fall TV Preview’s” issue states that Cherry, former writer for *Golden Girls* and avid soap fan, got the idea for *Desperate Housewives* while watching the trial of Andrea Yates with his mother who “spoke frankly about her own ‘desperation’ raising three young children” (110). Again, Cherry links his actual mother with the characters on his show. But further, he links his mother to real housewife Andrea Yates. On television, Andrea Yates’ desperation over her subordinate position in the role of housewife becomes something with which viewers identify. Interestingly, Marc Cherry, described in a later issue of *Entertainment Weekly* as “a gay (!) conservative (!! ) who wrote [*Desperate Housewives*] as a testament (!!!) to his mother (!!!!)” (Goldblatt 53), also seems to identify with his mother and Andrea Yates. This identification seems amplified by the description of Cherry as a former writer for *Golden Girls* and an avid soap opera fan, indicating that watching TV is a gendered experience but gender is negotiable; thus perhaps gay men like Marc Cherry can also identify with being a suburban housewife.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, viewers are positioned against the idea of housewifery by learning (from the Andrea Yates trial, in this case) that not every woman should be a mother living in the suburbs raising kids. This suburban housewife position then, is sometimes dangerous and can produce the kind of anger that kills. Newitz in her article

“Murdering Mothers” tells us that we like to read these stories about desperate housewives because we are “in one way or another, trying to figure out how to live without children; and perhaps more importantly, we are trying to live without motherhood as we know it” (335). Newitz declares that the spectator/reader of the cultural chatter surrounding the murdering mother decides that her deed is wrong but her social condition is understandable.<sup>95</sup>

Housewife Lynette Scavo, who on the first season of the show has “chosen” to raise four kids after quitting a successful career to become a stay-at-home-mom, is played by actor Felicity Huffman, who claims to identify with the frustration of her character. In another 2004 article of *Entertainment Weekly* called “Secrets and Wives: Why We Can’t Stop Talking About the Desperate Women (and Men) of Wisteria Lane,” she compares her on-screen self with her (real) off-screen self, “I am Lynette. No, really. *I...am...Lynette*. I am blond. I have twins. I perform frequent acts of desperation” (“Secrets and Wives” 26). One of fan’s favorite Lynette lines is in response to a neighbor telling her she has anger management issues: “I have four children under the age of six. I absolutely have anger management issues” (“Ah, But Underneath” 1:2). This sentiment continues in season six when Lynette finds out that she is pregnant with twins again. She tells a first-time mother in the doctor’s waiting room, “You know, most women say this is the greatest experience of their life. Most women are liars. My mother was liar, and her mother was a liar. And your mother is a liar. It’s a lie every generation tells the next so they can get grandchildren” (“Nice is Different than Good” 6:1). In this case, there is a blur between the actual actor and her character. Identifying this actor/character merger in *Entertainment Weekly* shows us a heightened understanding of the anger of a postfeminist who became frustrated performing the role of a new traditionalist housewife. Lynette’s character particularly speaks to the idea of “choice” rampant in the notion of postfeminism. In the first season Lynette chooses to



leave her a successful career in advertising to be a full-time housewife. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker call this typical postfeminist storyline “retreatism,” where an educated professional female displays her empowerment by retreating from the workplace” (“In Focus” 108). But Lynette’s choice is not really seen as natural. In Elspeth Probyn’s article, “New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home” she notes that “new traditionalism hawks the home as the ‘natural choice’—which means, of course, no choice” (131). However, in *Desperate Housewives* this choice seems to be made with disastrous consequences. In one episode, Lynette, frustrated with the loud, rowdy behavior of her children, daydreams that Mary Alice appears as an angel giving her a gun, thus giving her the option of suicide (“Guilty” 1:8). This, of course, is only a daydream, but the sentiment seems to resonate with viewers. Marc Cherry in an interview explained, “The idea is that we’re saying in this thing—a woman can choose the iconic role of wife and mother—she can choose it—she can make the choice. And then she gets it and she’s still not happy. Something’s not working. I think that a lot of women went, ‘Yes, yes, yes! This speaks to something I’ve experienced’” (“A Stroll Down Wisteria Lane”).

The ratings surge in its first season suggests that viewers felt the same. According to Nielsen Media Research, 22.3 million American viewers watched when *Desperate Housewives* first aired on October 3, 2003, and it went on to average 21.6 million viewers a week during the first season (McCabe and Akass 2).<sup>96</sup> In a year when cable, satellite, and digital channels divided television audiences and ABC seemed to be at the bottom of the network rating chart, *Desperate Housewives* completely altered everything (McCabe and Akass 4). As Janet McCabe and Kim Akass point out in the introduction to their book, *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*, the network “increase[ed] its market share by 17 percent in the key 18-49-year-old demographic” (McCabe and Akass 2, 4). As seasons progressed, its popularity seemed

to grow wider within and outside US audiences. For example, it has been remade (rather than dubbed) in Spanish as *Amas de Casa Desesperadas* (Garfield and Gladstone). It also has three Latin American and one Turkish version of the show (“Housewives Going Global,” “New TV Series: Turkish Desperate Housewives”). Auditions for *Desperate Housewives Africa* were held in Nigeria in 2014 for EbonyLife TV (“Desperate Housewives Africa’ Happening in Nigeria”). The ratings and remakes suggest that the show tapped into a particular twenty-first century zeitgeist around the world.

In another issue of *Entertainment Weekly* published in October in 2004, Huffman is quoted saying, “Marc’s tapped into the zeitgeist of women. There aren’t many models out there—there’s usually either the bad mother or the perfect mother” (“Screen Saviors” 24). Huffman’s comment illustrates that this anger is a part of a gendered “zeitgeist,” which places it in the complicated realm of spirit and time that considers *Desperate Housewives* and its viewers within mythologies and historical trajectories of feminism. Rosalind Coward analyzes this zeitgeist in “Still Desperate: Popular Television and the Female Zeitgeist” where “characters and plots are discussed in the wider culture, where the next episode is eagerly awaited, especially by women who find the concerns of their own lives reflected back” (31). Coward, linking the craze of *Desperate Housewives* to other previous popular shows like *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Dynasty* (1981-1989), and *thirtysomething* (1987-1991), suggests that that like past shows, *Desperate Housewives* achieved “mega popularity” with women because it taps into massive changes in women’s lives and empathized with women’s desire to improve their positions (34). Of reflecting the reality of the contemporary family she says,

[It] is touching on the illusion of post-feminism, the idea that, if women can choose how they live, they will be fulfilled. Instead the retro exteriors link the modern wives of

Wisteria Lane with 1950s suburbia. What is being articulated is a continuity of disappointment. The 1950s housewife railed against their circumscribed lives; in *Desperate Housewives* what is being exposed are false promises, the hypocrisy and unhappiness that coercive ideas, whether they are social or material, bring in their wake.

This – the con of post-feminism consumerism – is very modern territory. (40-1)

In other words, while the popularity of *Desperate Housewives* is a kind of example of postfeminist consumerism, it also reveals some sense that postfeminist “choices” are not as they seem.

It is also interesting to consider that it is a gay (!) conservative (!! ) man, Marc Cherry, who is able to “tap into the spirit” of women, further complicating the notion of identification. Elsewhere Huffman has said that one reason Cherry is able to understand women so well is because he “has a vagina in his head.” We could read this as another version of postfeminism where men take over women’s roles as feminine subjects (called by Projansky as the feminist man, when men turn out to be even *better* feminists than women (Projansky 68)). Indeed, Cherry constructs the husbands as desperate too, perhaps usurping the housewives’ gendered oppressive status, shifting the problem from patriarchy to place (suburbia). For example, Bree’s dead husband Rex narrates an episode in season three in order to speak about the desperation of men living in the suburbs. He says,

Take a drive down any street in suburbia. Know what you're gonna see? A bunch of guys wearing the same expression. It's a look that says, Oh, crap. My dreams are never gonna come true. I'll never have a life free from scandal. I'll never have a son of my own. I'll never hold her in my arms again. I'll never get to tell her how I feel. Yeah, the suburbs are filled with a lot of men who've given up hope. Of course, every once in a while you

do come across some lucky SOB whose dreams have all come true. You know how you spot them? They're the ones who can't stop smiling. Don't you just hate those guys? ("My Husband, the Pig" 3:16)

However, Cherry's references to gay audiences and the creation of more and more gay characters throughout the seasons signal a strong comparison between the suburban housewife and the twenty-first century gay man perhaps more so than the heterosexual suburban husband. "I'm a Bree" t-shirts are also available in men's sizes. In other words, Cherry presents the housewife being re-gendered or in drag, the newest desperate icon for the gay man. For example, according to Cherry, more men than women dressed up as Bree for Halloween in 2004. This phenomenon is referenced in season four when the gay neighbors (another example that the suburban housewife is in drag) on Wisteria Lane host a Halloween party ("Now I Know, Don't Be Scared" 4:6).<sup>97</sup> Bree's pregnant daughter, Danielle (Joy Jorgensen), is dressed up as a pregnant Bree, complete with a red wig. Andrew, Bree's gay son, is dressed up as Cher. Again, in season seven both new housewife Renee (Vanessa Williams) and gay househusband Lee (Kevin Rahm) both come dressed as Marilyn Monroe to the Halloween party, demonstrating the similarity between the housewife and the gay man as well as the performative nature of being a suburban housewife ("Excited and Scared" 7:6). More strikingly, in season seven, Bree's gay son Andrew seems to develop a case of the postfeminine mystique and a drinking problem after losing his job and spending his days at home as a househusband. He says, "Alex works these crazy 18-hour shifts at the hospital. What's my day? Long, endless stretches of nothing. I work out. I do laundry. I dusted the other day, actually dusted, and felt proud. How pathetic is that?" ("Everything's Different, Nothing's Changed" 7:17). Andrew's problem, like-mother-like-(gay)son, draws

desperate parallels between the two. In other words, Cherry creates plenty of gay characters that, like the housewives, perform acts of desperation.

The housewife in drag, however, is not necessarily a feminist statement. Some scholars have pointed out that the gay characters are just caricatures who lack sympathy and thus are just figures “against whom a heterosexist narrative can resolve” and “that the religious right can more easily stomach” (Kahn 105). Kristian T. Kahn in “Queer Dilemmas: The ‘Right’ Ideology and Homosexual Representation in *Desperate Housewives*” argues that Cherry’s oxymoronic self-proclamation of a “gay Republican” is an “odd balance of liberal sexuality and right-wing politics [that is] crucial to an examination of *Desperate Housewives*” (95). He suggests that while the show may have a left- and right-wing audience, conservative ideology is “reinforced through the ‘seemingly liberal’ (sexual) transgressions acted out in the series” (95). Kahn’s criticism, however, comes within only two seasons on the show’s inception, and, while mostly proves correct over subsequent seasons, does not play out in quite the same way as the series progresses. While gay male characters remain rich, white, and stereotypically imagined, they are not as menacing as Andrew’s depiction in the first two seasons. Arguably, the gay male characters are no more or less transgressive, troubled, or stereotyped than the heterosexual, female housewives. Cherry’s personal identification and his subsequent gay male characters align themselves with the desperate housewife status during a time when debates about gay marriage abound. Gay partners moving into the suburbs and conforming to 1950s ideals is also a desperate scenario.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps this is a further illustration of the timely constructedness of the gendered housewife as well as her spirit being reappropriated by viewers.

In addition to taking part in debates about gay marriage, *Desperate Housewives* clearly places itself within debates about the supposed death of feminism. *Desperate Housewives*, in

fact, seemed to summon feminism back from its grave. *Entertainment Weekly* notes that “Not since *TIME* magazine proclaimed *Ally McBeal* the death of feminism in 1998 has a show produced so much cultural chatter (are desperate housewives the new soccer moms?)” (Goldblatt 53). This comment, in a magazine designed to describe and produce cultural chatter or gossip, gives us a few temporal and perhaps, spirit-ual, reference points for *Desperate Housewives*.<sup>99</sup> First, this comment tells us that television (in this case, *Ally McBeal*) inspired, reconfigured or gave image to a certain phenomenon—the death of feminism. With the creation of *Desperate Housewives*, television is again signaling something about feminism, namely that the supposed death of feminism needs to be revised or reconsidered in the current climate. Sarah Projansky, in her book *Watching Rape*, gives us contexts with which to describe the death of feminism within postfeminism. Projansky uses the term “linear feminism” to describe the idea that feminism has gone through a historical trajectory from birth to death (67). She also cites *Time* magazine’s



illustrated cover that posed the question “Is feminism dead?” On the cover are the photographs of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Ally McBeal. (Varvus calls this *Times* headline a “time-worn formula of putting feminism to death” (Varvus 419).) Projansky notes that Ally is the only woman printed in color; the others are in black and white (68-9). Ironically, Ally is also the only fictional woman. Color, in this case, implies something contemporary, something fictional, and that the real women of

feminism have died (or have been killed off by their fictional TV representations). In other

words, we can see by the existence of *Ally McBeal* that feminism has worked (at least for white, heterosexual, middle/upper-class women) and is now no longer needed (Projansky 70). However, *Entertainment Weekly* provokes the question “Is feminism (really) dead?” by remembering *Time* magazine’s cover, perhaps urging us to take a closer look at the question of (post)feminism in relationship to what is happening in and around *Desperate Housewives*. Maybe the show gives us a glimpse of what could happen when feminism is declared dead; e.g., women who are not so content—like Mary Alice often says in her voiceover, “Things on Wisteria Lane aren’t always what they seem.” In other words, we might need feminism again since the new traditionalist housewife is not really what she seems. *Desperate Housewives*, as a response to new traditionalism, can be seen, as Douglas describes, as a “backlash [...] against the new momism” (Douglas 296). Yet, the question about real “soccer moms” and fictional housewives remains unanswered. How do television characters fit into historical feminist trajectories?

Since *Ally McBeal* was not a real woman and the characters on *Desperate Housewives* are not real women, how can we make sense of what is happening with real women when their deaths are seen as mythologies? Feminist media scholar Kristyn Gorton in “(Un)fashionable Feminists: The Media and *Ally McBeal*” suggests that not only does the cover of *Time* delineate a “then” and “now” within feminisms, it implies that “‘today’s’ feminist is a woman who is identified by the character she represents, not by her own name. Her agency is exchanged for the character she portrays” (215). For *Desperate Housewives* fans, this might prompt an “I’m a Bree” t-shirt purchase. Perhaps the real feminist and the fictional housewife do not cancel each other out or remain separate entities. Or maybe fictional characters are somehow ghost versions of real women. Munford and Waters suggest that “Television’s status as the preferred venue for feminist hauntings is reflected in the regularity with which we return to television fictions in our

analyses of feminism's pop cultural configurations (13). In many ways, the anger exuding from the housewives in *Desperate Housewives* is describing how the role of the mythological housewife pervades the role of the actual housewife. Richardson notes that the collapse between representation and reality is one of the key ways in which post-feminism embraces the ironies of postmodernism (Richardson 88). The question at the end of this *Entertainment Weekly* quote is "are desperate housewives the new soccer moms?" This question does not ask if the characters in the show *Desperate Housewives* are the new soccer moms (none of the housewives on the show are actual soccer moms), but rather are real soccer moms currently feeling desperate and thus, feeling a kind of rage that seems to be happening after feminism has supposedly died?

The best way to explain how *Desperate Housewives* performs a revision of a historical trajectory of feminism that revises real history in fictional terms is to look at the opening credits of the show. The company that designed the opening credits yU & co calls them a "wickedly funny take on the history of female angst" ("yU + co Opens"). yU & co use animated images in a pop-up book style drawn from famous works of art and pop art to "show how women from Eve to the present have chafed under the marital bit" ("yU + co Opens"). Each little vignette "represents a woman doing something desperate" (Number Seventeen 147). By using a pop-up book style to speak about history, the opening sequence points to the way in which the history of women's emotion is steeped in a kind of mythology and is not to be taken too seriously. Although this is perhaps troubling, it also points to the idea that the history of women via the death of feminism is not necessarily over and done with. In other words, by creating a "take" on the history of female angst, they illustrate that there could be more than one version of how this history happened. And indeed, the credits seem to suggest that martial angst has not died.



The credits begin with an image of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden inspired by the painting “Adam and Eve” by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Eve, the first angry housewife, gets satisfaction when, after picking an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, a larger, redder apple falls on Adam’s head and crushes him. The animation gives us a close-up of Eve’s smiling face while the snake grins behind her head still hanging from the tree. By using this since-the-beginning-of-time reference in the opening credits, *Desperate Housewives* not only draws on the anger of the mythological first woman scorned, but gives us a reference point from which to understand the entire show. It also acts as a revision of Eve’s plight and makes it possible to rethink the history of women’s subordinate position as the fault of Adam, rather than Eve. In the *Desperate Housewives* version of the Garden of Eden, Eve’s apple works to her advantage, and even works to her revenge.

The opening credits move through several more time periods of female angst working within popular artistic expressions. After the Adam and Eve story, the credits depict an Egyptian queen being swallowed up by her multiplying children. Although it is not clear why the creators chose Egypt as a reference, we can only imagine that the reference is an allusion to Cleopatra or Nefertiti, both symbolic myths of female power and sexuality as queens of Egypt. Cleopatra’s real suicide, a lesson that even strong women take their lives, has its own mythological resonance. The myth, of course, is that Cleopatra uses the poisonous asp to take her life before Octavian could take Egypt. However, in *Desperate Housewives*’ revision of the ancient Egyptian story, the Egyptian queen succumbs to her multiplying children. Since the snake in the Adam and Eve story did not cause the downfall of Eve, the snake does not even make an appearance here. Instead, the queen is killed by her multiplying children, making snakes seem preferable to

children; or, rather, that having children is more likely to drive one to suicide than the fall of an empire.

Next, we are shown a revision of the *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Genami* painted by Jan van Eyck in 1434. The original painting is thought to be a done as a legal document witnessing marriage. His wife, although appearing pregnant to a contemporary viewer, is not actually pregnant in the painting but is holding up her full-skirted dress in the contemporary fashion of the day (Hall 105-6). Additionally, the man and the woman are thought to represent traditional gender roles where the man stands near the window looking outside, where the woman stands well inside the domestic space, symbolizing her role of caretaker in the home. Among other symbols in the original painting, the oranges below the window has been interpreted, although probably incorrectly, as a symbol of purity and innocence that reigned in the Garden of Eden before the Fall of Man (Bedaux 22). In the



revised version in *Desperate Housewives'* opening credits, the wife is indeed domesticated, sweeping up the floor. Instead of an orange peel, she is seen sweeping up a banana peel (much more phallic than an orange) that her husband throws back behind him for her to sweep up. While sweeping the floor, the housewife is rubbing a seemingly pregnant belly. The gender roles in this revision remain traditional, although much less optimistic than in the original painting. The artistic depiction of a happy marriage is not as real as it seems.

The next sequence revises the image in Grant Wood's 1930 *American Gothic* (time skips 500 years or so). Although the actual painting is of a farmer and his unmarried sister, the opening credits of *Desperate Housewives* suggest that the two could be unhappily married. A younger woman (looking like a 1940s playboy cartoon) comes into the scene and seduces the farmer. He smiles, while the sister (wife/old maid) is shown being swallowed by a can of sardines that say



the word "aged" on the package. This position of being canned and packaged is particularly distressing and seems to signal the position of woman as being packaged like cold, salty fish, shipped away and sold, only for the next generation of housewives to consume her. Her

packaged state- the state of the old unhappy housewife- becomes one we can buy. And in fact, in the following sequence it seems she is bought when the can of sardines appears on the 1950s countertop of the next housewife in the opening credits sequence. In this way, we can see how the housewife can be re-owned by the next generation of women consumers.

This apron-wearing 1940s-looking housewife looks flustered and overwhelmed carrying a load of three cans in her arms, one of which is an Andy Warhol Campbell's soup can, often associated with the ills of mass consumerism. (This image clearly comes from a WWII



propaganda poster encouraging women to do their part in the war effort.<sup>100</sup>) She drops the Campbell's soup can which gets picked up by a male character in what looks like one of Roy Lichtenstein's famous comics, but is actually done by Robert Dale, called "Fighting Couple." In this revision, the housewife, after crying, socks the man in the face. He, like Adam, falls to the ground. In the final shot, four apples fall from the Tree of Knowledge into the hands of four of the smug-looking, desperate housewives (who now *know* that history has dealt them a myth), thus completely revising the history of the housewife's desperate story.

This historical trajectory of "female angst" is interesting because it remembers women's anger, not by actual events or real experiences, but by the mythologies and popular expressions about women's subordinate positions. These cultural currents are freely adapted and re-imagined, indicating that the role of the housewife is powerfully persuasive, but also malleable and mythological. It *can* be changed. Viewers and producers of *Desperate Housewives* can



contest that image and create a cultural discourse around it, as they do with their identifications with characters and situations in the show, thus rejecting the end/death of the history of feminism. They can

use the problematic power of the position of consumer--a position to which they have historically been delegated--to drop the apple as a weapon, drop the can of soup, give the comic heart-throb a punch in the eye and wear a t-shirt stating "I'm a Bree" to use the tools of the master's house, so to speak. Perhaps this revision also makes it possible to re-examine or disallow the death of

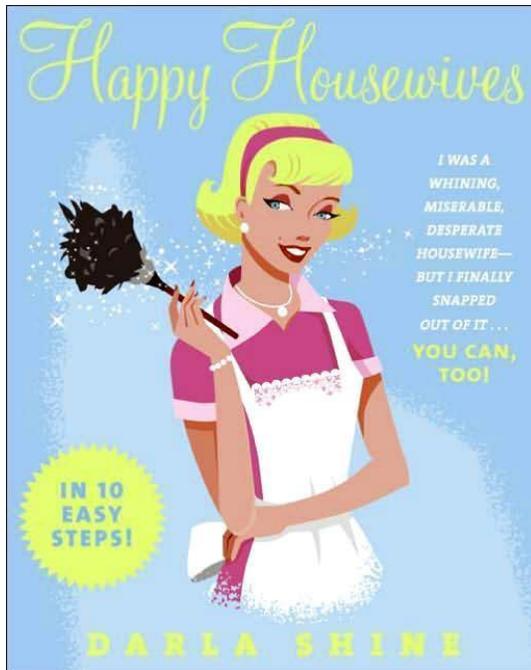
feminism post-*Ally McBeal* and hints toward Ann Brooks definition of ‘post’ that would “impl(y) a process of ongoing transformation and change” (Brooks 1). Feminist film scholar Patrice Petro in the “Introduction” to *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (2002) says that “while some may now find feminism (rather than the limitations placed on women) tiresome and repetitive, it is important to remember that dead moments and dead ends in the past can be the source of new ideas and new creations of the present” (Petro 12). The ghosts of feminism can still come back from the dead to haunt us and help us situate these posts. In the final episode of the last season, Susan Mayer takes one last drive around the block of Wisteria Lane before moving away. As she drives, she sees all her former neighbors who have died over the course of the last eight seasons dressed in white. The ghosts watch her drive away. Mary Alice narrates, “As Susan left her driveway, she had a feeling she was being watched. And she was. The ghosts of people who had been a part of Wisteria Lane were gazing upon her as she passed” (“Finishing the Hat” 8:23). Although perhaps strange to invoke the gaze of suburban ghosts in this weirdly creepy way, the show reminds us that even when housewives move away from the confines of the suburbs and onto a better, less desperate life, ghosts of the past remain.<sup>101</sup> *Desperate Housewives*, in an oddly postfeminist way, captures the spirit (and ghosts) of a pre-post-feminism, and (re)claims the right to be angry.

### **Post Script- A Backlash Against Desperation**

While researching and writing about this topic, I was never sure as to whether or not I saw a kind of popular feminism lurking in *Desperate Housewives*. I knew that *Desperate Housewives* did not exactly look like feminism,<sup>102</sup> but I still felt it was doing something that was uniquely critical of postfeminism even within the confines of some of its traps. At the very least, viewers were responding to some kind of recognition that a postfeminist world is problematic.

As Busch says, “postfeminist heroines are not traditional feminists, yet they cannot and do not want to return to stereotypes associated with the feminine mystique” (96). Of course, *Desperate Housewives* was not, in many ways, as successful at resonating a shared postfeminist anger as it was in its first season. There have been many reasons considered by critics (Mary Alice’s mystery was solved for the viewers at the end of season one; the housewives did not have the same kind of chemistry; season two’s housewife, Betty Applewhite (Alfre Woodard), does not seem to fit in with the other women, not to mention her portrayal as the only African American housewife is deeply problematic and racist...etc). Aside from the narrative and representational problems on the show, I believe there was another reason why *Desperate Housewives* did not retain its success. Namely, because the show was successful enough at showing women’s anger and unhappiness in its first season, there produced a subsequent backlash against that portrayal. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991), Susan Faludi demonstrates that a backlash against second-wave feminism involved a direct repudiation of feminism as being bad for women. She describes the paradox in women’s lives that would become so central to the backlash, “women have achieved so much yet feel so dissatisfied; it must be feminism’s achievements, not society’s resistance to these partial achievements, that is causing women all this pain” (Faludi *Backlash* 77). This new twenty-first century backlash to unhappy housewives, largely played out in popular television, magazines, and advice books, tried to shame or ridicule housewives for articulating their dissatisfaction and desperation. Arguably, it does not look good for new traditionalism when the stay-at-home mom is unhappy, desperate, and full of rage. While surfing the internet back in 2005 while writing my earliest versions of this chapter, I found a book written by real housewife Darla Shine called *Happy Housewives* (2005), a kind of self-help, ten-step program that tells the housewife to snap out of her whining, miserable desperation.

The book seemed to be written as a direct response to *Desperate Housewives* and the cultural chatter it produced within television talk shows. Darla Shine, a former television producer turned



stay-at-home mom, wonders when it became fashionable to become a desperate housewife and encourages women in step one to “Please, stop whining!” The book’s inner flap claims that the book will help moms everywhere “realize that they *can* be hot mamas, they *can* rekindle the romance in their marriages, the *can* reinvent themselves—and they can do this *without* getting desperate.” Shine herself says, “I don’t want to break the glass-ceiling. I now know exactly what I want. I am desperate no more. I

am proud to say I’m a happy housewife” (Shine 10). This direct response to the show *Desperate Housewives* tries hard to shove women back into the home with a smile on her face. (Perhaps a new re-version of *Stepford Wives* is in order?) While the second season of *Desperate Housewives* responds to some of Lynette’s frustrations by sending her back to work (where she starts a much-needed daycare program for employees while her husband learns the hardships of being a househusband), conservative culture responds with a self-help book designed to keep the glass ceiling intact. The front cover of *Happy Housewives* looks hauntingly like many of the etiquette books and advertisements of the 1950s.

In 2015, a decade later, I recently noticed that the happy housewife trend/backlash has continued when an acquaintance of mine posted something on Facebook she found on a website called [happywivesclub.com](http://happywivesclub.com), which prompted her to “put this as your status if you love your

husband.” The website/blog promotes a book of the same name published in 2014 by Fawn Weaver, whose author bio on the website reads, “Fawn Weaver, a successful business executive and marriage advocate, noticed a disturbing trend. Marriage and wives were caricatured in nearly every form of media, and marriage was getting a bad rap. Frustrated by the constant negative press, Fawn set out to prove all wives aren’t miserable, most husbands don’t cheat, and happy marriages do still exist.” On the website, wives are encouraged to “join the club” to receive daily emails from Fawn “to encourage my marriage”; it says, “Join the nearly 1,000,000 women proud to proclaim, **I am a happy wife!**” Although perhaps Darla Shine’s and Fawn Weaver’s books prove my point that *Desperate Housewives* was effective at resonating postfeminist desperation, it also shows that patriarchy, unlike Mary Alice, has never died.



## CHAPTER FOUR- REAL HOUSEWIVES

### Confessions of “Real” Housewives and “Real” Feminists: Intersections of Feminism and Realism in Reality Television’s Housewives

Although most of us tend to locate the beginning of reality television in the 1990s with MTV’s *The Real World* (1992- ), in many ways the advent of reality television began with the desperate confessions of the real 1950s housewife. *Queen for a Day* started as a radio show in 1945 before it aired on television (NBC and then ABC) from 1955-1964. Most similar a game show, *Queen for a Day*, hosted by Jack Bailey, featured four or five housewives vying for the title of Queen for a Day, a title earned by sharing their sob stories with the audience.<sup>103</sup> Introduced as “the Cinderella show,” in every episode Bailey would interview each housewife asking them to share her financial and emotional reasons why the audience should vote her Queen for a Day with the applause meter. Usually, the housewife that confessed the most heart-wrenching desperation would receive the most enthusiastic applause. Like most beauty pageant contestants, winners would appear shocked and begin sobbing when donned in a crown and velvet robe. The queen was then seated on a throne, handed a large bouquet of roses, and asked to watch as models paraded her winnings in front of her. The winner of Queen for a Day won what she had requested during her story (ranging from diaper service, to vacations, to a wheelchair for her disabled family member) and also collected prizes from sponsoring companies that apparently would help ease her suffering, usually appliances, furniture, cosmetics, and household items. Throughout each episode, the housewives’ stories were interspersed with commercials, women modeling expensive clothes (that the contestants would eventually win), and circus-like stunts.

Although critics despised the show, it was viewed by 13 million Americans every day and quickly climbed to number one in the ratings during its first year in 1955 (Scheiner 375). By its end, the show crowned more than 5,000 queens and gave away more than \$23,000,000 in prizes (385).<sup>104</sup> Although *Queen for a Day* was considered a game show, it was different in that contestants did not have to showcase their knowledge of trivia or compete in a game. The appeal of the show, instead, was that real (often working-class) housewives broadcast their intimate stories of hardship for the entertainment of the (mostly middle-class) housewives watching television at home. Gender studies scholar Georganne Scheiner in “Would You Like to be Queen for a Day?: Finding a Working Class Voice in American Television of the 1950s” argues that despite the critics disdain for the show and its gross display of consumption, *Queen for a Day* was significant in that it showcased voices of women we rarely hear who were primarily from the working class and lower middle class, and in some cases “barely living above a subsistence level” (375).<sup>105</sup> Like many feminist media scholars who write about cultural texts created for a female audience, Scheiner contends that the show had “real feminist possibilities” because of the “female address implied in texts that focus on women’s lives” (376). For example, Scheiner points out that the desperate female narratives often reveal husband’s inadequacies in providing for their families. This “patriarchal impotence” was part of a larger theme hashed out in popular 1950s television, as argued by Lynn Spigel and others. (Scheiner 376, Spigel *Make Room* 62-3).

In the twenty-first century, reality television shows that feature so-called desperate housewives as main characters for the viewing pleasure of housewives at home are shockingly pervasive. Unlike *Queen for a Day*, however, class roles are reversed. The new housewives of reality television conspicuously show off their couture fashions and lavish homes so as to seemingly already been crowned queen before the filming even begins. Instead of Cinderella, the

real housewives act more like her evil stepmother, the “rich bitch.” Michael J. Lee and Leigh Moscovitz in “The ‘Rich Bitch’: Class and Gender on the *Real Housewives of New York City*” define the rich bitch as an “archetypal, trans-historical [...] bourgeois feminine character [who] pursues selfish material gains single-mindedly” (65). They assert, “Always gendered (female), always classed (leisure), and almost always racialized (white), she functions at a cultural crossroads where class antagonisms can be articulated and traditional gender roles can be reasserted” (65). This class reversal and the narratives surrounding it makes it difficult to discern any real feminist possibilities in reality television’s newest female address.

Filming the conflicts of real housewives in the twenty-first century largely began in the United States<sup>106</sup> in 2004 with the advent of *Wife Swap* (2004- ) on ABC and *Trading Spouses* (2004- ) on FOX, the same year as the remake of the film *The Stepford Wives* and the first season of the prime time show *Desperate Housewives*. Then in 2006, Bravo created the enormously successful reality show *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006-2014). Bravo president Lauren Zalaznick stated in announcing the show's premiere date, "From *Peyton Place* to *Desperate Housewives*, viewers have been riveted by the fictionalized versions of such lifestyles on television. Now, here is a series that depicts real-life 'desperate' housewives with an authentic look at their compelling day-to-day drama" (“Bravo’s ‘The Real Housewives’”). In order to capitalize on their successors and position their audience, Zalaznick’s comment likens *The Real Housewives of Orange County* to both old and new enormously popular soap operas. However, whereas many traditional narrative daytime soap operas, such as *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, *Passions*, and *Guiding Light*, saw a declined audience which led to cancelations in the twenty-first century, *The Real Housewives of Orange County* brought about a new wave of iterations. Namely, its success brought about other identical versions set in different cities (New

York City, Atlanta, New Jersey, D.C., Beverly Hills, and Miami), as well as other popular similarly structured shows on VH1, Lifetime, and TLC. By my count, at the time of this writing there has been 23 reality television shows in the twenty-first century with the word “wife” “housewives,” or “wives” in their titles.<sup>107</sup> Many of these reality stars have also inspired spin-off shows, such as *Don't Be Tardy* (2012- ) and *Bethenny Ever After* (2010-2012). Additionally, the pervasiveness of reality housewife shows has also led to a failed attempt at featuring the husbands in *Househusbands of Hollywood* (2009), as well as mockumentary-style comedy spoofs, such as Hulu's *The Hot Wives of Orlando* (2014) and *The Hot Wives of Las Vegas* (2015), and Kevin Hart's *Real Husbands of Hollywood* (2013- ). There has even been a *Saturday Night Live* sketch created for a 2009 NBC special called *The Women of Saturday Night Live* that parodied Bravo's *The Real Housewives* reunion episodes starring Tina Fey, Cheri Oteri, Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, Nora Dunn, Ana Gasteyer, Molly Shannon, Rachel Dratch, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Amy Poehler, and Laraine Newman; Andy Cohen, Bravo's executive producer and host of the reunion shows, guest starred as himself (Cohen 237).

Since *Queen for a Day*, reality shows about housewives situate and characterize housewives as consumers whose problems can be solved by consumption. In other words, consumption, rather than feminism, has a liberating force. However, unlike *Queen for a Day* (and with the possible exceptions of *Wife Swap*, *Prison Wives* (2009-2010), and *Prison Wives Club* (2014- )), the new reality stars' desperation has little to do with financial hardship; for the most part, they have already achieved the female version of the American dream.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, their lifestyles are so lavish that the current reality star's extravagant clothes, jewelry, homes, fine dining, and spa treatments seem to make the fictional suburban Wisteria Lane on *Desperate Housewives* look positively average. Mass media scholar Nicole B. Cox in “Bravo's ‘The Real

Housewives': Living the (Capitalist) American Dream?" states that "even the most casual viewer is aware that programming centers on wealth and the American Dream" (78). Cox argues that by positioning the idea that upward mobility is a matter of *choice* and emphasizing the capitalist class ideal, *The Real Housewives* franchise "relies on the same neoliberalism that some scholars argue is inherent to reality TV" (85). For example, the housewives often discuss their financial success in terms of their individual hard work, beauty, or luck/fate, rather than by any system of privilege or social movement. Their wealth, however, while compelling to watch, is not treated with the same reverence as some other reality shows that tend to treat the rich "as hard-working testaments to the American Dream" (Lee and Moscovitz 66). Instead, Lee and Moscovitz contend that their failings as mothers, workers, and friends serve as a "modern-day cautionary tale about consumptive, bourgeois femininity" (66-7). This neoliberal position, among other visual and narrative constructs, make it difficult to determine where reality television's housewives fit into current mediated conversations about feminism and femininity, which are often depicted in conflict to one another through feminism's examination of the housewife as the primary subject of feminism.

In a 2012 interview at a women's conference, Gloria Steinem was asked to weigh in on the so-called conservative "war on women" after Rush Limbaugh called a Georgetown law student a "slut" and "prostitute" who was speaking out to demand that religious institutions cover birth control. Sensing that portrayals of women on reality television was in part to blame for the current backlash, the interviewer asked, "Do you think the 'Housewives' shows, the Snookis and the Kardashians of the day are setting women back?" Steinem replied, "Well, yes. Women are portrayed as ornaments. The media shapes our views of what we can be. Part of the backlash says, if we just changed our bodies, society would be fine" (Hill 17). A year later in an address to

Simmons College upon receiving an honorary doctorate in human justice, Steinem further remarked on *The Real Housewives* franchise, “I think the worst are the ‘Housewives’ shows, because they present women as rich, pampered, dependent and hateful towards each other” (“Gloria Steinem Hates”).<sup>109</sup> Although Steinem cannot be said to represent the sentiment of all feminists, the public disapproval from a very public (historically located second-wave) feminist is important in understanding relationship to the changing characterization of the housewife. For Steinem and in the tradition of second-wave feminism’s position against the unfairly treated and imagined housewife in the 1950s, the idealized housewife on television is still part of a larger war on women. For example, in writing for *Time* in 1970, Steinem imagines what the world would look like if women were equal players in “What Would it be Like if Women Win.” She says, “No more men who are encouraged to spend a lifetime living with inferiors; with housekeepers, or dependent creatures who are still children.” She continues, “The revolution would not take away the option of being a housewife. A woman who prefers to be her husband’s housekeeper and/or hostess would receive a percentage of his pay determined by the domestic relations courts” (Steinem). Steinem expresses concern that housewives are financially dependent on their husbands, and the solution is about pay. If she does not go to work outside the home, she must be paid for her labor within the home. In other words, women’s economic independence is intricately tied to her freedom. This sentiment represents a fairly popular second-wave feminist reaction to the role of the 1950s housewife. (It is also a big part of the argument made by first-wave feminists, such as by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Women and Economics* (1898).) However, in the twenty-first century, the housewife who has achieved economic independence does not seem to fit with these old feminist definitions of freedom from her gendered position as a housewife. Nonetheless, although financially things may be different

for the twenty-first century housewife on reality television, the housewife's inferior gendered portrayal is again connected to a larger war on women still being waged today.

Conversely, problematic and controversial writer and cultural critic Camille Paglia, who describes herself as a dissident feminist,<sup>110</sup> loves *The Real Housewives*. She declares, "*The Real Housewives* franchise isn't entertainment to me- it's a lifestyle. I watch virtually nothing else on TV now" (O'Donnell). Capitalizing on Paglia's public praise for the show, Bravo asked her to sit down for a "Watch What Happens Live!" interview aired on BravoTV.com with *The Real Housewives*' executive producer and talk show host Andy Cohen, who Paglia calls the "Soap Messiah [...] Jesus was Jewish. What's the problem?", and *The Real Housewives of Miami* housewife Ana Quincoes. The interview, titled on BravoTV.com as "After Show: 'Housewives' and Feminism," is bizarre on many levels. What exactly does *The Real Housewives* franchise have to do with feminism, and why is Paglia, of all people, there to provide fans with these answers? Paglia, and her troubled relationship to feminism, seems markedly out of place next to the glamorous housewife and the well-groomed, handsome Cohen. In addition to providing extra entertainment to online fans, both Paglia and Quincoes are there to promote their most recent books. Quincoes' book is called *Sabor! A Passion for Cuban Cuisine*. Paglia's book, called *Glittering Images: A Journey through Art from Egypt to Star Wars*, details 29 of her favorite artworks. The juxtaposition of the housewife promoting her cookbook alongside the dissident feminists' book about her number one picks from Western art is, again, strange indeed. Of course, as a public academic "feminist" (who is also publically against academic feminism), Paglia is also there specifically to speak about the feminist position of *The Real Housewives*. Here is the first part of the conversation between Cohen, Paglia, and Quincoes:

Cohen asks a question from a fan on the cue card in front of him, “Is reality show narcissism a radical feminist act?”

Paglia responds, “Um, well, I think that *The Real Housewives* is helping to redefine feminism after the Gloria Steinem generation kind of sanitized sexuality right out of the female persona. So I think this is like bringing it back. The passion and the power and the majesty.”

Quincoces interrupts, “I mean there’s power in sexuality.”

Paglia, “Absolutely!”

Quincoces, “So I think Gloria Steinem didn’t want to use that. But you know what- you have that, you use it, and there is a feminist principle involved in that.”

Paglia, “Absolutely. Second-wave feminism made a terrible mistake by defining female power as solely advance in the office, in the workplace. When in fact, the new woman should be able to do it all, should be able to have a sexual power, but also a professional power.” (“After Show”)

Obviously, the initial question is never really answered, and it’s unclear why the question was chosen for Paglia. In other words, the fan’s question could work to criticize Paglia for enjoying the narcissism of the show, as in, how could she possibly see any kind of feminist actions in these narcissistic housewives? Or alternatively, the fan might really believe that female narcissism could actually be construed as an “f-you” to those that want to judge housewives’ current behavior and choices. This conflict of how feminists or postfeminists should respond to *real* housewives now is nonetheless important and up for discussion again in the twenty-first century. However, unlike Betty Friedan taking into account the real lives of her Smith College



classmates at her 15 year reunion in 1957 wherein she got the idea for *The Feminine Mystique*, feminists are being asked to take into account how real housewives are depicted on reality television. Are they similarly as desperate as their 1950s counterparts? Should we boycott them, or watch them in secret as a guilty pleasure? Or maybe we should do as Paglia, and watch virtually nothing else? How should (or should) feminism respond to television's twenty-first century real housewives? Why is Andy Cohen even entertaining the question, since feminists (perhaps like housewives) are such a throw back?

Paglia and her new friend, Quincoces, use the opportunity to criticize Steinem and second-wave feminism. A public high-five against the prudishness of those old feminists in favor of the new sexuality of housewives (a well-disciplined and idealized female body that enacts an ultra-femininity) who, as such, may very well be the



new twenty-first century feminists, practicing a new “feminist principle” as Quincoces suggests.<sup>111</sup> Projansky describes this as sex-positive postfeminism, which defines feminism as antisex “and then offers itself as a current, more positive, alternative” (Projansky 67). Paglia is, of course, infamous for taking part in the public critique of second-wave feminism’s supposed push for gender neutrality and movement into academia. Criticizing second-wave feminism in this way is very typical within postfeminist narratives and ultimately reflects a misreading, or at least a narrow definition, of the goals of the second wave. Lynn Spigel criticizes the unfortunate historical revision of the feminist past within the “wave” metaphor, “With both its oceanic and

avant-garde connotations, the waves thesis works to place old feminists on the beach – washed up like fish on the shore” (“Theorizing *The Bachelorette*” 1212). Additionally, Paglia’s praise of how female sexuality is used in *The Real Housewives* is slightly out of line, since there is actually very little sex or sexuality displayed in any *The Real Housewives*’ episodes. Although the housewives’ relationships with husbands or boyfriends create some compelling narrations, the men mostly remain on the periphery. Instead of displaying it openly, housewives talk to each other about sex, confessing either their lack of it or how freaky they are. For example, housewife Vicki Gunvalson (*Orange County*) complains that her “love tank” is empty when she and her husband haven’t had sex for two years. Alternatively Kandi Burruss (*Atlanta*) asks housewives to reveal their “freak number,” or how sexually daring they are in the bedroom. Georgetown University film and media studies program coordinator Lilian Hughes, in studying the way the introduction segments of each show position the housewives within the rhetoric of postfeminism, argues that the housewives identify themselves more so as mothers and wives, rather than like previous postfeminist characters who are promiscuous girls gone wild or sexually liberated heroines (like *Sex and the City*) (Hughes 54).<sup>112</sup> This suggests that the “real” housewives may have more in common with their 1950s counterparts and may be more like the postfeminist’s mother rather than her “sexy daughter” (54).

Instead, the camera position on *The Real Housewives* seems to sexualize the housewives in that it often focuses our gaze on the housewives’ bodies, and particularly, their cosmetically enhanced breasts. In the first season, Orange County housewife Kimberly Bryant’s introductory tagline is “85% of the women around here have had breast implants.” Especially early on, in *The Real Housewives of Orange County* there is an attempt to sexualize the role of the housewife in depicting the relationship between young “housewife” Jo De La Rosa and her fiancée, Slade

Smiley. Slade says, “I would love to see Jo become that housewife that I dreamed of,” while Jo remarks, “He’s pretty much keeping me.” When Jo loses a bet, she has to dress up in a French maid’s costume and clean the house. The camera watches Jo saunter down the white carpeted stairs in the costume. Jo begins dusting. Slade remarks “All I need is a beer and a remote control,” which solidifies his position as a Stepford husband. The editing gives viewers a shot-reverse-shot of him watching her, practically licking his lips. Afterwards, he says in a voice over, “I’m not sure what was more exciting. Jo in that French maid’s costume, or the fact that she actually used a cleaning product” (“Cut the P and Lem Out of Problem” 1:5). He smacks her butt. The narrative of the sexualized housekeeper doesn’t last much beyond the first season of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, however (and neither does Jo’s character who eventually breaks up with Slade and leaves the show, remarking on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary special that she regrets filming this scene). Instead, rather than acting out their sexuality, the housewives themselves seem to encourage their to-be-looked-at-ness with their clothing choices and the ways in which they discuss their bodies amongst each other.

What Paglia may be responding to, then, is the physicality of the housewives’ luxuriously and scantily dressed bodies as they verbally spar over who-said-what-to-whom. Paglia has written elsewhere that she loves the “frank display of emotion, the intricate interrelationships, and the sharp-elbows jockeying for power and visibility” more like the “great female trash-and-sleaze” of the old school soaps and soap stars like Donna Mills in *Knot’s Landing* (O’Donnell). However, it is not useful to take sides on this as though Steinem and Paglia are, like the housewives, jockeying over the title of Queen for a Day. Taking sides on something like this is exactly what is wrong with the public visibility of feminism/postfeminism in the twenty-first century. Instead, what is interesting from this exchange between Steinem and Bravo’s elected

feminist-in-residence Paglia, is that there is a real desire to make sense of the current relationship between real feminists and real housewives, and to also understand why real housewives are so captivatingly popular again.

Nineteenth-century Russian and English literature scholar Emma Lieber in “Realism’s Housewives” suggests that the popularity of *The Real Housewives* is similar to the popularity of (and rise of) modern realism in the nineteenth century, as a historical and aesthetic development, which categorically has something to do with women in general and housewives specifically (Lieber 114). Lieber locates the progenitor of *The Real Housewives* not with other television sitcoms with female leads, but looks further back to the nineteenth century realist novel, which she says was “not only the first literary form both to place women (and homemakers) center stage and to appear serially, but also a genre that was in many ways focused, often ambivalently, on the female body” (115). More specifically, the rise of modern realism was tied to the rise of women as both subject matter and audience of the realist novel (115). In citing novels such as *Middlemarch* and *Bleak House*, Lieber describes the single woman, in “a profound state of want,” who must fill up her life with a husband and a home, only to end up with “the paradoxes of domestic settlement” (116-7). These modern female dilemmas were created in response to the new age of industrial capitalism, where realism is about objects, the overflow of things, and where “realist representation [also] objectifies” (117). Lieber’s point is that the human female, in realism’s tradition, is both viewer and viewed, subject and object. She says, “if realism is ontologically imbricated with the fate of subject-object hybrids, then it is understandable that the question of how desire is managed by such creatures would be central” (119). Although there is, obviously, a profound difference between the nineteenth century novel and reality television, Lieber suggests that they both enact a “shared realist agenda”; the similarities in subject matter,

narrative interest, and interpersonal dynamics prompt a “kind of realist drive as a human attribute, the impulse to create and consume artifacts that announce themselves as ‘real’” (122, 120). This process is enacted through female protagonists’ questions of “moral improvement through self-abnegation” in the “form of conversion tales” (122). In *The Real Housewives*, narratives of “before” and “after” are a major part of the drama.

Thus, Steinem’s criticism is understandable in the sense that viewers gaze voyeuristically upon the real, but exaggerated, overly-managed, and well-disciplined bodies of housewives, those objects of conversion. Viewers watch as they transform their bodies through plastic surgeries, Botox injections, spray tans, and spa days, often performing these rituals together, calling them “parties,” as story lines feature, for example, one housewife hosting a “Botox party” for her friends. In this way, the housewife is both objectified and classed. They are often racially categorized too, depending on which housewife program one is watching; a white housewife may have a spray-tan party, whereas shows that include more housewives of color may feature wig parties. Body maintenance and disciplining is a key topic in the confessionals as the housewives narrate over footage of spa treatments and cosmetic surgery. The examples are endless. In the first episode of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, housewife Ramona Singer narrates her trip to the dermatologists’ office, “There’s a lot of pressure to look good in New York... I want to maintain my look by having some procedures done now. I call them beauty maintenance. I believe that a woman should maintain her beauty. We all want to look younger. And if you work on it, on a timely, regular basis, you’ll look younger than what your chronological age is” (“Meet the Wives” 1:1). Maintaining one’s body is often described in terms of what a good housewife should do. Dina Manzo narrates over her spa day in *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, “It’s very important, I think, to keep yourself, you know, presentable,

especially as a wife. You don't want to become a mother and let yourself go. I don't believe in that at all. I think you should always be like your husband's girlfriend. Otherwise they're going to go out and get a girlfriend" ("Thicker than Water" 1:1). Similarly, as 32 year old Alexis Bellino of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* says in her interview confessional during season five when her mother comes into town from Missouri to get a facelift (mother/daughter plastic surgery dates happen frequently on the show):

All women need to have a certain level of maintenance, a certain level of preserving their beauty. I have had my breasts done, veneers put in. I've had Botox and Restylane in my lips. I don't think you can just get a facelift and expect everything to look normal and natural. So that's why I Botox. But the maintenance just keeps going up and up, man. That age thing! ("This is How We Do it in the O.C." 5:14)

This sentiment is typical of postfeminist narratives that work to depoliticize female empowerment through self-improvement narratives. This is sometimes called lifestyle postfeminism, tied intricately to neoliberalism, where, "This focus on individual subjectivity is characteristic of post-feminism's celebration of media visibility and the pleasure of consumption practices, as well as indicative of post-feminism's shift away from questions of power and domination" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 268). This sense of adopting a lifestyle is referenced by the housewives; for example, in housewife Kimberly Bryant's voiceover on season one of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, she refers to Coto as not just a place to live, but a "lifestyle," as viewers watch her do a Pilates work-out at a gym, the camera honing in on her obvious breast implants. Gender and communication scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer, in writing about reality television's obsession with cosmetic surgery, note that the underlying assumption is that "appearance is one's character and capacity for achievement in

all aspects of life” (268). The body is a project, and making the right consumer choices, including cosmetic surgery, is the responsibility of the woman who wishes to assert her individuality (Wearing 286). Later in season eight of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, Vicki confesses her nervousness about revealing her facelift to the other housewives when she says in a voiceover, “I’m going to own what I did to myself. It’s my body, it’s my choice. It’s my money” (“Bullies and Babies” 8:1). Additionally, the housewives’ audacious spending on her appearance is often exploited, as the camera moves in for close-ups of cash register totals or price tags. This, too, is tied to politics. In the reunion show of season two of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* all the housewives raise their hands when Andy Cohen asks them if they vote Republican. It is also tied to conservative religious ideology. Later seasons of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* feature openly religious housewives. For example, Alexis says in her introduction tagline, “I know who I am, and God does too.” Alexis often describes her relationship to her husband in religious terms, for example, “The Bible says you put God first, your marriage second, and your children third” (“Shameless in Seattle” 6:2).

However, on *The Real Housewives*, these narratives of personal transformation via disciplining the body through cosmetic surgery, obsessive exercise, or designer clothes are more than Cinderella stories. They challenge the limits of “girling” the “older woman” (Wearing 277). For example, Lee and Moscovitz discuss NYC housewife LuAnn de Lesseps’ “pathetic attempt to reclaim her youth as she buys gaudy trinkets, giggles girlishly at dildos in a sex shop window, and pretends to enjoy the band playing at the ‘bohemian’ dive bar” (Lee and Moscovitz 75). Bodies are not just objects of desire, they are also call into question the failings of the female body/housewife to remain desirable, the inevitability of aging and even illness. For example, even though Heather Dubrow (*Orange County*) is married to a plastic surgeon, she and her

Emmy Award winning actress friend Dina Spybey-Waters talk about only being viable as an actress for another ten years. Heather says, “We have a shelf-life in this business.” Dina elaborates, “I’m too old to play Harrison Ford’s wife.” This conversation is interspersed with Heather’s dilemma about taking her husband’s last name, which if she does, she says, “To me, giving up my professional name would mean that I was never going to work again” (“Scream Therapy” 7:15). In the next episode, the camera watches as she goes to the DMV and changes her name, and the final episode of the season is filmed at her house as a lavish party to celebrate this change which she likens to a Jewish naming ceremony. Of course, this storyline also ignores her (and her castmates’) work or labor of acting in a reality television show. Ultimately, all the money in the world can’t entirely remove age from the equation, and a woman better claim a rich husband while she still can. The “preoccupation with the temporal” is, too, a distinction of postfeminism as Tasker and Negra describe, “Women’s lives are regularly conceived of as time starved; women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their ‘biological clocks,’ and so on to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis” (*Interrogating* 10). Money can’t stop illness either, as we learn on *The Real Housewives of Orange County* when Vicki’s daughter discovers tumors on her thyroid and Gretchen’s fiancé/sugar daddy ultimately dies of leukemia.

These dramas of age and desirability, carried out with mothers and daughters or with older housewives and younger housewives, enact a generational politics that highlight the changing status of the housewife as well as the representation of the mature woman in popular culture. When asked on the 100<sup>th</sup> episode special of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, “what do you look for when you’re trying to find a new housewife?”, Andy Cohen, clearly linking a housewives’ looks to her success, responds, “A good ‘Real Housewife’ is pretty, she’s



outspoken, she's opinionated, she's got strong feelings about how she lives her life, and about the way others should live their lives" ("100<sup>th</sup> Episode Special"). Gender scholar Sadie Wearing in "Subjects of Rejuvenation: Aging in Postfeminist Culture" contends that "makeover paradigms are a crucial feature in postfeminist popular culture" which are also reproduced "in popular representations of feminism as an outdated anachronism, ripe for a makeover" (304). In some ways, reality television tried to makeover the old housewife character into a woman who is not only visually appealing by contemporary standards, but financially successful (through the show and her business endeavors) despite her relationship to her husband. Although housewives on the show have relationships with men, many of the housewives identify as single, whether they were previously married in the past or going to be married in the future. This single housewife character, in removing the man and marriage from its formulation, allows us to see how the housewife has become internalized as a state of mind rather than contingent on one's current marriage. However, this rejuvenated housewife, like postfeminism, is under a false sense of agency, liberated only by capitalism and only temporarily, since the biological clock is ticking. (Perhaps Paglia would like to see Steinem go under the knife and arise, like the housewives, rejuvenated.)

Yet, Lieber's argument (although not Paglia's), is that while the housewives' bodies are, perhaps, the main focus of the show, the show's engagement in self-reflection and confessional are equally as compelling. The confessional genre, integral to the realist tradition including reality television, is enacted in the formulaic structure of *The Real Housewives* series. Juxtaposed between the scenes of parties and dialogues between friends and enemies, are close-up interviews that feature one housewife alone intimately narrating and reflecting on the previous scene for the camera/audience. Sometimes the housewife's voice bridges over into the scene as it

is happening. These short confessionals and the subsequent reunion specials where they have to relive storylines and conflicts with host Andy Cohen, showcase the housewives' narcissism, but also allow audiences to hear their voices reflect (the rare voice of the female narrator) and experience the moments of realization that comes from looking at one's self in the mirror. In the reunion shows specifically, the housewives must atone themselves to viewers for how they behaved all season when Cohen reads critical comments and questions from emails and blogs interspersed with footage from the season. In fact, the reunion show, is "a metadiscursive sub-genre of reality show that is designed for revelation: it magnifies the typical reality TV expectation for disclosure" (Squires 33). Lauren Squires studies *The Real Housewives* reunion shows for how they display the tension between the confessional format of reality television and the upper-class norm of discretion in "Class and Productive Avoidance in *The Real Housewives* Reunions." She suggests that the realist narrative, advanced by the drama of talk and gossip, is at odds with the housewives' claim to an elite identity, of having class or being classy (35). *The Real Housewives* uses this contradiction between what the housewives say and how they act to discipline women's behavior. Lee and Moscovitz argue that footage of the rich "defiling themselves [...] reflect a deep class anguish within the US political culture and express a potentially powerful populist sentiment" that the upper-class did not get its wealth by hard work and education, the tenets of the American dream (Lee and Moscovitz 78).

Nonetheless, this confessional formula draws out the narrative and reframes it again, sometimes tearfully, candidly, cattily, or stupidly, switching the narration of the show from third-person to first-person, between producer and housewife. At times these perspectives are complimentary, and at times they are at odds or ironic, questioning the realness of representation (Hughes 30). Lieber elaborates on this point extensively:

To the extent that the *Housewives* confessionals present both figures of the self at once (in the sense that the detached, reflective self is just as much a beckoning object of the gaze as is the body-bound character who behaves badly in the scenes displayed – which means the buxom blonde or brunette must also be embraced as a cogitating creature), we are met face-to-face with the basic but ultimately ineffable truth that we are truly at once subjects and objects, thinkers and actors, minds and bodies, inhabiting time and outside of it, both knowing and benighted. And so the paradoxical simultaneity whose representation can only be approached in realist text is in the television spectacle given full and immediate expression. (Leiber 124)

This confessional drama which draws out the difficulty of desire, the negotiations of being both subject and object, is at the very heart of *The Real Housewives* franchise, and arguably, a large part of what makes it, and other reality television shows, so popular (128).<sup>113</sup>

The shift in perspectives, partly allowed by the confessional, provides some possibilities for critical distance and also encourages irony. Irony can prove useful in that it showcases a playful understanding of the sexism at play in the modern construction of the desperate housewife. That is to say, the real housewife on television is only a parody of the real housewife, and thus opens it up for destabilization and denaturalization. This critical and ironic distance provides space for the housewives to judge each other and audiences to judge the housewives. A wink-wink at “real” housewives was part the original intent of the show. Executive producer Scott Dunlop says of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*,

The show was originally based on a treatment called “Behind the Gates” and was supposed to be a satirical look at life in affluent gated communities. When I moved out here I realized Los Angeles was a company town. Looking at the town, I had to ask, ‘Is

California a state or a stage?’ I wanted to open the show with time lapse footage of Coto as it was 40 to 50 years ago, a barren valley then show the suburbanization of it. (Eades)

The opening shot of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* exploits this in the first episode. The show begins with a montage of different scenes from the gated community in Orange County. A helicopter shot of the houses. A close up of a white mansion. A golfer. A body swimming in a pool. These shots are juxtaposed with a collage of different voices from the housewives and husbands that reveal, “Life is different in a gated community”; “The land here is a million an acre. The average price house is a million point 8 to 2.2”; “Once people come through this gate, there is a sense of being Tefloned, nothing sticks to you”; “Image is everything in my world”; “When you’re not behind the gates, you don’t know what you’re missing”; “This isn’t just a place to live, it’s a lifestyle” (“Meet the Wives” 1:1). Then the music changes and there is a shot of a sunset over water with the words “7 million families live in gated communities” at the bottom of the screen. The little song played during this shot hints to its suburban gothic predecessors, signaling that there is something sinister going on behind the gates. In the final shot before the first episode begins, the viewer is positioned inside the car, watching the gates open. The title of the show *The Real Housewives of Orange County* appears in the space between the gates, showing the exclusivity of being this particular kind of housewife.<sup>114</sup>

This shot of the gates opening mimics a similar shot in the satirical film *The Stepford Wives* (2004) which, arguably, was the first media product to signal a revival of the 1950s desperate housewife character that 1960s and 1970s popular feminism worked to critique.<sup>115</sup> This nod to *The Stepford Wives* links *The Real Housewives of Orange County* to past constructions of the 1950s housewife, thus asking viewers to critique them in that way. Since women have

seemingly progressed since then, this anachronistic portrayal of the modern women should give the viewers (and feminist media critics) a sense of superiority over their characterization. While ironic distancing is not unique to *The Real Housewives*, Andy Cohen claims that is specifically part of Bravo's strategy to appeal to its audience. In a 2009 interview on National Public Radio he explains Bravo's editing strategy, "We do something with the editing that is called the Bravo wink. We wink at the audience when someone says 'I'm the healthiest person in the world' and then you see them ashing their cigarette. We're kind of letting the audience in on the fun" (qtd. in Lee and Moscovitz 68). Strangely, in twenty-first century television, winking is both a way to justify sexist television and a sign that something is "so gay."<sup>116</sup>

However, the critical distance and ironic positioning comes not only from their position as real, modern day Stepford wives, it also comes from way the show uses the wealth of the housewives to create exclusivity. In other words, the original intent of *The Real Housewives* was to critique the women on the show for their failed attempt at maintaining their upper-class status. Their failure at class is ultimately related to their failure at gender, their public hysterics or their displays of bad mothering, for example. The exclusivity of their wealth and geographical location (behind the gates) not only provides the critical distance between them and the viewer, but their failure at gender, at being a mom and a housewife, accentuates their undeservedness. As also discussed in previous chapters, irony can also be dangerous in postfeminist narratives in that it can provide an excuse for sexism to continue. For example, Susan Douglas, who calls this phenomenon "enlightened sexism," notes that it is now acceptable, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of women (Douglas *Enlightened* 9). And nobody but those stuffy, old, second-wave feminists would dare ruin all the fun. Ironic distancing can also provide the new feminist

media scholar with just enough of an excuse to watch countless hours of bad television. Wink, wink.

Although Paglia's confessional love for *The Real Housewives* is doubled as a very public statement about her disappointment with second-wave feminism (and Steinem personally), not all love for *The Real Housewives* goes completely against such histories. Feminist media scholars in the twenty-first century also have to wrestle with their fascination with these shows that they work so hard to critique. Tasker and Negra in their introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* admit that as feminist academics they find postfeminist culture "provocative in all the senses of that term: it is troubling and yet at the same time compelling" (4). Leiber too confesses to loving *The Real Housewives*; she qualifies her research into their popularity, "I am not simply trying to justify my less-than-exalted leisure activities (though that would be a welcome result)" (114).<sup>117</sup> Admitting to one's leisure activities implicates oneself in relations of power. As Angela McRobbie notes, "relations of power are indeed made and remade within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment" ("Postfeminism and Popular Culture" 38). Leiber's confession hits close to home as I reveal to my friends and colleagues what I am writing my dissertation about. Most seem confused that someone could earn a Ph.D. writing about the most banal throw back from the 1950s. They are also equally as surprised to learn that my young kids are in daycare four days a week while I'm taking a sabbatical from my community college job in order to write this, as though being on sabbatical means I should be relaxing and rejuvenating at home with young kids. (Are my transgressions similar to the real housewives when they outsource their motherhood to nannies?)<sup>118</sup> These negotiations that I'm having with myself and my critics seem to be very much related to this dilemma, as I find myself in the middle of the day folding laundry and watching

*The Real Housewives*. Is this real labor or “me-time”?<sup>119</sup> Am I a real feminist? Or a real housewife?

Lynn Spigel speaks to the dilemma of the feminist intellectual’s relationship to her subjects in an article called “Theorizing *The Bachelorette*: ‘Waves’ Of Feminist Media Studies,” published for a roundtable on approaches to film feminisms in *Signs* in 2004. Like her title suggests, Spigel examines the different trends in feminist media studies since its inception, as feminism grew as an academic field alongside film studies in the 1970s. As Spigel recounts, through Laura Mulvey’s 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” feminist film scholarship challenged the politics of looking within the patriarchal structures of Hollywood cinema (1209). But, as she notes, feminist film theory soon had to adjust to take into account the desire women film scholars had to watch these films and the pleasure they felt in doing so. Spigel, too, admits to feeling constricted by the gaze theory, and later, confesses her “(sort of)” enjoyment of *The Bachelorette*, another television reality show that uses the same typical confessional interview format that intersperses with the real dating drama. Rather than, however, completely dismissing the second wave (as Paglia does) and its ascent into academic theories (especially psychoanalysis), Spigel tries to see how feminist film theory can be useful in answering these complex questions of pleasure and fantasy within television programs that market themselves to a postfeminist logic that embraces femininity in the name of enlightenment and girl power. Spigel says, “Many of us (including myself) often enjoy these programs. Yet as numerous feminists have argued, that pleasure should never be used as the justification for their existence—nor should these programs’ popularity with women be seen as proof of generational transcendence past the ‘cranky’ mothers of feminist film theory” (1212).

Instead of thinking in waves of feminism and media images, Spigel proposes that we concentrate on “feminist media studies itself as a ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault 1972) that is composed of a variety of discursive practices that is informed by ‘popular’ feminisms in the broader sphere of culture” (1212-3). Although defining feminism in terms of historical waves seems to fit neatly into historical trajectories, feminism and its relationship to media images is much trickier than that. Relationships shift and discourses develop as much through their transformations and contradictions as they do through their constancy. Spigel is trying to say, in using Foucault, that the search for discursive unities in feminist media studies can only be enacted by studying their differential relations to each other. And although Spigel goes on to define seven different discursive practices in feminist media studies<sup>120</sup> wherein even someone like Paglia can find her particular mode of practice, she never really says how she accounts for her own pleasure in watching *The Bachelorette*. Presumably, discursive practices like theory can/do arise alongside “popular feminisms.” For example, the “advice” discursive practice as enacted in nineteenth century domestic manuals that focused on women’s everyday life (cooking, cleaning, child rearing), also grew to include the discursive practice of “criticism” of the housewife role (as in Helen Gurly Brown’s 1962 *Sex and the Single Girl*) (1213). Using this model, perhaps we can better imagine Ana Quincoces’s cookbook and Camille Paglia’s art critique sitting alongside each other on Andy Cohen’s bookshelf, likely next to his own memoir *Most Talkative: Stories from the Front Lines of Pop Culture* (2012).

As discussed in chapter one, feminism and housewifery have always been connected, discursively forming together. Essentially the character of the American housewife, first created and imagined by real American housewives in the nineteenth century, has continually been used to spark debate about the subjectivity and objectivity of women’s roles and bodies in American



society. Although the nineteenth century housewife might have also been considered a feminist by later definitions, the two haven't always remained united, and at times seem contradictory. Yet as feminists like myself and Lieber admit to (sort of) liking *The Real Housewives*, it seems we still need to work through our differences in order to understand our particular formations. As both characterizations of the housewife and the feminist have changed dramatically in the twenty-first century, it's time we get "real" with each other and see, as in the confessional format, how they present both figures of the self at once. Although reality TV resurrects sexist stereotypes and exploits exaggerations of the female body, both feminism and reality shows about housewives narrate their concerns about the visibility of women's bodies. Both employ women as their subject matter and their audience. And both are wrestling with questions of relevancy in the newest century. Are housewives, like feminists, still necessary? Although I am not eager to claim that Paglia or any of the real housewives currently proliferating television are real feminists, I cannot entirely remove my own position from either characterization. Yet, the seeming exclusivity of each position simultaneously eludes me.

### **The Housewife Race and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.**

In the first reunion episode of the first season of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, housewife Jo, the only non-white housewife on the show, responds to a critique that accuses *The Real Housewives* of not representing real housewives very well. Jo, who does not believe they are representing anybody but themselves says, "It's about five women and their stories. Not trying to be representative of the entire housewife race, if you will" ("Reunion" 1:8). Jo is talking about individual representation characteristic of neoliberal and postfeminist narratives; she is not exactly talking about race. However, the criticism she receives and her rather glib reply does call

into question how housewives are/should be categorized in popular culture and what does race have to do with that categorization.

It is painfully obvious that the “housewife race” represented on television in the twenty-first century is depicted as largely white. This representation, of course, mimics the 1950s and 1960s televised housewife. In *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* (2002) television scholar Beretta E. Smith-Shomade notes that “after the cancellation of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* [1951-1953] and *Beulah* [1950-1953] no other sitcoms concerning African-Americans appeared on prime time for fifteen years. Consequently, from the late 1950s until the end of the 1960s the narrative of situation comedy was thoroughly dominated by professional, college-educated WASPs” (33). Additionally, African American women’s lives in the 1950s were markedly different than their white, middle-class counterparts. Stephanie Coontz notes that while white women raised in the 1950s were often criticized by their friends and families when they decided to “combine motherhood with paid employment,” African American women were more likely to be criticized by their friends and family when they considered becoming full-time housewives (*A Strange* 125). In 60 percent of African American middle-class families, both parents worked, compared with less than 40 percent white middle-class families (*A Strange* 125).

Since the clichéd image of the quintessential housewife character was formed from the white, televised, 1950s and 1960s housewife, only to be replaced by the white, postfeminist, single girl, it seemed initially difficult to tell how television would respond to the return this traditionally white new/old character in the twenty-first century, especially considering the increasingly multicultural ensemble casts proliferating cable and prime time television. Indeed, the housewife’s middle/upper class concerns have been primarily brought about by gender roles, and not by her race or even class position. This is also the critique of popular feminism or liberal

feminism, that the concerns of women of color and poor women are marginalized. In *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) bell hooks argues,

White middle and upper class women like those described in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* were housewives not because sexism would have prevented them from being in the paid labor force, but because they had willingly embraced the notion that it was better to be a housewife than to be a worker. The racism and classism of white women's liberationists was most apparent whenever they discussed work as the liberating force for women. In such discussions it was always the middle-class "housewife" who was depicted as the victim of sexist oppression and not the poor black and non-black women who are most exploited by American economics. (hooks 146)

While it remains questionable that middle/upper-class women "willingly embraced" housewifery, they were certainly influenced by media that claimed it was better to be a housewife than a worker, whereas poor women did not have the luxury of so-called choice. Friedan largely ignores the experience of African American women in *The Feminine Mystique*. Once media texts got on board with depicting economically viable (mostly) white women who work in the 1980s and 1990s, liberation feminism seemed no longer necessary. Thus, it is easy to see how liberal feminism led to a postfeminist media trend. Media scholar Kimberly Springer in "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights Popular Culture" makes this comparison, "Liberal feminism and postfeminism exclude revolutionary visions of feminism that continue to ask the question 'equal to what?'"(251). Indeed, Tasker and Negra define postfeminism as "white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self. It is thus also a strategy by which other kinds of social differences are glossed over"

(*Interrogating 2*). Even though reimagining the housewife today signals some anxiety over the supposed gains of second-wave feminism, her characterization is still influenced by contemporary neoliberal trends that seem to gloss over difference.

For the most part, popular culture demands that non-white housewives must be demarcated by place or celebrity position, such as in *Basketball Wives*. Attempts in pop culture to include African American housewives in stories about housewives have been, not only few, but also, when they do happen, the African American housewives are marginalized and mostly appear like their white counterparts. For example, in the 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives*, Ira Levin includes an African American housewife, Ruthanne Hendry, who is, for the most part, very much like Joanna Eberhart. Joanna is a photographer; Ruthanne is an illustrator. Joanna and Ruthanne get together to discuss what they have in common. For example, Joanna and Ruthanne discuss their similar tastes in books when meeting at the library. Interestingly, the character of Ruthanne does not exactly appear in the 1975 film adaptation except to show an African American couple at the grocery store in the final scene of the film. The woman is wearing a bandanna on her head just like Joanna wears in the first scene in the movie, thus to suggest that the African American housewives' fate in Stepford is the same as the white housewives. Does the post-Civil-Rights narrative of the housewife conclude that integration means assimilation? What happened to all the up-and-coming Ruthannes? Did white liberationist feminism save them from a similar fate? Did she, like her white counterparts, achieve economic freedom by working in the 1980s and 1990s only to retreat from the workplace to suburbia to now become the latest version of a Stepford wife? The problem, of course, with this storyline, is that most African American women have always worked outside the home, rarely making enough to achieve economic independence. Nevertheless, now that the desperate housewife character has returned

to films and television once again, how is the African American housewife imagined in the twenty-first century media landscape?

Tellingly, in the 2004 film *The Stepford Wives*, there are no African American housewives featured as speaking characters in the suburban Connecticut town. *Desperate Housewives* began in the same way, except that it featured a Latina housewife (Eva Longoria). Perhaps responding to criticism in 2005, *Desperate Housewives* created an African American housewife in the second season. Ironically named, Betty Applewhite (Alfre Woodard), this fraught, problematic depiction of a suburban housewife-turned-single-mother, practically got run out of town by the end of the season. She was hiding her son, a mentally disabled man who seemed to prey on young, white women, in the basement of her home on Wisteria Lane. This monster/black man hiding in the basement of white suburbia was too much of a commentary on white people's racist fears about suburban integration for a Sunday night escapist soap opera. It wasn't until 2010 when *Desperate Housewives* introduced another African American housewife Renee Perry (Vanessa Williams) to Wisteria Lane, a much more mild and entertaining character, and also similar to the other housewives (although was, of course, portrayed as divorcing from a baseball star).<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, Vanessa Williams's winning of the Miss America crown in 1983 was one of the key television moments that signaled a change in television's previous "dearth" of African Americans on network television (Smith-Shomade 33). However, as Smith-Shomade points out, "With her light skin, green eyes, and hair texture normally associated with Europeans, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issued a statement claiming the Williams was not 'in essence, Black'" (117). Thus Williams's portrayal on *Desperate Housewives* was similar to Ruthanne Hendry's portrayal in *The Stepford Wives*, a parallel housewife that did not engage with racial politics.

Not until 2008 did contemporary reality television make a concerted effort to cast African American women as a new kind of (style of) housewives with the creation of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.<sup>122</sup> Reality television, especially due to its trend to voyeuristically gape at the wealthy and spoiled, seemed a perfect place to recast the housewife as African American. Smith-Shomade explains of the history of African American women on television, “Afro-American women emerged in the 1980s television comedy as upper and middle class (as represented by the Huxtables and the young coeds of *A Different World*). They embodied the Black bourgeoisie. Women play material-driven individualists who possess the education, ability, and means to achieve goals, all through their own efforts [...] Hooray for the Black superwoman!” (22). Of course, this representation of African American women was in sharp contrast to her previous depictions on film and television which, as Smith-Shomade notes, “confines them to work that cleans, cooks, suffers, or entertains” (50). It was also in stark contrast to her depiction in news media as “welfare queen” in the 1980s. While, ironically, the description of a woman who “cooks, cleans, suffers, or entertains” may fit into the critique of suffering white housewives offered up by Betty Friedan and others, African American women were never shown as housewives in the same scenarios as white their counterparts. Instead, it seems like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* was just continuing the media tradition set in place by the Reagan-Bush years into the twenty-first century (just coming out of the new Bush years). Bravo was using the latest reality genre to showcase the lives of material-driven African American women, whose newest definition of “superwomen,” like her white counterparts, included abandoning the notion of “having it all” in favor of having a rich husband.<sup>123</sup> However, this model of “retreatism” does not seem to work in the same ways for African American women. As Springer points out, “[W]hile postfeminism proposes that white women cannot have

it all, racialized postfeminism, at least for black women, means continuing to be everything for everyone else *and* maintaining a sense of self” (252). Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* seems to perfectly embody a particular flavor (or flava) of racialized postfeminism.

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is the third iteration of *The Real Housewives* franchise, coming out in the fall of 2008. Because all but one original cast member was African American, Bravo seemed to be narrowcasting housewives for African American viewers. However, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* quickly became the most watched series on Bravo and the highest-rated of all *The Real Housewives* franchise with over 4.6 million total viewers (Kondolojy).<sup>124</sup> Perhaps Bravo, like other networks, was just tapping into a commodity-driven role (housewives) by targeting aspects of identity (like race) as a way to be inclusive or at least to target broad, especially white, audiences (Banet-Weiser 203-4).<sup>125</sup> Its popularity during the same year that Barack Obama was elected into office is no coincidence. America was tossing around the term post-racial just as we were so past feminism that we could once again embrace the housewife. But what does it mean to air a show largely about African American housewives in a “post-racial” society? Does it mean that becoming a housewife, like becoming president, is now an equal opportunity endeavor? Although becoming president of the United States and becoming a reality television housewife announces oneself with a certain relation to class privilege (which seemingly promotes illusions of racial equity being achieved), laying claim to the gendered position of a housewife does not exactly showcase the dream of equality.

At first glance, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* seems to follow the same formula as the rest of the geographical locations, showcasing the lavish lifestyle of elite women who just happen to be African American. Indeed, the very first few minutes of the first season attempts to position the wealth of African Americans living in Atlanta similar to that of Orange County.

Viewers watch footage of well-dressed African Americans stepping out of luxury cars, golfing, getting their pictures taken by the press, etc., while the housewives' voiceovers explain,

Atlanta is a mecca for wealthy African Americans. Nowhere else is there an elite society of African Americans going to galas, fashion shows, and living in luxury gated communities. Atlanta is the black Hollywood. We have a lot of A-listers around town. Atlanta is new money. You have to watch what you say. Everybody knows everybody. There's a lot of gossip. Image is everything in Atlanta. Everybody wants to be in Atlanta. It's hot! ("Welcome One, Welcome ATL" 1:1)

Initially this class characterization may seem to place African American housewife characters in parallel positions to white housewife characters, referred to as pluralist by Herman Gray in *Watching Race* (1995) (87). Yet, despite its attempts to conform to the class standards set by *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, the show's does not sidestep its racial identification or potential racial conflicts. Even though its opening segment announces its class position, it also conspicuously announces itself as Black through its location, Atlanta. The background music, too, has a slightly more audible, hip drum beat than the other *Housewife* shows (Gates 141). While the African American housewives of Atlanta, like their white counter parts, struggle to maintain an image of themselves as having class, their class indiscretions are not only a symptom of their gender, but also their race.<sup>126</sup> For example, in media scholar Raquel Gates' "Keepin' It Reality Television," she points to critiques made of NeNe Leakes' speech patterns and mannerisms that distance her and her castmates even further from definitions of upper-class, white femininity (Gates 141-2). Additionally, even though she is not a singer, NeNe's behavior often stereotypes her as a diva, defined by Springer as "a powerful and entertaining, if pushy and bitchy, woman [...] Today's divas are unreasonable, unpredictable, and likely unhinged. When a



woman is called a diva or accused of exhibiting diva behavior, she is usually a woman of color” (Springer 255, 257). While some may embrace this term, Springer notes that “it seems the label is ultimately just another form of categorization that classes women according to how well they adhere to race, class, and sexuality norms” (257). These racial and gender stereotypes are ultimately commodities that “make difference legible” (258). These differences also mark how well the housewives conform to their class status.

Actions made by the Atlanta housewives, defined by housewife Kandi Burruss as “boughetto” as a combination of “bougie” and “ghetto,” showcase how the housewives simultaneously negotiate their new elite class (bourgeois) with their ties to a racial identity defined by poverty (ghetto) (“Petty Boughetto” 3:4). This, and Atlanta’s new money status, runs the risk of depicting the housewives as “a class below” other white, reality television housewives (Moody 278-9). Although arguably, these indiscretions and ironies make all *The Real Housewives* shows entertaining, Gates notes, “From the very first episode, *Atlanta* involved a clash of realities that was based on the specificities of racialized, gendered difference” (Gates 142). Specifically, criticism of the show revolves around the ways in which African American women are portrayed on television when it positions race narratives as dramatic moments that reinforce racial stereotypes. For example, when University of Pennsylvania doctoral candidate Gretta Moody studied African American audience responses to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, she pointed to participants’ criticism of the way the housewives were stereotyped, “black women are angry, controlling, and gold digging, have no use for men, and contribute to dysfunction in families,” all of which caused them to question the show’s authenticity (Moody 277). However, at the same time, casting African American women as the newest and most popular real housewives both reinvents the role and potentially expands the representational possibilities for

African American women on television, or at least expands the choices cast members and fans can make about who/what constitutes a “real housewife.” Moody notes that these negative stereotypes did not keep participants from watching and argued that they filtered out the negative in order to select which elements are relatable (277). While there is no question that the traditional, white televised housewife calls attention to gendered relationships, her characterization rarely engages with racial politics.<sup>127</sup> What, then, does the creation of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* signal about gender and race in a postracial and postfeminist media landscape?

The way in which *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* characterizes the only white housewife on the show is key to understanding, at least initially, how conversations about postracial and postfeminist identity come together. Kim Zolciak begins the show as an unmarried “housewife” with two kids. Her otherwise married boyfriend, Big Poppa, prefers to remain off camera. But Big Poppa’s money is clearly seen when audiences frequently watch her calling him to ask him for money to buy her things like a Cadillac Escalade “fully loaded, TVs, bigger tires” (“Welcome One, Welcome ATL” 1:1). In her introductory scene, audiences watch Kim shopping with NeNe, calling herself “very materialistic,” and announcing that she wants to “die in Dior.” She wears a big, blonde wig, and in her confessional, juxtaposed with close-up shots of her sifting through designer clothes (ultimately paying for them in cash), she claims, “In Atlanta, even though it’s predominately African American, I don’t feel out of place. I’m a black woman trapped in a white woman’s body. But people always said I should have been black anyway.” Looking at how Kim negotiates her “minority” status in a show where, in all other iterations, she is part of the majority is interesting. Although Kim may be tapping into the idea that blackness is a performance (she is wearing a wig, after all), she specifically calls attention to the “limits” of

her white body, and imagines herself trapped inside her skin, which inhibits her from her true self, a black woman.<sup>128</sup> Kim's announcement does several things to bring ideas about how a postracial mentality is brought out in a postfeminist context. By declaring herself as a black woman, she is essentially saying that America is so post-race that skin color no longer comes with a history of racism. Instead, it is a desirable and hip identity that anyone can claim or, in this case, buy into with enough money and designer clothes. Blackness, in other words, is like fashion, consumable and changeable, despite the actual material realities of poverty brought on by institutionalized racism (Banet-Weiser 205). Sarah Banet-Weiser in "What's Your Flava?: Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture" notes that the increased visibility of an urban, cool aesthetic implies "that race itself no longer matters in the same way it once did but is now simply an interesting way to feature the authentic, cool, or urban or develop a theme in a reality show" (223). Similarly, as Springer discusses, race is always present even when women of color are not seen (Springer 249). These new economic models also form the production of postfeminist popular culture when considering the new housewife trend it is another manifestation of postfeminist identity category that announces its past relationship to feminism in rather consumable and shallow ways. Banet-Weiser says, "Like race, gender identity is constructed in the present 'postfeminist' culture economy as a 'flava,' a flexible, celebratory identity category that is presented in all its various manifestations as a kind of product one can buy or try on" (Banet-Weiser 202). This sentiment is confirmed by Andy Cohen in his memoir, "And indeed, every series has its own flavor; OC is cul-de-sac normality. Atlanta is campy and over the top. Jersey is hot-tempered and clannish. DC was thoughtful and provocative. Beverly Hills is image-conscious and *this* close to Hollywood. Miami is spicy and tele-novellic. New York is aggressive and controlling" (Cohen 196). Although the show is about real housewives, Kim is not actually a

wife (at least on the first season). She is seen more like a gold digger, whose reliance on a rich man for support, makes her a kind of housewife, trapped in a single mother's body.<sup>129</sup> Identifying as two previously unpopular roles on television, an African American woman and a housewife, Kim demonstrates the new cultural capital of both consumable posts.

While initially she seems to get along with other housewives, Kim's racist comments ultimately alienate her from the group, proving that she cannot really claim blackness for her white body. In *Shaded Lives*, Smith-Shomade tells the story of a fan who wants to be "a white Oprah" to which Oprah replies, "You want to be a white Oprah? What does that even mean?" (183). In considering the reverse, Smith-Shomade concludes that "the reality of race relations in the United States secures the idea that Winfrey cannot escape her blackness. Nor do I think she has ever wanted to" (185). On *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Kim cannot escape her whiteness or become the black housewife she imagines, especially when she makes racist comments or interacts with the other cast members in racist ways.<sup>130</sup> (She can and does, however, become a legitimate housewife when she marries Atlanta football player Kroy Biermann in 2011 on her spin-off show, *Don't Be Tardy*.) For example, in the first season Kim expresses that she doesn't want to go to housewife DeShawn Snow's BBQ because "I don't want to sit around with NeNe and eat chicken" ("Dream a Little Nightmare" 1:6). Since DeShawn had never claimed she was going to serve chicken (they had lamb), the other housewives, especially NeNe, believe Kim's comments were racist and call her out on it. Her subtle or not-so-subtle racist comments continue throughout her five seasons on the show. For example, when Kandi arrives late to a pedicure, Kim refers to her lateness as "black people's time." NeNe accuses Kim of treating her African American assistant, Sweetie, as a slave. And when Kim visits Kandi's new house in a (wealthy) neighborhood which she calls "ghetto" and "hood," Kim remarks about Kandi's indoor

swimming pool, “Well, you don’t need sun; that’s perfect for you!” (“Got Sexy Back” 5:1). Ultimately, Kim is alienated from the rest of the housewives and does not finish the fifth season. Although she starts her own spin-off series with her new husband, her actions demonstrate that she is not successful at claiming her identity as a black woman trapped in a white woman’s body. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* does not replace her character with another white woman, articulating the disconnect between white and African American housewives, the impossibility of a shared oppression. The cast remains all African American until it briefly introduces a biracial housewife Mynique Smith in season six, who Phaedra Parks accuses of “really being raised as a white person” (“Ghosts of Girlfriends Past” 6:8). This positioning of Mynique proves similar to the way Kim tried to explain her own racial politics. When Mynique has to be schooled by the housewives when she doesn’t understand what “getting read,” “throwing shade” or “tea” means, NeNe describes her to the camera, “Mynique is biracial. Her mom is white. Her dad is black. She’s a white girl trapped in a white girl/black girl body” (“Ghosts of Girlfriends Past” 6:8). Mynique’s time on the show also proves limited since she does not conform typical stereotypes of African American women nor does she present compelling stereotypes of a desperate and hysterical housewife. Arguably, the combination of these two caricatures is what accounts for the drama of the show.

Another interesting way that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* merges discussions about postfeminism in a postracial society is articulated through the character Porsha Williams, introduced in season five. Porsha begins the show as the wife of former NFL football player Kordell Stewart. Importantly, she is also the granddaughter of Civil Rights leader and philanthropist Reverend Hosea Williams who was known as Martin Luther King Jr.’s right hand man. These two identities intersect in interesting ways. Porsha explains her ties to history in her

first confessional on the show, interspersed between vintage photos of King and Williams, a check made out to the Hosea Williams Feed the Hungry Foundation for 10,000 dollars, and shots of Porsha working with volunteers sorting through donated food for the foundation. This introduction to Porsha, through her history, deliberately positions her within a trajectory of the history of race in America. After this introduction to her past connection to the Civil Rights Movement, the tone shifts as Porsha lightheartedly explains that she's "always lived well" while we watch her twirl around in expensive dresses, modeling them for her mom and her sister ("Call Me Miss USA" 5:3). This juxtaposition from the Civil Rights era to its legacy (the granddaughter's subsequent wealth) is meant to showcase the successes of the Civil Rights era. Expressly, Porsha's character as a wealthy housewife represents the gains of the Civil Rights era, the right to consume in leisure as a non-working housewife. This representation is also linked to how she displays femininity and how she represents herself as a housewife in a postfeminist era. She exclaims of her marriage to the NFL star, "In that first year of marriage, I didn't have to work, sweep or vacuum or anything!" The shots of her husband bringing her breakfast in bed, and later relaxing in the hot tub drinking champagne, is meant to show off a happy marriage. Throughout the season, Porsha tries to maintain the image of a happy wife who tries desperately to please her man, although eventually the image falls apart after Kordell exhibits controlling behavior.

Porsha's subsequent divorce from Kordell in the sixth season complicates the way she exhibits her postfeminist and postracial status. Watching Porsha struggle to admit how she tried to be a certain kind of wife and maintain the image of happiness in the public eye is difficult. She tries to find her new identity as a single woman, yet she is often shown still wearing her wedding ring. This predicament demonstrates that the mystique surrounding the "happy wife" today is

still a myth, similar to what it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, as Springer says, “postfeminism retrenches women’s grievances, especially those of black women, as personal- not structural or institutional” (268). We watch Porsha visit a therapist, wondering what she could have done differently or alternatively, commenting on the personal flaws of Kordell. She does not blame the institution of marriage or Kordell’s sexism for her marriage’s failure. This is an interesting position when considering how black women viewed the struggle for racial equality more urgent than gender equality in the 1950s and 1960s (Coontz *A Strange* 127).

Concurrently, Porsha’s character is seen as postracial failure on a “girl’s trip” to Savannah where the housewives go on a Freedom Trail Tour to visit historic sites important to African American history. Again, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, through this storyline, attempts to frame the housewives’ tour of Savannah within the historical trajectory of race in America. Housewife and famous entertainment lawyer Phaedra Parks says, “Everybody knows you don’t know where you’re going until you know where you came from. It would be remiss of us if we visited Savannah, a very historical city for people of color, and not pay homage to our history” (“Ghosts of Girlfriends Past” 6:8). The housewives’ first stop is the First African Baptist Church which was one of the stops on the Underground Railroad. Initially, filming the housewives touring the church seems like a way to elevate the housewives’ status. After all, they are going on a trip to Savannah instead of a more exotic, tropical location, typical of other *Housewives* shows.<sup>131</sup> Porsha remarks, “Being here in such a historic place, really makes me feel connected to my grandfather’s legacy and how hard he fought for our civil rights.” However, when the tour guide points to the holes in the floor to show how the slaves caught air as they moved under the four feet high crawl space to escape slavery, Porsha seems confused. Although she makes special attempt to reference her grandfather’s name as she moves through the church,

she seems unaware that the Underground Railroad was not actually a railroad when she says, “But there has to be an opening for the railroad at some point. Cause somebody’s driving the train. It’s not electric like what we have now.” The other housewives appear visibly shocked as they try to explain to her that the Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad, but a euphemism. In a later episode, Phaedra jokes about Porsha’s lack of education about African American history when she does not want to go to Mexico with the other housewives, “When it comes to traveling to Mexico on a trip that Kenya organized, honey, I would rather Porsha take my Black History final exams” (“He Said, She Said” 6:17). That is to say, the gains of the Civil Rights movement didn’t prove successful at educating its granddaughters about the history of African Americans in America. While the granddaughter of a prominent Civil Rights leader can appear so past-Civil-Rights that she doesn’t need to learn her history, arguably, Porsha also appears to still need a little help from the Civil Rights Movement because of her ignorance. She also needs a little help from feminism since, in the same Freedom Trail Tour episode she declares, “I feel like all wives need to be submissive to the right person. I happened to have done it to the wrong person” (“Ghosts of Girlfriends Past” 6:8). It seems both the ghosts of feminism and the ghosts of the Civil Rights era are haunting *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Housewife, and former supermodel Cynthia Bailey confirms, “Her grandfather, Hosea Williams, just rolled over in his grave.” Interestingly, Porsha’s historical obliviousness is seen primarily as a symptom of gender, a general girlishness and flightiness, and not as a representation of her race. This has the result of keeping the show about the housewives rather than about their race relations. But it also confirms what Springer concludes of postfeminist films featuring African American casts, “when black women [...] become homemakers they lose their connection to being black” (272). Porsha’s character is, however, unlike the rest of her castmates in that she is the only non-



working housewife on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. All the other housewives seem well aware of the history of the Underground Railroad, and their position within the historical trajectory of race as examples of how far African American women have come.

Indeed, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* features more successful working women than any other of its counterparts. After casting Kandi Burruss, a well know Grammy-winning songwriter, in the second season, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* seemed to shift some its focus onto the business adventures and professional successes of the housewives. Tellingly, unlike *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, the opening segments in season six, for example, juxtaposes the image of the housewife posing in her expensive outfit with a clip of her working, rather than featuring her kids and husband in the background. This difference articulates a variation in postfeminist discourse for African American women. Springer argues that African American women are “denied the pedestal designated by nineteenth-century ideals as the sole province of white women. Instead, black women are expected to remain in the workplace [performing] racial success stories” (272-3). In some ways, this mimics the mid-century self-image of the black mother, which as Coontz says “coincided rather than conflicted with their identity as providers of the family” (*A Strange* 126). Wealthy black women in the mid-twentieth century were more likely to work outside the home than wealthy white women, and glamorous working women were more likely to be featured in African American magazines like *Ebony* (Matchar 40).<sup>132</sup> The Atlanta housewives seem to work excessively, occasionally to the detriment of their health and relationships. For example, in addition to being a famous entertainment lawyer (most famously for Bobby Brown), Phaedra, self-described “southern belle,” also decides to go to school for mortuary science and become a mortician. She works at the law office and studies for exams while taking care of two young boys, one of whom is an infant. Often she expresses the extent of

her tiredness to her fellow housewives. In one scene she is even shown pumping her breast milk on the bus ride to Savannah in plain sight of the housewives and cameras.<sup>133</sup> Meanwhile, her relationship with her husband, Apollo Nida, suffers, and the camera makes sure to focus in on scenes of her overly messy and chaotic house, showcasing her trouble in maintaining the image of a southern belle, that gendered nineteenth-century ideal.

While having an African American presence in *The Real Housewife* franchise may look like an attempt at inclusion, merely altering the housewives' "flava" is not exactly an exercise in equality, and the show looks more like a modern exercise in separate-but-equal entertainment politics. It seems as though the traditionally white housewife character has trouble crossing racial barriers, despite attempts to move "post" historical racism. Springer concludes, "no matter how much we adamantly maintain that no one black person should have to be representative of the race, we need to be aware that television disseminates these representations nationally and internationally" (268). Other reality housewife shows depict the "housewife race" as a class of white, rich women exhibiting classless behavior due to her gendered hysterics. While *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* follows this model, the indiscretions of "the housewife race" in Atlanta is additionally tied to stereotypes of African American women, which is arguably, and unfortunately, related to its ratings success.

Ultimately, Bravo's (and other networks') attempt to reclaim the character of the housewife by filming the gossip and hysterics of real housewives, partly led to the demise of many beloved fictional soap operas. Andy Cohen wonders, after the announcement that his favorite soap, *All My Children*, was going to be cancelled, "Was I, in some way, partly to blame for this? Had I helped kill soaps? (Cohen 268). While this is certainly debatable, it does make me wonder the extent to which reality television has since shaped our discussions of real

housewives, and by extension, shaped the way we position our contemporary feminist critique of housewives- both real and imagined. The soap opera was once considered the fiction habit of housewives, but it also played an enormous role in developing a critical voice for the feminist media scholar, beginning in the 1970s (Brunson *The Feminist* 3). Specifically, as I will explore further in my next chapter, feminist criticism of the soap opera had a hand in shaping the feminist academic (217). Yet intellectual critique involves a distancing, a “disidentity” with one’s subject. In the twenty-first century, much fiction has been replaced by some version of reality. While certainly, the feminist media scholar can critique reality television’s editing techniques, camera angles, and excessive displays of wealth, what does she have to say about real women? Can she really distance herself far enough from real housewives? What does the death of the traditional, fictional soap opera signal about the real feminist intellectual’s relationship to the real housewife? The housewife, while still fictionally present in the twenty-first century, is lately more often represented as “real,” whether on television or on the blogosphere. Whereas the 1970s feminist built an identity for herself by disassociating with the housewife, the feminist in the twenty-first century finds herself reluctant to do so. If we were to reimagine the 1998 cover of *Time* that illustrated the historical trajectory of feminism that ended with Ally McBeal, perhaps we may find a real housewife depicted as the next floating head in 2015.

## CHAPTER 5- CONCLUSION

### **Domestic Chic and the Neoliberal Ghosts of Lydia M. Child: Radical Housewifery and the New Frugality of the Feminist Hipster Housewife**

The idea for this dissertation came as a result of two seminar papers and a subsequent conference paper for the Midwest Modern Language Association I wrote in 2005. At the time, writing about housewives seemed relevant and exciting. It was only a year after *Desperate Housewives* aired, and everybody was talking about it. *Desperate Housewives*, along with *Wife Swap* and the film *The Stepford Wives* seemed to signify a new trend about an old idea. How strange this seemed in the first few years of the twenty-first century! This was even before *The Real Housewives* franchise began in 2006. While I had for years thought 1950s housewife fashion was fabulous, searching out vintage purses and dresses at thrift stores, I was much more hesitant to believe that actually becoming a real housewife could itself be considered trendy.

However, trendy television shows featuring gorgeous vintage fashions like *Mad Men* (2007-2015) seemed to make that suffering housewife seem so desperately chic. In the first season of *Mad Men*, Don Draper (Jon Hamm) calls the psychiatrist that his wife, Betty (January Jones), has been seeing. The two men discuss Betty's problem without any regard for confidentiality. The psychiatrist explains, "Mostly she seems consumed with petty jealousies and overwhelmed with everyday activities. Basically we're dealing with the emotions of a child here." Don says, "She wasn't always like this." The psychiatrist replies, "We're finding that this kind of anxiety is not uncommon in housewives" ("Red in the Face" 1:7). As contemporary viewers, we are supposed to react incredulously at the idea that a husband can discuss his wife's therapy session with her psychiatrist. But Betty Draper's 1960s "petty" anxieties she expresses during her psychiatry sessions are in some ways currently familiar even as they reference an old

mystique. Her character is both disdainful and strangely desirable, as she lays her beautiful, blonde head carefully on the fainting couch, her poufy dress splayed out around her crossed legs, her gloved hands reaching for her cigarette case. She is cool and fabulous, enviable in her quiet and chic desperation. *The Feminine Mystique*, perfectly captured in Betty Draper's character, somehow still resonates with us today.

*The Feminine Mystique* still evokes strong and contradictory reactions 50 years after its publication. Stephanie Coontz discusses the history and reception of Betty Friedan's book in *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and the American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (2011). Coontz notes that in 2006 it ranked "thirty-seventh on a list of the twentieth century's best work of journalism, compiled by a panel of experts assembled by New York University's journalism department," but it also ranked number seven of the ten most harmful books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by editors of a right-winged magazine, *Human Events*, just below Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (xv). Coontz goes on to cite how Friedan was remembered upon her death in 2006; some credit her for "ignite[ing] the women's movement" and "transform[ing] the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world" (xv). However, many believe that the transformation was detrimental to and even an attack on housewives. Notably, contemporary critics of *The Feminine Mystique* accuse it of being "modern feminism's Original Sin" for supposedly denigrating stay-at-home mothers (xvi). Nonetheless, Coontz argues that three themes from Friedan's book continue to affect Americans today: 1) her analysis of consumerism and "the sexual sell," 2) the defense of "meaningful, socially responsible work" as central to both women's and men's identity, and 3) her belief that more fulfilling relationships are the result of men and women sharing "access to real meaning in their public lives" (xxiii). These relevant, important concerns, along with the book's integral role in defining popular

feminism (for better or worse) are part of what make it relevant and even interesting to the twenty-first century and its new brand of feminist and postfeminist housewives, including myself.

In 2007 I left UW-Milwaukee after finishing my preliminary exams to move to Minneapolis. I was 30 years old, and my only five-year marriage was already falling apart. Graduate school and other circumstances had taken their toll on our relationship, and we thought a fresh start in a new city would help repair our crumbling marriage. Although I wasn't retreating from the workforce to become a stay-at-home mom, I did retreat from academia and my dissertation to focus on my marriage and, eventually, have kids. Even though I did not conceptualize it in this way at the time, I enacted my own version of the postfeminist retreatism narrative, choosing to opt-out of academia in favor of marriage. Years later, after obtaining tenure at a local community college, I was granted a sabbatical from teaching during the 2014-2015 school year. I decided to finally write my dissertation as my sabbatical project and took up thinking about housewives again. Since I began the project nearly a decade ago, some things had changed.

Unlike in 2005, I am now a bit of a housewife myself. Although I had an academic project to attend to, I struggled to read and write when there was so much domestic work to do. I had an infant and a three year old to get off to daycare in the morning, for whom I always felt terrible leaving. I had dinner to plan, laundry to fold, toys to put away, and dishes to wash. I pumped milk for my baby three times a day, all while reading about and watching films, reality shows, and prime time soap operas featuring unhappy housewives. When the kids got home from daycare, the evenings were rushed to get dinner, baths, and bedtime stories all accomplished by a reasonable time. Although the lives of television housewives were not exactly like mine, there

were certainly days that I felt desperate and unhappy. Being both a housewife and a working academic feminist sometimes seemed like an impossible union, both tasks riddling each other with guilt. (Can one be a good feminist and a good mother?- the age old question.) While I did not quit writing or quit my job, I watched some of my very creative, successful, incredibly hip female friends leave their jobs in favor of staying at home with their kids. And part of me felt jealous.

In *New York* staff writer Lisa Miller's much discussed article written in 2013 called "The Retro Wife: Feminists Who Say They're Having it All- By Choosing to Stay at Home," Miller cites an episode in season three of *The Good Wife* (2009- ) where an ambitious associate, Caitlin D'arcy (Anna Camp), suddenly quits when she becomes pregnant. Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies) worries that Caitlin's resignation has to do with how poorly she mentored her and tries to dissuade her.

Alicia: "You're smart and clever. If you give this up for someone, even someone important to you, you'll regret it."

Caitlin: "I'm not giving it up for my fiancé. I'm giving it up for myself. I like the law, but I love my fiancé."

Alicia: "But you don't need to choose. There is no reason why you can't work, be a wife and a mother."

Caitlin: "But I want to choose. Maybe it's different for my generation, but I don't have to prove anything. Or if I have to, I don't want to. I'm in love." ("Long Way Home" *The Good Wife* 3:17, Miller)

The storyline in *The Good Wife* illustrates a growing trend among self-described feminists and highly educated, ambitious, career women who are fully embracing domesticity, giving up their harried workplace lives in favor of the domestic arts. Unlike in the 1990s, the ambitious career women are now portrayed on television as nutty and single (Claire Danes in *Homeland*, and Tina Fey in *30 Rock*) (Miller). In other words, not only is the urban, career woman quickly falling out of fashion in favor of a more domesticated woman, her choice to leave work is starting to seem less desperate and more empowered. This movement is not just happening on television. Miller cites,

The number of stay-at-home mothers rose incrementally between 2010 and 2011, for the first time since the downturn of 2008. While staying home with children remains largely a privilege of the affluent (the greatest number of America's SAHMs live in families with incomes of \$100,000 a year or more), some of the biggest increases have been among younger mothers, ages 25 to 35, and those whose family incomes range from \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year.

These differences between the upper-class housewives and the middle-class housewives are interesting. Not only are these distinctions a matter of class (and race), but they seem to be a matter of how well one aligns oneself with feminism and, especially, liberal feminism's concerns with female autonomy and ultimately as we will see, female biology.

The more privileged housewives have been called Glam SAHMs, for glamorous stay-at-home moms by Wednesday Martin, a researcher with a Ph.D. in anthropology who is writing about them in her upcoming memoir *Primates of Park Avenue*. In a 2015 opinion article for *The New York Times* called "Poor Little Rich Women," Martin defines these Upper East Side women as "mostly 30-somethings with advanced degrees from prestigious universities and business



schools” who are married to rich, powerful men, have three to four children under the age of ten, and prefer to engage in “intensive mothering” rather than work outside the home. They also exercise vigorously, wear expensive clothes, and participate in sex segregation as “a choice.” Martin describes women-only luncheons, shopping sprees, coffees, dinners, and “flyaway parties on private planes, where everyone packs outfits the same color.” Most troubling, Martin explains, are the commonly arranged “wife bonuses” which are apparently distributed for her good family management skills, usually when her husband receives his own financial gain from an investment or yearly work bonus. While these women are rich, Martin argues that their stratified society makes them disempowered. Her conclusion is much like Friedan’s in that she believes power comes from earning one’s own money. By participating in such “rigidly gendered social lives” the Glam SAHMs exemplify how women maintain a lower status when they financially rely on men (Martin). In this way, they seem much more like *The Real Housewives of New York City*; excess resources and petty arguments make them a spectacle for middle-class housewives. In other words, because of their wealthy class status, Glam SAHMs choice to stay-at-home seems more desperate than radically (post)feminist.

However, the most recent middle-class housewives are not exactly like the Glam SAHMs or even the conservative, new traditionalist, Martha Stewart-types. Instead, the newest iteration of stay-at-home moms and housewives of my generation and class are tattooed, hip feminists, often found represented on the blogosphere or the proprietor of an Etsy site. They are fed up with the rat race and uninterested in the elite and their glamorous lifestyles. They want to define themselves against their “media mothers” in that they are happy, rather than desperate, and resourceful, rather than wasteful. In chapter three, I cite Charlotte Brunsdon in “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella,” who discusses a “disidentity at the heart of

feminism.” Her point is that second-wave feminists tried to distance themselves from the housewives on television, while postfeminists try to distance themselves from feminists rather than television housewives. However, while new feminists are not disclaiming housewifery, this new brand of self-proclaimed feminist housewives are, in a way, trying to distance themselves from the rich, suburban housewives they see on television. The newest housewife might prefer to be called a neo-homesteader or a radical homemaker. While they are not heavily featured on prime time soap operas or reality television shows, they are dominating the blogosphere. Alternatively, their choice to stay at home is linked to a radical act against the corporatization of America and consumer culture. Embracing domesticity among the middle-class, educated woman is the new feminist act. Miller says that this new “feminist revolution” is defined as an attempt to attain fulfillment for each individual woman. Where “the rewards for working are insufficient and uncertain,” the “tug of motherhood is inexorable” (Miller). She cites one interviewee, Kelly Makino, a M.S.W. graduate with honors from Penn who sports Converse low-tops and a nose ring, “The feminist revolution started in the workplace, and now it’s happening at home” (qtd in Miller). In other words, the so-called feminist response to the televised representation of the desperate twenty-first century housewife was not to send her back to work. It was to reclaim the home as a progressive site for nineteenth century retrograde domesticity, and (re)learn the practices of our great, great, great grandmothers.

This new self-described feminists’ decision comes with rediscovering the old school domestic arts like canning food, knitting, and “making their own laundry soap from scratch,” displaying their crafty creations on Pinterest and mommy blogs or even selling them on Etsy or at indie craft fairs for a little “egg money,” or extra cash (Miller, Matchar 85). While not exactly poor, Makino and many of my own contemporaries have reclaimed a kind of frugal

housekeeping, positioning the Do-It-Yourself, or DIY, domestic arts as anti-establishment. Many of these domestic arts are hauntingly reminiscent of Lydia M. Child's 1829 *The American Frugal Housewife*, which also has countless directions for canning, knitting, making one's own soap, and even brewing one's own beer, a huge movement among hip, urban 30-somethings today. In the first line on her section on "Beer," Child even announces, "Beer is a good family drink" (Child 86). Child's frugal housekeeping was also a response to the extravagance of the elite, especially aimed at establishing an American identity separate from the British. DIY trends, suggestive of the old-fashioned domestic arts, are "partially rooted in a recession-based ethos of frugality" whose Depression-era ideals could "easily been ripped from the pages of last month's *O, the Oprah Magazine* or *Real Simple*" argues journalist Emily Matchar in her book *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (2013) (20). While environmentalism and self-sufficiency are also reasons for this growing trend, "homecentric lifestyles" tend to be more popular during an economic downturn. Matchar claims that the "thrifty, resourceful, self-sufficient homemaker still carries a huge amount of cultural currency" and has become a "veritable heroine" during the recession economy in the twenty-first century (20-1).

This inspirational frugality, newly aligned with the newest American values/circumstances, is on target to remake the middle-class American housewife a patriot again, reminiscent of "the first woman of the republic," Lydia M. Child, who cautioned against extravagance, implicating it as a reason for hard times (Child 110).<sup>134</sup> Child, also a well-known radical abolitionist writer, was quick to condemn the "absence of domestic education" in her section "Education of Daughters," since modern American girls are no longer being schooled by their mothers in the domestic arts and therefore losing their ability to manage a home (Child 92, Ogden 54). Child writes, "But what time do modern girls have for the formation of quiet,

domestic habits? Until sixteen they go to school; sometimes these years are judiciously spent, and sometimes they are half wasted; too often they are spent in acquiring the *elements* of a thousand sciences, without being thoroughly acquainted with any; or in a variety of accomplishments of very doubtful value to people of moderate fortune (Child 93, emphasis in original). Child, who was “generally a supporter of feminist causes” was not against the education of girls, but rather, she says the “greatest and most universal error is, teaching girls to exaggerate the importance of getting married” by learning such “man-traps” as music and drawing (Ogden 54, Child 91, 93-4). After they catch the man, she worries, how will housewives be useful and “cultivate the still and gentle affections” which has “such an important effect of a woman’s character and happiness” (Child 93)? Like Child suggests of the nineteenth century housewife, contemporary housewives today run the risk of being too far removed from hands-on basic skills, which ultimately jeopardizes her autonomy and character. In other words, Child is worried about housewives becoming desperate.

Today, the middle-class neo-housewife is far from desperate; her frugality, resourcefulness, and anti-corporate mentality make her radical and hip, a new pioneer. In fact, one of the most popular and successful neo-homesteader and blogger, Ree Drummond’s memoir title perfectly captures this pioneer-like spirit, *The Pioneer Woman: Black Heels to Tractor Wheels*. Drummond’s plans to attend law school in Chicago after graduating from the University of Southern California were interrupted when she decided to marry Ladd Drummond, a cattle rancher from Oklahoma, who she frequently refers to as “the Marlboro Man.” Although she cheekily calls herself a “desperate ranchwife” on her Pinterest page, *The New Yorker* announces “Drummond makes an average life look heroic” (Fortini). Not only does Drummond assist in her husband’s ranch work and homeschool her four children, she boasts several of her own creative

projects. Aside from being an award-winning blogger and memoirist, Drummond's résumé also includes photographer, author of four children's books and three cookbooks, and frequent television personality. On her blog, Drummond announced that Columbia Pictures has even purchased the film rights to her memoir. In fact, she has made neo-homesteading so popular that she recently launched her own line of cookware and dinnerware through Walmart. On the Walmart commercial, Drummond says, "To me, a great meal is just as much about the presentation and personality as it is about the food. I designed my Pioneer Woman line of cookware and dinnerware to be pretty and practical" ("Walmart TV Commercial"). Thus, Ree Drummond successfully merges the new, practical frugality with an artistic sensibility. This is similar to the way nineteenth century domestic pioneer Catherine Beecher addressed both frugality and art. Historian Annegret S. Ogden notes, "As chief instigator of the movement to train female teachers for the Western frontier, [Beecher] wrote the book both for the pioneering woman who had to fall back on the skills of colonial times, and for the artistically or socially inclined lady" (Ogden 59). Like Beecher's target audience, Drummond's retrograde return to the skills (and sites) of colonial times do not remove her from her social and artistic engagements. Instead, they paint the thrifty, self-made housewife as positively heroic.

Heroically situated, the new humble domestic is now a veritable Rosie the Riveter, or at least a Laura Ingalls Wilder. Matchar suggests that "the symbolism around homemade items began to shift" (45). For example, while "a jar of home-canned tomatoes was once a sign of poverty, it now became a sign of an enlightened attitude toward food and the environment. If an apron was once a symbol of oppression, it was now a kitschy-cool reminder of the joys of cooking" (45). Matchar notes that 43 percent of new canners are between the ages of 18 and 34, and sales of canning supplies have recently risen 35 percent (97). Canning, she says, "is the

height of hipness” citing a Bay Area canning blog called *Punk Domestic*s (96, 107). One can find nearly 45,000 aprons on Etsy or just 21 styles at the chic clothing store, Anthropologie (101). Or, of course, there are plenty of apron patterns posted on the blogosphere to help the crafty

housewife sew one herself. This new heroic and feminist attitude about domestic canning is captured in this Rosie the Riveter cartoon drawn by *The New Yorker* magazine cartoonist Carolita Johnson. Visibly pregnant Rosie proudly displays her jar of pickles tattoo and a red apron. The slogan “We Can Do it!” is revised to “We Can Pickle That!” These



symbolic practices are not just hip, however; characteristics of this new/old heroine, like the nineteenth century housewife, include American virtues of “independence, industriousness, and self-reliance.” During Child’s day, these were values that were not yet masculinized, but soon came to be distinctly masculine. Interestingly, these values practiced within the new hip, radical homemaking are distinctly feminized, and even considered feminist practices. This combines old-fashioned notions about (Victorian) womanhood and American citizenship into the new feminism.

This heroine, part of the larger “re-skilling movement,” situates homemaking as “an explicitly political act,” a “feminist revolution ... happening at home” (Matchar 22, Miller). This modern feminist heroine is “restoring prestige to historically devalued traditional domestic arts and skills,” “reclaiming traditional women’s work” (Matchar 23). Shannon Hayes, author of *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture* (2010), is a major

influence of this movement. The cover of her book boasts the author raising her rolling pin triumphantly into the blue sky. Domestic acts like hanging out the laundry can take on a new meaning and become a political, and even dangerous act, especially if it violates local zoning laws that prohibit it. In an article written for *Yes! Magazine* titled “Live Dangerously: 10 Easy Steps” Hayes suggests that the commitment to hanging the laundry is a commitment to “slowing down [...] to align one’s daily household activity with the rhythms of nature [representing] the new, sane world so many of us are working to create” (Hayes). Her other dangerous, radical acts include “cook[ing] for your family” and “choos[ing] one local food item to learn how to preserve for yourself for the winter” (Hayes). Performing rural domesticity in urban spaces can seem especially radical. Currently, some of my Minneapolis neighbors keep chickens or bees in their backyard.

The slow food or scratch food movement can, however, seem like just another attempt at getting women to spend more time in the kitchen. Matchar critiques Michael Pollan, author of the bestselling book, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), for the sexism apparent in his philosophy. For example, Pollan admonishes Betty Friedan for teaching American women that cooking was “drudgery, indeed [a] form of oppression,” and he laments that women no longer feel the “moral obligation to cook” (qtd in Matchar 112). Nonetheless, Matchar suggests that new food culture represents a “nostalgia for hands-on work” that is fulfilling “in a way that it never was for Betty Friedan’s desperate housewives” (Matchar 23). She cites Peggy Orenstein’s term “femivore” as “an unexpected way for women to embrace homemaking without becoming Betty Draper” (qtd. in Matchar 103). Orenstein says that “Feminivorism is grounded in the very principles of self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal fulfillment that drove women into the workforce in the first place” (qtd. in Matchar 103). Arguably, it is also similar to the way Child

positioned frugal housekeeping in the nineteenth century and suggests a longing for pre-industrialization.

These radical ideals about homemaking translate into radical ideas about mothering which are not only practiced by stay-at-home mothers but also attempted by frantic working mothers like myself. This new standard of ideal parenthood is often linked to Dr. Sears' 2001 *The Attachment Parenting Book*, a book nearly all of my fellow 30-something feminist friends read while pregnant with their first child. Feminist scholars Miriam Liss and Mindy J. Erchull in "Feminism and Attachment Parenting: Attitudes, Stereotypes, and Misperceptions," note, "Practices associated with attachment parenting have served as a nexus of debate about what it means to be a feminist parent" (132). Attachment parenting, a technique designed to "minimize the boundaries between baby and child" includes "babywearing" (rather than use a stroller, the mother is expected to carry the baby in a sling or an expensive Ergo, \$130+ for a soft, organic piece of fabric with some buckles), extended breastfeeding into toddlerhood, and refusing to let one's baby "cry it out" to fall asleep (Lim and Erchull 132). In ascribing to many of these ideals, I spent many days in the summer walking around the neighborhood with a sweaty 15 pound baby attached to my body and found myself crying (rather than my baby) through the night while endlessly rocking him (and then her) to sleep. When I discovered I had a low milk supply and a starving baby with my first child, rather than just give up breastfeeding in favor of formula, the modern pressures of mandatory breastfeeding flung me into an obsession with searching for a solution from lactation consultants, midwives, and mommy blogs, trying anything from teas, herbs, non-FDA approved drugs ordered from New Zealand, expensive pumps, and supplemental nursing systems. As I am writing this, I ran across a typical article (more like a blog written by a lactation consultant) on Facebook that illustrates the pressure of "natural parenting" among my



peers. The enthusiastically-like article, called “Low Milk Supply 101,” claims to offer breastfeeding support by beginning with, “Forgive me for asking but... Do you REALLY have low milk supply?” (Pickett). This mom-shaming question was one I heard from several of my peers and even, colleagues.

Additionally, I, like many of my friends, chose to use cloth diapers, a practice on which I spent a lot of money, time, and blogosphere research, trying to find the best methods of washing and drying the diapers. Like radical homemaker Shannon Hayes suggests of hanging one’s laundry out to dry, choosing to use and launder cloth diapers (rather than buy disposable diapers) is painted as an earth-friendly, natural, and progressive choice among feminist mothers. The labor and time involved in laundering the diapers is however, frankly, exhausting and stinky. Cloth diapering has become so trendy that they are now available at Target and Kohl’s, forcing a local “natural toys and baby care” shop near me, Peapods, to close. Natural (preferably home) childbirth, prenatal yoga, doulas, placenta encapsulation, co-sleeping, and following an alternative vaccine schedule (or refusal) are all fashionable, and even, mandatory practices among my peers. These pressures of all-consuming, natural parenting are partly aligned with the class anxieties of parents with money and education, as well as preoccupations with the definition of natural (Matchar 148, 155). However, despite some who claim that attachment parenting is “inherently anti-feminist” since it focuses on “the mother’s duty to engage in these [extremely intensive and time consuming] behaviors,” many link these new/retrograde birthing and parenting practices with “the new wave of feminism,” one which argues against the stereotype that feminists are anti-parenting (Liss and Erchull 131-2, Matchar 125). Matchar cites a blogger known as Hipster Homemaker who explains this phenomenon, “Women who grow their own food and make their own diapers. Women taking back the home. This is my domain”

(qtd. in Matchar 126). Again, Matchar links this with “the twenty-first century progressive ethos of self-sufficiency, sustainability, and the elevation of the ‘natural’” (131). However, these ideas that so-called natural mothering or attachment parenting is better can easily lead us back into old arguments about biological essentialism.

Some neo-homemakers are even opting out of the education system, choosing to home-school their kids, an act previously associated more with fundamentalist Christian groups rather than liberal feminists. Miller states that in 2012 New York City “the number of children being taught in their apartments rose by nearly 10 percent” (Miller). An article for the *Economist* reports that whereas homeschooling was illegal in 30 states just 30 years ago, today it is legal in all states and approximately two million children are taught at home (“Keep it in the Family”). On the United States Department of Education website it states that 91 percent of parents who homeschool their children said that “a concern about the environment of other schools” was the top reason for homeschooling. Currently, articles about “unschooling” frequently appear in my Facebook feed. Putting the responsibility on the mother, rather than the education system, to educate her kids aligns with eighteenth and early nineteenth century values wherein mothers devoted many hours a day to teaching and deciding what children should learn (Ogden 11). Ogden notes that in the eighteenth century, “character mattered more than a great deal of academic learning,” and the mother’s job was to “impos[e] God’s will upon the young mind” (11). While the radical homemaker may be imposing anti-corporate, pro-environment values, rather than God’s will, upon her children, she is still highly concerned with their moral character. However, the opt-out mentality, integral to the new housewife heroine, runs the risk of a kind of hyper-individualism characteristic of neoliberalism. Even though some neo-homemakers espouse opting-out as a “feminist necessity” and part of a “women-led movement” many find themselves

interestingly aligned with very conservative religious housewives (decidedly imposing God's will), especially trading recipes and gardening tips on the blogosphere. For example, Matchar cites the Duggars' (of TLC's *19 Kids and Counting*) propensity for DIY laundry detergent and homeschooling and Dr. Sears' other parenting book, *The Complete Book of Christian Parenting and Child Care* which favors mothers staying home (and strangely absent from my peer's knowledge) (146, 130).

All of these new domestic trends have been made popular and cool by blogs written largely by new, feminist, hip, stay-at-home-moms, as well as by more conservative stay-at-home mom groups, such as Mormons.<sup>135</sup> These lifestyle blogs, including mommy blogs, neo-homesteader blogs, and cooking blogs, are "strangely compelling" and play a "crucial role" in trying to make "traditional women's work cool" according to Matchar (49). This trend in making domestic arts hip again partly began in the late 1990s with third-wave Riot Grrrls who reappropriated "old-fashioned activities" like knitting as a form of "cool anticorporate rebellion" (Matchar 44). But blogging has brought hip domesticity into the mainstream. Contradictorily, it utilizes feminist rhetoric, while maintaining a familiar retrograde happy marriage narrative (67). For example, Matchar writes about Homemaker 2.0 bloggers who view reclaiming a traditional domesticity as a rebellious act, like Kate Payne, author of the blog, *The Hip Girl's Guide to Homemaking*, with a post called "Keep the Apron, Pitch the Bra" whose blog boasts 21,063 page views per month (Matchar 57, Payne). Since Payne is "formally trained as an anthropologist," the first line of the blog post tries to appeal to the educated feminist who may feel a little guilty in her new search for domestic advice, "So homemaking, eh? You might think that your college-level post-modernism and feminist theory courses exempt you from ever belonging to an age where 'homemaking' is considered an acceptable unit in your lexicon. Well, think again"

(Payne). Like other bloggers, Payne puts neo-homemaking in economic terms, “My point in all this is, lest we confuse ‘traditional’ with ‘bad’ or ‘inefficient,’ let’s think of other words to describe a return to sincere, earnest, and economical values” (Payne). In her reader comments, fans compliment her using radical feminist references, “Well done, WriterGrrl,” “Well-done, sistah,” and “this Manifesto on Homemaking is brilliant.” For some, says Matchar, “blogging is not just personal, it’s political” (Matchar 57). It is also a way for housewives to declare her domestic work meaningful (adding blogger to her résumé), validated by her readers (55). Additionally, blogging and selling on sites like Etsy is a way to earn some money doing exactly what Friedan and other second-wave feminists have argued for- engaging in “meaningful, socially responsible work” that is central to one’s identity. Or at least, the housewife is getting paid for performing her domestic duties, even if it’s through corporate compensation, advertising, and freebies.

Yet, as Matchar and others, like the late *Ms.* senior editor Michele Kort, point out, the transformation stories (from high-paid career to opt-out domestic hipster) are reminiscent of 1950s narratives where marriage and domestic life is ultimately the goal, even if lifestyle bloggers currently describe personal fulfillment as the reason, rather than pleasing one’s man (Matchar 69, Friedlander). A “mompreneur” selling on Etsy in the new craft economy who is attempting to work from home, may be initially expressing a dissatisfaction with the current job market’s undervaluation of working parents (73). Yet, she may ultimately find herself implicated in a repackaging of “old failed ideas about microenterprise” and “pink-collar” businesses for women (93).<sup>136</sup> Matchar says that Etsy has been accused of selling women a “false feminist fantasy of self-employment” (90). In other words, despite radical claims, many bloggers and Etsy-preneurs end up in line with postfeminist, neoliberal, consumer-driven fantasies that

ultimately support big business. Some of their highly “art-directed” and advertised blogs are reminiscent of the glossy magazine stories in praise of housekeeping of the 1950s and 1960s of which Betty Friedan was critical (64). Some of the blogs that review the latest natural care products also reminiscent of Molly Goldberg, from *The Goldbergs* 1950s television show, leaning out of her urban window, carefully weaving the sponsor’s product into humorous stories about her family about to unfold.

Nonetheless, as I have suggested, most domestic blogs of the twenty-first century seem to have much more in common with early domestic manuals of the nineteenth century. Specifically, the more recent iteration of the housewife character doesn’t just long for a return to a pre-(second-wave)feminist past, as have been previously theorized by feminist scholars (including myself) about the return of the housewife. The recession produced a desire for a much simpler time than the 1950s. The new nostalgia includes a desire for a pre-(first-wave)feminist past, minus the sexism and desperation. This hip neo-housewife encompasses a contradictory longing for Laura Ingalls Wilder’s farmhouse, Betty Draper’s fashions, and Riot Grrrl attitudes. She encompasses postfeminist neoliberal individualism while simultaneously claiming to embrace a collective social fantasy of a more sustainable, less-corporate world. While she despises American business capitalism, she ascribes to American bootstraps self-sufficiency. In some ways, the newest, hippest, housewife character is pushing us to start over, from scratch.

Currently, I see two different ways of making sense of how this reimagining of the housewife character as a radical homemaker tries to position popular feminism: 1) as a way conservative culture tries to coopt feminism by aligning neoliberalism with feminism, and 2) as a ghosting of feminist past summoning a spirit of the “future-to-come,” using Derrida’s hauntology terms from *Specters of Marx* (1993). Since I am deeply implicated in all this, as I

have noted, it is difficult to see how this newest pop culture feminist positioning of the housewife will play out. First, we must be wary of the development from liberal to neo-liberal feminism which, as Angela McRobbie points out is “partly realized and embodied through the ubiquitous figure of the middle-class, professional, wife and mother” (McRobbie “Feminism, The Family” 119). In “Feminism, The Family and the New ‘Mediated’ Maternalism,” McRobbie suggests that “a new momentum for the political right comprises a careful claiming of progressive heterosexual maternal womanhood” (120). This fantasy of the “progressive” blogger housewife reimagines the housewife character with “tropes of averageness,”<sup>137</sup> separate from the reality television housewives making a mockery of the homemaker “profession” with her excessive consumption and hysterics. Even though housework is labor, repositioning it as progressive connotes a set of experiences. This is surprisingly similar to the repositioning of housework as domesticity in the nineteenth-century domestic manuals.

As I have previously suggested, the rhetoric of female empowerment quickly shifted from a denunciation of feminism as old-fashioned in the early 2000s, to currently fashionable again (121). McRobbie notes that the “neoliberal regime” is able to use “a weak version of feminism,” guised as maternal responsibility and choice, for its promotion of individualism and family values (122). Structural issues in healthcare, education, and parenting become “personal matters for which private solutions must be found” (128). For the neo-frugal housewife, distrust of the healthcare system, the FDA, the schools, are all reasons for stepping out on her own, away from the workforce, away from schools, away from processed foods, taking the solutions into her own bread-making hands, and sharing these so-called radical feminist solutions with like-minded women on the blogosphere.<sup>138</sup> In these new retrograde (opt-out) narratives, the family becomes a team, a “partnership of equals” even if mom stays at home and dad ventures into the workplace

(since because of feminism, this arrangement can be reversed) (130). Like it was in the nineteenth century, the middle-class family “becomes a more self-contained” unit, and the mother is responsible for the moral authority without the help of the state, much like in the Victorian cult of True Womanhood (131, 134). The family is “a small business,” the professionalism of which elevates domestic skills and promotes childrearing (and wearing) as enjoyable (130). Without relying on the government, the housewife can “do it all’ even if she cannot quite ‘have it all’” (130). Even though McRobbie does not specifically mention blogs, she references some “irony and ‘feminist’ self-consciousness in recounting the rewards of good housekeeping” within the new professionalization of motherhood, much like the “Keep the Apron, Pitch the Bra” blogpost on *The Hip Girl’s Guide to Homemaking* (130).

However, this de-politicized feminism totally devalues systems of power that promote poverty and unemployment in favor of the language of a new frugality (the middle-class discourse of economic crisis). It also ignores issues of systemic racism that affect the lives of women and families of color. McRobbie says,

[A] new maternal-feminine performs a double function for the neoliberal hegemony of the present; by endorsing liberal feminist principles it provides the centre right and the centre left with a more up to date way of engaging with women and women’s issues while simultaneously expunging from popular memory the values of the social democratic tradition which had forged such a close connection with feminism through the pursuit of genuine equality and collective provision for families as a public good. (135)

Indeed, this loss of a genuine collective fight for women and families is potentially and profoundly troubling for the future-to-come. However, while I agree that popular feminism often

works in favor of hegemony, its nostalgic references to past spirits may, indeed, lead to some good.

Indeed, in some ways, the American housewife seems to be a kind of ghost that continues to haunt us. Ogden's (now outdated) book *The Great American Housewife: From Helpmate to Wage Earner 1776-1986* (1986) uses the word "ghost" to describe the housewife quite often. For example, she claims, "Confronted with a vast volume of conventional opinions supporting old theories about the traditional nuclear family and an increasing amount of new documentation on black, immigrant, and female Americans, I came to realize that the Great American Housewife might be but a figment of our national imagination, a legend, even a ghost come to haunt us" (Ogden xiii). In trying to make sense of "today's homemaker" who is also a wage earner of the 1980s, Ogden describes the modern housewife's difficulty of being haunted by "ghosts of the past [who] continually whisper the old lines from the past, reminding her to leave nothing out" (xx). Similarly, in the "Ghostscript" to *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters imagine the housewife as a ghost, implicated in reviving feminism. They repeat a line from Derrida that they also used in their chapter on "Haunted Housewives" (and that I have also cited in chapter three), "A question of repetition, a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (qtd. in Munford and Waters 169; emphasis in original). In citing Derrida in this context, Munford and Waters suggest that when popular culture revitalizes and "reanimates images and styles of femininity that belong to the past" we are currently engaging in speculation about the death of feminism (169). Feminism is not dead, but rather it "is a ghost that popular culture cannot lay to rest," an "undead history," its business unfinished (170-1). In seeing the housewife's "spectacular 'postfeminist' return," they suggest that we first must



account for her disappearances,” ways in which she has been summonsed up and dismissed in both popular culture and feminist scholarship (82). In this way, *The Stepford Wives*, *Mad Men*, and (as McRobbie discusses) *Revolutionary Road* (2009) may signal their own relationship to an anachronistic temporality, the 1950s and 1960s, a pre-(second-wave)feminist past that predates the postfeminism of the late twentieth century, and postdates the success of first-wave feminism. Even though these narratives may suggest a linear model of progress, they may have their own way of challenging “postfeminist valorizations of feminine re-domestication” (Muford and Waters 103). Or at least, they had a bit of a hand in challenging the myth that housewives are happy, anti-feminist, or no longer in need of feminism.

Revalorization of the frugal, pre-industrial homesteader, then, transports the housewife even further back in time. Her re-domestication back to the early nineteenth century, signals a pre-(first-wave)feminist past, before the housewife was pegged as bored and unhappy. Instead, the nineteenth century’s housewives’ frugality, self-reliance, craftiness, and parenting skills possibly ensure a new wave of good American citizens, a collective vision of progress. Munford and Waters suggest, “While the postfeminist mystique’s haunting often presents as an extended exercise in nostalgia (part of an elegiac lament for a past that feminism threatened with extinction), its temporal shifts make possible a process of endless cultural recovery that might, at other times, rescue and revivify feminism itself” (169). While some may argue that the hipster housewives’ opt-out mentality makes her both a throw-back and a neoliberal, her presence may also signal (in Hamlet’s and, by extension, Derrida’s words) that the “time is out of joint [both] out of order and mad” and that we need a new version of first-wave social feminism again, one that begs for equal voting/representational rights, safe and fair workplace conditions, quality childcare and healthcare, extended parental leave, clean environments, etc. This desire to

reimagine pre-(first-wave)feminism is headed to the big screen in October in a movie called *Suffragette* (2015). Although *Suffragette* is a British film about the suffrage movement in Great Britain, it boasts Meryl Streep as one of its stars, thus hoping to appeal to a US audience. The trailer shows Carey Mulligan's character, Maud, being harassed at work and subsequently joining the suffrage movement, ultimately hinting that her children are eventually taken from her for taking part in the fight. The official Focus Features website gives this synopsis:

A drama that tracks the story of the foot soldiers of the early feminist movement, women who were forced underground to pursue a dangerous game of cat and mouse with an increasingly brutal State. These women were not primarily from the genteel educated classes, they were working women who had seen peaceful protest achieve nothing. Radicalized and turning to violence as the only route to change, they were willing to lose everything in their fight for equality - their jobs, their homes, their children and their lives. Maud was one such foot soldier. The story of her fight for dignity is as gripping and visceral as any thriller, it is also heart-breaking and inspirational. ("*Suffragette* Official Site")

*Suffragette* is decidedly more interested in systemic structural changes, unlike *Revolutionary Road* where liberation is depicted as personal or individual, thus as McRobbie suggests, supporting a future neoliberal agenda (McRobbie 124). As the *Suffragette* website description suggests, change against the State must be radicalized by feminist foot soldiers. This kind of radical feminist ghosting, "a spirit of the 'future-to-come'" also represented on the blogosphere and among my friends' backyard chickens, kitchy aprons, and knitting projects, is one for which I am desperately hoping and remains to be seen.

## **Conclusion: Specters of Feminism, Speak**

With the bodies of feuding housewives proliferating our screens, it would be impossible to talk about all of them. I tried to pick representations of ones that were most relevant in the way they related to feminism and the current moment. To revive Spigel's term again, I attempted to make sense of feminism's "popular memory" by examining which housewife characters had the most "use value" to us today in the way in which they presented the "fiction and science of the past." (Spigel *Welcome* 363-4). For better or worse, and despite many social gains, the American housewife has served a major role in constructing American identity (family, childhood, motherhood, womanhood) in the first part twenty-first century. Undoubtedly, it is clear that the way in which the housewife character is imagined within the popular press of the day is intimately linked to the way in which the public conceptualizes American womanhood and citizenship. The construction of her character is also implicated in the way in which we view feminism and feminism's cultural use. Indeed, the housewife's reemergence in the twenty-first century, first as someone who could use feminism (as in *Desperate Housewives*), to someone who is already a feminist (as on the blogosphere) tells us also about the most recent speaking position of the feminist intellectual.

In her analysis of the history of feminist television criticism of the soap opera in *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (2000), Charlotte Brunson traces the soap opera's appearance on academic syllabi. She reminds us that feminism, previously known as Women's Liberation, and the soap opera, "moved together from outside to inside the academy" beginning in the mid-1970s (Brunson 3). In her research and interviews with feminist academics who conducted the early work on soap operas, she describes a "shadowy" figure, a ghost haunting her

process. Brunson's first model of analysis that included just two terms, feminist and soap opera, was "inadequate" (4). She says,

I saw a shadowy third term- most neutrally, 'the television viewer', sometimes, in the early articles, 'the housewife' or 'the ordinary woman' - who was understood to motivate, and in some cases, through her tastes and desires, to be the focus of, the enquiry. The feminist engagement with soap opera, historically, has an ambivalent relation with this figure. She both is and isn't the feminist herself. (4)

(Derrida says in *Specters of Marx* that "[t]he specter [...] is the *frequency* of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. [...] The specter is also [...] what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects- on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (Derrida 125).) The shadowy figure of the housewife, Brunson notes, is "figured in complex set of ways in feminist research" (4). Brunson suggests that the entry of feminist intellectuals into a masculine academy required some distance between herself and the housewife, "her abandoned or fictional other- the female consumer of popular culture" (5). The housewife was constructed as a non-feminist, one who might become more "civic-minded" or even become a feminist if she understood "the role of her fiction habit" (214). Yet, of course, the feminist intellectual had to account for her own pleasures of her fiction habit. Ultimately, Brunson's project leads her see the significance of how feminist criticism of the soap opera produced a "new speaking position of the feminist intellectual" (217).

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida invokes the ghost of Hamlet's father as a way to understand spectrality and the role of the intellectual (the Marxist, in his case, after Soviet communism had collapsed). The ghost implores Hamlet to make it right, put things back in order, to do justice. Hamlet curses "this unjust effect of the disorder [...] to put a dislocated time back on its hinges"

(Derrida 23). For help, he appeals to Horatio, the scholar, who would “understand how to establish the necessary distance or how to find the appropriate words for observing, [...] for apostrophizing the ghost”; “Thou art a Scholler- speake to it, Horatio” (12). Horatio demands an answer, “By heaven I Charge thee speake!” (qtd in Derrida 13). This loud demand and his scholarly distance does not prove a productive way to speak to ghosts. Similarly, Derrida cites Marx’s declaration to Engels where he tries to distance himself from his own philosophy, “What is certain is that I am not a Marxist” (42). This declaration suggests that “Marx had difficulty living with the disjunction of the injunctions within him [...]” (42). Since I am trying to wrestle with the ghosts of housewives and the ghosts of feminism, I will invoke the often used statement by feminists, “What is certain is that I am not a housewife,” and by housewives (and many others) after the supposed death of feminism, “What is certain is that I am not a feminist.” With the return of the housewife character to popular media, the twenty-first century revealed that these declarations and distances have not proven useful either. On the final page of the book, Derrida asks, “Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? (221). And he says “even if [ghosts] do not exist,” “If he loves justice at least, the ‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘intellectual’ of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost” (221). In other words, he says the scholar must “let [ghosts] speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself” (221). Even if it is the feminist, in the housewife, in the housewife in the feminist.

As I have tried to show here by implicating myself in my conclusion, there is a sense that the housewife and the feminist intellectual have decided to reclaim each other in the twenty-first century in the name of their mutual experiences navigating, loving, and struggling through motherhood, popular culture, and the domestic arts. The housewife is now a feminist. The

feminist is now a housewife. While certainly critics may claim that this is the definitive of the “soaping of feminism,” perhaps that just goes to show how much (domestic and feminist) work needs to be done.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Coontz in *The Way We Never Were* begins her second chapter by suggesting that “our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sitcoms” (23).

<sup>2</sup> Spigel mentions television series that included working class and ethnic women such as *The Goldbergs* (1952-1956), *Mama* (1949-1956), and *Beulah* (1950-1953).

<sup>3</sup> Even though the housewives on contemporary television shows may not always wear it, notably, 1950s fashion is back. See Felicity Capon’s article for *The Telegraph*, “Why is the 1950s Housewife Making a Comeback?”, that discusses recent fashion designers’ attempt to reconstruct the 1950s housewife look at London Fashion Week in 2013.

<sup>4</sup> In “Explorations of Gender” in *A History of Women* Francoise Thébaud states, “The image of the twentieth century as a time of progress for women, in stark contrast to the Victorian era, is based on a series of clichés” (2).

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen McHugh in *American Domesticity* posits how *American* the construction of both femininity and domesticity is (6).

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Coontz in *The Way We Never Were* says that “the liberal theory of human nature and political citizenship did not merely leave women out: It worked precisely because it was applied exclusively to half the population [...] Self-reliance and independence worked for *men* because *women* took care of dependence and obligation” (53).

<sup>7</sup> Kerber, Linda. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1980. Print.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to her success with *The American Frugal Housewife*, Lydia Child also pioneered other genres of American women’s writing such as “the historical novel, the short story, children’s literature, the domestic advice book, women’s history, antislavery fiction, and journalism” (McHugh 17).

<sup>9</sup> McHugh references Foucault’s criteria for “disciplinary effectivity” whereby disciplines “reduce what in a multiplicity makes it much less manageable than a unity” (17).

<sup>10</sup> Yet, arguably we are returning to this emphasis on frugality in the new housewife DIY culture in the twenty-first century. See chapter five.

<sup>11</sup> This is also how she argues for the importance of women’s education. Interestingly, Beecher suggests that because women’s place is in the home (not in government), she bears the responsibility of moral formation of the young boys who will someday enter public life (McHugh 48).

<sup>12</sup> McHugh borrows these terms from Hortense Spillers’ article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 7 no. 2 (Summer 1987): 78. Print.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthews also describes a backlash to the highly moral character of the housewife by male authors in the late nineteenth century. Particularly she analyzes Mark Twain's novels *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* as belonging to a "bad-boy sub-genre" that "acted out" anti-woman behavior through the character of a "lovable boy" (81).

<sup>14</sup> Matthews characterizes this as an "epic style of domesticity" (65).

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately the deployment of domestic discourses by white middle-class women to gain power simultaneously inscribed classist and racist inequality into their discourses "because of their structural relation to changes in civic privilege" (McHugh 8).

<sup>16</sup> The domestic novel was replaced first by children's literature (Matthews 106) and then later by domestic advice treatise and the cookbook (167).

<sup>17</sup> Matthews overviews the "servant problem" as a shift in native-born, mostly poor farm girls, to immigrants who had little experience with American standards of domesticity (95-6). Racism and religious differences account for this "problem."

<sup>18</sup> Gilman's very first line is a clear reference to Darwin, "SINCE we have learned to study the development of human life as we study the evolution of species throughout the animal kingdom, some peculiar phenomena which have puzzled the philosopher and moralist for so long, begin to show themselves in a new light. We begin to see that, so far from being inscrutable problems, requiring another life to explain, these sorrows and perplexities of our lives are but the natural results of natural causes, and that, as soon as we ascertain the causes, we can do much to remove them."

<sup>19</sup> Balides makes note of Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" which posits that early film is organized around "presenting a series of views", and it 'displays its visibility' in a way that directly solicits the attention of spectators" (21).

<sup>20</sup> Matthews analyzes F. Scott Fitzgerald's article "Imagination and a Few Mothers" which proclaims the average home to be a "horribly dull place," and encourages housewives to "join in the spirit of Jazz Age hedonism" (184).

<sup>21</sup> This would rarely happen in the eighteenth century. As Ogden notes, "Though a woman with a large family might tremble at the responsibility and dread the endless work, perhaps she took comfort in the secure knowledge that she would never be discarded as obsolete and useless, as are many of our elderly today" (Ogden 13). In chapter five, I will look more closely at the return of the eighteenth and nineteenth century crafty housewife to popular culture.

<sup>22</sup> A check of the Internet Movie Database brings up: *Husbands and Wives* (1920), *Scrambled Wives* (1921), *Suspicious Wives* (1921), *Discontented Wives* (1921), *Be My Wife* (1921), *Too Wise Wives* (1921), *Foolish Wives* (1922), *Island Wives* (1922), *Daytime Wives* (1923), *Unmarried Wives* (1924), *Single Wives* (1924), *Restless Wives* (1924), *Gambling Wives* (1924), *Flapper Wives* (1924), *Lying Wives* (1925), *The Trouble with Wives* (1925), *School for Wives* (1925), *Wages for Wives* (1925), *Exchange of Wives* (1925), *The Wives of the Prophet* (1926), *Wives at Auction* (1926), *For Wives Only* (1926), *Faithful Wives* (1926), *Craig's Wife* (1928), *Sailors' Wives* (1928), and *The Farmer's Wife* (1928).

<sup>23</sup> That Helen also declares herself "white," is certainly interesting. While I suspect that her declaration largely has to do with her class, there are some racial tensions in the film between the Russian swindlers and the French and American characters.

<sup>24</sup> Sumiko Higashi in "The New Woman and Consumer Culture" writes that after the success of *Old Wives for New* "countless titles hinting at marital strife, such as *Rich Men's Wives*, *Too Much Wife*, *Trust Your Wife*, *How to Educate a Wife*, and *His Forgotten Wife*, appeared on marquee signs" (302).

<sup>25</sup> Spigel cites a 1954 qualitative study by NBC which determined that daytime viewers, as opposed to nonviewers, were largely 25-34 years old with larger families, larger incomes, and lived in better market areas. The average viewer was a "modern active woman" with a kitchen full of "labor saving devices" with an interest in her "house, clothes, and the way she looks" (82).

<sup>26</sup> In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May points out, "Appliances were intended not to enable housewives to have more free time to pursue their own interests, but to help them achieve higher standards of cleanliness and efficiency, while allowing more time for childcare" (163).

<sup>27</sup> Stephanie Coontz in *The Way We Never Were* points out the major transformation of diversity in America, "More Mexican immigrants entered the United States in the two decades after the Second World War than in the entire previous one hundred years [...] By 1960, a majority of blacks resided in the North, and 80 percent of both blacks and Mexican-Americans lived in cities. Postwar Puerto Rican immigration was so massive that by 1960 more Puerto Ricans lived in New York than in San Juan" (30).

<sup>28</sup> See pg 37 in Coontz's *The Way We Never Were*.

<sup>29</sup> The first de Beauvoir quote and the Brown quote are also located in Munford and Waters' *Feminism and Popular Culture* (74).



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<sup>30</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the word Stepford, when used as an adjective means, “Robotic; docile; obedient; acquiescent; (also) uniform; attractive but lacking in individuality, emotion, or thought.”

<sup>31</sup> In the DVD commentary 1975 *The Stepford Wives* director Bryan Forbes responds to a “manic libber” hitting him over the head with an umbrella at the New York Press show. Forbes says that the film is really “anti-men” not anti-women.

<sup>32</sup> These include references in television shows such as *Supernatural* and *Rosanne*, comics such as *X-Men*, and countless songs by bands such as Radiohead, Lard, Chumbawamba, Superchick, and Ministry.

<sup>33</sup> In this version the husbands use mind control and pill-popping to alter their wives. Later, critics like Maureen Dowd would accuse women of choosing to become Stepford wives by using pills such as Xanax.

<sup>34</sup> In an article in the society pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Margaret Talbot imagines that the Stepford wives of today would be more about perfecting children than perfecting wives. She notes, “It would be about the collaboration between ambitious fathers and mothers who believe both in the meritocracy and in doing what it takes to rig it in the interest of their own offspring’s Ivy League prospects” (31).

<sup>35</sup> In the 1996 *The Stepford Husbands* starring Donna Mills, gender roles are reversed and the men are being brainwashed by a female clinic director. This sets up the idea that not only is “Stepford” an adjective that can be applied to two genders, a Stepford wife/husband is comedic idea, not to be taken too seriously. The women want to turn their men into “sensitive guys who like to cuddle and cook” (Maio 118). Later, in the 2004 film *The Stepford Wives*, the final dramatic twist reveals that the leader of the men’s organization, Mike (played by Christopher Walken), is actually a Stepford husband. In part, this spoof about Stepford husbands seems humorously similar to the 2013 mock-reality show *Real Husbands of Hollywood*.

<sup>36</sup> It was also made into a porn film in 2007 called *The Breastford Wives*.

<sup>37</sup> This is a question addressed more broadly in the introduction to *Third Wave Feminism and Television* edited by Merri Lisa Johnson.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps a postfeminist mystique, as Melanie Waters and Rebecca Munford argue in *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*.

<sup>39</sup> Ironically, the word brotherhood is the final word in *The Second Sex*.

<sup>40</sup> Ira Levin includes other references to cultural objects and real people in the book. Specifically, Levin includes a description of the library books that Joanna and another housewife, Ruthanne, check out at the library. Ruthanne, the only black housewife in Stepford, checks out *A Severed Head*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *The Magus*. Joanna checks out B.F. Skinner’s *Beyond Freedom & Dignity* (Levin 71). Later, Joanna reads Skinner’s books after a long day of performing domestic chores (79).

<sup>41</sup> This is what Peter Masterson, who plays Walter, says in the DVD commentary.

<sup>42</sup> The original intention was to dress the Stepford wives a little more like Playboy bunnies. However, because the actor playing Carol Van Sant, Nanette Newman, objected to that costuming and was the wife of Bryan Forbes, the film took on an entirely different aesthetic. Instead of Playboy bunnies, the Stepford wives were costumed in now iconic floor-length flowery cotton print dresses. This costuming choice failed the original intent of the movie. Not even Ira Levin liked it (Bellafante).

<sup>43</sup> In the novel, this is the moment where Joanna dies. It is implied that Bobbie kills her with the knife.

<sup>44</sup> Elyce Rae Helford in “It’s a Rip-Off” cites *Sisterhood is Powerful* in feminism’s critique of mass media shaping consumers into “one-dimensional receivers of communication- people who were more easily channeled into the roles of unprotesting consumers” (qtd in Helford 35).

<sup>45</sup> The “awareness session” was hosted by Eleanor Perry, screenwriter for *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Helford “It’s a Rip-Off” 24).

<sup>46</sup> Bernice Murphy in “Zombies and the Suburban Gothic” also makes this claim.

<sup>47</sup> In *Feminism and Popular Culture* Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters cite Peter Knight’s *Conspiracy Culture* which suggests that in many places Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* reads like a thriller, “with Friedan the lone detective chasing up the clues to the mysterious mystique” (qtd. in Munford and Waters 175).

<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the zombie craze gained “cultural currency” with George Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* (Boon 50).

<sup>49</sup> This is interesting to consider alongside of other popular films in the 1970s that emphasize male bonding, known as “buddy films” (Haskell 2, Boruzkowski).

<sup>50</sup> Boon delineates nine different kinds of zombies, including zombie ghouls, tech zombies, bio zombies, zombie channels, psychological zombies, cultural zombies, zombie ghosts, and zombie ruses.

<sup>51</sup> The film versions, interestingly, do not contain “tech zombies,” but rather, robotic duplicates completely replace the women (Boon 58).

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<sup>52</sup> Maio notes that “a movie’s failure to follow its own internal logic is one of the greatest sins a science fiction film can commit (119).

<sup>53</sup> In Kimberly Springer’s article, “Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women,” she talks about Condoleezza Rice’s stereotype of the black lady who disavows affirmative action, claiming success based on merit, and determinedly asexual (259). At the same time, Springer comments on how others perceived Rice’s relationship to President George W. Bush. When Rice slips up at a dinner party, saying “As I was telling my husband- As I was telling President Bush,” black liberal news sources implied that she might have a more intimate relationship with Bush than previously thought. This Freudian slip along with reports that she spent many of her weekends at Camp David with the President “watching baseball and football and doing jigsaws with the first family,” seems to position Rice as Bush’s other black Stepford wife, or even more incendiary, playboy bunny.

<sup>54</sup> As Claire Wellington in the 2004 film drives Joanna around town, she explains proudly, “The town is over 200 years old. It was founded by George Washington. And Martha just loved it. Stepford is Connecticut’s family paradise. It has no crime, no poverty, and no pushing.”

<sup>55</sup> In the 2004 film, Claire Wellington, the mastermind behind the robotization of Stepford wives asks, “Where would people never notice a town full of robots?” And answers herself, “Connecticut!”

<sup>56</sup> Maureen Dowd argues this more at length in *Are Men Necessary?* In a chapter called “How Green is My Valley of the Dolls.” She says, “The sexual revolution that began with the Pill in the ‘60s revived with another kind of pill in the ‘90s. The generation of sex, drugs, and rock and roll devolved into the generation of Viagra, antidepressants and lip-synching” (267).

<sup>57</sup> Susan Sontag in “Notes on Camp” says, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”; not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.” But more on Stepford camp later.

<sup>58</sup> Bonnie Dow concludes that in the 2004 film feminist and postfeminist earnestness has been replaced by post-postfeminist irony, a disregard to take any of these issues seriously (129).

<sup>59</sup> Elliot notes that Claire is suffering from so-called “hurried woman’s syndrome.” She says, “a woman who is always hurrying forward but getting nowhere but the corner office might as well go home” (54).

<sup>60</sup> It is also reminiscent of Susan Faludi’s backlash thesis, wherein she described a pattern in films where the heroine discovers too late that her focus on career has condemned her to a loveless spinsterhood (Vint 162). Vint cites Faludi’s *Backlash*: “Women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood” (qtd. in Vint 162).

<sup>61</sup> Bliss Cua Lim argues that *The Stepford Wives* is really just a remake of the old Bluebeard French folktale which tells the story of a nobleman who keeps murdering his wives.

<sup>62</sup> Jane Elliot says of this scene, “In its depiction of the repeating wife, *The Stepford Wives* depends on just this sort of representational strategy; it relies on its viewers possessing an implicit sense that things ordinarily differ over time (that is, change) if left to themselves- and that their failure to do so indicates that some malevolent agency has intervened, controlling the actions of the subject” (42-3).

<sup>63</sup> This quote is also used in Sherryl Vint’s article “The New Backlash: Popular Culture’s ‘Marriage’ with Feminism, or Love is All You Need.”

<sup>64</sup> See *Gothic and the Comic Turn* by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik cited in Anne Williams’ “*The Stepford Wives*: What’s a Living Doll to do in a Postfeminist World?”

<sup>65</sup> In “The Female Gothic: Then and Now” Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace point out that “[t]he growth of ‘lesbian Gothic’ fiction [...] developed out of a specific historical context – the feminist movement and the growth of lesbian/queer studies, which in turn created a readership for texts which appropriated, reworked and parodied Gothic modes and motifs to articulate lesbian subjectivities” (3).

<sup>66</sup> Housewives in Santa hats singing Christmas carols is mimicked in an episode of *Desperate Housewives*, season six episode 10, “Boom Crunch.”

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Kaufer Busch in “*Ally McBeal* to *Desperate Housewives*” concludes, “Following the dictates of the feminist mystique, women had mimicked traditionally male nature (the “masculine mystique”) or ignored female nature altogether, a strategy that led women back to the only other understanding of female nature available- the 1950s happy housewife heroine, a role that no longer seems to fit” (96).

<sup>68</sup> Busch says, “If the messages of popular feminist icons are to be believed, not only are middle-class women abandoning the feminism that afforded them unprecedented rights and opportunities, but they actually hold such feminism responsible for their current unhappiness” (88). In *Ally*’s case, “Feminism bullies her into pursuing a role to which she is unsuited- that of the independent professional- rather than her desired role of wife and mother” (91). Similarly, Busch argues that *Sex and the City* “does not merely critique but actually undermines sexual liberation by heralding a return to the very feminine roles such liberation sought to eradicate” (93).

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- <sup>69</sup> When Susan pays off her husband's loan for him, he gets upset that he's not man enough to pay off his own debts and provide for his family. When Susan says she will cancel the check, she says, "Hey, you know that 1956 thing. It's kinda sexy" (6:17).
- <sup>70</sup> Popular feminism of the 1970s is in contrast to activist feminism. Jane Elliot says, "The Stepford metaphor thus exemplifies the two most salient and troublesome aspects of 1970s popular US feminism: its difference from activist feminism and its remarkable ability to define feminist politics in the national imagination for decades despite (and because of) that difference" (33).
- <sup>71</sup> Munford and Waters ask "What is it about the concept of haunting that lends itself to the description of feminism in the twenty-first century?" (18).
- <sup>72</sup> Murphy defines suburban gothic as a "sub-genre" of the wider American gothic tradition that "often dramatises anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and protagonists. Minorities tend not to feature much, save as exploited outsiders, bit players or dangerous interlopers" (*The Suburban 2*).
- <sup>73</sup> Jermyn cites *Rebecca* (1940), *The Snake Pit* (1948), and another film with "wives" in the title, *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949).
- <sup>74</sup> Larry Hagman, who plays J.R. Ewing on *Knot's Landing* and *Dallas*, guest starred on *Desperate Housewives*' seventh season for two episodes.
- <sup>75</sup> In season seven housewife Susan stoops to filming herself cleaning in lingerie in an effort to earn extra money. The website she works for, va-va-va-broom.com, sells the fantasy of hot housewives cleaning for the viewing pleasure of the male patron. This playboy-type fantasy was explored more in Ira Levin's novel than the subsequent film adaptation.
- <sup>76</sup> Murphy says *Desperate Housewives* "combines familiar soap opera tropes with obvious gothic elements" (169).
- <sup>77</sup> When Susan's painting teacher visits her on Wisteria Lane, he remarks, "This is where you live, huh? Norman Rockwell would walk down this street and say, 'A little much'" ("The Art of Making Art" 8:5).
- <sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Universal Studios set for Wisteria Lane was also used in *Leave it to Beaver* (Murphy 187).
- <sup>79</sup> Historian of suburbia, Mark Clapson argues that contemptuous *idea* of suburbia is largely a myth cultivated by books and men's magazines, such as David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), *Penthouse*, and *Men Only*.
- <sup>80</sup> Another example: "It's not hard to find sin in the suburbs. Just look behind closed doors. That's where you'll find your neighbors cheating on their taxes, and drinking too much vodka, and stealing their father's magazines. Yes, the suburbs are filled with sinners, some of who occasionally repent" ("Nice is Different than Good" 6:1).
- <sup>81</sup> In the twenty-first century, Murphy notes that due to the oil crisis, the sub-prime housing crisis, and global recession, suburbia may be on the decline (193).
- <sup>82</sup> Not all scholars agree that the suburban gothic works to expose the ills of suburbia for the better. Kristian Kahn says of the gothic literary genre connection to the show that it only allows for a brief exploration of unconventional themes only to "restore traditional values in the eventual patching up of any given transgression" (97). He links sexuality in Gothic traditions to homosexuality as described by Eve Sedgwick; "the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as a metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified" (qtd. in Kahn 97-8).
- <sup>83</sup> Feminist film and television scholars Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in "Postfeminism and the Archive for the Future" suggest that "postfeminist media culture demonstrates the capacity to convert race problems into race pleasures via the commodification of difference" (Tasker and Negra 172). I suspect this is what is happening in *Desperate Housewives*' construction of Gabrielle's characterization of a suburban housewife.
- <sup>84</sup> Various food and its signifiers are also used in this opening scene to exploit Gabrielle's otherness as the only non-white housewife. Mary Alice says, "Gabrielle liked her paella piping hot. However, her relationship with her husband was considerably cooler." Debra Merskin in "Three Faces of Eva: Perpetuation of the Hot-Latina Stereotype in *Desperate Housewives*" argues that Eva Longoria, both onscreen and off perpetuates major Latina stereotypes. In this scene she inhabits the "Cantina Girl" and the "Vamp." The Cantina Girl demonstrates "great sexual allure," a "naughty lady of easy virtue" (137). The Vamp "uses her intellectual and devious sexual wiles to get what she wants" (137).
- <sup>85</sup> Douglas is using Angela McRobbie's ideas from "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime" in *All About the Girl* edited by Anita Harris (2004).
- <sup>86</sup> In Janet McCabe's "What is it With That Hair? Bree Van de Kamp and Policing Contemporary Femininity" she describes the affect of the colorful mise-en-scène of *Desperate Housewives*. She says that the "heightened colour palette that makes Bree and her life look as if it has been lifted straight from the luscious pages of *Homes and*

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*Gardens*, and reminiscent of 1950s Sirkian melodrama, portrays a charming world crammed full of furniture, pastel shades and domestic accomplishment. [...] It is meant to be ironic, a pastiche. We get it” (79).

<sup>87</sup> Doing an internet search of “Mamie Pink” will bring up lots of great images of pink bathrooms of the 1950s that remind me of my own bathroom I had in my childhood home. Notably, there is a website called “Save the Pink Bathrooms” which discusses how pink and blue gender distinction became particularly entrenched in the 1950s because of “Mamie Pink.”

<sup>88</sup> McCabe also notices that Bree, while retro-chic, looks distinctly slimmed down from her 1950s happy housewife counterparts. In part, McCabe links this to a Foucaultian policing of the body, the “quest for body margins and a complete self-mastery over the feminine self- style, lifestyle and body” (“What is it With” 83).

<sup>89</sup> Bree’s seductive parody of the 1950s housewife reminds Janet McCabe of what Susan Bordo said about our media-saturated age when it becomes increasingly “difficult to discriminate between parodies and possibilities for the self” (qtd. in McCabe “What is it With” 82).

<sup>90</sup> See season four, particularly episode four “Now I Know, Don’t Be Scared,” episode 11 “Sunday,” and episode 16 “Gun Song.”

<sup>91</sup> For example, McCabe and Akass cite the president of Parents Television Council characterizing *Desperate Housewives* as “just the latest in a long series of shows that aims to pulverize the cartoonish 1950s black-and-white stereotype of *Leave it to Beaver*, creating in its ancient wake a catty, snarky, amoral cesspool” (6). This increasing censorship of network television after September 11<sup>th</sup> was, as Kahn points out, referenced by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, as well as the rise of anti-intellectualism (Kahn 95-6).

<sup>92</sup> Here McCabe is using a reference from Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake’s book *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist* (51).

<sup>93</sup> See Jennifer Pozner and Jessica Seigel’s article published in *Ms.* in the spring of 2005 “*Desperately* Debating *Housewives*.” The article is a series of letters back and forth to each other defending their love or hate relationship with the show. Pozner thinks the show is racist, sexist, and classist, while Seigel celebrates its feminist tendencies. In my Foundations of Women’s Studies course, I have students watch *Desperate Housewives*, read this article, and take a side. Interestingly, more students tend to side with Seigel. While this might have more to do with a reluctance to critique television, it also reflects what seems to be the general trend of viewers.

<sup>94</sup> It is interesting to consider the role of gay, white men in the reemergence of the desperate housewife character in the twenty-first century. Marc Cherry, Paul Rudnick, screenwriter for the 2004 *The Stepford Wives*, and Andy Cohen of *The Real Housewives* franchise, all have played a major part in bringing this character back to life.

<sup>95</sup> In a strange twist at the end of her article Newitz asks “What’s feminism got to do with it?” It is here she decides that second-wave feminism does not have the language to talk about the case of murdering mothers, thus demonstrating “mistakes” in contemporary feminism (349). Newitz’s version of post-feminism is riot grrl feminism that has no trouble defining anger.

<sup>96</sup> This number slowly decreased each season. According to ABC MediaNet season two averaged 21.7 million viewers; season three averaged 16.7; season four averaged 17.52; season five averaged 15.66; season six averaged 12.83; season seven averaged 11.85; and season eight averaged 10.6 (“Season Program Rankings”).

<sup>97</sup> Gay neighbors moving into suburbia is something that the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* also explored. In my previous chapter I pointed out that in the original novel by Ira Levin, an African American couple moves into suburbia. This couple is completely absent from the 2004 film. Although perhaps *Desperate Housewives* chooses a Latino family instead, an African American woman (Alfre Woodard) with deep and troubling secrets and her two sons move into suburbia in season two, only to be run out of town by the end of the season. In season four, her family seems to be replaced by a more comical and stereotypical gay couple.

<sup>98</sup> See what screenwriter Paul Rudnick says about this in my section on “Stepford Camp” in chapter two.

<sup>99</sup> This comes alongside other headlines and stories. A *Time* magazine in 2004 cites “22 percent of mothers who hold graduate or professional degrees pick up crushed Cheerios for a living” and *Newsweek* in 2005 asks, “What happened when the Girls Who Had It All become mothers?” (Sayeau 44).

<sup>100</sup> In chapter five I explore the new canning craze among contemporary housewives. Canning has again become associated with a kind of patriotism.

<sup>101</sup> In the final episode, all four original housewives move out of Wisteria Lane to make something of their lives. As mentioned, Bree moves onto Louisville to work in the Kentucky State Legislature, and Gabrielle moves to mansion in California where she starts her own personal shopping website which leads to her own show on the home shopping network. Most notably, Lynette moves to a penthouse overlooking Central Park in NYC where she becomes a CEO, thus, in some ways, completing the *Sex and the City* story. In other words, maybe Carrie Bradshaw did not end up a desperate housewife in the suburbs after all.

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<sup>102</sup> Sayeau calls it “flimsy feminism” or “faux feminism” (43-4).

<sup>103</sup> In *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (2004), Mark Andrejevic describes *Queen for a Day* as “more broadly defined [form] of reality programming [which belongs] to the ‘exceptional moments’ brand of reality programming, whose descendants include programs like *Funniest Home Videos*, *When Animals Attack*, and, of course, the current incarnations of *Candid Camera*” (91).

<sup>104</sup> In “Would You Like to be Queen for a Day?: Finding a Working Class Voice in American Television of the 1950s,” Georganne Scheiner notes that NBC earned about 9 million dollars annually from the show, and sponsors paid \$4,000 for a one minute commercial (379).

<sup>105</sup> Scheiner cites Stephanie Koontz estimation that 25% of Americans were poor in the 1950s (375).

<sup>106</sup> *Wife Swap* was first produced in 2003 in the U.K. Both American versions use the same format as the British one.

<sup>107</sup> *Wife Swap* (2004- ), *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006-2014), *The Ex-Wives Club* (2007), *The Real Housewives of New York City* (2008- ), *Farmer Wants a Wife* (2008), *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008- ), *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (2009- ), *Prison Wives* (2009-2010), *Sister Wives* (2010- ), *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010- ), *The Real Housewives of D.C.* (2010), *The Real Housewives of Miami* (2011- ), *Baseball Wives* (2011-2012), *Mob Wives* (2011- ), *Mob Wives Chicago* (2012- ), *Basketball Wives* (2010- ), *Basketball Wives LA* (2011- ), *Celebrity Wife Swap* (2012- ), *Starter Wives* (2013- ), *Deadly Wives* (2013- ), *Private Lives of Nashville Wives* (2014- ), *Prison Wives Club* (2014- ), and *Secrets and Wives* (2015- ).

<sup>108</sup> In her analysis of *Queen for a Day*, Scheiner talks about how the show helped give working-class women upward mobility by giving them the “accouterments of the middle class home” (384). TV helped create the desire for upward mobility and TV would be a part of giving them just that. Scheiner says, “The show provided these women legitimate access to the female version of the American dream” (384).

<sup>109</sup> Steinem compares *The Real Housewives* to HBO’s *Girls*, which she finds somewhat enjoyable for its more honest portrayal of sex.

<sup>110</sup> See page 189 in *Vamps and Tramps* where Paglia is being interviewed on *Larry King Live* in 1994. King outright questions whether or not she is, indeed, a feminist, after criticizing Elenor Smeal, at the time of the interview president of the Feminist Majority Foundation and former president of NOW. Paglia responds, “I am a committed feminist. I am a *dissident feminist* (*angrily stabs her finger at the camera*). And NOW does *not* speak for American women! NOW does not speak for all women or all feminists!” (Paglia 189, emphasis in original). This label as a “dissident feminist” also appears in the first line of Paglia’s Wikipedia entry.

<sup>111</sup> In another interview, Paglia says, “Well, there’s the big difference between Steinem and me. She sees the show as a distortion of women, while I see it as a revelation of the deep truth about female sexuality. Right there is the proof of why feminism has faded. Those second-wave feminists had a utopian view of women — they constantly asserted that anything negative about women is a projection by men. That’s not what I see on “Real Housewives”! It’s like the Discovery Channel — sending a camera to the African savannah to watch the cheetahs stalking the gazelles! What you’re seeing is the primal battles going on among women. Men are marginalized on these shows — they’re eye candy, to use Obama’s phrase, on the borderlines of the ferocity of female sexuality” (Lauerman).

<sup>112</sup> However, these definitions of themselves as wives and others are often juxtaposed with ironic footage of their failures at motherhood, especially. Lee and Moscowitz write, “The housewives’ relationships with their children are depicted as empty, built on consumptive behaviors and unsolicited, shocking, and even dangerous advice. Excess means are blamed tacitly for the shortage of mothering; a life brimming with extravagance and temptation provides the ‘pull’ that draws mothers outside the home, away from their rightful duties of child-rearing” (75).

<sup>113</sup> In *Shaded Lives*, Smith-Shomade expresses a similar sentiment about *Oprah* and other talk shows featuring African American women guests. She says “objectification and agency are not true opposites” (178).

<sup>114</sup> In episode three there is a shot of the gates again with a voiceover from housewife Vicki which says, “I live behind the gates, I work behind the gates, so when I get outside of the gates, it’s fun. I can be myself” (“Upgrading has Nothing to Do with You Honey” 1:3). This implies, of course, that she cannot “be herself” or have fun inside the gates.

<sup>115</sup> This mimics the first scene in the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* film when Joanna Eberhart arrives in Stepford, Connecticut with her family. They pull up to a guard post outside the gated community. After being asked to state his name, Walter smiles as the guard welcomes him into Stepford and allows him to pass. In the next shot, the viewer is positioned from inside the car, watching the white gates opening in front of them to see a tree lined, flawlessly paved street. The crane pulls the camera up higher to oversee more (a white church steeple) as the car drives down the road. Angelic voices hum in the sweeping orchestral score. Walter breathes a sigh of relief and the camera pans over a shot of large, perfectly manicured lawns. It looks like the opening scene in Douglas Sirk’s opening credits in *All that Heaven Allows* (1955).

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<sup>116</sup> Andy Cohen frequently discusses his love of the “wink” in his memoir *Most Talkative*. For example, he says about his mother, “I was particularly skilled at getting out of punishment, and usually did so by slowly winking at my mom while she was in mid-yell. It stopped working postpuberty, and now pretty much the only winking in my life is from Vicki Gunvalson during RHOC reunion shows (Cohen 11). Another examples is when accompanying Dan Rather on an excursion to interview Don Ismus for *48 Hours*, Cohen describes being winked at by Rather, “He liked to wink and I like to be winked at, which I thought should work well” (141).

<sup>117</sup> I ran across this sentiment quite a bit in my research. In the “Epilogue” to *Shaded Lives*, Beretta E. Smith-Shomade says, “Let’s keep it real here. I enjoy television. [...] Call it my guilty pleasure with scholarly backup” (177).

<sup>118</sup> On *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Camille Grammer’s employment of four nannies to help take care of her two children seem like an extreme example of “outsourcing motherhood.” Also, her revelation that she hired a surrogate to carry and birth the children is especially shocking. Lee and Moscovitz include a section on “Outsourcing Motherhood” in *The Real Housewives of New York* in their article on page 76.

<sup>119</sup> Again, Lee and Moscovitz critique the housewives’ work which is shown as frivolous (creating skin care lines, costume jewelry, make-up, hand-bags, etc.), characterized as unreal labor (73). Similarly, “me-time” is depicted as the wrong choice the housewives make between home lives and social lives (75).

<sup>120</sup> (1) advice, (2) criticism, (3) manifesto, (4) theory, (5) history, (6) autobiography, and (7) ethnography (Spigel 1213)

<sup>121</sup> Vanessa Williams divorced from NBA basketball player Rick Fox in 2004.

<sup>122</sup> Using Christopher Smith’s definition of the “New Economy,” Sarah Banet-Weiser says, “Despite the material realities of poverty, unemployment, and general institutionalized racism in the United States, a contemporary ideology about race casts it as a style, an aesthetic, a hip way of being” (Banet-Weiser 205).

<sup>123</sup> In writing about African American women’s depiction on 1990s sitcoms, Smith-Shomade argues, “Material success functioned as the most central component and the distinguishing feature of the Colored women characters in these series” (57).

<sup>124</sup> Alexandar Cooper Hawley notes that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is also an internet sensation, “RHOA’s Twitter hashtag #RHOA frequently trends globally on Twitter during its first Sunday night airing, being used in hundreds of thousands of tweets” (4).

<sup>125</sup> Banet-Weiser is looking to Nickelodeon for her example.

<sup>126</sup> Gray notes that a diverse or multicultural representation of blackness on television includes the use of “blackness and African American culture as a kind of emblematic code of difference” (Gray 89). In his rather rudimentary PhD dissertation, Alexandar Cooper Hawley argues that *The Housewives of Atlanta* occupies this category (Hawley 12).

<sup>127</sup> The exception to this is, of course, in how the white housewife character played a role in sentimentalizing the African American slave in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

<sup>128</sup> Kim’s wig-wearing is another interesting component in this dynamic. As many scholars have noted, concerns over hair, especially in the African American community, “incites concern, discussion, and humor” (Smith-Shomade 61). Smith-Shomade details the way 1990s sitcoms handle discussions of African American women’s hair. She says, “Continually negotiating the standards of beauty as articulated within Anglo mainstream culture, Black women struggle to find their political and cultural voice within chemically relaxed, braided, and natural hair care/wear” (61-2). Later in the series, Kim starts her own wig line with the help of her gay, African American friend. The politics of this are interesting since Kim claims that white women need to get on the wig bandwagon that black women have been on for years. Much talk on the show revolves around Kim’s “real” hair,” which takes her years to reveal and incites an internet sensation when she finally does.

<sup>129</sup> A “single wife” has become an actual, definable identity in the twenty-first century, defined on thesinglewivesclub.com as “single woman preparing for marriage.” The website says, “The Single Wives Club educates, empowers and inspires single ladies to become better women before becoming wives by living happy, healthy, wealthy lives.” There was also a film in 1924 called *Single Wives*, but it is not clear whether this term caught on as part of the rise in divorcing women.

<sup>130</sup> This drama has been recently playing out in the news media with Rachel Dolezal, the local NAACP president in Washington State who tried to pass as black, despite having no black ancestry. While she still insists she is black, she is not considered black by anyone else. Thus, her story demonstrates that one cannot buy blackness like one buys a weave or a perm. We are not *that* postracial.

<sup>131</sup> One of the most interesting examples of the housewives navigating their postracial identity comes when they go on another “girl’s trip” to South Africa. Although the housewives show off their charity through gifts to an orphanage and try to connect with their African identity, they are largely portrayed as rich bitches (see Lee and Moscovitz). They stay at an elaborate resort, go on safari in designer heels, and argue about sleeping arrangements.

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<sup>132</sup> Matchar cites a January issue of *Ebony* that featured Eartha Kitt on the cover “proudly proclaiming that she takes her baby daughter on worldwide tours with her” (40-1). Further inside the issue there is a profile of a “top woman Civil rights lawyer,” a profile of a Cornell-trained female ethnomusicologists [...] and a profile of Germany’s first black fashion model” (41).

<sup>133</sup> This storyline continues throughout the season. Phaedra is shown pumping in her hotel room while Kenya tries to carry on a conversation with her. Later on a different trip to a winery, she is again talking about having to pump on the bus. More than once she refers to her milk as “organic chocolate milk” (“Sour Grapes, Sour Peaches” 6:12). Overworked lawyers pumping while working is also shown a couple years earlier on *The Good Wife*. Tough-as-nails lawyer Patti Nyholm (Martha Plimpton) argues for the insurance company failing to deny coverage to an expectant mother needing a risky, expensive surgery. Meanwhile, her new motherhood is exploited when she is shown pumping milk in her office (“Heart” 1:17).

<sup>134</sup> See my paragraph on Lydia M. Child in chapter one’s section “The Rise of a Stock Character and the Politics of a Nation.”

<sup>135</sup> “Provo [Utah] has one of the highest concentrations of Etsy vendors in America” (Matchar 222).

<sup>136</sup> Matchar says that as many as 97 percent of Etsy sellers are women, and it is considered one of the greatest business success stories of the twenty-first century (72-3). Etsy was started in 2005 by three young men and pulled in \$170,000 (72). In 2011 it earned \$525.6 million (72). Yet selling on Etsy remains a very difficult way to make money (89).

<sup>137</sup> See chapter one where I mention the construction of the 1950s housewife as Mrs. Daytime Consumer, a mix of “upper-class fantasy with tropes of averageness” (Spigel *Make Room* 84).

<sup>138</sup> McRobbie points to Foucault’s Biopolitics Lectures in the 1970s that focused on good housekeeping as part of the neoliberal program (130).

<sup>139</sup> “The soaping of feminism” comes from Jim McGuigan’s 1992 *Cultural Populism* and is quoted critically by Brunson (213).

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“Shameless in Seattle.” *The Real Housewives of Orange County: The Sixth Season*. Writ. Meg



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“Smiles of a Summer Night.” *Desperate Housewives: The Fourth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Bob Daily. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2007. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2007.

“Sour Grapes, Sour Peaches.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta: The Sixth Season*. Prod. Matt Anderson, Lauren Friedland, and Glenda Hersh. Bravo, 2014. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

“Spark, A. To Pierce the Dark.” *Desperate Housewives: The Fifth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Alexandra Cunningham. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2009. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

*Stepford Wives, The*. Dir. Bryan Forbes. Perf. Katharine Ross, Paula Prentiss, and Peter Masterson. Columbia, 1975. DVD.

*Stepford Wives, The*. Dir. Frank Oz. Perf. Nicole Kidman, Bette Midler, and Matthew Broderick. Paramount, 2004. *Netflix*. Web. 10 Sept. 2014.

“Sunday in the Park with George.” *Desperate Housewives: The First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Katie Ford. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2005. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

“Thicker than Water.” *The Real Housewives of New Jersey: The First Season*. Prod. Scott Dunlop. Bravo, 2009. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

“This is How We Do It in the O.C.” *The Real Housewives of Orange County: The Fifth Season*. Prod. Scott Dunlop. Bravo, 2010. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

*Too Wise Wives*. Dir. Lois Weber. Perf. Louis Calhern, Claire Windsor, and Phillips Smalley. Lois Weber Productions, 1921. DVD.

“Truly Content.” *Desperate Housewives: The Seventh Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Matt

Berry. Dir. Tara Nicole Weyr. ABC, 2010. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

“Upgrading has Nothing to Do with You Honey.” *The Real Housewives of Orange County: The First Season*. Writ. Scott Dunlop. Dir. Michael Dimich and Kevin Kaufman. Bravo, 2006. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

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“Welcome One, Welcome ATL.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta: The First Season*. Prod. Scott Dunlop. Bravo, 2008. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

“We’re So Happy You’re Happy.” *Desperate Housewives: The Fifth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Alexandra Cunningham. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2008. *Hulu*. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

*Why Change Your Wife?* Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Perf. Gloria Swanson, Thomas Meighan, and Bebe Daniels. Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1920. DVD.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

RUTH WOLLERSHEIM

## EDUCATION

### **Ph.D. in English**, emphasis in Modern Studies

Women's Studies Certificate Completed

Graduation- December 2015, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI

Committee Chair: Patrice Petro

Areas of Concentration: Feminist Film and Media Studies, Cultural Studies/Cultural History, and Feminist Theory and Criticism

Dissertation Title: "Retrograde Returns of the American Housewife: Reimagining an Old Character in a New Millennium"

### **M.A. in English**, emphasis in Modern Studies

Graduated in May of 2004, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI

Thesis title: "The Poetics of Melodrama's Mise-en-Scène"

### **B.S. in English**, Film Studies Minor

Minnesota Teaching Certificate grades 7-12

Graduated in May of 2000, St. Cloud State University, MN

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2008-now                    **Tenured Full-Time Faculty**, English Department, Century College, MN  
English 90: Introduction to Writing  
English 1021: Composition I  
English 1022: Composition II  
English 2052: Contemporary World Literature  
English 2043: Literature and Film  
GNDR 1061: Foundations of Women and Gender Studies  
HUM 1025: Introduction to the Humanities: A World View  
HUM 1041: Art of Film
- Spring 2008                **Part-Time Faculty**, English Department, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, MN  
English 1111: College English 2, Research Writing  
English 1110: College English 1
- Part-Time Faculty**, Film Studies and Theatre Department, Inver Hills Community College, MN  
FS 1101 and THTR 1101 (cross-listed): Introduction to Film Studies

- Fall 2007      **Part-Time Faculty**, Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance, St. Cloud State University, MN  
                     FS260: The Art of Film
- Part-Time Faculty**, English Department, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, MN  
                     English 1111: College English 2, Research Writing
- Part-Time Faculty**, English Department, Inver Hills Community College, Inver Grove Heights, MN  
                     English 1108: Writing and Research Skills  
                     English 1111: Research Writing in the Disciplines
- 2003-2007      **Graduate Teaching Assistant**, Department of English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
                     English 101: Introduction to College Writing  
                     English 102: College Writing and Research  
                     English 286: Writers on Screen  
                     English 286: Writing about Film and Television  
                     English 290: Introduction to Film Studies  
                     English 295: Women and Film
- Summer 2006      **Reading Instructor**, Academic Opportunity Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Summer Bridge Program
- 2002-2003      **English Classroom Assistant**, Academic Opportunity Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
                     English 101: Introduction to College Writing  
                     English 102: College Writing and Research
- 2000-2002      **High School English Teacher**, Sheboygan Falls High School, WI  
                     English 9  
                     English 10  
                     Contemporary Issues  
                     Accelerated English 11
- Spring 2000      **Student Teacher**, Brooklyn Center High School, MN  
                     Eighth Grade English  
                     Global Literature
- 1998              **Undergraduate Teaching Assistant**, St. Cloud State University, MN  
                     Understanding Movies 260

## SERVICE TO CENTURY COLLEGE

2012	Helped develop new <b>LGBTQ Literature</b> course
2012-now	Serving as temporary co-department chair for <b>Humanities</b>
2012-now	Participating in the English Dept. 's monthly <b>Teaching Discussion Group</b>
2010-now	Active faculty for the <b>Gender Studies Certificate Program</b>
2010	Presented a paper at the <b>Dojka-Davis Brown Bag Series</b>
2010	Century College <b>Film Competition Judge</b>
2009-12	Served on the committee for the <b>Common Book</b>
2009-12	Co-taught in a <b>Learning Community</b> with Communication faculty
2009	Co-edited <b>Breathing In: Stories from the Century College Community</b>
2009	Created and executed campus events for <b>Poetry Month</b>
2008-9	Participated in the <b>Getting Results Teaching Circle</b>
2008-now	Developed <b>online</b> and <b>hybrid</b> sections of Composition 1 and Art of Film
2008	Brought in local author, <b>Kao Kalia Yang</b> , to my literature classroom

## PREVIOUS COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

2012-13	<b>Co-organizer and Judge</b> , Co-Kisser Annual Poetry Film Festival, Minneapolis
2005-07	<b>Committee Member</b> , Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference (MIGC), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2005-07	<b>Judge</b> , Milwaukee International Film Festival
2006 May	<b>Volunteer</b> , Consoling Passions Conference: Television, Video and Feminism
2003 Sept.	<b>Volunteer</b> , The Films of Anne-Marie Miéville Conference
2002-3	<b>Poetry Reader</b> , The Cream City Review, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2002	<b>Tutor for women recovering from substance abuse</b> , Meta House, Milwaukee
1998-9	<b>Editor and Contributor</b> , Upper Mississippi Harvest, St. Cloud State University Art and Literary Magazine
1998	<b>Editor and Contributor</b> , The Rendering, publication of the English Club, St. Cloud State University
1997-9	<b>Actor and Scriptwriter</b> , Players Performance Group, St. Cloud State University

## RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

2006-8	<b>Reader</b> , for the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam
2003-7	<b>Media Collection Manager</b> , for UWM's Film Studies Program
2000-2	<b>High School Newspaper Advisor</b> , The Talon, Sheboygan Falls High School
1997-9	<b>Literary Arts Coordinator</b> , St. Cloud State University Program Board

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2012 Apr. **Presenter**, “Performing Inside and Outside the Discourse: Approximating Roles in the Writing-Centered Classroom” Inclusive Pedagogies: Health, Science, and Online, WGST Discipline Conference, White Bear Lake, MN
- 2010 Mar. **Presenter**, “In In the Garden of Edies, From Verité to Vogue: Reconsuming Little Edie in the Age of HBO” Conference for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Los Angeles, CA
- 2008 Mar. **Presenter**, “Melodrama and the Biological Clock: How American Television Constructs Anxiety about Fertility during the War on Terror” Conference for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Philadelphia, PA
- 2007 Mar. **Presenter**, “Dramas of Finery and Justice: Early Film Narratives of the Female Consumer Citizen 1903-1919” Conference for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, IL
- 2006 Mar. **Co-presenter**, “Compos(t)ing Non-FYC Courses: Regenerating Film Studies Curriculum Out of Composition Theory” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, IL
- 2005 Nov. **Presenter**, “Why I’m a Bree’ and so is He: Commodifying Desperation As Anger” for a panel called “Dis.par.ate Housewives: Representations of Domesticity in Contemporary American Culture” Conference for the Midwest Modern Language Association, Chicago, IL
- 2005 Mar. **Co-presenter**, “Approximating Inside and Outside the Discourse: Voices and Roles in the Composition Classroom,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Francisco, CA
- 2004 Nov. **Co-presenter**, “Validating Voices, Exposing Roles, and Developing Meta-Roles in the Contact Zone,” Midwest Modern Language Association, St. Louis, MO
- 2004 April **Presenter**, “Revisioning Composition in the Wired World: TK3 Authorship and the Performance of Imaginative Discourse” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee First Year Composition Forum
- 2003 Dec. **Co-presenter**, “Picturing the Carnavalesque in the First-Year Composition Classroom: Exposing Roles in the Contact Zone,” Tenth Annual Conference on Teaching First-Year Writing, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

## HONORS AND AWARDS

Graduated summa cum laude from St. Cloud State University

Received an in-state tuition scholarship from St. Cloud State University

Awarded a film studies scholarship at St. Cloud State University

Awarded a teaching assistantship at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Received a Chancellor’s Award for the summer of 2006 from UW-Milwaukee