

The World Is Her Oyster: Negotiating Contemporary White Womanhood in Hollywood's Tourist Spaces

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Abstract: This article analyzes a recent variation of the contemporary Hollywood travel romance that sees middle-aged female protagonists involved in the creative industries suffer a form of urban melancholy caused by years of adherence to neoliberal feminism. The films employ the trope of the creatively gifted melancholic in order to allow the heroines to "rediscover" feminism through fantasized constructions of foreign countries built by the mobilization of projected affect. These gendered narratives must be read for their racial implications, given that they present affluent white women as the ultimate bearers of burden in contemporary US society, and they must also be analyzed as offering a commentary on the extradiegetic global image of the United States.

The contemporary Hollywood travel romance offers a number of pleasures for those cinemagoers looking to indulge in a bit of armchair travel at the multiplex. Frequently boasting a fair-skinned star with a warm, infectious giggle, a combination that has proved valuable at the box office, these films allow their female protagonists the opportunity to marvel at historical Parisian architecture, navigate a crowded New Delhi marketplace, enjoy the panoramic views of the Mediterranean seascape from a Santorini villa, or salivate over fresh plates of pasta and bottles of red wine while seated at a Roman sidewalk café. The appeal of these films, however, lies not merely in the postcard-perfect images of carefully selected international locations and artfully constructed sets designed to evoke romance and excitement, mystery and glamour, but rather in the transformative potential they offer their white, middle-class tourists who frequently initiate their journeys while suffering from a form of urban bourgeois malaise. It is my hypothesis that the middle-aged protagonists of recently popular Hollywood fare—*Eat Pray Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010) and *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Audrey Wells, 2003)—need to be read as cinematic manifestations of cultural discomfort with the heightened focus on female aspiration and achievement under neoliberal governance. However, these

characters, played by such bankable stars as Julia Roberts and Diane Lane, respectively, also serve as fantasy ambassadors sent beyond US borders to be schooled in appropriate forms of international relations in an age of imperial politics, advanced consumer capitalism, and anxiety about immigration. These journeys abroad are invested with a sense of higher purpose, with the filmic heroines represented as having been “chosen” to take part in the excursion following prayers to God or the Virgin Mary requesting spiritual clarity. The protagonists are seemingly embraced and protected by specific icons of religious worship in the foreign countries they visit, a device that works to designate as exceptional both the white, female individual and her country of origin. Their encountered opportunities for healing, growth, and thus salvation from prior life trajectories are therefore to be understood as the result of divine intervention.

While these films provide solutions to individual crises in keeping with romance genre formulas, the use of the tourist trope results in an ideological signification that extends beyond the personal problems of the protagonist. When traveling, one is typically found to represent or asked to speak for one's country of origin in various ways. In the travel romance it is these encounters with other cultures and subsequent reflections on the differences from the US lifestyle that facilitate the protagonist's changing sense of self. This transformation results in a renewed understanding of the restrictions placed upon white, middle-class femininity in the US context and a changing relationship to feminism in a “postfeminist” era, in which the meaning of the term is fraught with ambivalence and contradictions. Yet these tourist films create cosmopolitan citizens through the mobilization of idealized women, played by idealized stars, whose renegotiated understanding of feminism is made possible through a renegotiation of white hegemony. There is a disavowal of the importance of racial hierarchy to these narratives of gendered liberation. While the films seek to engage in a segregation of the female protagonist from the influence of neoliberalism, a fantasy of “racelessness” that David Theo Goldberg argues is typical of a neoliberal climate that seeks to disavow the persistence of racial inequality nevertheless pervades the texts.¹ While “race” here operates as a muse to the creative female protagonist, thus contributing to her emancipation from previous performances of femininity, *racism* ceases to exist. Forms of oppression beyond those concerning the white heroine become suppressed in favor of exploring the social tensions and contradictions experienced by the white postfeminist subject of neoliberalism. The travel romance film, I suggest, engages in strategies in which white dominance and privilege undergo discursive adjustments made possible by the question these films posit—what does female empowerment mean today? White hegemony is never deposed but rather readjusted, reoriented, and finally recentered via the mobilization of a conflicted female character.

This ideological trope, while typical of most contemporary Hollywood travel romances, is most pronounced when featuring a middle-aged as opposed to a younger

¹ Goldberg argues that the erasure of racial categories in daily social life in favor of an ideology of racelessness has resulted in relegating racism to an attitude exhibited by either the most bigoted or those who invoke race as a potential rationale when drawing attention to injustices, in *The Threat of Race* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 360.

protagonist.² Diane Negra argues that postfeminist culture defines female life stages in terms of “time panic,” with conservative ideologies centering on the necessity of marriage and motherhood reinforced for younger women, whereas middle-aged women are frequently cast “as desperate to retain or recover their value as postfeminist subjects.”³ Popular culture forms, such as the romantic comedy, dramatize dilemmas associated with the female life cycle in a manner not paralleled in films containing a male protagonist, even though certain texts may be critical of the social pressures facing women. In films such as *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, travel becomes beset with heightened emotional urgency as a result of the female protagonist’s increasingly melancholic disposition in the urban space of home. These films adopt a somber and reflective tone, with more depicted to be at stake should the female character fail in her quest for self-discovery. Although the rationale behind the decision to travel demonstrates marked similarities in films featuring younger protagonists—for instance in *When in Rome* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2010) and *Letters to Juliet* (Gay Winick, 2010)—the configuration of mental distress, as brought on by decades of urban female masquerade, is absent even though the promise of its eventual genesis is strong. Both *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun* feature high-achieving, middle-class white women who have reached a pinnacle in their careers and yet are in the midst of crumbling marriages. These women, despite their financial success, are also represented as creatively inclined. The protagonist’s melancholic projections in the tourist space thus operate simultaneously to enable liberation from gendered constraints while also providing an alternate realm of discovery for artistic types. The representation of melancholia as a female illness in *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun* has particularly powerful implications for a cinematic politics of gender and race because of its creative and affective potentials in the foreign countries the white woman visits. For this reason the bulk of my analysis focuses on these particular films, albeit with occasional reference to others in the subgenre. *Eat Pray Love*, while initially entirely consistent with the ideological drive of the typical European travel narrative, also has its protagonist visit India and Indonesia following the initial Italian sojourn. Italy, the most popular destination in contemporary variants of the travel romance, here operates as a training ground for this female tourist seeking her enlightenment. India and Indonesia offer her the opportunity to share her newfound knowledge, create affective bonds with local women, and ultimately engage in a more benevolent, yet nevertheless imperial, feminism within these tourist spaces. It is this additional

2 Although an extended analysis is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that there is also a variation of the Hollywood travel romance that aims to appeal to the teen market, as exemplified by the popular 2005 film *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Directed by Ken Kwapis and based on a novel of the same title by Ann Brashares (New York: Delacorte Press, 2001), this feature focuses on four teenage girls whose shared connection is symbolized by the fact that they can all miraculously fit into the same pair of jeans. By individually writing about their travel experiences while wearing these jeans, the teens are more able to successfully navigate their journeys into womanhood. In contrast, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (John Madden, 2012) is a recent, commercially successful travel film exploring the lives of white British citizens in their sixties and seventies as they navigate the challenges of advancing age while at a retirement home in India. A sequel to the film, *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (John Madden), was released in 2015.

3 Diane Negra, “Time Crisis and the New Postfeminist Heterosexual Economy,” in *Hetero: Queering Representations of Straightness*, ed. Sean Griffin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 173.

element that aids in greatly illuminating the more subtle problematic politics of the contemporary European travel romance, thus making the text particularly worthy of analysis. *Eat Pray Love* participates in a fantasy of universal sisterhood, which, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, allows for the visibility of gender at the expense of categories of race and class, ignoring the particularities of localized lived existence.⁴

In *Eat Pray Love*, Liz Gilbert (Julia Roberts) is a successful New York novelist about to launch her new book, yet she experiences frustration that her dreams of travel are not shared by her husband, Stephen (Billy Crudup), and are not granted the same social validation as the desire to start a family. Stephen has been unable to match Liz's success, and his frequent career changes become an additional source of frustration for her and one of her prime motivations for divorce. Following an ill-fated, postseparation fling with young actor David (James Franco), Liz decides to set off on a yearlong adventure during which she will spend time in Italy, India, and Indonesia. In these countries, Liz gains a new sense of self through newfound friendships and through the consumption of food and religions available in her chosen locations. Eventually she is rewarded through a romance with fellow divorcé and traveler Felipe (Javier Bardem), who similarly is trying to alleviate a sense of loss and disconnectedness through travel and as a result has acquired forty-six stamps on his passport.

Like Liz Gilbert, Frances Mayes (Diane Lane) in *Under the Tuscan Sun* is a successful and influential novelist struggling to make sense of her life following a divorce. Also like Liz, Frances's husband, Tom, has failed to reach the levels of success that she has while working in order to support him, and Tom is unfaithful to her with a younger woman. Worried about the state of Frances's mental health, her friend Patti (Sandra Oh) decides to send her on a trip to Tuscany in the hope that a change of scene will set her on the path to happiness. While there, Frances decides on a whim to buy a Tuscan villa, finds a surrogate family in the local inhabitants, and achieves a newfound spirituality and sense of guidance through her discovery of Roman Catholicism. Like Liz, Frances also glimpses the possibility of true love in the form of a fellow traveler and writer at the close of the film.

The Burden of Heightened Visibility. The protagonists of both films first feel the stirrings of loss and alienation in their urban milieu during events at which they are the objects of admiring gazes due to their professional successes. Liz is the guest of honor at a literary soirée held by her agent, Delia Shiraz (Viola Davis), to promote her new novel and spends the evening meeting influential members of her chosen field who offer congratulations. It is at this party, however, that she realizes her lack of fulfillment despite achieving the ambitions she held in her twenties. Upstairs, Liz confides to Delia that she harbors a stash of *National Geographics* and travel magazines full of places she wishes to see before she dies and that these dreams eclipse her desire to be a mother. It is following this promotional soirée that Liz discovers that her love for Stephen has faded. When he confesses that he does not wish to go to Aruba with her, Liz replies that she no longer wants to be married. A similar opening scene in

4 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 107.

Under the Tuscan Sun provides the catalyst for the female protagonist's deepening sense of loss and disconnectedness with her life in the United States. In this film, Frances, a professor of creative writing, attends a literary launch held for one of her young protégés, a writer who declares his gratitude to her during a celebratory monologue. Like Liz, Frances is clearly an influential figure in her professional sphere—the person at the party whom everybody wants to meet. A colleague also notes that Frances is a particularly successful example of modern femininity, able to balance the demands of career with traditional modes of feminine work. "Tom is a lucky bastard," this event attendee assures her, "a literary wife who makes brownies." However, it is Frances's influence in her profession that leads her to discover the truth about Tom. At the event, she happens to meet a male writer whose book she has reviewed as reminiscent of "a middle-aged man living out his horny teenaged fantasies." The author takes the opportunity to respond that Frances's poor review is ironic given her husband's infidelities, and her world begins to unravel.

Both Frances and Liz, however, are examples of successful neoliberal femininities, maintaining restrictive standards of female attractiveness while striving toward upward mobility in their professional lives. Contemporary feminist scholars exploring the linkages between representations of femininity in Western popular media and cultural shifts in attitudes toward gender egalitarianism have pointed to the co-optation of second-wave feminist discourses by neoliberal political rhetoric, an interrelationship that is evident in popular film and television. In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff highlight the strong connection between neoliberalism and contemporary popular feminism, noting the mutual emphases on self-regulation and individualism as replacing "notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints, or influence from outside themselves."⁵ Angela McRobbie suggests that contemporary femininity, to be deemed intelligible, requires a contract in which career opportunity, wage-earning capacity, and thus ability to participate in consumer capitalism are rewarded on the basis of adhering to a strict gender regime that requires a constant monitoring of the self and disavowal of feminist ideals.⁶ Gill, in turn, states that this disciplining entails an obsessive focus on the slim, youthful, and fashionable body as the primary source of female power.⁷ *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun* feature women who have abided by the rules of neoliberal feminism, engaging in a rigorous monitoring of the self and conforming to heteronormative gender standards while aspiring to career success. Despite this dutiful adherence, however, they have failed to achieve the feelings of empowerment, fulfillment, and contentment promised to their younger selves through this ethos. Because of Liz's investment in this gendered neoliberal ideology, her dreams of self-fulfillment through travel have been suspended, thus contributing to her current midlife crisis. Frances learns that her investment in

5 Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

6 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 2.

7 Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 149.

career aspiration has only sustained her romantic partnership in the economic sense and has not given her enough leisure time to indulge in life's pleasures.

Both Liz Gilbert and Frances Mayes harbor a sense of loss, felt most keenly during a particular moment when they should be proud of their achievements. The gaze of the crowd upon the bourgeois white woman suddenly begins to feel heavy and burdensome despite her previously held ambitions and current success. Liz and Frances exemplify what Negra has described as the postfeminist time crisis. The sense of being "out of time" and the subsequent melancholic state are here presented as resolvable through adjustments to the relationship between neoliberal and feminist ideologies that occur as a result of a literal and metaphoric journey of discovery. It is by venturing into the tourist space that the protagonist comes to read her previous model of femininity as a social performance resulting in mental stasis. This occurs not only through a rediscovery of sensuous pleasures and the capabilities of the female body in the tourist space but also through a problematic formation of empathetic bonds with people who are victims of social inequalities in their countries of birth. As such, the fantasies of resolution these texts offer, while indicating an important shift in how Hollywood texts present neoliberal femininities, signify on multivalent levels with regard to gender and nationality and how we make sense of the national through the mobilization of gender.

There is an indication in these films that the focus on female mobility in the professional sphere has come at the expense of male achievement and that this is not conducive to the formation of the nuclear family, with Tom dependent on his wife's income and Stephen unable to commit to a single career path. In a recent article exploring the significance of *Eat Pray Love* as well as *Julie & Julia* (Nora Ephron, 2009) to the postrecession context, Pamela Thoma argues that these texts may be read as updates of an earlier group of films analyzed by Negra as exhibiting uneasiness over female career aspiration.⁸ Writing on trends in contemporary romantic comedy, Negra has pointed to the prevalence of the "miswanting" narrative, in which the female protagonist comes to realize that her life as an urban career woman is deficient, leading her to reprioritize romance and family through a change in location from the city space to a regional idyll.⁹ Although this trope is evident to a degree in the travel romance, Liz and Frances notably differ in that they remain sympathetic figures despite achieving their career ambitions.¹⁰ By contrast, the female protagonist in romantic comedies including *13 Going on 30* (Gary Winick, 2004) and *The Proposal* (Anne Fletcher, 2009) tends to find that her career success has resulted in an alteration

8 Thoma provides an intriguing analysis of the film in the context of the 2008 recession and in relation to the media crisis theme proclaiming the "end of men," an issue explored from various angles by other scholars in the same edited collection. Pamela Thoma, "What Julia Knew: Domestic Labor in the Recession-Era Chick Flick," in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 108.

9 Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.

10 The "miswanting" narrative is strongly evident in *When in Rome*. In this film Beth (Kristen Bell), an art curator, proudly declares that she is not interested in romance because she is married to the job. It then transpires that her former boyfriend broke up with her because she cared more about work than him, while her boss, upon hearing of Beth's sister's engagement, drawls, "You must be ecstatic . . . and still single I understand."

of character, leaving her narcissistic, selfish, and unable to appreciate either homespun, traditional values or the love of a good man. It is up to this good man to teach her the correct personal values so that she can be transformed into someone worthy of true love and deeper human connection. Liz and Frances, however, remain likable characters, prompting audience identification throughout the films, and it is never indicated that career achievement has hindered their sexual desirability or capacity to form close friendships built on respect and trust. Frances, for instance, is shown to have a loyal and loving friendship with Patti and at the literary launch has to laughingly remind young novelist William that she is married after he requests a kiss. Husband Tom remains a faceless villain throughout the piece, his lack of appearance in the film ensuring that our sympathies reside with Frances. He is the man who does not appreciate his luck at having the “literary wife who makes brownies.” While Stephen in *Eat Pray Love* is a more sympathetic figure than Tom, shedding tears throughout the divorce proceedings, Liz’s frustrations at not being understood by her New York City peers are vindicated through discussions she has with others outside the United States, who agree it is more difficult for women to feel that they can make their own choices. Furthermore, the decision to travel abroad operates to reinvigorate both protagonists creatively, which in turn benefits them professionally, given that novelists depend on the ability to compellingly convey real or imagined experience through the written word. While *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun* do remove their female protagonists from a masculinized professional environment and into “feminized” travel zones more hospitable to the traveling white woman, it is important to note that both films were based on best-selling autobiographical novels. This suggests a certain cultural capital inherent in translating personal experiences of urban neoliberal femininity and a capitalization on stories of transcending an associated melancholic state through fantasies of escaping the United States. In these tourist films, blame for personal dissatisfaction does not lie with any one individual but rather within the individual’s environment.

The Peril and Prestige of Urban Melancholy. The protagonists’ state of melancholy in both films manifests in feelings of physical inertia and lack of direction despite cultural emphases on increased socioeconomic mobility for women. “I don’t know how to be here,” Liz complains to David, who angrily retorts that she should “stop waiting for something.” Frances, following her divorce in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, moves into a halfway house that she soon learns is full of divorced men and women who, despite initial intent for a temporary stay, have failed to move on from their derelict accommodation and thus have failed to transcend their state of existential crisis. The landlord informs Frances that, as a writer, she may wish to help her cohabitants with their suicide notes, pointing out that the resident doctor hands out the sleeping pills and the attorney provides free legal advice. In referring to the depressed residents by their middle-class professions, the landlord suggests that a life lived in pursuit of bourgeois professional respectability is doomed to failure. This scene may also serve as a commentary on the declining value of middle-class professions in a neoliberal “risk society” that glorifies celebrity and successful entrepreneurs. While whiteness in the United States has historically operated as a form of insurance against poverty

and literal homelessness, and continues to confer benefits in the labor market, here it becomes associated with a creative and spiritual “excess” that prevents the white woman from finding fulfillment within everyday middle-class routine.¹¹

As the Hollywood travel romance features female protagonists and largely appeals to a female audience, the state of melancholy depicted in these films, along with the eventual transcendence of this state, is of course thoroughly gendered. Angela McRobbie, in arguing that idealized contemporary femininity requires the repudiation of feminist ideals, hypothesizes that feminism becomes an “object of loss and melancholia” for those girls and women forced to give it up.¹² As a result, she argues, certain pathologies disproportionately associated with women, such as eating disorders, are becoming increasingly normalized in contemporary Western societies.¹³ Although McRobbie’s analysis indicates this female melancholia may transgress class boundaries, the ideal neoliberal female subject is, or aspires to, middle-class status, and claims to cultural intelligibility and respectability for working-class women have always been compromised by ideological prejudice. Furthermore, McRobbie explains that female melancholia is given “dramatic form” through the high-fashion image, which provides “an oscillation between possibilities of freedom from the constraints of gender subordination and the reestablishment of order and control.”¹⁴ This suggests not only a reflection of cultural feminine malaise but also an economic interest in reproducing the melancholic state—and the fantasized escape from it—within a photographic showcase for luxury couture—and also, I argue, through popular cinema.

It is important to note that despite its association with mental suffering, melancholia has historically been considered a mark of creative giftedness and thus has been utilized to confer notions of uniqueness or specialness upon certain individuals.¹⁵ Juliana Schiesari, in her discussion of the gendering of melancholia, describes it as a phenomenon among the Western intellectual elite that, despite causing mental distress, also works to “affirm the masculine ego” through literary and cultural production.¹⁶ Schiesari notes the absence of women among the great melancholics, among whom she includes Dostoyevsky, Tasso, and Benjamin, attributing this to the lack of importance ascribed to female grief in a patriarchal culture.¹⁷ The visibility of female melancholia in commodity form in the contemporary moment is dependent for its ideological signification on restrictions placed upon women in patriarchal culture, and there

11 Cheryl Harris discusses whiteness as a form of insurance conferring public and private benefits in “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707–1791.

12 McRobbie, *Aftermath of Feminism*, 94.

13 Ibid., 95.

14 Ibid., 100. Utilizing the work of Leslie W. Rabine, McRobbie points out that while the male presence is largely absent in images aiming to sell contemporary fashions to women, this presence is substituted by the fashion item as fetish object, ultimately reestablishing gender hierarchies despite the promise of liberation from these norms within the image. *Aftermath of Feminism*, 101.

15 Sander L. Gilman discusses the significance of the melancholic constitution in association with conceptions of mental illness and artistic giftedness in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 219–235.

16 Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 8.

17 Ibid., 5.

may be an exploitative element inherent in the fact that fantasies of escape are being sold to women through various media forms. Nevertheless, female melancholia is not invisible, and there is a certain “cultural prestige,” to use Schiesari’s terminology, for middle-class white women in having their burden represented and recognized. Thoma rightly notes that in many postfeminist texts, female writing is strongly differentiated from an artistic literary culture associated with the masculine.¹⁸ Yet in *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun* the connections between creative writing and melancholy are a recognizable cultural trope that lends weight to the fantasy that these characters are engaging in a mission of higher purpose—acting in the service of social understanding as opposed to a merely personal endeavor. Both Elizabeth Gilbert and Frances Mayes, though not associated with genius, are certainly creatively gifted. Both films privilege the female narrative voice-over, which allows the characters to continually relate the tourist experience back to their recovering mental state while also paying homage to the literary source material behind both films. Their creative abilities allow them not only to give their sadness a voice but also to speak the tourist space into being in a way that serves both their therapeutic interests and the therapeutic interests of the countries they have left behind. Such a task insists on the traveler occupying a socially elevated position throughout the journey. While the power associated with creative capacity in the tourist space may not be consistent with the feminine position, it is certainly dependent on the capital afforded these protagonists by their class and race.

Nurturing Burdened Whiteness. If middle-class white women are the ideal representatives of a successful neoliberal society, then middle-class white women are also represented as feeling its burdens most strongly. This is how female melancholia comes to be associated with relative privilege in the Hollywood travel romance. Both Frances and Liz have nonwhite friends whose primary role is to act as a counselor or therapist to the burdened white woman in her time of need. It is Delia Shiraz, an African American literary agent, in whom Liz confides that she “wants to go someplace where I can marvel at something . . . language, gelato, spaghetti, something!” while pointing out that she has not been given “two weeks of a breather, to just deal with myself.” The views harbored by Shiraz and those Liz encounters in Italy, India, and Indonesia are philosophies to be consumed on the journey toward inner peace. Part of this journey includes partaking in the national cuisine as a form of therapy. The gustatory pleasures involved in sharing food and wine with newfound friends allow the melancholy white woman to shed the corporeal restrictions placed upon her in the US environment and to overcome neoliberalism’s emphasis on competitive individualism. Those who do not bear the apparent burden of white privilege exist to offer advice to the female melancholic, their wisdom presented as offering nutritive value to the woman in need. Delia’s last name, Shiraz, prefigures a joke made by Liz in Rome regarding the consumption of red wine as ideal therapy (Figure 1). Despite her role as counselor and confidante, Delia, as an inhabitant of New York, is less able to understand her friend than are those Liz encounters on her travels because of Delia’s belief in the city’s values of upward mobility and ambition. Yet her appearance in the

18 Thoma, “What Julia Knew,” 125.

film works to prefigure the nature of the division between Anglicized whiteness and nonwhiteness that this tourist film creates. The close friendships Liz and Frances have with Delia and Patti, an Asian American lesbian in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, operate to distance the protagonists from the values of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie in that they serve to provide a therapeutic outlet for the white female melancholic. This lays the narrative groundwork for the semiotic function of the tourist space, in which the land, building structures, and inhabitants must all relate to the white female protagonist's goal of alleviating personal crises. Liz later encounters an Italian barber named Luca Spaghetti (Giuseppe Gandini), whose knowledge regarding the differences in American and Italian lifestyles is consumed with as much relish as the famous pasta his last name invokes. While Delia and Patti are portrayed as of similar social standing to the lead female characters, there is little indication of the ongoing socioeconomic inequalities and prejudice encountered by racial minorities in a neoliberal America that insists on the irrelevance of race.¹⁹ The Hollywood travel romance therefore engages in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has described as a powerful ideology of "color-blind racism" to construct a gendered narrative predicated on burdened whiteness.²⁰



Figure 1. Delia Shiraz's role in *Eat Pray Love* (Plan B, 2010) is predominantly to provide therapeutic advice and support to her friend Liz, a successful novelist burdened by the spotlight.

Eat Pray Love and *Under the Tuscan Sun* champion what bell hooks has termed "eating the Other" as a fantasy liberation strategy for those middle-class white women who have failed to achieve the fulfillment promised to them in the American urban environment. The protagonists rediscover an authentic self that was presumed lost to the requirements of neoliberal femininity in the United States, ultimately through an engagement with the inhabitants of the tourist space who by necessity are reduced to

19 Sarah Projansky argues that despite the fact that nonwhite women appear in contemporary film and television, postfeminist popular culture constructs the white, middle-class female as its ideal subject through denial of the ongoing socioeconomic barriers and inequalities facing minority groups. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 87.

20 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 2.

racial cliché in their role as cultural rehabilitators. The search for the authentic self is thus reliant on a validation of one's fantasies of cultural difference, which serves to reinforce the centrality and power enjoyed by Anglicized white femininity in the tourist space. As hooks points out, the commodification of race serves to provide an "alternative playground" for white hegemony looking to affirm its dominance.²¹ It is Patti in *Under the Tuscan Sun* who realizes the therapeutic benefits that Italy will offer Frances, warning her friend that she is "in danger of never recovering" and becoming an "empty shell" of a person who did not take an opportunity to move forward when it was presented to her. When Patti informs Frances that her reluctance to travel is just "depression talking," Frances replies that her "depression doesn't speak Italian, only a little high school French." Of course, Frances eventually learns that the Italian environment is indeed capable of alleviating her depressive state, as her newfound milieu unlocks her writer's block, which had been leading her into "abject self-loathing." While on a sojourn to Cortona, Frances offers to assist a young male traveler who is struggling to describe his experiences of Italy in a postcard home to his mother. Explaining to this fellow tourist that she "used to be" a good writer, Frances soon succumbs to the pleasures of her surroundings as she observes that Italians seem to know more than Americans about having fun, while noting amusedly the accuracy of cultural stereotyping in writing that "clichés converge at this navel of the world." Frances here takes pleasure in the apparent validity of the Italian stereotype, the semiotic shorthand for the country as sold to travelers through the tourist brochure now known to have an authentic base.

The commodification of race, bell hooks suggests, typically promises a conversion experience to the white individual, which depends upon an eradication of the history of the racial Other while utilizing cultural difference as a resource for pleasure.²² In this scenario, hooks hypothesizes, the desire to model the Other into a reflection of one's self is exchanged with the desire to become more like the Other.²³ As Negra has noted of this subgenre in an article examining the 1990s European tourist romance as a burgeoning form of women's film, ethnicity operates as a trope of empowerment.²⁴ The white woman is able to incorporate elements of ethnic identity at will to make necessary lifestyle adjustments because, for her, ethnicity operates as a floating signifier, even though the locals in the tourist space remain racially fixed. While this trope operates throughout *Eat Pray Love*, the film emphasizes Liz's association with a variety of Italian people through her engagement in urban *flânerie* while segregating her from the majority of the populace in India and Indonesia through her choice to stay at retreats outside the metropolis. The religious retreat in India is predominantly frequented by devotees of international origin, whereas the retreat in Bali offers affluent tourists a temporary reprieve from the stresses of everyday living. Liz only ever

21 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 23.

22 Ibid., 31.

23 Ibid., 25.

24 Diane Negra, "Romance and/as Tourism: Heritage Whiteness and the Inter(national) Imaginary in the New Woman's Film," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), 82.

gazes at Indian urban life from behind the window of a taxi stuck in traffic, pausing only briefly at the sight of a child sifting through a rubbish pile at the side of the road, as rapid editing highlights the face-paced, frenetic energy of her surroundings and the transient role the scene will play in the overall narrative. Liz's association with Indian and Indonesian peoples is largely confined to those whom she perceives as spiritually enlightened, such as the Balinese medicine man Ketut Liyer (Hadi Subiyanto), to facilitate her own transcendence above personal pain. In India, Liz's engagement with Hinduism is predominantly filtered through her relationship with fellow American tourist Richard (Richard Jenkins), as the guru she traveled to see has, ironically, departed to visit New York. The emphasis on meditation and silence in these sections of the film operate to further remove Liz from her environment, ensuring that the relationship between person and place is solely a spiritual one, allowing the film to disengage from a potential exploration of the political, social, and economic inequalities that separate Liz from her environment in both countries.

Rediscovering Feminism in the Apolitical Zone. The Hollywood travel romance illustrates an important relationship between white hegemony and postfeminist ideological formations, mobilizing feminist discourses through the presentation of narratives about US women who regain control of their lives through a literal and metaphorical change of direction. While the "feminism" the films represent may bear little relationship to the politics of the second wave, popular cinema constitutes an important site where struggles around the contemporary ideological meanings of female empowerment are played out.²⁵ "Feminism" is a battleground, with a number of conflicting representations in contemporary popular culture sold to us as "feminist," without recourse to the political discourses of the second wave. This is perhaps most obviously true of the romance and romantic comedy genres, because these films often deal with the role of middle-class women in the home and workplace, an issue of concern for many feminists in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, feminism is filtered through fantasies related to the perceived healing power of travel. This form of feminist empowerment, however, is reliant on a phenomenological reawakening of the female body that is simultaneously empowered in its belonging to the white race and disempowered as a result of gendered social positioning. As Frances writes her postcard, she becomes newly aware of the pleasures gained through a sensory engagement with the world, musing upon "the velvet sweetness" of a hot grape that "even smells like purple." The tourist locale therefore becomes an idealized space in which the white female can thrive in her newfound mobility and rediscovered capacity for enjoyment, while the urbanized US environment becomes resignified as a site of feminine restriction. This transformation narrative is dependent on racial ideologies privileging whiteness in order to explore the contemporary meanings of female empowerment for middle-class white women.

For the female character to reap the therapeutic benefits of her chosen destinations, these countries must be reimaged as entirely separate from the influence of global

25 As argued by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley in the introduction to their edited collection *Feminism and Popular Culture* (New York: Berg, 2006), 8.

capitalism, politics, trade, and immigration. In particular, the ideological success of the films depends on the apparent immunity of the tourist space to any form of American imperialism, whether this be through foreign policy, value systems, or product importation. In presenting travel as an idealized method of revitalization for its female protagonists, who can thus escape the perils of the postfeminist time crisis, the Hollywood travel romance gives rise to an interesting inversion in its representation of the changing relationship between the individual and her inhabited space. The female protagonist must learn to read her initial environment as contributing to her sense of self-limitation as a result of socioeconomic emphases on upward mobility and career advancement. This realization, however, is possible only in the tourist zone, where these factors are completely absent from daily social life. Negra hypothesizes that the narratives address a lack of connection between American whiteness and “heritage homelands” through a polarization of contemporary US society and nostalgic fantasies of Europe.²⁶ European tourism therefore works to reconnect the protagonist with lost ideologies, values, and lifestyles while restoring the character to “a simplified, purified economic realm.”²⁷ Writing on the promoted ideologies of the tourism industry, Urry and Larsen point out that the mobility of the tourist is dependent on the immobility of those in the chosen locale whose bodies exist to be displayed and gazed at by the traveler.²⁸ These tourist films operate first to connect the female protagonist, representing America, to the past through its representation of a pure and uncorrupted Italy whose inhabitants would never dream of migrating elsewhere due to their superior leisure lifestyle (Figure 2).

As Thomas Ferraro points out in his study of Italian pop-cultural images in the American context, it is these ideals of “solidarity and cultural retention” that not only prove to be attractive fantasies to the people of the United States but also allow them to negotiate national identity and progress, including

“what they have never been” and what “they would still like to be.”²⁹ While Frances in *Under the Tuscan Sun* marvels at the ability of Italians to relax and have fun, barber Luca Spaghetti informs Liz in *Eat Pray Love* that American behavior is dictated by over-investment in work and the commercial imperatives of capitalism. “You don’t know



Figure 2. Italy operates in *Eat Pray Love* (Plan B, 2010) as a playground of leisure where Liz can indulge her corporeal desires. The consumption of food equates to the fantasy consumption of Italian cultural philosophies.

26 Negra, “Romance and/as Tourism,” 82.

27 Ibid.

28 John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 29.

29 Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 202.

pleasure," he says, "you need to be told you've earned it. You see a commercial that says, 'It's Miller time,' and you say, 'That's right' and buy a six pack. An Italian doesn't need to be told." Neither labor nor consumerism, it would seem, exist in contemporary Italy, where people are represented as living according to instinct and desire, their sense of subjectivity uncorrupted by state or business intervention. This depiction of the Italian people is reliant on their sociohistorical designation in the United States as ambiguously white, for as Alistair Bonnett suggests, to live on the edges of whiteness is also to operate "outside the cold and instrumental realm of modernity."³⁰

It is not only Italy that is removed from the global order of advanced capitalism in *Eat Pray Love*, however, but India and Indonesia as well. The white woman, who is herself not a full participant in patriarchal bourgeois whiteness given the association of her gender with emotional excess and bodily spectacle, is able to connect with those in the tourist space because of her lack of satisfaction with her role in the US neoliberal system. For this feminist salvation to occur, the white woman must relocate both herself and her work as outside history, extraneous to contemporary sociopolitical history in the making and thus apparently outside of patriarchal intervention. As Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar have noted, the naming of certain countries as backward and "underdeveloped," as unable to emerge into advanced capitalist life, not only informs imperialist ideology but also commonly constitutes a problematic in leftist politics.³¹ In these films, the fantasized *resistance* to development in these countries allows the white woman to craft a new feminist value system, negating the role of the United States as a major contemporary imperial power and the role of affluent white womanhood within this system. These countries become ideal venues in aiding the rediscovery of a feminism based upon the unity of body and spirit, free from commercial and governmental imperatives, resulting in the American woman's pleasure in acting upon her desire to eat, pray, and love. The adoption of the tourist gaze works to disrupt the female protagonist's previous role as an ideal citizen of neoliberalism, and yet her newfound mobility through triumph over space and place is possible only as a result of the tourist zone's temporal suspension, in its representation as timelessly cultural. The use of feminist discourse, in conjunction with essentialist portrayals pertaining to both gender and racial characteristics, operates to situate white women as ideal candidates through which to renegotiate American whiteness.

Reimagining the United States Abroad. The Hollywood travel romance needs to be read in a cultural context marked by growing discomfort and disillusionment with America's global image in its production of filmic fantasies whereby female heroines are at once retrained in appropriate lifestyle values and working to modify the views of

30 In "White Lies, Dark Truths" Jennifer Guglielmo explores the ambiguous state of whiteness the Italian diaspora inhabited upon arrival in the United States. While Guglielmo states that according to the law Italians were white in that they could vote and own land, she points out that racial discrimination occurred through segregation practices in public institutions and through racist images of Italian people in the popular culture of the time. See Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9–11. Alastair Bonnett discusses the relationship between whiteness and modernity in *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives* (Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall, 2000), 78.

31 Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review* 17 (1984): 10.

those they encounter in relation to their country of origin. While *Under the Tuscan Sun* is unique in introducing Frances as an inhabitant of San Francisco, the majority of travel romance protagonists hail from New York, an urban space commonly represented on film and television as a city where femininity is made and shaped. As Deborah Jermyn argues, there is an inextricable link throughout cinematic history between New York and the “independent, desiring and desirable woman,” from the iconic image of a Givenchy-clad Audrey Hepburn eating breakfast outside Tiffany’s to Diane Keaton’s offbeat Annie Hall, right through to the frivolous, fashion-loving women of *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004).³² Jermyn suggests that the association between New York City and themes of hope and possibility in relation to the archetype of the urban female consumer and tropes of romantic love have their genesis in New York’s history as an arrival port for new immigrants. The allure of the American dream, with its emphasis on values of “egalitarianism, enterprise, and ambition,” Jermyn suggests, forms a key component of how New York signifies in the cinematic context as a magical space where “anything can happen.”³³ When female protagonists such as Liz in *Eat Pray Love*, Beth in *When in Rome*, and Sophie in *Letters to Juliet* experience themselves as unable to achieve their desires in New York, this urban space—no longer able to accommodate the hopes and dreams of its female inhabitants—undergoes a resignification in terms of its relationship to female mobility and success.

The feminist reappropriation of the heroine’s life trajectory corresponds directly to a change in relationship to American whiteness through an engagement with cultures that seem entirely segregated from its influence. American intention in the foreign space can thus also be reframed as “benevolent and benign,” to use prominent US foreign policy critic Noam Chomsky’s description of an ideally mediated US foreign policy that works to obscure both the problematic politics and the true rationale behind foreign intervention.³⁴ In these films, this occurs in terms of recourse to essentialist views of an idealized nurturing femininity able to provide care and support for those encountered overseas. The shifting representation of New York in the travel romance is not solely due to contemporary cultural discomfort with female career aspiration; it also signifies with regard to the powerful yet ambivalent role New York has played as both victim and aggressor on the world stage over the past decade. The al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of 9/11 led to an upsurge of patriotism in the United States, resulting in a rise of support for then president George W. Bush and his proclaimed “war on terror,” as well as religious intolerance and hate crimes against those believed to be of Middle Eastern descent. However, as Chomsky explains, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified through claims that the state harbored weapons of mass destruction, was unpopular with Western European electorates, including those of Spain, Italy, Germany, and France, and was opposed by a substantial proportion

32 Deborah Jermyn, “I Love NY: The Rom-Com’s Love Affair with New York City,” in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 15.

33 Ibid., 16.

34 Noam Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 130.

of US citizens.³⁵ Those opposed to the invasion questioned the legality of the exercise in accordance with international law, the large number of casualties the war would likely result in, and the rationale provided for the invasion, with some opponents believing the United States was looking to control Iraq's natural resources. The invasion of Iraq and the ongoing resultant war thus provoked global dissatisfaction with US international relations, which was exacerbated during the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 which began with the US housing market collapse resulting from risky lending practices by Wall Street financial institutions. This led to vast numbers of nations around the globe spiraling into recession.³⁶ While certainly not directly or explicitly referencing these concurrent issues, the contemporary Hollywood travel romance illustrates subtle shifts in the cinematic representation of the American dream through the mobilization of a female protagonist uncomfortable with a US value system that she perceives as disadvantaging her. She is immediately identified by those in the foreign space as unique in her ability to provide care, but only after she is recognized as an ideal representative through which to modify a US value system that has lost its way.

Divinely Unique: Religious Guidance in the Foreign Locale. With recourse to both religious and feminist discourse, these films are able to portray the global expansion of American whiteness as both therapeutic and empowering to the US female citizen while also working to alleviate guilt or discomfort with similar facets of the contemporary American image. For the female protagonist to be deemed worthy of an education in lifestyle choice, she must first be marked as uniquely special upon her arrival in the tourist zone in a manner that alludes to financial capital only in subtext. This gives rise to an interesting theme that locates the heroine as being in God's favor, both through her need for spiritual salvation and in her capacity to act as a force of redemption through acts of goodwill in the countries she visits. This theme, prominent in both *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, bestows a greater worth on the heroine, who finds herself simultaneously "chosen" and guided by icons of religious worship in the tourist space. This trope propagates a form of American exceptionalism while working to assuage white guilt, all the while operating to ensure that the female individual learns to make peace with her past while preparing for a different future. American exceptionalism, the notion that the United States is unlike other nations in its global purpose to deliver equality and freedom abroad, is modified in these films for a dual purpose.³⁷ The process of divine intervention allows for the projection of the protagonist's melancholic state upon the tourist space, so that healing transpires through a

35 Chomsky notes that governmental support, or lack thereof, for the unpopular Iraq War played a key role in US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's distinction between Old Europe and New Europe. Old Europe, Chomsky states, consisted of those governments that refused to support the invasion, whereas New Europe consisted of nations that supported George Bush and Tony Blair despite the will of the majority of their population. In Spain, Chomsky points out, polls at the time indicated support for the war was at a mere 2 percent. *Hopes and Prospects* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 43–44.

36 Maziar Peihani outlines these causes as well as their national and international impact in "The Global Financial Crisis of 2008: An Analysis of Contributing Trends, Policies and Failures," *Banking & Finance Law Review* 27, no. 3 (2012): 465–493.

37 Noam Chomsky discusses these stated US foreign policy goals in *Hopes and Prospects*, 39.

symbiotic bond between person and place. “Romance” in the Hollywood tourist film does not merely allude to the “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back” battle-of-the-sexes formula continually played out on cinema screens through the romantic comedy. Given that they tend to have a comedic as opposed to melancholic tone, tourist films featuring younger protagonists largely conform to genre requirements. However, the romances under discussion here introduce the romantic partner toward the close of the narrative and thus do not feature a male coprotagonist as a plot driver. In *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the romance is primarily between the heroine and the tourist milieu itself. During a luncheon in Rome, Liz and her newfound friends challenge themselves to encapsulate the character of their cities of origin with just one word. The words they use to describe such cities as London, Stockholm, and New York are articulations of urban living that have worked to impose limitation and restriction upon the travelers, such as stuffy, conformist, and overly ambitious, respectively. The equation of Rome with sex, however, elicits a collective cheer from the group in its evocation of a pleasurable bonding of bodies and extends beyond sexual intercourse to the liberation of acting upon multiple desires. When Liz visits a famous eatery in Naples, for instance, she describes herself as “having a relationship” with her pizza.

The symbiosis between person and place, while pleasurable in its liberating capacity to indulge the female protagonist’s narcissism, is also curative to the melancholy state as a result of the mobilization of affect. Although Liz has always harbored a desire to travel, her decision to divorce her husband and tour Italy, India, and Indonesia comes to her following a prayer to God for spiritual guidance. Liz therefore understands every event that occurs in these countries as serving the divine purpose of healing the fractures in her life. A tourist venture to the Augusteum in Rome allows her to make a clean break from David, as she not only begins to see the ruins of her life as reflected in the ruins of the historical building but also learns to understand the transient nature of her personal pain. “The place has withstood so much chaos,” Liz writes in her email to David, “ruin is a gift. Ruin is the road to transformation. The world is so chaotic and maybe the real trap is getting too attached to any of it.” The Augusteum here assumes the form of Liz’s melancholy, operating as a projection of burdened whiteness as well as offering redemptive potential in the eyes of God (Figure 3).

In *Eat Pray Love*, Italy becomes a spiritual primer for Liz, who eventually leaves the country to practice Hinduism at an Indian ashram. Following a period of self-enforced silence and meditation, Liz comes to learn that “God is not interested in a performance of how a spiritual person looks and behaves. The quiet girl who glides silently



Figure 3. Liz reflects on her life in the United States as she ponders the history of the Roman Augusteum. *Eat Pray Love* (Plan B, 2010).

through the place with a gentle, ethereal smile. Who is that person? It's Ingrid Bergman in *The Bells of St. Mary's*, not me. God dwells within me, as me."

The deployment of divine intervention as a trope in the Hollywood travel romance operates to define the heroine's intentions in the tourist space as pure as opposed to being driven by an imperialist, capitalist greed.³⁸ While mobility afforded by capitalist imperatives is disavowed, the elevation of the white female protagonist as "chosen" through her embrace of the religions on offer to her in the tourist space is thoroughly dependent on ideologies of white exceptionalism. *Under the Tuscan Sun* similarly employs the divine to bestow a sense of manifest destiny upon the female protagonist's arrival in the tourist space. After deciding to purchase a Tuscan villa that has fallen into disrepair, Frances encounters financial opposition in the form of an Italian couple who angrily declare that her interest in the property is typical of "greedy Americans" who have an overinflated sense of entitlement, to which Frances replies, "A lot of us feel really badly about that." Frances ultimately is deemed the interested party who will most benefit from the acquisition and is sold the property by a contessa whose family has owned the villa for generations and who Frances is told has more interest in signs from above than money. As Frances struggles to tame the unruly land, repair shredded wallpaper, and deal with various household appliances in dire need of maintenance, there is a sense that her labor is a form of healing spiritual dialogue with the encountered space. Polishing a picture of the Virgin Mary on her bedpost, her voice-over commentary emphasizes the importance of interfamiliarity with new places. "Go slowly through the house," she counsels herself, "be polite. Introduce yourself, so it can introduce itself to you." Like Liz, Frances is endowed with special significance in the tourist space through a form of religious anointing. The Virgin Mary in this film is very much connected with the Italian milieu Frances inhabits, appearing on pendants around necks and on pictures at grocery stores and being idolized in festivals (Figure 4). The



Figure 4. The Virgin Mary presides over Frances as she learns valuable life lessons in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Touchstone Pictures, 2003).

image of the Virgin literally watches over the female protagonist during her time at the villa, this image's presence contributing to an "internal juggling" within Frances as she struggles to come to terms with the role of Roman Catholicism in her

38 An interesting example of a character exhibiting a commercialist, and thus impure, rationale for visiting Italy occurs in *Letters to Juliet*. In this film, Gael García Bernal plays Sophie's love interest Victor, an immigrant to New York who harbors dreams of opening a successful Italian restaurant in the city. Victor's belief in the validity of the American dream results in his privileging work over his relationship with Sophie, who eventually finds love in Florence with an English traveler mourning the loss of his parents. Victor's fetishizing of Italian culture is demonstrated through a hyperbolic performance of emotional excess that Sophie eventually learns to decode as inauthentic.

life, despite identifying herself as “a fallen-away Methodist.” “To my surprise I have become friendly with Mary,” Frances muses. “I think it started the night she stood by me through the storm knowing full well I’m not a Catholic. Yet somehow she seems more like Mary my favorite aunt than Santa Maria. Aunt Mary is everywhere, her calm presence assuring us that all things will go on as they have before.”

The acquisition of land and property in the visited countries occurs as a result of divine right and is portrayed as a necessary step in the heroine’s transcendence of the melancholic state, as the tourist space comes to operate as an extension of the self. The right to command authority in space is not typical of the female position, with feminist phenomenologists including Vivian Sobchack and Iris Marion Young having pointed to the relationship between restricted feminine comportment and an inability to command mastery over space.³⁹ This extension of white female melancholy, however, in allowing for a certain porousness between female corporeality and the tourist zone, is entirely consistent with the privileges of a white phenomenology that organizes the world in its own image. Sara Ahmed, in an article exploring the relationship between corporeality and white hegemony, suggests that white bodies have an ability to extend into space that is not enjoyed by those marked as nonwhite. In inheriting whiteness, Ahmed suggests, one also inherits an orientation that puts “styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, and habits” within reach.⁴⁰ Noting that white bodies exhibit a peculiar comfort in space, Ahmed declares that “to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins.”⁴¹ In *Eat Pray Love* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the white body’s extension into space is portrayed as a feminist act. Frances’s acquisition of the Tuscan villa after her husband Tom purchases her share of their San Francisco home goes far beyond a simple realignment of woman with the domestic. The remodeling of the house allows Frances to unleash her creative capacity and thus remodel her life, recalling Virginia Woolf’s thesis that female creatives looking to distinguish themselves in patriarchal society need both a literal and a symbolic space.⁴² In a review of *Eat Pray Love*, in fact, the *Sunday Times* declared the novel “a modern day *Room of One’s Own*.⁴³

Refiguring Consumption and Transformation. These films demonstrate an ambiguity in their approach toward the ideological role of cinema in sustaining the values of neoliberal femininity, in particular the emphasis on consumer capitalism, which these films cast in opposition to “authentic” religious values. *Eat Pray Love* engages in self-reflexivity in regard to the role of both cinematic vehicle and star as Hollywood product and a disavowal of the text and star commodity as part of that same Hollywood machine. When Liz, upon her sojourn to India, declares that God dwells within

39 See Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

40 Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 154.

41 Ibid., 158.

42 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929).

43 As noted on the book jacket of Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

her, she first distances herself from inauthentic spectacles of religion as exemplified by Hollywood star performance, claiming that she is not like Ingrid Bergman in *The Bells of St. Mary's* (Leo McCarey, 1945). Bergman as a nun, it is implied, is too glamorous, too perfect, and ultimately deemed too inauthentic to be believable as a "spiritual person." Bergman's performance is made possible by a costumed decoration of the self, the exterior, while Liz/Roberts has learned, as a result of consuming the philosophies of her visited countries, that God dwells in the interior. This is an important point, as Roberts's star text is inextricably linked with contemporary popular culture's "make-over paradigm," which requires its participants to address the flaws in their lives via the alteration of appearances through conspicuous consumption.⁴⁴ The hugely popular Julia Roberts vehicle *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), the story of a prostitute whose inner worth and capacity for romantic love is recognized after a wealthy client provides her with first-class accommodation and a designer wardrobe, provides an ideal model of neoliberal femininity through its protagonist, Vivian. As Hilary Radner explains, Vivian's "capital" resides primarily in the fetishization of her body and her ability to look good in designer clothing.⁴⁵ The Hollywood travel romance does, of course, provide a makeover narrative of sorts but requires forms of consumption that incorporate elements of the tourist space into the self to create a fantasy of the liberating, symbiotic bond between person and place. The makeover process works from the inside out rather than the outside in and in doing so must distance itself from the type of makeover that promises empowerment as a result of developing the body as spectacle. *Eat Pray Love*, like *Pretty Woman*, contains a Julia Roberts shopping scene. This scene, however, does not take place among the designer boutiques of Rodeo Drive, and Richard Gere is not on hand with his credit card to survey any glamorous transformation. Instead, Liz/Roberts's expedition to buy new jeans in Naples lies in diegetic and extradiegetic defiance of her previous role as object of desire for both the male gaze and the gaze of the crowd.

Negra argues that the tourist film often explores the female protagonist's problematic relationship to her corporeality, with the texts establishing a "contrast between the United States as a site of body dysfunction and Europe as a place in which women enjoy an easy, settled relationship to food."⁴⁶ Declaring that she is "tired of counting every calorie" so she knows "exactly how much self-loathing to take into the shower," Roberts's character, Liz, takes her new friend Sofi (Tuva Novotny) to buy bigger jeans in order to celebrate their newfound liberation. This freedom has been made possible by the conquering of an existential inertia through their status as mobile tourists who have subsequently adopted Italian philosophies through the consumption of national cuisine. In this segment, a long struggle with a zipper is crosscut with images of pub-goers watching an Italian soccer game in which a skilled player is approaching the goal line. Corporeal expansion here, then, is associated with deft mobility through

44 Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 156.

45 Hilary Radner, "Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.

46 Negra, "Romance and/as Tourism," 95. Interestingly, Negra's primary case study illustrating this point is the 1999 Roger Michell film *Notting Hill*, in which Julia Roberts self-reflexively plays the role of a Hollywood actress who has "been hungry for a decade." Ibid., 94.

space, something normally reserved for masculine bodies and made possible for Liz only by playing the Italian game. Both the patriarchal association of women with the corporeal and irrational, and the focus on bodily maintenance and discipline required of neoliberal femininities, are disregarded in travel romances featuring middle-aged protagonists. The body does not constitute an obstacle, as coming to allow the body its wants and needs allows for a romanticized disentanglement of the corporeal from the nexus of power relations in which it has previously been caught up. Furthermore, this understanding of the body allows for the successful union of body with spirit and the subsequent understanding of the body and mind as always interconnected with others, albeit on fantasized terms of equality. The travel romance thus engages in a utopian form of corporeal feminism, which, Elizabeth Grosz articulates, must reject binary opposition while developing a phenomenological understanding of both the corporeal and the lived body as cultural product.⁴⁷ In these films however, this understanding must remain focused on the white American female of privileged economic status. The feminist reclamation of the body in *Eat Pray Love* also allows for a renegotiation of the Julia Roberts star image in middle age, from glamorous consumer to an everyday woman who sometimes needs to shop for bigger jeans. This self-reflexive deviation from her Hollywood image as a young and beautiful ingenue has subsequently allowed Roberts to renegotiate her star persona in middle age and take on more “serious,” deglamorized roles designed to showcase her capabilities as an actress. Roberts was nominated for an Academy Award for her turn as Barbara Fordham, a woman struggling to keep her chaotic family together in *August: Osage County* (John Wells, 2013) and appeared as doctor and HIV researcher Dr. Emma Brookner in the highly acclaimed television drama *The Normal Heart* (HBO, 2014), helmed by *Eat Pray Love* director Ryan Murphy. The “authenticity” of the Italian setting allows for a glimpse into the “authentic” Roberts, her role as Vivian the upwardly mobile prostitute recast as a performance not unlike Ingrid Bergman’s as a nun.⁴⁸

Unlike Roberts, Diane Lane’s performance in *Under the Tuscan Sun* does not allude to her past cinematic appearances and in fact was followed by two more roles as a melancholy divorcée, in *Must Love Dogs* (Gary David Goldberg, 2005) and *Nights in Rodanthe* (George C. Wolfe, 2008). Like *Eat Pray Love*, however, *Under the Tuscan Sun* chooses to distance itself from promises of fulfillment as arising from conspicuous consumption facilitating the decoration of the self. After Frances is swept off her feet in Positano by a charming Italian named Marcello (Raoul Bova), she undergoes a physical transformation in opting for a voluminous blow-dry and white dress with a cinched waist for their next meeting. Unlike the makeover narratives seen in films of a similar genre—for instance, *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002) or the aforementioned *Pretty Woman*—Frances’s makeover leads to romantic disappointment. Marcello, instead of learning to see Frances as the object of his romantic destiny upon witnessing her transformation, has already moved on with another woman. In contemporary variants of the

47 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 20–23.

48 Richard Dyer explains that the search for the authentic personality of the star constitutes an enduring aspect of our fascination with celebrity, in *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 20.

Hollywood travel romance, female protagonists rarely encounter the potential for lasting love with local inhabitants of the tourist space, so dependent is the formula on the heroine's elevated hierarchical position as a result of her whiteness and projection of melancholy. Furthermore, the nostalgic element of the tourist zone, which in its inertia facilitates the protagonist's movement, guarantees that the heroine and any potential love interest are unable to coexist on the same temporal plane. "I'm sorry that you're hurt, but what did you expect?" Marcello asks Frances. "We were never able to get together again even though we tried. These things must come naturally."

Under the Tuscan Sun frequently pays homage to Federico Fellini's 1960 classic *La dolce vita* throughout the narrative. In contrasting the diegetic material relating to *La dolce vita* with the natural, communal representation of Tuscany, this travel romance is able to distance its idealized lifestyle values from those based around consumerism, casual sex, and female spectacle as employed in Fellini's film. Frances's British friend Katherine (Lindsay Duncan) becomes the embodiment of nostalgia for Italy's cinematic past, constructing her appearance in reference to Fellini's heroines in her favoring of vibrant garments, long blonde locks styled into waves, and dramatic, sweeping hats. While Katherine helps Frances acclimatize to her new environment, even suggesting that she buy the villa and indulge her "terrible idea," it soon becomes evident that she utilizes Italy as a space for indulging her own narcissism rather than adopting the philosophies of Tuscany to facilitate human connection, as Frances does. Katherine informs Frances that Fellini once told her to live life spherically, in many different directions, while retaining a childish enthusiasm in order to ensure that good things come her way. Katherine uses this advice to live life to excess, such as by having her portrait painted by her young artist lover while draped in nothing but furs. While Frances eventually finds happiness, Katherine's final appearance sees her drunkenly swaying in a fountain in a melancholic parody of the iconic scene featuring actress Silvia (Anita Ekberg) in *La dolce vita* (Figure 5). Katherine, while a sympathetic character and close friend to Frances, holds separate values more akin to those of Marcello, whose name



Figure 5. Katherine reenacts her favorite Fellini scene in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Touchstone Pictures, 2003).

references *La dolce vita*'s lead actor, Marcello Mastroianni. These characters exist in a realm of transient fantasy for Frances, operating in parallel to the film's construction of an authentic reality. While Frances will move forward from her existential crisis, Katherine will remain locked in melancholic temporal suspension, her unattainable dreams represented by her interpretation of *La dolce vita*, with the values held by the superficial characters in the film sitting uncomfortably close to those Frances has left behind in the United States.

Problematizing Benevolent Feminism. The shedding of values associated with neoliberal consumer capitalism and the subsequent discovery of inner beauty is critical, given that these Hollywood travel romances require their protagonists to "give back" to the communities that have worked to alleviate their melancholic state. This theme, while present in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, is more pronounced in *Eat Pray Love*, with Liz first encountering a young Indian girl named Tulsi (Rushita Singh) who expresses her unhappiness at being forced into an arranged marriage by her parents. Next, she meets a Balinese woman, Wayan (Christine Hakim), who has lost all of her assets in a divorce. Liz's sympathy for this woman's plight results in her decision to organize friends around the globe to contribute money in order to help purchase a house for Wayan and her young daughter, Tutti (Anakia Lapaé). As Liz reflects upon her journey, she muses that "sometimes when you set out in the world to help yourself, you end up helping *tutti*," which, as coincidence would have it, is not only the name of Wayan's daughter but also the Italian word for everybody. Frances in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, after jokingly describing herself as "the patron saint of horny teenagers," is rewarded with romantic love after she helps a young couple in their relationship despite the girl's father expressing displeasure with his daughter's choice of romantic partner, a Polish migrant worker employed to renovate the villa. The acts of generosity carried out by these female tourists work to transform how local communities view the American identity of these travelers abroad. The tourists' value systems gradually transform from those favored by their home country, in which an upwardly mobile lifestyle built upon economic privilege and conspicuous consumption is fundamental to personal success, to an ethos promising fulfillment through acts of care and kindness toward those society refuses to value. This transformation, while reliant on essentialist notions of women as possessing a heightened capacity to nurture, is presented as the ultimate in feminist empowerment for the diegetic heroine and is sanctioned in these texts via a process of divine intervention that demarcates the heroine as unique and special.

These films, however, present gendered oppression as something shared by both the protagonist and the women she decides to help, despite the therapeutic capabilities of the tourist space for the white woman, rather than presenting the American heroine as enjoying greater social freedom. The protagonist's demarcation as exceptional, predicated upon her race as well as country of origin, is key to her ability to reap therapeutic rewards. The protagonist therefore has a duty to recognize the exceptionality and specialness of those she wishes to help, so that they, too, are able to enrich their lives through this supposedly symbiotic arrangement. The ideological drive of *Eat Pray Love* can perhaps best be summed up by Liz's monologue at the film's opening in which she describes the experiences of a psychologist friend who was asked to counsel a group

of Cambodian refugees newly arrived in the United States. While her friend displayed initial reluctance, uncertain as to whether she would be able to relate to these people's suffering, given their experiences of genocide and starvation, she soon found that all the women in the group wanted to talk about were their forlorn love lives. What this passage demonstrates is the inherent danger in these filmic narratives that present romantic fantasies built upon affective, symbiotic bonds between female traveler and encountered space (Figure 6).



Figure 6. According to the racial politics of *Eat Pray Love* (Plan B, 2010), Wayan's and Tutti's predicament can really signify only in terms of Liz's past traumas.

Because India and Bali operate as extensions of Liz's melancholy and because these oppressed women are seen through the lens of the white woman's view, their predicaments can really signify only in terms of similarity to what Liz sees as traumatic events from her own past—unhappy marriage or social exclu-

sion as a result of divorce. For instance, witnessing Tulsi's wedding prompts a flashback for Liz as she recalls her own nuptials with Stephen. "Funny thing about weddings," Liz's Texan friend subsequently muses, "you end up thinking about yourself." The film elevates female bonding as a source of healing for the American female while simultaneously disavowing the position of power and privilege occupied by the affluent protagonist. Oppression must be "shared," meaning that forms the white woman cannot relate to through her own experience are elided in the text.

Conclusion. In the novel upon which the film *Eat Pray Love* is based, author Elizabeth Gilbert expresses her pleasure that the countries she wishes to travel to all begin with the letter *I*—"a fairly auspicious sign" she says "for a voyage of self-discovery." Indeed, the appeal of these Hollywood travel romances lies in the fact that these exotic lands operate as empowering, affective extensions of the melancholic white self, with the pseudosymbiotic fusion of person and place allowing for a philosophical and spiritual "transcendence" over neoliberal feminism's consumer capitalist logic. Despite disavowing the position of privilege occupied by the female protagonist, the emphasis on gender works to obfuscate how the engagement with foreign spaces is dependent on the cultural prestige afforded to the creative melancholic and to middle-class whiteness and how these texts in fact operate more broadly as fantasies of national rehabilitation for the United States. The films thus ultimately engage in a reimagining of the neoliberal systems that the stories aim to critique through tales of middle-aged women seeking a feminist rediscovery of the self. These systems, of course, enjoy a high degree of political and cultural currency, and these texts at the extradiegetic levels of production, marketing, and commercial tie-ins are firmly embedded within them. Yet these fantasies are powerful ones that help illuminate a US political environment

currently negotiating not only the fluctuations of these neoliberal systems but also the branding of its own identity. When presented with stories about individuals negotiating their own pathways through these hegemonic fluctuations, it is important to examine not only whose story is being told but also how a given protagonist's interactions with other characters in the story realm provide insights into which societal ideologies are perpetuated and which are challenged. *Eat Pray Love*, as a highly problematic variant of the travel romance subgenre, aids in illuminating the ideologically questionable notions on which a typical European travel romance such as *Under the Tuscan Sun* is built. In these texts, it would appear that the trope of feminist empowerment functions as a masquerade, with the growth of an already racially, economically, and nationally empowered group dependent on the refusal to allow the growth of those aiding them in their journeys.

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