

GENERATION X AND THE INVENTION OF A THIRD FEMINIST WAVE

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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January, 2010

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For Gabe, Kristin, and Xoe

And in memory of  
Judith Northwood  
(1964-2009)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people enter graduate school with a clear dissertation project in mind. This was not true in my case. Yet, the foundations of my project were with me when I entered Case Western Reserve University's history department as a Ph.D. student in 2003. I credit my mentor and dear friend Renée Sentilles with recognizing my intellectual strengths and interests and for encouraging me to embark on a project on third wave feminism. I credit the origins of this dissertation to a moment in a conversation we had in 2006. As we mulled over potential dissertation topics in her office, Renée raised a characteristically intuitive question: "Why not write about riot grrrls and third wave feminism?" The project evolved from there and Renee supported my intellectual journey at every turn. The fact that I am her first graduating Ph.D. student means more to me than I can say.

While I owe Renée the greatest single intellectual debt, Jonathan Sadowsky also contributed a great deal to my thought processes and to the project as a whole. I revisited his comprehensive exam question—"Is there a "post-modern" feminism? Does the alleged rise of postmodernity help to explain anything about changes in feminism?"—so often in the early phases of the project that I decided to expand upon the question and my response to it in the dissertation. His trenchant question is at the core of chapters three and four. Mary Triece's enthusiasm for my work and her insights on media culture and mass communication proved invaluable to my dissertation. She is a friend and a mentor, and I have learned a great deal from her as a scholar, but also by watching her skillfully

navigate many intersecting roles. She is a brilliant, productive professor who also makes time for activism and leadership in her near west side neighborhood. I am very grateful to Peter Shulman, whose enthusiasm and energy rejuvenated me at a moment in the process when I needed it most. Peter incisively encapsulated my project into one sentence: “GenX feminism is an instance of political action in an age of paralyzing ironic detachment.” After the dissertation defense, I immediately wove various articulations of Peter’s synopsis into the dissertation, and it is one of the key phrases that I use to succinctly describe it. It is just one instance of Peter’s many sharp assessments of the project.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of the Department of History at Case Western Reserve University. Rhonda Williams read early versions of chapters one and two and offered valuable insight on the racial dimensions of my interpretation of primary sources. As co-advisor to Case’s 2007 Arts and Sciences Dissertation Fellowship Seminar, Ken Ledford suggested that I explore second and third wave feminisms through a generational lens, which set in motion what ultimately became a study of the interconnectedness of Generation X and third wave feminism. Many of my graduate student colleagues contributed their wisdom and insight to my project. Ben Sperry and Jon Wlasiuk read drafts of all five chapters; they encouraged me to consider the broader implications of my project, to clarify claims, and to hone the theoretical aspects of the narrative. Just weeks after delivering her second child, Beth Salem enthusiastically read and thoroughly edited the introduction and chapter four. My late friend and colleague Judi Northwood offered a constructive critique of chapter two, which compelled me to look at school textbooks as a way to further reinforce claims I

was making about the implications of gendered images in 1970s children's popular culture.

In my six and a half years as a part of Case's history department, I have been encouraged and supported by three department chairs—Carroll Pursell, Alan Rocke, and Jonathan Sadowsky—and four directors of graduate studies—Angela Woollacott, Alan Rocke, David Hammack, and Dan Cohen. I am indebted to all of them, particularly to Jonathan and David and the graduate student council for their commitment to my work, and for providing monetary support in the form of stipends, fellowships, teaching assistantships, and instructor of record positions. Their generosity also included funding for research trips and conferences, for which I am also very grateful. Department assistants Nancy Kryz, Marissa Ross, and Kalli Vimr helped me navigate countless graduate school hurdles.

No lengthy research project can be completed without financial support. In addition to history department funding, I received three consecutive fellowships from History Associates, for which I am extremely grateful. I also received travel grants from The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University, and from the Sophia Smith Collection Women's History Archives at Smith College. I made two trips to The Sallie Bingham Center, and I am particularly indebted to the Center's staff, especially to Kelly Wooten, Research Services and Collection Development Librarian and Laura Micham, The Sallie Bingham Center Director and Librarian for Women's Studies. Kelly's knowledge of the Center's extensive collections of third wave feminist zines is

remarkable, and her suggestion that I focus my research on the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection was invaluable to me as I crafted the culminating chapter of my dissertation.

Embarking on a major research project is a commitment that one's family and friends share. I am grateful to my parents, Joan Altmayer and Darrell Bly, for their encouragement and patience for the project, particularly as they sometimes struggled to comprehend what, exactly, I was writing about. My sister-in-law Kandi Genis' constant encouragement compelled me to write on days when my spirits were low and the project's completion seemed unfathomable. My friends and teachers at Inner Bliss Yoga Studio helped me stay physically strong and mentally grounded, and made me laugh and have fun in unexpected ways. Most importantly, however, I am thankful for the love and support of my spouse Kristin Rogers and my children Gabe and Xoe Bly. Kristin's enthusiasm for my research and writing was boundless, and he helped me work through early iterations of the dissertation and read and edited chapter drafts. During the six and a half years that it took for me to earn the Ph.D., Kristin was a loyal partner who endured stacks of books and papers, weeks of single parenting as I conducted research out of state, and solo nights out as I stayed in to read, write, and revise. My son Gabe spent most of his teen years watching his mother incessantly write and study, and my daughter Xoe's world has always included the nebulous (to her young mind) entity—"mommy's dissertation." Without Krisin, Gabe, and Xoe's presence and cooperation I do not know if I would have completed this project.

# Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave

Abstract

by

ELIZABETH A. BLY

In the early 1990s, young middle-class women took to the streets to protest the erosion of abortion and reproductive rights, gathered in coffee shops and dorm rooms to discuss their personal experiences with sexism and violence, and assembled in punk rock nightclubs and hijacked typically masculine spaces in order to stage their own creative and political actions. This surge of activism is identified as the beginning “third wave” feminist activism. By no coincidence, the progenitors of “third wave” feminism were largely members of Generation X, the group of Americans born between 1960 and 1975. As heirs of the cultural and political transformations of previous decades, this generation grew up benefiting from the gains made by the women’s liberation movement of the sixties and seventies. As GenXers came of age as teens and young adults in the eighties and nineties, the privileges of “normative” identity—those wrought from whiteness, masculinity, and social class—had been thoroughly challenged by three decades of activism, and nearly two decades of academic proliferation of French post structuralism and post modernism, which were mainstreamed in the U.S. under the rubrics of “multiculturalism” and “identity politics.”

*Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave* is a study of late twentieth century feminist activism, popular culture, and the gendered implications of the

1990s political conflict known as the culture wars. The dissertation explores two inextricably linked phenomena: Generation X and third wave feminism. Third wave, what I term “GenX,” feminism emerged as an example of political action in an age of paralyzing ironic detachment. GenX feminism surfaced at a time in history when it seemed impossible to incite political activism based solely on gender. Feminists of this generation understood the ways in which various socially constructed categories of identity intermingled and produced social inequality. As activists and scholars grappled with the complex implications of the intersections of identity, markers such as “woman” came to be understood as problematically limiting concepts.

In charting the life cycle of white, middle-class GenX women, this dissertation illuminates the forces that shaped the generation’s worldview. It also elucidates the ways in which GenX feminism both challenged and maintained conventions of femininity and feminist activism during the last decade of the twentieth century.

## INTRODUCTION

*It's the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine.*

R.E.M.

*In my mind and in my car, we can't rewind, we've gone too far.*

The Buggles<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, young middle-class women took to the streets to protest the erosion of abortion and reproductive rights, gathered in coffee shops and dorm rooms to discuss their personal experiences with sexism and violence, and assembled in punk rock nightclubs to commandeer typically masculine spaces for their own creative and political purposes. This rise in feminist activism was, in part, spurred on by the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas controversy of 1991, which put sexual harassment and the intricacies of gender and racial politics front and center through the televised Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, which ultimately led to Thomas' confirmation as Supreme Court Justice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Video Killed the Radio Star" was initially released by Island Records as a single in 1979; it is widely known in the U.S. as the first song played on MTV at 12:01 a.m. on August 1, 1981.

The Hill-Thomas affair was one of the first battles between progressives and conservatives of the nineties; it was a continuation of the anti-feminist backlash of the previous decade, and it foreshadowed what would come to be known as the culture wars. The culture wars were fought over national ideology, or, what 1996 Republican presidential candidate Senator Robert Dole called “American unity,” which was, according to the World War II veteran, tied to the country’s “language, history, and values.”<sup>3</sup> Dole and other politicians—most influentially, Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and media commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Pat Buchanan attacked concepts such as multiculturalism and legislative initiatives such as affirmative action. They also took on more specific endeavors such as the national history standards, and the “Enola Gay” exhibition at the Smithsonian for the curator’s sympathetic portrayal of the Japanese in the exhibit’s educational text and materials. Artists also came under conservative fire for using public funds to create and perform “sexually deviant” art work. Four avant-garde performance artists (Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller)—the “NEA Four”—became known outside of the art world as details of their lawsuits against the National Endowment for the Arts were broadcast on cable television.

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<sup>2</sup>The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University reports that the Hill-Thomas controversy increased involvement of women in politics. They write: “The media heralded the 1992 election year as the “Year of the Woman” when a record number of women ran for public office and won. In the U.S. Senate, eleven women ran and five won seats—including one incumbent candidate. In the House of Representatives, twenty-four women won new seats.” Overall, they assert, “[Thomas’s] appointment dismayed many women, who felt that Anita Hill’s allegations were not taken seriously by a Senate that was 98 [percent] male.” It is, however, important to note that Thomas won the Supreme Court seat by a narrow margin of four votes. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/122/hill/hillframe.htm> (accessed July 6, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Tom Englehardt and Edward T. Linenthal, “Introduction: History Under Siege,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, Englehardt and Linenthal, eds. (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1996, 1-8), 4.



By 1990, the privileges of “normative” identity—those wrought from whiteness, masculinity, and social class—were thoroughly challenged by three decades of activism and, during the same period, the academic proliferation of post structuralism and post modernism, which were mainstreamed under the rubrics of “multiculturalism” and “identity politics.” American language, history, and values were re-written to include the voices and experiences of women, gays and lesbians, people of color, and disabled individuals. Ultimately, the homogeneous traditions and values that many Americans found comforting served as a veneer that covered a reality that had always been complicated.

Young feminists of the early 1990s, many of whom were part of Generation X, (middle-class Americans born between 1960 and 1975), were comfortable with the complexities of identity politics—indeed, this reality was central to their worldview. They nonetheless witnessed the political and ideological battles waged around them. It was in this atmosphere that members of the post-Baby Boom generation came of age both as young adults and feminists. In order to understand nineties feminism, which, for the last 15 years, has been controversially labeled “third wave,” we must come to terms with the parameters of Generation X.<sup>4</sup> The social and political climate of the eighties and nineties, coupled with the cultural discourse on gender and the women’s movement of the

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<sup>4</sup> The dates of Generation X and “Third Wave” feminism vary. When GenX emerged as an identity in the early nineties, most writers used William Strauss and Neil Howe’s dates, which held that anyone born between 1961 and 1981 was categorized as a member of Generation X (see Howe and Strauss, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* [New York, NY: William Morrow, 1991] and Howe and Strauss, *13<sup>th</sup> Gen: America’s 13<sup>th</sup> Generation, Born 1961-1981* [New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993]). Employing Paul Virilio’s assertion that “generation[al] realities are connected to generations of images, I date Generation X as those born between 1960-75 (see Jérôme Sans, “Interview with Paul Virilio,” *Flash Art* Number 138 [January-February 1988]). “Third wave” feminism emerged around 1991; it is often tied to the riot grrrl feminist movement, which began in 1991 in Seattle, WA and Washington, DC, as college-aged feminists such as Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, Molly Neuman, Erin Smith, and Corin Tucker established riot grrrl bands (Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy). The term itself was first used by Rebecca Walker, daughter of writer and womanist/feminist Alice Walker, in a 1992 essay in *Ms.*; in the article Walker asserted, “I am the third wave.”

late sixties and seventies, shaped GenXer's ideas about gender, and, subsequently, their feminism. As late twentieth-century creations, "third wave" feminism and "Generation X" are inextricably linked.

Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave is a study of the intersection of these phenomena and the emergence of GenX feminism.<sup>5</sup> This spate of activism is an instance of a political action in an age of paralyzing ironic detachment. Both the "movement" and generation are white, middle-class inventions, relics of a time when it seemed possible to incite political movements or market products based solely on singular categories of identity such as age or gender.<sup>6</sup> Markers such as "woman" or "generation," however, came to be understood as problematically limiting concepts at the end of the twentieth century as politicians, pundits, academics, and educators explored and debated the implications the intersectionality of socially constructed categories of identity such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. While Generation X was paradoxically imagined as white and middle class, I do not maintain that only white, middle-class women and men claimed this identity. As I discuss in chapter three, this hegemonic (masculine) identity was challenged by the popularity of rap and hip hop music in the late eighties and early nineties. The alienation white GenX men felt over their "de-centered" status became the trademark of Generation X.

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<sup>5</sup> For reasons that I subsequently address in the introduction and throughout the dissertation, I take issue with "third wave" feminism and instead use the phrase "GenX feminism."

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Walker, daughter of writer and womanist/feminist Alice Walker, is the originator of the theory of womanism, which is articulated in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Despite Rebecca Walker's identity as a bi-racial woman, I contend that she perpetuated the white feminist discourse by asserting the rise of a "third" feminist wave in 1992. Her public assertion appeared in *Ms.*, the bastion of the white women's liberation movement. It is important to note that Rebecca Walker grew up amid a circle of famous feminists, including Gloria Steinem. Her proclamation of the rise of a "third wave," is, therefore part of the trajectory of white, middle-class (affluent) feminist activism.

This project is centered on the popular culture of the seventies, eighties, and nineties and the ethos of the postmodern condition, which is clearly discernible in the cultural detritus of the latter two decades. I analyze the pop cultural discourse of this era, employing Foucaultian theory to, as scholar Nancy Fraser explains, unpack and analyze “...the processes, procedures and apparatuses whereby truth, knowledge, and beliefs are produced, within what Foucault calls ‘the politics of the discursive regime’.”<sup>7</sup> Plainly put, my dissertation is a rejoinder to the questions that were raised in the 1990s by scholars such as Cathryn Bailey. In an essay that appeared in an issue of *Hypatia* devoted to “third wave” feminism, Bailey writes: “[I]t is hard to imagine how the negative stereotypes issuing from the backlash media could fail to have an effect on most young feminists. Instead of denying that influence, younger feminists might seek to understand it better, to accept it as part of what makes us, for better or worse, who we are.”<sup>8</sup> *Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave* illuminates the ways in which late twentieth century popular culture and the postmodern ethos affected white GenX women—the ways in which it shaped their understanding of femininity and informed their feminist activism.

“Generation X” and the postmodern condition are inextricably connected; I therefore address the role this condition played in shaping the generation’s worldview. However, I also acknowledge that Generation X emerged at a time when all-encompassing identities such as “generation” were exposed as overly-simplistic and falsely homogenous. GenX was an invention that served advertising executives on

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cathryn Bailey, “Making Waves and Drawing Lines: The Politics of Defining the Vicissitudes of Feminism,” *Hypatia*, Vol 12, no. 3 (Summer, 1997, 17-28), 24.

Madison Avenue very well. In 1996, a USA Today commentator plainly described the situation: “[It] is troublesome to everyone from Nike to Sony to Saturn. It’s no cakewalk aiming multimillion-dollar messages at youthful targets that have no bulls-eye—or, for that matter, no glue to keep them in place.”<sup>9</sup>

The essence of postmodernity was both cultivated by and projected through popular culture, most notably television. The generation born between 1960 and 1975 grew up with TV and, as they matured, the medium evolved from a box with a few channels that projected flickering black and white images, to a center of entertainment with hundreds of cable options, VCRs, and videogame systems. As literary studies scholar Bran Nicol states, Gen Xers have “never known reality unframed by mass media and are consequently unable to avoid relating everyday ‘real’ experience to everyday fictional experience, especially that which has been screened.”<sup>10</sup> A history of Generation X therefore involves interpreting and contextualizing images, particularly those disseminated through television.

Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave is a historical examination of two intersecting, interdependent identities that are, unto themselves, nebulous. They are tenuous constructions that emerge at a moment in “Western” history when ideas such as “truth” and all-encompassing categories of identity such as “woman” and “generation” were coming apart at the seams. The dissertation is, therefore, a “postmodern” history, as I employ and historicize theoretical premises that surfaced in France in the 1960s and 70s and became entrenched in American academic discourse

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Horowitz, “Gen X in a Class by Itself: Problem is, Nobody Can Agree Which Years the X Marks,” *USA Today*, September 23, 1996 (final edition), MONEY; Pg. 10B; “On Madison Avenue.”

<sup>10</sup> Bran Nichol, “Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Postmodernism,” in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*, Bran Nichol, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002, 13-19), 4.

throughout the eighties and nineties.<sup>11</sup> These theories resonate in the popular culture of the era, reflecting an emphasis on diversity and racial and gender equality. They inculcated the psyches of the white middle-class children and teenagers, who, in young adulthood, came to be identified as “Generation X.”

### ***White Grrrls***

In the 1990s scholars focusing on critical race theory began analyzing “white skin privilege,” and “whiteness studies” emerged as an academic field. Academics studying whiteness and the histories and experiences of white people walk a fine line between perpetuating powerful prevailing discourses and critically examining them. Indeed, as critical whiteness studies emerged, critics of the field questioned whether or not it ultimately re-centered whites in studies of race and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> Critical whiteness studies identifies whiteness as a category of identity, one that comes with privileges that are further mitigated by class, gender, sexual orientation, and numerous other culturally and historically constructed attributes. Scholars studying whiteness demonstrate the

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<sup>11</sup> I am aware of the debates among historians and scholars outside of the field regarding the claim that postmodernity is a break from modernity, or an era that arises following the modern period. Many historians accept David Harvey’s argument—that postmodernity is a phase of modernity. However, feminist historians and theorists such as Rita Felski contend that Harvey’s premise relies on Marxism – a grand narrative/theory – to map the trajectory of modernity. Felski notes that Harvey’s reliance on Marxist theory is problematic as far as gender and modernity (or postmodernity) are concerned, as Marxism is clearly connected to the Enlightenment and its full articulation of public (male) and private (female) spheres. Moreover, Felski recognizes that the situating of postmodernity within the frame of modernity re-grounds it in the context of a master narrative, which undermines Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernity – “Simplifying to the extreme,” he writes, “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.” (See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990], 173-188, \*Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [New York and London: New York University Press, 2000], 194-195, “Introduction,” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [Manchester University Press, 1984], xxiv-xxv.

\*While Felski does not directly mention Harvey or *The Condition of Postmodernity* in her book, chapter 9 of *Doing Time* is widely regarded as a response to Harvey’s germinal text.

<sup>12</sup> Birgit Brander Rasmussen, et al, “Introduction,” *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, Birgit Brander Rasmussen, et al., eds. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001, 1-24), 1.

ways in which whiteness was invisible—the ways it functioned (and continues to function) as the norm against which others were (and are) judged.<sup>13</sup> Studying white identity not only helps us better understand the ways in which white privilege shapes discourses; it helps us understand that whiteness has cash value. As George Lipsitz explains: “Whiteness...accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through unequal educations allocated to children of different races...[and] through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.”<sup>14</sup>

Even as these and other deeply rooted privileges began to be celebrated in the fifties and sixties, America was a land of assimilation. “Erasing one’s difference,” writes Wini Breines, “was a sign of becoming American. But assimilation meant passing for white, which was normative and invisible. Beauty standards were white... [as] were pluralist theories of democracy and models of the family. Deviants and doubters were outcasts.”<sup>15</sup> The culture wars of the nineties were a culmination of a two-decade-long ideological evolution from assimilation to multiculturalism. The melting pot—the metaphor of assimilation—was re-imagined as a salad or a mosaic. This transformation, coupled with the changes brought by the women’s liberation movement, were at the core of the nineties culture wars. The historically powerful white-male dyad was under siege and conservatives and ordinary white Americans who found comfort in white hegemony fought back.

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<sup>13</sup> For a historical study of the ways in which images of whiteness served as the standard against which other racial identities are judged, see Richard Dyer, *White* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), vii.

<sup>15</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15.

Combined, the feminist backlash and culture wars were deliberate attempts at reframing the vision of America, of returning to a time when families were headed by men and the prevailing worldview was white. Men such as Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich longed for a time when white males indisputably dominated, as he said to a group of foundation cohorts in the eighties: “‘We’re not here to get into politics. We’re here to turn the clock back to 1954 in this country’.”<sup>16</sup>

White GenX feminists, who came of age as teenagers and young adults amid the culture wars, grappled with the tension between “traditional” and “liberated” images of femininity. They watched the conflict unfold on television and in the news media, and they experienced it in their own lives. Many of the young women that I cite in this project became feminists because they were excluded from the punk subculture of the late eighties and early nineties, which was largely comprised of white males. These women were part of riot grrrl, a radical feminist movement that began in the early nineties in Washington, DC and Seattle, Washington. The riot grrrl subculture produced and distributed fanzines (zines) and established discussion groups. They also formed bands, claiming punk club stages for themselves and their fans, re-configuring the punk ethos and eschewing many of the genre’s masculine rituals.<sup>17</sup> They pushed the mosh pit—which usually forms at the front of the stage—to the back, relegating chaotic, often

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), 230.

<sup>17</sup> Riot grrrl was a network of young women who explored feminism and gender through women-centered punk music and self-published, self-distributed fanzines (zines). Zines were roughly rendered and written, incorporating images and texts from the mass media, which were cut and pasted between rants, poetry, and short stories on menstruation, sexual abuse, personal relationships, and unattainable standards of beauty. Riot grrrl music followed suit; songs were often diatribes about or against parents (especially fathers), boys and men, abuse, and patriarchal power structures.

violent behavior to the sidelines.<sup>18</sup> Riot grrrls created settings that favored and protected women. Kathleen Hanna, lead singer of the band Bikini Kill, became known for kicking men out of shows if they mistreated women—"If I see a woman being fucked with," says Hanna, "I...say 'You—outta here now!'"<sup>19</sup> Riot grrrl bands often charged men higher admission prices than women, sometimes waving the excess cost if they attended shows dressed in women's clothing.

Riot grrrls challenged the masculine discourse of the punk scene, but, like the men they confronted, they were mostly white and often middle class. However, some women clearly understood their advantaged positions. Corin Tucker of the band Heavens to Betsy wrote the song "White Girl" to encourage white people to take responsibility for their privilege and racism. "It is really scarey [sic] to [do so]," Tucker writes, "but...it is necessary for this to happen before anything will change, before any productive dialogue will take place."<sup>20</sup> Tucker's lyrics echo Lipsitz's thesis on the "possessive investment in whiteness": "It's a privilege, it's a background—it's everything that I own. It's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white song; it's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white world."<sup>21</sup> By example, Tucker challenged whites in the punk and riot grrrl scenes to look inward and examine their privileged positions within the subcultures and—more broadly—in the social hierarchy. On the whole, riot grrrl was a reactive movement, and

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<sup>18</sup> Mosh pits are freeform spaces that usually emerge in front of the stage at punk shows; people—usually men—engage in frenzied, violent dancing, often slamming into one another.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Juno, "Interview with Kathleen Hanna, Bikini Kill," in *Angry Women in Rock, Volume I*, Andrea Juno, ed. (New York, NY: Juno Books, 1996, 82-103), 88.

<sup>20</sup> Heavens to Betsy, *Calculated* (Seattle, WA: Heavens to Betsy and John Goodmanson, 1993), CD liner notes, outside back cover. The lyrics of "White Girl" are, as follows: "We should've talked about this a long time ago; but I didn't have to think about it, and that's what this song is about. White girl, I wanna change the world, but I won't anything unless I change my racist self. It's a privilege, it's a background—it's a background. It's everything that I own. It's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white song, it's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white world. White girl, I wanna change the world, but I won't change anything unless I change my racist self" (track 11).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



riot grrrls often spurned men and defied and reordered the white, masculine conventions of the punk scene. And, as white GenX feminists, riot grrrls confronted and challenged traditional articulations of white femininity.

***“We Don’t Need Another Wave”<sup>22</sup>***

GenXers spent their childhoods watching shows and reading books and school texts that told them that all people—regardless of their gender, race, or ethnic—were equal. In these contexts, difference was cherished, and white men were often marginalized. As young women GenXers put these lessons to work, reframing gender as a site of possibility. Paradoxically, these postmodern feminists adopted an outmoded metaphor—the wave.

The post structural and postmodern theoretical discourse, coupled with the social movements of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, made the idea of an all-encompassing “third” feminist wave an unconvincing proposition. During the last 15 years, scholars studying “third wave” feminism have spent a great deal of time and brainpower questioning and eschewing the wave metaphor.<sup>23</sup> For more than forty years, the wave has provided GenXers with a way to envision the history of feminist activism and comprehend the ways in which the generation’s efforts build upon the work of feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, “human conceptual system[s] [are] metaphorically structured and defined.”

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<sup>22</sup> I appropriate this subheading from the book, *We Don’t Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*, Melody Berger, ed. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford provide a succinct overview of this scholarship in “Introduction,” *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Gillis, Howie, and Munford, eds. (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, xxi-xxxiv), xxiii-xxx.

Therefore, a culture's values are evident in its metaphors; they replicate and support them, they provide, to use Lakoff and Johnson's phrase, "cultural coherence."<sup>24</sup>

This study of "GenX" feminism is a study of white middle class women. I agree with scholars who question the idea of all-encompassing "waves" of feminism.<sup>25</sup> My goal is not to perpetuate this paradigm; rather, my goal is to articulate what and to whom we are truly referring when we hear or use the phrase "third wave feminism." The wave metaphor coheres with the deep-seated values (such as "growth," "evolution," and "advancement") of a society founded on progress. The invention of first, second, and third wave feminist movements reinforces a teleological historical narrative, which implies that through surges of activism, "progress" is being made and women's lives are consistently improving. By the seventies and eighties any discussion of "progress" was wrought with suspicion, and coupled with the fundamental question: "Progress for whom?" "Third wave" feminism emerged amid the "condition of postmodernity," a state paradoxically described by French theorist Jean-François Lyotard as an "incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>26</sup> Uncomplicated, "coherent" views of culture and history are clearly insufficient following a tumultuous two-decade struggle for gender, racial, and gay/lesbian rights, and amid the culture wars, which were being fought over who would

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<sup>24</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?," *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1059-1082), 1061-1064, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Response from a 'Secnd Waver' to Kimerbly Springer's 'Third Wave Black Feminism?'" *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1091-1094), and Shelia Radford-Hill, "Keepin' It Real: A Generational Comentary on Kimberly Springer's 'Third Wave Black Feminism?'" *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1083-1089).

<sup>26</sup> Here I am specifically referring to Jean-François Lyotard's definition in his 1979 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He writes, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (See "Introduction," *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [Manchester University Press, 1984], xxiv-xxv). As an "ism," postmodernism "refers to the cultural and... artistic manifestations of [a] period" (See David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* [New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001], 305-309; and Lyotard, 14-23).

create and control the nation's identity and history. Ultimately, the wave metaphor was hindered from the start.

In the field of history, metaphors are precarious because they have the potential for oversimplifying the past. Historian Jonathan Sadowsky addresses this quandary in relationship to the pendulum and the history of psychiatry. He writes,

The pendulum metaphor is not so much wrong, as incomplete. It does capture aspects of the history... [M]y objection is still less to the fact that it is a metaphor; metaphors are essential for making very complex phenomena...intelligible. In this case, however, the intelligibility comes at the cost of obscuring critical nuances in the development of American psychiatry.

Sadowsky proclaims the pendulum a dead metaphor; it is “one whose status as metaphor may sometimes be forgotten,” he writes.<sup>27</sup> If left unexamined, dead metaphors are barriers to understanding the complexities of an era or, as with the present case, the history of feminist activism. Likewise, when the wave is imagined one-dimensionally, as a peaking and receding line that corresponds with a horizontal timeline, it obscures the efforts of the historical actors who worked for rights and equality in unconventional ways outside of the white, “Western” arc of progress.

American Studies scholar Kimberly Springer reveals the ways in which the history of Black feminists has been “drowned out by the wave.” She asserts that enslaved women were some of the earliest feminist resisters because they fought back when confronted with nonconsensual sexual advances and taught one another to use herbal abortifacients to terminate undesired pregnancies. Springer subsequently questions the periodization historians typically assign to the emergence of the first wave, which grew

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<sup>27</sup>Jonathan Sadowsky, “Beyond the Metaphor of the Pendulum: Electroconvulsive Therapy, Psychoanalysis, and the Styles of American Psychiatry,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* (Volume 61, Number 1 [2006], 1-25), 5.

out of the abolitionist movement. White women, she reminds us, honed their “oration, organizing, writing, and agitation skills” as they worked alongside Black and white men and women of color.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, first wave feminism is inextricably linked to the abolitionist movement, where women such Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott recognized their own gendered subjugation while working to free enslaved men and women.<sup>29</sup>

Taking the limitations of the wave metaphor and the metanarrative on women’s history further, Springer acknowledges the limitations of her argument. “In sum,” she writes, “as we learn more about women of color’s feminist activism, the wave analogy becomes untenable. What might, for example, the inclusion of American Indian women’s gendered resistance do to even my time line?”<sup>30</sup>

I agree with Springer and other scholars, who question the idea of all-encompassing “waves,” of feminism.<sup>31</sup> And, while this project is centered on white middle class women, I do not perpetuate the wave paradigm; instead, I articulate what and to whom we are truly referring when we hear or use the phrase “third wave feminism.” By employing the tools of postmodern theory, I call into question the ways in which the “third wave,” as paradigm and metaphor, has for the last 15 years subordinated and erased as much as it has explained. Discourses are not, however, totalitarian entities;

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<sup>28</sup> Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?,” *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1059-1082), 1061-1064.

<sup>29</sup> The debate on the problems/limitations associated with the metanarrative of women’s history is not new. See Jean Allman and Antoinette Burton, “Editor’s Note: The *Journal of Women’s History* at Twenty,” *Journal of Women’s History* (Volume 20, No. 1, 8-13).

<sup>30</sup> Springer, 1062.

<sup>31</sup> Springer’s essay incited discussion on second and third wave feminisms and race. See Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Response from a ‘Second Waver’ to Kimberly Springer’s ‘Third Wave Black Feminism?’” *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1091-1094) and Shelia Radford-Hill, “Keepin’ It Real: A Generational Commentary on Kimberly Springer’s ‘Third Wave Black Feminism?’” *Signs* (Volume 27, No. 4 [Summer 2002], 1083-1089).

as a social movement, nineties feminism simultaneously perpetuated and undermined the white, twentieth century feminist discourse.

GenX feminism is a prime illustration of the ways in which historical actors concurrently challenge and maintain discourses. By studying nineties feminism, we will better understand the issues postmodern feminist theorists raised in the eighties and nineties, as they wondered how feminist activists could speak or act for “women” when “woman” is itself a tenuous, multifarious proposition. Through lived experience GenX white women came to understand womanhood as a site of contingency, of free play. GenX feminism may be, therefore, the beginning of something new, if not, in Judith Butler’s words, “a ‘bidding farewell’ to the subject...[then a] call to rework that notion outside the terms of an epistemological given.”<sup>32</sup>

Historians have yet to extensively study “third wave” feminism. Estelle Freedman discusses late twentieth century feminist activism in the concluding chapter of *No Turning Back*, her broad study of feminist politics, and, in *The World Split Open*, Ruth Rosen briefly discusses post-feminism and the rise of “third wave” feminism in a chapter titled “The Proliferation of Feminism.”<sup>33</sup> Recently, scholars outside of the discipline of history have explored second and third wave feminist movements through an intergenerational lens; many of these studies include cursory examinations of Generation X.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992, 3-21), 14.

<sup>33</sup> See Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2002) and Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> See Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), Jo Reger, *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women’s Movement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), and Devoney Looser

This body of work, and, for that matter, most of the historical scholarship on twentieth century feminist movements relies on the established women's history timeline and on the conviction that there is a break between waves. Less has been written on which issues and concerns bridge the alleged fissure between "waves." Amy Richards, a prominent voice of Generation X and one of the authors of the groundbreaking 2000 text *Manifesta*, asserts that "the legislative agenda of the third wave [could] be accurately called 'Second Wave, Part Two'." She argues that "only [the] young[er] feminist culture [is] truly third wave."<sup>35</sup> Historical evidence supports the first part of Richards' claim. Many of the social issues at the center of the second wave agenda have yet to be resolved through legislative action. In a paper titled "International Women's Day 1970," feminists listed the following goals as issues "To Fight For Now!":

Equal pay for equal work; No job discrimination; Free daycare centers; Free, legal and safe abortions; Free healthcare and paid maternity leaves; An end to the degrading pictures of women as mindless sex objects in the press, advertising and movies; Free divorce without red tape; No more channeling of high school women into stereotyped female subjects.<sup>36</sup>

While some of these goals were achieved, many remain unresolved, and abortion, while still legal, is not only costly, it is inaccessible in many parts of the country due to the efforts of the antiabortion movement.<sup>37</sup> The issue of affordable childcare is one that still

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and E. Ann Kaplan, editors., *Generations: Academic Feminisms in Dialogue* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Second wave feminism incited a variety of legislative decisions and changes, including Title VII and Title IX amendments, *Roe v. Wade*, and galvanization around the failed Equal Rights Amendment, Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004), 95.

<sup>36</sup> Authors unknown, "International Women's Day 1970," 3. (Type-written document from the Women's Liberation Collection, materials documenting the contemporary women's movement in the Pioneer Valley, New England, and many U.S. cities and campuses [circa 1966-1980], Sophia Smith Collection, Women's History Manuscripts at Smith College – Northampton, MA). Lists such as this one are ubiquitous in newsletters, treatises, and documents printed by independent women's presses.

<sup>37</sup> A 2005 Guttmacher Institute Study reveals that 87 percent of U.S. counties (containing 35 percent of all American women age 15-44) do not have abortion providers. Overall there were fewer abortion providers in 2005 than in 2000, and there were eight percent fewer abortions in 2005 than in 2000. Rachel K. Jones,

eludes us; it is perceived as a private matter, even though it collectively affects women's decisions about their careers, as well as their success on the job.<sup>38</sup>

Richards' suggestion that the "young feminist 'culture' is third wave," is partially accurate, particularly when we take into account "third wave" feminists' penchant for "reclaiming" feminine pursuits such as sewing, knitting, and cooking, and their unqualified embrace of signs of "girliness," such as donning "sexy" clothes, makeup, and the color pink. The feminist backlash of the seventies and eighties is at the core of "girlie" feminism. "Third wave" activist Megan Seely begins her book, *Fight Like A Girl: How to Be a Fearless Feminist*, with a list of adjectives that she regularly hears when she asks people what comes to mind when they hear the word "feminist." "Bitch. Fat. Ugly. Dyke. Man hater. Hairy. Butch. Loud. Militant. Radical. Angry," mirror the images propagated in the media and by politicians and pundits as GenX women were coming of age. Allegedly, feminists were unattractive, irrational, hirsute, humorless, and asexual and GenXers sought to prove that feminists could be pretty, sexy, funny, and interested in heterosexual relationships and sexual encounters.<sup>39</sup>

"Girlie" feminists' reclamation of domestic skills is also a reaction to second wave feminism. As GenX feminist and crafting aficionado Debbie Stoller tells us, knitting is a meditative, creative endeavor. Seventies feminists, she writes, "overlooked

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et al., "Abortion in the United States: Incidence and Access to Services, 2005," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* (Volume 40, No. 1 [March 2008], 6-16), 6.

<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/4000608.pdf> (first accessed on August 4, 2009).

<sup>38</sup>Peggy Orenstein's *FLUX: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, & Life in a Half-Changed World* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000) provides a revelatory picture of the how decisions about child-rearing and childcare continue to shape women's lives and life choices. Mary Frances Berry's *The Politics of Parenthood: Child Care, Women's Rights, and the Myth of the Good Mother* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1993) provides a historical perspective on the roles of parents—particularly mothers, and the ways in which public policy shapes these roles and put women at a disadvantage in the "public" realm of work and politics.

<sup>39</sup>Megan Seely, *Fight Like A Girl: How To Be A Fearless Feminist* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 1.

an important aspect of knitting when they viewed it simply as part of women's societal obligation to serve everyone around them—they [forgot] that knitting served the knitter as well.”<sup>40</sup> Crafting is also part of a larger generational project: the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. DIY pursuits foster subcultures and self-styled communities, serving as a way to eschew the tools and tactics of global capitalism. Hand making clothes—through sewing, knitting, or crocheting, went along with other forms of circumventing corporatism, such as self-producing and distributing fanzines (zines) and music.

From a historical, ideological perspective, GenX feminism closely resembles second wave feminism, making the break seem particularly specious. As a largely white, middle-class endeavor, it is part of a larger history of feminist rebellion against “true womanhood,” a historically ascribed ideology that Barbara Welter articulates in her germinal 1966 essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860.” Welter tells us that “true womanhood” arose in a period of rapid social and economic change. In this environment, society was grounded by the belief that white feminine virtues were constant and secure: “A true woman was a true woman wherever she was found,” she writes. “If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic.”<sup>41</sup> Throughout American history white women have challenged and grappled with the virtuous woman trope and its attendant “cardinal virtues,” which Welter identifies as piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.<sup>42</sup> It was no accident, however, that “The Cult of True Womanhood” was published in 1966.

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<sup>40</sup> Debbie Stoller, *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* (New York, NY: Workman Publishing, 2003), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* (Volume 18, Number 1, Part 1 [Summer 1966], 151-174), 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



The ideology gained currency in the post World War II era, as the mass media and popular culture ubiquitously disseminated images of docile, domestic white women happily “returning” to their roles as homemakers, consumers, and mothers. There was some truth to this nostalgic vision of womanhood, which was at the center of the critique Betty Friedan put forth in 1963 in *The Feminine Mystique*. However, the mid-twentieth century vision of ideal white femininity was distinctive, as it reflected the modern, atomic age of suburban contentment and containment. Life for middle-class white women was allegedly simpler, as canned, processed foods abounded, as did technologically sophisticated home appliances.

Like the feminists of the sixties and seventies, who rejected and confronted mid-twentieth century articulations of the ideology of “true womanhood,” GenX feminists defied and resisted these homogeneous visions of femininity. Their reclamation of domestic endeavors was a reaction to their foremothers’ rejection of these pursuits, making it part of the tortuous historical trajectory and the genealogy of white feminine “virtue.” Like their foremothers, GenX feminists brazenly shunned and confronted feminine stereotypes and double standards that stressed submissiveness and sexual and moral purity. GenX feminism, therefore reveals a continuation—not a break, as many scholars maintain, of the second wave feminist project.

### ***Generation X, Feminism, and Contemporary History***

GenXers were heirs of the cultural and political transformations of the middle decades of the twentieth century. The 1960s and 70s were “a time when personal freedoms vastly expanded, when racial hierarchies came tumbling down, and when

gender relations were fundamentally reworked,” says Lisa McGirr in her study of the rise of the American right and conservative activists in Orange County, California.<sup>43</sup> The social and political upheavals that threatened the Right were rooted in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s political reforms of the 1930s and the extension of the Federal government’s role in directing the economy.<sup>44</sup> In the 50-year period between the New Deal and the early 1980s, conservative Americans’ marginalized status continued to build, and reached its zenith in the 1970s with the end of the Vietnam War and the Nixon-Watergate scandal. Conservatives did not, however, sit worriedly wringing their hands following these political debacles and the rise of the New Left; they got to work organizing, founding, and supporting conservative think tanks and foundations. By the 1970s and 80s they formed numerous conservative organizations, including the American Legislative Exchange Council (1973), The Cato Institute (1977), Federalist Society (1982), The Heritage Foundation (1973), and The Media Research Center (1987). These bastions of conservatism shaped national policy and influenced public opinion. People born in the twenty years before Ronald Reagan’s inauguration grew up amid a concerted conservative counterattack on political and cultural liberalism, including an assault on the gains of the women’s liberation movement.

As young people in the 1980s, GenXers grew up amid what cultural critic Susan Faludi characterizes as the backlash against second wave feminism. Faludi articulates the

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<sup>43</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>44</sup> McGirr illustrates the ways in which ordinary right-wing citizens organized on a grassroots level, gathering in homes to hold intimate fundraisers and informational meetings in support of Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential candidacy. The right to which I refer arose during Goldwater’s campaign, and in McGirr’s words, “expanded its influence on the national scene in the late 1960s and 1970s and vaulted to national power with the Reagan landslide of 1980. Since that time,” she writes, “conservatives...have transformed the relationship between federal and state power, limited the regulatory capacity of the central state, and altered the fundamental structure of the New Deal welfare state (McGirr, 5).

ways in which mass media talking heads, pundits, “experts,” and right-wing politicians of the late seventies and 1980s waged an attack against feminism, declaring it a failure and blaming it for a variety of social ills, including the deterioration of the American family, the rise in crime, and for various “neuroses” supposedly emerging among newly liberated women.<sup>45</sup> Feminist backlash rhetoric and narratives were both explicitly and implicitly broadcast via television, the quintessential manufacturer and propagator of stereotypes and allegories on gender roles and norms. Gen X youth were the first generation to spend significant amounts of unsupervised time in front of the television. In the seventies, unbridled television consumption was exacerbated by the faltering economy and rise in divorce rates and the emotional strife these issues caused financially burdened dual-income or single parent families. Often the messages Xers absorbed were accentuated by the turmoil in their own families, which further colored their perceptions of the social changes occurring around them.

As parents adapted to and celebrated new sexual freedoms and opportunities for “self actualization,” divorce rates rose and “finding oneself” often meant losing sight of one’s children. Many of GenXers were the unintended victims of, if not the deterioration of the “American family,” then of its evolution into a malleable units comprised of two working parents, single parents, or stepparents and step-siblings. By 1975 sixty-four percent of all mothers with children between the ages of six and 17 worked outside of the home. Single-parent families increased, as did newly formed families headed by step-

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Anchor Books, A Division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1991), ix-xiii.

parents, as divorce rates more than doubled between 1966 and 1979.<sup>46</sup> In the mid 1970s the phrase “latchkey kid” was coined and applied to middle-class children who came home from school to a house lacking adult supervision.

By the early 1990s white Americans born in the 60s and 70s were teenagers or young adults. “Latchkey kids” grew into members of “Generation X,” a moniker contemporarily appropriated from Douglas Coupland’s novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. The novel centered on a trio of white, disenchanted young friends who search for meaning and purpose in the seemingly meaningless, consumption-driven decades of the late twentieth century. Skepticism and ambiguity were the defining features of Generation X. Unlike the Baby Boomers, a World War and post-war economic prosperity did not spark GenXers’ collective conception, and demographers and marketing gurus had a difficult time defining the generation. If, as French theorist Paul Virilio, asserts, there is “no longer any single reality that we can think of as given once and for all [and]... generations of realities are connected to generations of images,” then generations are a relic of the past.<sup>47</sup>

Madison Avenue advertising executives and corporate agents desperate to categorize people based on homogeneous imagined categories such as age group quickly co-opted Generation X. Faced with an elusive generational demographic, Madison Avenue initially responded to their marketing quandary by paring down Generation X to a one-dimensional character—the “slacker.” Slackers became ubiquitous representations in

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<sup>46</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, Report 985, Table 7: Employment status of women by presence and age of youngest child, from *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, May 2005, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2005.htm> (accessed March 20, 2008); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 2006), 261.

<sup>47</sup> Jérôme Sans, “Interview with Paul Virilio,” *Flash Art* Number 138 (January-February 1988), 57.

nineties popular culture; they were the “twenty-something,” disaffected, over educated, and underemployed youth of the day, and, most often they were white and male. They came to life on screen through characters such as convenience and video store workers Dante Hicks and Randal Graves of the 1994 film *Clerks* and their blasé attitudes were realized in the string of characters in Richard Linklater’s low-budget film, *Slackers* (1991). The grunge and industrial music scenes of the late eighties and early nineties were breeding grounds for slackers, as self-loathing men such as cEvin [sic] Key and Nivek Ogre of Skinny Puppy and Kurt Cobain of Nirvana wrote and performed songs about the social ills and alienation of the “post-industrial” late twentieth century.

Gen X angst and apathy were cast as manifestations of the failures of modernity and a generation’s acquiescence to those losses. Compared to Baby Boomers, who witnessed or participated in the political activism of the 1960s and 70s, Gen X teens and young adults seemed politically disengaged, indifferent, and self centered. Slackers, it seemed, were the living signs and symptoms of the end of modernity. Ultimately, however, marketing and recording executives latched on to the slacker because the archetype was good for business.<sup>48</sup>

The slacker may have temporarily resolved marketing firms’ demographic quagmire, but in reality, the group of people they were attempting to define was, of course, multi-faceted and complex. This diversity was not new to people living in America’s urban centers; historically, the U.S. has always been racially and economically heterogeneous. Generation X was, however, the first to witness (often in schools and neighborhoods, and especially on television) an assault on white male cultural hegemony.

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<sup>48</sup>Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is An Energy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 1997), 9-13.

GenXers grew up in an era of multiculturalism and identity politics, which followed the women's/gay/African-American rights movements of the "long 1960s" and 70s.

Beginning in childhood urban Generation Xers navigated a cultural terrain of racial and socioeconomic diversity in public school classrooms, though once desegregation efforts failed, schools populations mirrored those of their neighborhoods. Outside of the urban northeast, in suburbs across the country, and in homogeneous, Midwestern bastions of whiteness GenXers experienced racial and cultural difference in school textbooks and teaching materials, on television, through PBS programs such as *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, and television specials such as Marlo Thomas' *Free to Be You and Me*, and "After School Specials." Tenets of multiculturalism, diversity, and identity politics were visually and ideologically manifest in the visual and popular culture that children of the seventies and eighties consumed day after day.

As disenfranchised groups gained rights and as the discourse on American identity shifted, social apparatuses such as popular culture and the mass media reflected and perpetuated these changes. Mostly white writers, directors, and producers created the television programs GenX children grew up on in the seventies; these programs shaped the generation's ideas about gender and feminism and race and class.<sup>49</sup> Even as they addressed these issues, they did so through the lenses of whiteness, urbanity, affluence, and patriarchal masculinity. Generation X was a flagrant attempt at homogenizing a group of people who, because of their mass-mediated and lived experiences, understood themselves to be fundamentally diverse.

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<sup>49</sup> See Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

***“The Order of Things”<sup>50</sup>***

Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave follows the life cycle of GenX women. In chapters one and two, I explore the seventies popular discourse on feminism and feminists of the women’s liberation movement. In the former, “Generation X and the 1970s Pop Cultural Discourse on ‘Women’s Lib,’” I assert that the feminism surrounding children of the seventies, whether directed at them or not, became a part of their lived reality. “Women’s Lib,” as the women’s liberationist movement was derogatorily dubbed in the mass media, was omnipresent in adult popular culture. GenX children witnessed negative and positive portrayals of seventies feminists through television sitcoms such as *Maude*, popular press photographs and articles featuring feminist luminaries such as Gloria Steinem, and “battle of the sexes” spectacles such as the 1973 Billie Jean King-Bobby Riggs tennis match.

In chapter two, “Generation X and the 1970s Pop Cultural Discourse on Feminism,” I illustrate the ways in which gender equality was projected as an expected reality for GenX children, who were exposed to seventies feminism through textbooks, literature, and children’s television. Many of the textbooks published in the 1970s and early 1980s portray a utopian world of gender and racial diversity. In many of these texts, women are more often than men depicted performing skilled and technical jobs requiring advanced degrees. Publishing companies also perpetuated gender equality through language, distributing guidelines to writers instructing them to use neutral terms to describe groups of men and women (such as “their” instead of “his,” or “humanity” instead of “mankind”). Television shows such as PBS’s *The Electric Company* (TEC)

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<sup>50</sup>This subtitle references Foucault’s 1966 work, *Les Mots et Les Choses*, literally translated as “words and things.”

depicted strong, competent women running businesses, directing plays, and serving as police officers. Paradoxically, as adult popular culture reflected its audiences' struggle to come to terms with the changes brought by the women's liberation movement, the texts children read and television shows they viewed made it appear that the feminists of the seventies had attained their goals. Ultimately, I argue, the images that emerged as a result of "second wave" feminism convincingly portrayed men and women as equals, contributing to GenXers' vision of feminism as a baseless, ineffectual relic of another generation.

I conducted research for chapter one at the Sophia Smith Collection Women's History Archives at Smith College, which houses extensive collections on the women's liberation movement, including numerous files of clippings from national and New England-based newspaper and magazines and small press publications created by women's liberationists. This research influenced the shape and scope of chapter one, as seeing these materials together provided me with a sense of the ways in which the women's liberation movement was presented (or, I argue, caricatured) in seventies print media. Through these clippings, I was able to establish an image of what seventies feminism may have looked like to GenXers and their elders.

In this age of digital archives, YouTube, eBay, and DVD compilations classic television shows, there was no shortage of primary source material available to me. This situation creates its own set of challenges, the most notable among them is justifying why some sources are more significant to the project than others. In most cases, I chose instances of pop culture that were popular at the time and were widely broadcasted and distributed. Norman Lear's *All in the Family* and *Maude*, for instance, were highly-rated



sitcoms. *All in the Family* was the number one rated primetime television show from 1971 to 1976, and *Maude*, running between 1972 and 1976, rated as high as four.<sup>51</sup>

In the seventies, nationally syndicated comics such as *Peanuts* and *Blondie* appeared in many large urban newspapers, as well as those in small towns, reaching a large number of readers. Americans encountered feminism through multiple instances of mass media, becoming aware of the movement's consequences. Concurrently, producers of popular culture such as Lear, *Peanuts* creator Charles Schultz, and *Blondie* creator Dean Young addressed the concerns and the cultural ethos that ordinary people grappled with in their own lives.

I selected other sources for their visibility and because they capitalized on the supposed goals of the women's liberation movement. Television commercials for Enjoli and Aviance Night Musk perfumes, for instance, culturally resonated because they depict a newly liberated woman who seemed to "have it all"—a career, an adventurous sex life, and a man. Like Lear's sitcoms and the cartoons of Schultz and Young, these commercials were tied to advertisements and product sales, and they, therefore reveal a great deal about the public's image of an acceptable liberated woman. With the exception of *Peanuts*, they do not patently challenge social norms, as they focus on stereotypically attractive women and heterosexual relationships.

Many of the sources I investigate in chapter two are connected to GenX children's educational experiences. PBS's Children's Television Workshop programming began in 1969 with *Sesame Street*, followed by TEC in 1971. Both programs were popular, well received, and widely viewed. TEC reached a large number of GenX children; two

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<sup>51</sup> Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 16, 22-23.

months after its debut, the show was screened in nearly one quarter all of second through fourth grade public school classrooms, including 70 percent of the nation's urban schools.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Scholastic Book Services was well-integrated into schools after the company significantly expanded its operations in 1968.<sup>53</sup> The Scholastic's *Weekly Reader* catalog offered hundreds of inexpensive new and classic children's books, many of which featured independent female protagonists, and a variety of racially diverse characters. As with school textbooks, teachers were intermediaries in disseminated these learning tools, giving credence to messages on the gender and racial equality presented through them.

Other pop culture sources that I selected for chapter two were popular and widely distributed or broadcast on television. Actress Marlo Thomas' *Free To Be... You and Me* (FTBYM) book, record, and television phenomenon emerged in 1972. The record sold more than 500,000 copies, and the television program won Emmy and Peabody Awards in same year that it was broadcast on prime time television.<sup>54</sup> The American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) "After School Specials" are an important source for addressing the ways in which gender, and to a lesser extent, race were presented to the newly identified demographic group of 12 to 15 year olds. In 1972, ABC established a time—4:00 p.m.—and a series, "After School Specials," for the newly identified demographic age group. The specials featured characters whose quirky individuality

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<sup>52</sup> Walter J. Podrazik, "It was 1971," from *The Best of The Electric Company* (Sesame Television Workshop [DVD insert], 2006), 15.

<sup>53</sup> In 1968 Scholastic opened a 2,000-employee warehouse and distribution center in Missouri. The expansion paid off; by 1984 Scholastic was the largest distributor of children's books in the world (see <http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/milestones.htm>, accessed September 23, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Marlo Thomas, *Free To Be... You and Me* DVD liner notes (Hen's Tooth Video/Free To Be... You and Me Foundation, 2001).

often rested on the manner in which they transgressed traditional gender norms and roles.<sup>55</sup>

Skeptical GenX viewers may have rolled their eyes and jeered at the oftentimes naive dialogue and sappy storylines of the “After School Specials.” Due to producer Martin Tahse’s efforts, however, the specials endured for more than 20 years. Tahse produced 26 of the “specials” in the seventies and eighties, establishing a lasting formula. Protagonists were always ordinary teenagers; their clothing and hairstyles reflected contemporary trends such as bellbottoms and wide-striped t-shirts.<sup>56</sup> GenXers identified with aspects of the storylines and characters, and the specials provided them with an outlet for working through the diversity and identity politics that were so patently integrated into their schools, popular culture, and literature. ABC’s “After School Specials” reveal a great deal about the kinds of messages on gender and race that GenX teenagers absorbed in the 1970s and 80s.

In chapter three, “‘Growing Up Postmodern’: Gender and Generation X,” I analyze the connections between Generation X and postmodernism, arguing that the former is a consequence of the postmodern condition. This state of multi-layered identities, “realities of intersectionality,” and the colliding profusion of surfaces and images created an “implosion of meaning...[and] sense...of ‘placelessness’.”<sup>57</sup> I reveal the ways in which this condition shaped GenXers’ worldview and profoundly informed their ideas about gender and, subsequently, feminism.

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<sup>55</sup> Joanna Weiss, “The strange afterlife of the After School Special: These cautionary tales for teens may be easy to make fun of, but their influence lingers on in unexpected ways,” *The Boston Globe* (January 1, 2006 edition) [http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2006/01/01/the\\_strange\\_afterlife\\_of\\_the\\_after\\_school\\_special/](http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2006/01/01/the_strange_afterlife_of_the_after_school_special/) (accessed October 25, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 181-182.

The final chapter of *Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave*, ““Typical Girls’?: GenX Feminism and Gender Contingency,” builds on chapter three, as I demonstrate that GenX feminists conceived of gender as a site of possibility and free play. Employing Susan Faludi’s trenchant analysis of the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, I illustrate the ways in which GenX feminists resolved the discord between the images they grew up with as children and the political atmosphere of the eighties and nineties. I also underscore the ways in which GenX feminism was shaped by the culture wars of the nineties and conservatives’ vision of gender roles and ideal white femininity. GenX feminists’ worldview was wrought by the postmodern condition, however, the trope of “true womanhood” was alive and well in the 1980s and 90s. Historical feminine virtues (purity, domesticity, submissiveness, and, to a lesser extent, piety) were manifest in the caricature of the 1950s “happy housewife,” which was ubiquitous in early nineties feminist zines, postcards, t-shirts, and coffee mugs. Like their “second wave” foremothers, they confronted and rebelled against this archetypal, historically constructed image of femininity.

Many of the primary sources that I analyze in chapters three and four directly convey the thoughts and feelings of GenX women and men. There is no shortage of primary source material, and this abundance extends to more traditional research venues. I conducted archival research for these chapters at The Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University, where I focused on several collections, namely the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection. The Dyer collection is comprised of thousands of zines, the bulk of which were created in the nineties by GenX women.<sup>58</sup> Organized by topic (e.g.

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<sup>58</sup> Zines are self-published, small press publications. They are frequently (often deliberately) coarsely rendered and written, incorporating images and texts from the mass media. Mass media imagery is often

feminism, vegetarianism/veganism, queer/lesbian identity, and music and art), the collection provides a broad overview of GenX women's views on and reactions to many of the decades political and cultural issues.

The ideas in and ethos of the zines are echoed in riot grrrl song lyrics, interviews with riot grrrl "leaders," and are also evident in 1990s mainstream publications such as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, *Sassy magazine*, Dave Egger's *Might* magazine, and Douglas Coupland's novel, *Generation X: Tales of an Accelerated Culture*. Through grunge music and films such as *Slackers* and *Clerks*, Generation X became a pop culture phenomenon. Together, feminist zines and popular literature and films of the nineties convey a great deal about the GenX worldview, and—ultimately—about the generations' feminism. Coupling these sources with theoretical currents of the eighties and nineties, I elucidate the ways in which GenX feminism encompassed the chaos, contingency, and contradictions of the postmodern condition. "Third wave" feminism was Generation X's earnest attempt at claiming feminism at a time when stringent categories of identity were coming apart at the seams. *Generation X and the Invention of a Third Feminist Wave* reveals the ways in which Gen X feminists concurrently challenged and maintained conventions of femininity and feminist activism during the last decade of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Generation X and the 1970s Pop Cultural Discourse on ‘Women’s Lib’”

*I am woman, hear me roar.*

Helen Reddy<sup>1</sup>

*Feminism means equal rights, so I’m a feminist. But I’m not a women’s libber.*

Paula Gadola, 23-year-old woman  
in 1983<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1970s, there was a riddle circulating about a man who had to rush his injured son to the hospital for emergency surgery. I remember the adults in my family being stumped over the doctor’s response when seeing the patient: “ ‘I can’t operate. He’s my son’.”<sup>3</sup> To our twenty-first century sensibilities the answer to this riddle may be obvious, but at the time it was effectively opaque. I came across a printed copy of it at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, and even there, in the academic bastion of

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Reddy and Ray Burton, “I Am Woman,” *I Am Woman* (Capital Records, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bolotin, “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/17/magazine/voices-from-the-post-feminist-generation.html> (accessed September 20, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> “A Little Riddle,” *Holyoke Transcript*, February 8, 1971 (clipping from The Women’s Liberation Collection at the Sophia Smith Women’s History Manuscripts at Smith College, Northampton, MA), n.p.

feminism, the person who collected or filed it took nothing for granted. They wrote in the margins: “Surgeon was a woman (mother).”

Around the same time that people were grappling with the surgeon-mother riddle, the women’s liberation movement—or “women’s lib,” as it was dubbed in pop culture, was the focus of a major media blitz. The women’s liberation movement grew out of the New Left movement and is contemporarily associated with the countercultural ethos of the sixties and seventies. As part of the “long seventies,” the fifteen year period from 1969 to 1984, it emerged during a time when rebelling against established order social norms was mainstream, particularly for people born during and following World War II. Historian Bruce Schulman characterizes the attitude of the seventies: “A new ethic of personal liberation trumped older notions of decency, civility, and restraint...Even those who had never been hippies, or never even liked hippies...let it all hang loose.”<sup>4</sup>

Members of Generation X were born immediately before and during this era of transformation. By the late sixties, women’s liberationists began to stage extravagant performance protests to garner media attention. On September 7, 1968, a cadre of approximately 150 feminists from six cities gathered in Atlantic City, New Jersey to protest the annual Miss America pageant—a bastion of feminine decorum and restraint. The women unfurled banners inside and outside the pageant hall, performed guerilla theater—a live sheep, for instance, was crowned Miss America—and tossed “woman garbage” (makeup, bras, high-heeled shoes, and hair curlers) into a “freedom trash can.” Participants were tousle-haired young women in blue jeans, parodying songs (“Ain’t she

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2001), xv.

sweet; making profits off her meat”) and escorting a giant Miss America cartoon-puppet.<sup>5</sup> Spectacles such as these served as fodder for the mass media pundits, who caricatured feminists as “women’s libbers” and often characterized their grievances as groundless and irrational. Scholars studying nineties feminism argue that these one-dimensional renderings of the second wave fueled Generation X’s skepticism of a rigid feminist identity and dogmatic feminism.<sup>6</sup> I expand on these latter scholars’ work, asserting that the crude constructions (“women’s lib” and “libbers”) that were everywhere in 1970s popular culture shaped GenXer’s ideas about gender, and, subsequently, their conceptions of feminism.

In this chapter, I explore the discourse on “women’s lib” as it pervaded adult popular culture. Mass media renderings of “women’s lib” were disseminated through a variety of channels, including an ever-expanding array of media that included television programs and commercials, print ads, and newspaper and popular magazine articles and photographs. Through these vehicles, GenX children encountered “women’s lib” at almost every turn of their daily lives. By amassing the images of and messages about “women’s lib,” we can more clearly envision the visual landscape in which GenXers traversed as children.

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<sup>5</sup> Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, “No More Miss America (1968-1969),” <http://uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/jofreeman/photos/MissAm1969.html> (accessed July 20, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake, editors, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, editors, *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: young women, feminism, and the future* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000); Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004); and Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).



### ***“Women’s Lib”: The Media’s “Charred Bra” Revolution***

“Women’s lib” and seventies feminism were by no means the same entity. For GenX children, “women’s lib” was an omnipresent, often simply construed notion. Unbeknownst to many adults of the seventies, the “lib” they were working to come to terms with or eschew was merely a sketch of a movement that was much deeper than the media images and descriptions of angry women with signs or fists raised in protest, marching around trash cans of “charred bras.”<sup>7</sup>

As historian Ruth Rosen explains in *The World Split Open*, the media coverage ranged from fair and sympathetic (particularly when articles were written by women journalists) to sarcastic and patronizing.<sup>8</sup> The affect the latter category had on the movement and its trajectory has been well documented and analyzed by historians and academics outside the discipline of history.<sup>9</sup> However, the adage “even bad publicity is better than no publicity” clearly applied, as essays, photographs, and televised representations of feminists launched “women’s lib” into the spotlight, making it a household phrase, and, in the most optimistic of interpretations, a serious political movement worthy of public attention. National and local newspaper and magazine

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<sup>7</sup> Activists who participated in the 1968 Miss America beauty pageant protest in Atlantic City, NJ dispelled the bra-burning myth long ago (they threw a variety of symbols of gendered oppression – hair curlers, lipstick, and – yes, bras into a trash can, but fire was not involved). See Rosen and Faludi.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York, NY: The Penguin Group, Penguin Putnam, Ltd., 2000), 296-297. Many feminist activists of this period refused to speak to male reporters, which often compelled editors to take women reporters off of “feminine” beats such as the fashion and society pages so that they could get more thorough coverage of feminist protests and sit-ins.

<sup>9</sup> See Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in America Since 1960* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), Chapter 6: “The Media and the Movement,” 106-120; Rosen, Chapter 9: “Sisterhood to Superwoman,” 295-330; Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York, NY: Times Books, Random House, 1994), Chapter 7: “Throwing Out Our Bras,” 139-162, Chapter 9: “The Rise of the Bionic Bimbo,” 193-220, and “The ERA as Catfight,” 221-244; and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), Part 2, “The Backlash in Popular Culture,” 75-200.

journalists wrote exploratory articles such as “The Equal Rights Amendment: What Exactly Does it Mean?,” “What it would be like if women win?,” “What Turns Docile Girls Into Rebels?,” “Women Are Incensed by TV Commercials,” and “Revolution Smoldering Under Charred Bras.”<sup>10</sup> During this period media pundits also staked out the movement’s “leaders,” naming liberal feminist Betty Friedan “Mother Superior to Women’s Lib.”<sup>11</sup> Younger, and often more radical, activists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem graced the covers of magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *LIFE*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, “women’s lib” was everywhere. Young GenXers learned of it while watching primetime television shows, and even made-for-TV movies. They heard adults discuss riddles such as the one I described, and saw it addressed in the morning paper. Feminism was not only in the news, it was also the focus of comic strips, where two-dimensional characters were shown discussing or bewilderedly lamenting the proliferation of “women’s lib.” GenXers heard phrases like “the battle of the sexes,” saw

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Sherrill, “The Equal Rights Amendment: What, Exactly Does It Mean,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 20, 1970, 25; *Time*, August 31, 1970; Mary Weigers, “Women’s Liberation: What Turns Docile Girls Into Rebels?” *Springfield Union*, March 23, 1970; *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, “Women Are Incensed by TV Commercials,” April 6, 1970, page numbers and author not identifiable; Mary Weigers, “Revolution Smoldering Under Charred Bras,” *Springfield Union*, March 22, 1970 (clippings from The Women’s Liberation Collection at the Sophia Smith Women’s History Manuscripts at Smith College, Northampton, MA).

<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, hierarchy and the idea of one or a number of “leaders” ran counter to the beliefs of many young feminist activists, who, as Rosen explains, came out of the patriarchal New Left movement and were skeptical of “authority and leadership.” While this “fear of domination and subjugation” often led to “political paralysis,” women liberationists initially believed that it was central in creating a “truly democratic, egalitarian, and participatory movement.” See Rosen, 228-229.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Wilkes, “Mother Superior to Women’s Lib,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 29, 1970; Photo caricatures of Gloria Steinem, and Kate Millett (accompanied by Betty Friedan and Simone Beauvoir) appear on the cover of the January 31, 1971 edition of *The New York Times Magazine* illustrating the cover story: “The FemLib Case Against Sigmund Freud,” by Richard Gilman; Germaine Greer dominates the cover of the May 7, 1971 issue of *LIFE* – her photograph shares the cover with the headline: “Saucy Feminist That Even Men Like”; the front of the August 31, 1970 issue of *Time*, features an illustration of Kate Millett with the headlines: “The Politics of Sex: Kate Millett of Women’s Lib”; Steinem also graced the cover of the August 16, 1971 issue of *Newsweek*, where she symbolized “The New Woman – Gloria Steinem: A Liberated Woman Despite Beauty, Chic and Success.”

ad slogans declaring, “You’ve come a long way, baby,” and witnessed spectacles pitting “women’s libbers” against “male chauvinist pigs.”

While these images and the clamor over “women’s lib” were ubiquitous, the true theories and aims of the feminist movement were not as transparent; when they were put forth they were often trivialized and made to appear groundless and silly. In the mass media, the women’s liberation movement was often parodied and projected as a shadow—a flat, darkly negative entity that lacked the nuances of its wholly dimensional, complex, and revolutionary ideas and aspirations.<sup>13</sup> As I will illustrate in chapter two, GenX children and young adults learned of a more earnest feminist theory and spirit through television programs, books, and educational materials created and written by college-schooled educators and activists who were prepared to bring the latest pedagogical and social theories to young people. Through these media, the dreams of gender equality were put forth as objectives that had already been achieved. Feminism pervaded GenXers’ childhood; it was stealthily integrated into the media they read and consumed. The metaphor “third wave” feminist activists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards assert is pertinent: “For our generation,” they write, “feminism is like fluoride...it is simply in the water.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The shadow metaphor was inspired by Plato’s use of it in *The Republic, Book VII*, available online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html> (accessed July 7, 2008). Thanks to Professor Sentilles for suggesting that I look at this source to find a fitting metaphor.

<sup>14</sup> Baumgardner and Richards, 17.

### *A Day in the Life: “Women’s Lib” as Spectacle*

GenXers born in the first half of the age bracket (between 1960 and 1967) spent their childhoods in a period of dramatic social change and political turmoil. In 1973, for instance, when the oldest in this group would have been thirteen years old and the youngest six, the end of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade*, and the Watergate conspiracy were major news stories, and they were covered extensively on television. GenX children who were home on summer vacation could not have avoided Watergate, as, beginning on May 18 and continuing until August 7, the Nixon-Watergate Hearings eclipsed regularly scheduled daytime television.<sup>15</sup> The “battle of the sexes” was another notorious episode of 1973. Millions of television viewers tuned in to watch Billie Jean King win the “battle of the sexes” tennis match against Bobby Riggs on September 20, 1973.<sup>16</sup>

GenX children came to know the women’s liberation movement as a spectacle of popular culture. If their family owned a television, and chances are they did, as 12,220,000 sets were sold in 1970 alone, subscribed to a newspaper or news magazine (or came across them in doctor and dentist office waiting rooms, grocery store aisles, or the coffee tables of relatives or family friends), or were around adults who discussed current issues and events, the seventies child was undoubtedly familiar with “women’s lib.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the television coverage of the Watergate hearings, see The Museum of Broadcast Communications Television <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/W/htmlW/watergate/watergate.htm> (first accessed July 20, 2009). Researcher Ronald Garay writes, “[television] cameras covered the Watergate hearings gavel-to-gavel, from day one until 7 August. 319 hours of television were amassed, a record covering a single event. All three commercial television networks then in existence...devoted an average of five hours per day covering the Watergate hearings [in] their first five days.”

<sup>16</sup> Neil Amdur, “Mrs. King Defeats Riggs, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3 Amid a Circus Atmosphere,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1973, section 1, page 1, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0920.html> (accessed October 29, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> C. Steinberg, *TV Facts: Television History, The First 75 Years*, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm> (first accessed August 9, 2008). In 1970 the population was 203,210,158, which meant that in that year

Newscasters and adult television characters used the catchphrase for the second wave feminist movement, especially the more radical women's liberation movement, which peaked in the first half of the seventies. The phrase was also co-opted as a fashion slogan and a marketing device; "women's lib" was printed alongside "ecology," "LUV," "funky," and "right on," on fabric by designer Anne Klein. Men's patterned neckties were designed so that wearers could show their support of or disdain for "women's lib," as the phrase was paired with a hand in the "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" position. It was embroidered onto patches promoting motorcycles ("It's Yamaha for Women's Lib"), and the goals of feminist activists (equal rights, pay, and employment opportunities, for instance) were humorously challenged or addressed on greeting cards, dishtowels, and coffee mugs.<sup>18</sup>

As a catch-phrase, "women's lib" was a thorn in the side of many radical feminists. Robin Morgan aptly noted that "...if the word 'lib' were a person, you'd pinch it's cheek and pat it on the head. It's a dear, cute, pretty, sweet little word." It was "a way of ridiculing and trivializing the women's movement," and of maintaining gendered notions that women were docile and submissive. Furthermore, Morgan writes, "editors and reporters don't write about 'black lib', or 'third world lib'."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, they did not. While writers and media pundits did not always use the phrase condescendingly, the phrases "women's lib" and "libber" neutralized a phenomenon that had broad

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alone, one television for every ten Americans was sold. (See U.S. Department of Commerce, "Characteristics of the Population, United States Summary," *1970 Census of Population* (Department of Commerce, Frederick B. Dent, Secretary, issued 1973), Table 189.

<sup>18</sup> The objects discussed in this passage are in the author's private collection of 1970s ephemera.

<sup>19</sup> Gena Corea, "Witch Watch," *Holyoke Transcript*, January 10, 1972 (clipping from The Women's Liberation Collection at the Sophia Smith Women's History Manuscripts at Smith College, Northampton, MA).

implications, particularly for the children who watched it unfold in the realm of popular culture.

“Women’s lib” was an omnipresent theme in early seventies print media. It was fodder for comic writers/illustrators, it was cover story material for news magazines such as *TIME*, *Newsweek* and *Life*, and newspapers and women’s magazines often reported on the implications of feminism. Paradoxically, however, even the most sympathetic perspectives or analyses were put forth amid advertisements that depicted women in traditional roles, emphasizing feminine domesticity, and characterizing women primarily as consumers (as opposed to producers). And, as historian Peter Carroll tells us, advertisements featuring women obsessed with the cleanliness and pleasing their husbands served purposes outside of simply selling products. These advertisements, Carroll writes, “appealed to women who felt threatened by the feminist challenge to traditional roles, [and by] placing females in ridiculous situations... [they] made women into objects of derision.”<sup>20</sup> The feminist GenXers and their parents saw in the media was a caricature, devoid of complexity and context. “Women’s lib” was, therefore, an apt term; it was a catchphrase. It signified a banal fad or trend—a phenomenon that, like mood rings or pet rocks, might soon wane.

While the complexities of the women’s liberation movement were shrouded by caricature and stereotypes, “women’s lib” was ubiquitous in a variety of print media. “Women’s lib” was the subject of the newspaper “funny pages” such as Charles Schultz’s *Peanuts*. In 1970 Charles Schultz frequently addressed feminism in *Peanuts*. On April 8 Schultz’s opening frame featured Lucy, who is standing in the outfield of a baseball

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<sup>20</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 30-31.

diamond, wearing a baseball cap and glove. She says to herself: “What am I, a ‘new feminist’, doing standing out here in center fields?” In the second frame, Lucy says: “This is a male-dominated game...why should I take orders from that stupid manager [Charlie Brown]? I’m just as good as he is! Why should I stand out here in center field? This is degrading, and I resent it!” In the final frame, Charlie Brown is “WHAP[PED]!” by Lucy, who throws her baseball and hat, and hits her mark: Charlie Brown’s head. Stunned by her action, he replies, “Now what was **that** all about?”

To the child reader, the full meaning of this interaction might not have been apparent. It may have been funny, nonetheless, as the narrative reflected the characters’ historically acrimonious relationship. A young reader might also have connected Lucy’s angst and anger with “women’s lib” or feminism, yet the full scope of the social commentary would have been lost. Lucy’s epiphany about her role in the game, and Charlie Brown’s obliviousness about why he was hit in the head by the tools of the sport succinctly capture the moment in history. Men and women who opposed feminism often believed that “women”—who were hegemonically imagined as white and middle class, were the last group that should claim repression. The question on many people’s minds, writes historian Beth Bailey was, “How could American women, supported comfortably by their husbands and able to stay home and care for their children and gather with friends to drink coffee...claim to be oppressed?”<sup>21</sup> The “nameless” problem Betty Friedan identified was difficult to comprehend in the context of African-American civil rights and socio-economic inequality and poverty across racial lines. Charlie Brown’s reaction to being hit in the head by Lucy over her feminist revelation aptly illustrated the

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<sup>21</sup> Beth Bailey, “ ‘She Can Bring Home the Bacon’: Negotiating Gender in Seventies America,” in *America in the Seventies*, Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 107-128), 112.

mood of many middle-class men in 1970. In the early seventies, an aggregate version of Lucy's "whap" was being felt by men in households and workplaces and projected in the larger arena of popular media.<sup>22</sup>

Charles Schultz was not the only cartoonist grappling with "women's lib." In a 1971 edition of *Blondie*, the stereotypically feminine protagonist enters the family home and says to her conservatively dressed husband Dagwood: "I attended my women's liberation meeting today... [and] we girls decided to have our husbands cook dinner tonight." The next frame depicts Dagwood's bewildered face next to a text bubble with Blondie's command, which emanates from another room: "Call me when it's ready, dear." A compliant, apron-clad Dagwood fills the final frame, as he walks from the kitchen precariously balancing stacks of dishes, saying to himself: "I'll sure be glad when this thing blows over."<sup>23</sup> While the women's liberation movement shared ranks with other social movements of the era, Dagwood's response implies that "women's lib" was an innocuous fad initiated by a horde of women who would ultimately come to their senses.

In another 1971 installment of *Blondie*, Dagwood enters the family living room to find Daisy, the family's dog, asleep in the couch. "Off the sofa, Daisy!," he commands, "I want to take a nap there, myself." Daisy responds with a resounding, "G-R-R!" The final two frames depict a befuddled Dagwood, who says to Blondie: "It's more of this

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Schultz, *Peanuts*, United Feature Syndicate, April 8, 1970. Historian Edward Berkowitz points out that "women had their sixties in the seventies," see Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Dean Young, "The Cartoonists: Dean Young," [http://www.blondie.com/page.asp?page=cartoonists\\_dean](http://www.blondie.com/page.asp?page=cartoonists_dean) (accessed May 28, 2008); *Blondie*, King Feature Syndicate, Inc., 1971; *Blondie*, King Feature Syndicate, Inc., 1971.



women's lib movement... [e]ven the female dogs are demanding equal rights."<sup>24</sup>

Dagwood's comment reflects an apprehension over the extent to which the demands of women and other "minority" groups might extend. From his (white, middle-class, male) perspective, "feminism" could be appropriated by female dogs and used to claim a space (the couch) that was reserved for the "man of house," after a day at the office and a quadruple-stacked meat and cheese sandwich.

For adults, however, *Blondie* provided an opportunity to laugh at (or with) Dagwood and his bafflement over the women's movement and the changes it brought. In both instances, Dagwood is befuddled by "women's lib," yet he acquiesces, preparing dinner for Blondie and leaving Daisy undisturbed on the couch. For mature readers, the humor is based on the centuries-old conviction that women have always had the upper hand in marital and family affairs, so Dagwood does what he is told, whether by his wife or the family's female dog.<sup>25</sup> His response is also in character for Dagwood, who is frequently portrayed as child-like and docile. However, his response to the fervor over the women's liberation—that it would "blow over," is telling and is underscored in the strip where Daisy commandeers the couch. The message is clear; if the goals of the women's liberation movement were allowed to blossom to their fullest, there may be no end to changes. Even female dogs would have more privileges than men.

GenX children who visited dentist, doctor, or hospital waiting rooms encountered "women's lib" on the covers of the magazines scattered across tables, with headlines and

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<sup>24</sup>Dean Young, *Blondie*, King Feature Syndicate, Inc., 1971.

<sup>25</sup> In the April 1776 letters between Abigail and John Adams on the inclusion of women's rights in the Constitution, John Adams asserts that masculine systems are "little more than theory," and repealing those systems would "subject [men] to the despotism of the petticoat." (See "Abigail and John Adams on Women and the American Revolution [1776]," in *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History, Vol. 1 [Second Edition]*, Eric Foner, ed. [New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008, 111-114], 114).

illustrations about “women’s lib” and “the ‘new’ American woman.” On March 20, 1972, the headline on the cover of *Time* declared: “Special Issue: The American Woman.” The text overlapped an image of a clear plastic female head filled with various objects symbolizing this new “American Woman,” including a “Shirley Chisholm for President” button, a hair curler, a lipstick tube, a birth control pill package, a plastic baby doll, a tiny toy typewriter, and a blue Matchbox sports car. If the dentist subscribed to *Ebony*, the child might’ve seen the cover of the July 1970 issue, which promised readers a look at “New Careers for Women.” If the June 9, 1972 *LIFE* magazine was at the top of the stack, the child would’ve seen a headshot of Bella Abzug with the enormous headline, “Women in Politics: How Are They Doing? Where Are They Going?” Or, in the spring of the previous year, the GenXer may have encountered an image of a young white woman wearing a sheer apron, positioned next to the headline, “She Thinks Women’s Lib is Crazy, Why?” The child of the seventies might also have seen prominent feminist activists and writers on the faces of magazines such as the August 31, 1970 edition of *Time*, depicting a defiantly Kate Millett; *LIFE*, featuring Germaine Greer on the cover of its May 7, 1971 issue, net to the headline, “Saucy Feminist That Even Men Like”; and, of course, the woman who became the cover girl of the movement, Gloria Steinem, who graced the covers of *Newsweek* on August 16, 1971 and *McCall’s* January 1972 issue, where she was named “Woman of the Year.”

Some children would have come across *Ms.* magazine, as well. *Ms.*, published in January 1972, had a circulation of four to five hundred thousand, and an estimated readership of three million, declaring itself “a lifeline, [connecting women] to the

national discourse on feminism.”<sup>26</sup> While many of the covers of *Ms.* deliberately looked like other women’s magazines, with images of celebrities such as Bette Midler, Lily Tomlin, Barbara Streisand, and Marlo Thomas, others more overtly featured the faces and issues of the women’s liberation movement.

The July 1973 edition of *Ms.* featured a close up photograph of tennis star Billie Jean King, along with text that read: “Billie Jean Evens the Score.”<sup>27</sup> In November of the same year, the feminist magazine’s cover design may have been particularly alluring to young eyes, as it featured a vividly colored, Pop Art inspired cartoon of a white woman being asked by a white man, “Do you know the women’s movement has no sense of humor?”

As the decade wore on, *Ms.* published covers illustrating previously suppressed subjects like domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. The artwork on the front of the August 1976 edition of *Ms.* featured the face of a bruised and battered looking white woman, accompanied by the headline, “Help For the Secret Victim Next Door.” Sexual harassment in the work place was brazenly exemplified on the front of the November 1977 issue, as a sullen looking cloth doll in business clothes is depicted with a male hand sliding into the front of her blouse and blazer. The title of the feature article, “Special Report: Sexual Harassment on the Job And How to Stop It,” also dominated the page. Deemed sensational by some readers and ground breaking by others—the covers

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<sup>26</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Aside from the “battle of the sexes” spectacle, the game garnered major publicity for women’s professional tennis, which was in its nascence in the early 1970s. King’s aim was to draw attention to the sport and the disparity in prize awards between male and female tennis players.

were, no doubt, seen by both young and old—though children would have been less likely to understand the social problems the images referenced.<sup>28</sup>

GenX youngsters did not have the wherewithal to fully grasp the gravity of the circumstances surrounding the women's liberation movement. However, through popular culture, "women's lib" was ever-present in their young lives, particularly through adult primetime television.

### ***"And Then There's Maude": "Women's Lib" and Adult TV***

While Xers learned of "women's lib" from the printed materials that were scattered among the adult and familial spaces they traversed, they received the most animated references and stereotypes about feminism from television. In the seventies, television was the primary form of entertainment for families; in 1973, 76 percent of three-year-olds were able to name their favorite program, and parents of four-years-olds reported that their children spent about one-third of their waking hours watching television. Elementary school children viewed television sporadically, as their viewing hours bracketed the school day and extended into the post-dinner primetime hours, which meant that they saw segments or entire episodes of programs marketed to their parents.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike contemporary television viewing conventions, where children, teens, and adults channel surf—often by themselves in their bedrooms, through hundreds of news, shopping, movie, and special interest channels—television in the post-World War II era

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<sup>28</sup> Farrell, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel R. Anderson and Stephen R. Levin, "Young Children's Attention to 'Sesame Street'," *Child Development*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 1976: 806-811), 806. A 1976 essay by Timothy Meyer reveals, for instance, that nine million children under age 12 regularly watched *All in the Family*, see "The Impact of 'All in the Family' on Children," *Journal of Broadcasting* 20:1 (Winter 1976), 23.

was imagined as a “unifying agent,” one that belonged in the family space. Screen cultures scholar Lynn Spigel explains that television of the late forties and fifties “reinforced the newly minted concept of the suburban family.”<sup>30</sup> By the sixties there were plenty of wholesome television shows that appealed to families, including *Leave It To Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, *The Adams Family*, and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Seventies television changed significantly as networks and advertisers targeted programs, and, more pointedly, advertisements, to various market segments, which were based on a number of factors, including age and gender.<sup>31</sup> This evolution went unnoticed by many parents of Xers, who gave their children unbridled access to shows that were full of sexuality and violence, as well as sitcoms, which were arenas for grappling with a variety of complex social issues.

Television’s new role, writes David Allen Case, was to “promote...an understanding of what might have been sexually, racially, or religiously alien to most of its audience.”<sup>32</sup> The situation comedy—particularly those produced by Norman Lear—epitomized this function, as they were created in reaction to the cultural changes and political uncertainties adults of the decade were attempting to navigate. The women’s liberation movement was just one of many factors that made the seventies an exciting and befuddling time for adults. Aside from the cultural upheavals brought by more than a decade of activism for civil and equal rights and against the Vietnam War, the era was

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Television in the Family Circle: The Popular Reception of a New Medium,” in *Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp, editor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, 73-97), 76.

<sup>31</sup> See Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 2003), especially pp. 292-331 of Chapter 7 “Culture: Segmenting the Mass.” Wini Breines provides an excellent summary of the rise of the teenager as an identity and a market segment in the post-World War II era (see Breines, 92-102).

<sup>32</sup> David Allen Case, “Domesticating the Enemy: ‘Bewitched’ and the Seventies Sitcom,” in *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, Shelton Waldrep, editor (New York and London: Routledge, 2000, 195-202), 196.

colored by the end of the U.S.'s failed involvement in the war, the Watergate scandal, the OPEC oil embargo, and an economic crisis, which came to be known as "stagflation."<sup>33</sup> These factors made for a period that was disorienting for many people, even those who most benefited from the changes brought by the social movements of the era.<sup>34</sup>

Freud's theory on humor as a vehicle for alleviating unpleasant emotions—in this case, disorientation and anxiety, may partially account for the popularity of the seventies sitcom.<sup>35</sup> GenX writer and cultural critic Pagan Kennedy posits that *All in the Family* and Lear's subsequent sitcoms were popular because, "[i]nstead of preaching to the audience, they brought up issues and let the audience draw their own conclusions—which they did." Kennedy reports that surveys of *All in the Family* audience members (the show was taped in front of a live studio audience) reveal that people found their values echoed in the characters with whom they were the most politically aligned. Their beliefs were further validated through the patriarchal Archie Bunker character, the show's unapologetic misogynist and bigot. Kennedy explains: "Some saw Archie as a right-on social critic, voicing the working class, white frustrations they were afraid to express, [while] others took the sitcom as Lear intended it, laughing at Archie's paranoid rants."<sup>36</sup>

GenXers watching Lear sitcoms learned about serious social issues amid the laughter of the live studio audiences or their parents' chuckles or jeers. Lear's *Maude* was centered on a middle-aged white feminist, who was described as "a caricature of the

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<sup>33</sup> Stagflation meant that the economy was experiencing both slow growth and inflation. See Beth Bailey and David Farber, "Introduction" in *America in the 70s*, edited by Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 1-8), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Beth Bailey, "She 'Can Bring Home the Bacon'," *America in the 70s*, edited by Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 107-128), 108; Bailey and David Farber, "Introduction," *America in the 70s* (1-8), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Humour," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928): 1-6.

<sup>36</sup> Pagan Kennedy, *Platforms: A Microwaved Cultural Chronicle of the 1970s* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 12-14.

knee-jerk liberal” in *TV Guide*.<sup>37</sup> Beatrice Arthur played the contentious title character, who was unlike any other television character of the seventies. She was liberated like Mary Richards of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, yet she was married, middle aged, and affluent, living in a wealthy New York suburb. Most conspicuously, Maude Finley, in the words of Sean Campbell, a writer and expert on Lear’s sitcoms, “...had the potential to dominate anybody who came in her path—whether man or woman... [and on] some level she enjoyed it with a deep passion.”<sup>38</sup>

The Finleys epitomized what historians studying the seventies characterize as an age of self-fulfillment and personal liberation.<sup>39</sup> Maude struggled with identity crises based on her role as an upper-middle-class homemaker navigating a fourth marriage to Walter. Her twice-divorced daughter Carol, who, with her son Phillip, lives with Maude and Walter, is sexually liberated and she is frequently depicted walking out the door with a suitcase, off to meet one of many nameless men for a weekend get-away. While Phillip stays home in the care of his grandmother and Walter. Arguments between Maude and Walter often reflected the tension around changing gender roles, replicating the “battle of the sexes” paradigm.

Lear did not shy away from contentious political issues. In 1972, before abortion was legal in all 50 states, he and his staff created an episode in which 47-year-old Maude became pregnant and would opt to have an abortion. The dialogue was humorous, frank and, ultimately, feminist. The show’s writers shrewdly began the discussion with a joke;

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<sup>37</sup> *TV Guide*, September 1972 (Capital Cities Communications).

<sup>38</sup> Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992), 66.

<sup>39</sup> See Schulman, xiv-xvii, and Bailey and Farber, 6-8.

upon learning that she was pregnant, Maude's initial response was: "What'll I do? Trade it in for a volleyball on Let's Make a Deal?"

The most critical dialogue of the two-part episode was between Maude and her daughter, Carol. As fierce and liberated as Maude appears, in this episode she exemplifies an older, less liberated generation. Carol represents the possibilities of seventies personal freedom and feminism. She chides her mother for not being on the birth control pill—"What did you do mother, cross your fingers?" and, using language that could have (and, perhaps, did) come from The Boston Women's Health Book Collective's, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, she persuades her mother to have an abortion. "We're free," she says. "We finally have the right to decide what we can do with our bodies."<sup>40</sup>

While GenX children may not have fully understood what was happening on screen, the language and spirit of feminism were palpable. Not all of the episodes are as controversial and memorable as "Maude's Dilemma," yet Xers watching *Maude* saw a lead female character that was frequently vociferous and angry. In these contexts, the issues were not important; they were simply devices put forth to rile Maude for the sake of creating drama and laughter. Young viewers heard the studio audience—and, most likely their parents—laugh or scoff at her antics, yet they did not have the same understanding of the topics on which the drama was based. Adults knew, for instance, that abortion was a highly contentious issue, divorce rates were rising and multiple marriages were becoming more acceptable and common, and that open discussion of the sexual escapades of a single woman like Carol would have been taboo for television of

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<sup>40</sup> "Maude's Dilemma, Part I," *Maude*, originally broadcast on November 12, 1972, CBS.



the 1950s and 60s. Like the Archie Bunker character, Maude played to both sides of a debate, which, in her case, was often centered on feminist issues. Proponents of feminism appreciated and related to her forthright stances on the controversial topics that she, Carol, Walter, neighbor Arthur, and African-American housekeeper Florida debated, while people skeptical of “women’s lib” had their beliefs validated by Maude’s persistent histrionics. It is telling that the bigot (Archie) and the feminist (Maude) were both framed as contentious archetypes that could be taken seriously or derided, depending on one’s point of view. The nuances of the debates and discussions on *Maude* were probably not clear to most young Xers who watched the show, yet the character Bea Arthur played, or the caricature she embodied, fed the seventies discourse on “women’s lib,” and most likely shaped GenX viewers’ nascent views on feminism and feminists.

Aside from Lear’s programs, GenXers and the adults in their lives regularly encountered feminism and the changes it brought on other sitcoms, and on other genres of adult seventies television, including dramas and made-for-TV movies. The writer of *The Beverly Hillbillies* took on feminism in an episode that aired on January 26, 1971; *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which featured single, career woman, Mary Richards, ran for seven seasons beginning in 1970; Angie Dickinson starred as the tough Sergeant Suzanne “Pepper” Anderson in *Police Woman*, which aired for four years (1974-78); and white “flower child” Julie, white radical Pete, and Black inner-city rebel Linc collaborated to combat “counterculture crime” in *Mod Squad*, which began airing in 1968 and ended in 1973.<sup>41</sup> Farrah Fawcett, who later became famous as one of the detectives

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<sup>41</sup> For partial listings of episodes of the sitcoms *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, see [http://www.tv.com/the-beverly-hillbillies/show/1370/episode\\_guide.html?season=9&tag=season\\_dropdown;dropdown;8;](http://www.tv.com/the-beverly-hillbillies/show/1370/episode_guide.html?season=9&tag=season_dropdown;dropdown;8;)

on Charlie's Angels, starred in a 1971 television movie that echoed feminists' condemnation of beauty pageants (the beginning of the women's liberation movement is, after all, associated with the protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant in Atlantic City). In *The Feminist and the Fuzz*, Fawcett plays the role of a Playboy Bunny who loses her man to another woman. The plot had an unexpected twist, as the "other" woman was a feminist—specifically, the feminist to which the film title refers.<sup>42</sup>

Seventies primetime television shows and movies were interspersed with numerous commercials using women's liberation to sell products, including perfume. Charles of the Ritz advertised Enjoli, a new "eight-hour perfume for the 24-hour woman," which featured the memorable jingle, "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never, never, never let you forget you're a man," based on Peggy Lee's 1960s hit, "I am a Woman." In the advertisement, three versions of a blonde, white woman (the first in a robe, carrying a frying pan, the second in a business suit with a briefcase, and the last in a slinky, satin dress) confidently belt out the tune.

The premise of the commercial—that women could masterfully morph between the new roles open to them, was also echoed in a television commercial for Prince Matchabelli's Aviance Night Musk. In it, a housewife performs a bizarre striptease in her kitchen, shedding her apron, rubber gloves, and head scarf, for a chiffon blouse, an untamed hairdo, and a virtual spray bath of perfume. While this woman is not as liberated as her peer from the Enjoli commercial, she blatantly displays her desire for sex, as she boldly declares: "I'm gonna have an Aviance night" in front of a mirror, which

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<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/marytylermo/marytylermo.htm>;  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062589/episodes#season-1> (accessed June 29, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Karol, *The ABC Movie of the Week Companion: A Loving Tribute to the Classic Series* (iUniverse, Inc., 2005), 27.

bears the reflection of a double bed in it. Her sexual craving is portrayed as being equal to her partner's; when she greets him at the door they exchange seductive stares, and a male voice echoes the jingle, affirming: "We're gonna have an Aviance night."<sup>43</sup>

A young Xer watching these commercials might not have consciously connected the messages they conveyed with "women's lib," but the confidence the female characters exuded was palpably off the charts, giving the impression that women—at least beautiful, heterosexual, white ones—could "have it all." Such advertisements made women's expanding roles appear effortless; it was as if they could magically change from housewife to sex goddess, or mother to corporate power broker.

There were, however, limits to the ways in which this new brand of "woman power" could be framed. The ancillary message of both the commercials was that the ideal liberated woman could be—even was—successful and unabashedly sexual, but only to the degree that she did not undermine her partner's masculinity. The Enjoli woman vows "to never, never, never let you forget you're a man," and the Aviance commercial makes it clear to the viewer that the woman's sexual desires will be satisfied by her husband, at home in the "sanctity" of the couple's bed.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Television commercials for Enjoli and Aviance perfumes available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4X4MwbVf5OA> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd9gQkikr50&NR=1> (accessed July 25, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Ironically, these commercials portended what many of the GenX girls watching them would face as women in the 1990s and 2000s. As we juggle parenthood, careers, and partnerships in what Peggy Orenstein calls a "half-changed world," social programs and corporate environments haven't kept up with the daily demands and challenges that came with the opportunities brought by the women's liberation movement. Enjoli's upbeat pledge of creating an "eight-hour perfume for the 24-hour woman," takes on different tone for adult, middle class GenXers navigating twenty-first century realities of compulsory dual-income families, and faltering familial, community, and structural systems of support. See Peggy Orenstein, *FLUX: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, & Life in a Half-Changed World* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000). See especially Chapters one, "Anything is Possible," four, "One Woman, Two Worlds," five, "All at Once, All the Time," nine, "Almost Everything," and twelve, "Who Said It Would Be Easy?"

These limits extended beyond ads for “feminine” products such as perfume. Historian Lizabeth Cohen explains that the “women’s liberation movement inspired [marketers] to try to turn feminist defiance into consumer compliance.” In *A Consumer’s Republic*, Cohen includes an ad from the November 1976 issue of *Ms.*, which depicts eight businessmen and one businesswoman beneath the query, “Find the \$25,000 executive without life insurance.” The ad, which was produced by and appears in Cohen’s text courtesy of Equitable Life Assurance, clearly refers to the female executive, who stands in line with her male peers. It is ultimately about assimilation. The *Ms.* reader would have unequivocally advocated that the woman executive “[figure] out how much [her] life is worth,” as doing so implies stating that the women’s work and roles are as valuable as their male peers’. This message illustrates a liberal feminist point of view, as the woman executive is shown working within already established social and political structures.<sup>45</sup> Equitable Life Insurance and other corporations that co-opted feminism to sell products combined women’s traditionally ascribed feminine roles and behaviors with contemporary feminism, inventing a woman who was able to fulfill her domestic duties, sexual responsibilities (or desires), and her role as primary consumer, all while working her way up the corporate ladder.

### ***Women’s Lib as Concoction: Popular Culture, the Culture Industry, and Co-optation***

Theodore Adorno’s theory on the proliferation of the “culture industry” is applicable to the “women’s lib” phenomenon. The culture industry, he writes, “fuses the old and familiar into a new quality” thereby creating products that are “tailored for

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<sup>45</sup> Cohen, 316-317.

consumption by [the] masses.” These products—and here I also am referring to the manifestations of seventies popular culture, are “concoctions” created to reflect and perpetuate the prevailing cultural ideology.<sup>46</sup> “Women’s lib” is one such concoction; it was proliferated through mainstream newspaper and magazine stories and advertisements, and television programs and news reports, all of which were primarily aimed at an adult audience. Constructions such as “women’s lib” were “not,” in the words of Adorno, “guides for a...new art of moral responsibility, but rather [an exhortation] to toe the line.”

Some of the most forthright discussions of feminism and depictions of feminists took place on Lear’s sitcoms because a variety of viewpoints could be debated under the guise of humor. Pagan Kennedy and David Allen Case contend that Lear’s TV shows were ground breaking, and in many ways they were. However, comedic characters such as Maude Findley and Archie Bunker paradoxically upheld both progressive and regressive attitudes about feminism and other social issues of the day. These sitcoms provided viewers with a vehicle for working through their feelings and beliefs about the changes that emerged following the Black Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties, and the seventies women’s liberation movement. Despite Lear’s creative approach, his TV shows did not unequivocally disrupt the status quo because the format ambiguously sanctioned conservative, liberal, and even radical, views on controversial social issues.

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<sup>46</sup> Theodore Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *New German Critique*, 6, Fall 1975, 12-19 (translated by Anson G. Rabinbach), reprinted at [http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/Culture\\_industry\\_reconsidered.shtml](http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/Culture_industry_reconsidered.shtml) and repaginated as pages 1-17 (accessed June 29, 2008), 1, 15.

The women's movement had the potential of energizing more than half of the population. "Towing the line" was, therefore, essential for maintaining some degree of status quo in a period in American history when the established order was being challenged on numerous fronts. It was in this context that GenX youngsters saw "women's lib" debated and discussed. While they may not have had a clear sense of the movement's "back story," they caught glimpses of it on television, on the covers of magazines, and in the pages of the daily newspaper. "Women's lib" was ubiquitous; it was quickly co-opted by television network executives and creative departments of Madison Avenue ad agencies.

The counter-culture spirit of the women's liberation was, of course, just one of many co-opted by Madison Avenue in the sixties and seventies to sell products. GenX children were raised amid a profusion of images and sound bites, featuring, for instance, peace-loving young people who wished to "to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...[and] buy the world a Coke," or confidence-exuding, cigarette-smoking women who had allegedly "...come a long way, baby."<sup>47</sup> Contemporary marketing strategies connecting consumption with rebellion are ubiquitous in the history of American advertising, yet the seventies ethic of personal freedom and the mood of contempt for authority created an atmosphere (and an audience) that accepted advertisements celebrating this ethos. Admen and women, fashion designers, and television writers and producers adopted the anti-establishment spirit and fashion of hippies, feminists, and black power activists, adopting their style, postures, and language to sell products.

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<sup>47</sup>The "I'd like to buy the world a Coke" commercial is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mOEU87SBTU&NR=1> (accessed August 11, 2008).

Scholars Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter note that markers of sixties' anti-establishment such as long, unkempt hair, flowing tunics, bell-bottom jeans, mini-skirts, and beaded jewelry were quickly appropriated as fashion, "showing up in advertisements and on mannequins in shop windows," as mass produced manifestations of the originals. Department stores sold peace pendants and love beads just as they sold crinoline-lined poodle skirts, "pedal pushers," and tight-white t-shirts to an earlier generation of youthful hipsters and rebels. Ultimately, Heath and Potter assert, " 'the system' seemed to regard the hippies less as a threat to the established order than as a marketing opportunity." The hippie, the libber, and the black power advocate were appropriated, caricatured, and sold as rebels that contradicted the "organization man" and "consumer woman" of the 1950s.<sup>48</sup>

The process of co-optation, explain Heath and Potter, is insidious, as mass media and corporate agents "assimilate resistance by appropriating its symbols, evacuating their 'revolutionary' content and selling them back to the masses as commodities."<sup>49</sup> In the process, they write, the counterculture is eventually neutralized, as over time "people ignore the revolutionary kernel of [the] new [idea]." With a system of co-optation in place, counter-cultures are subsumed as corporate-sanctioned ideology.<sup>50</sup>

Xers were the first generation reared amid this ideology; since the first decade of their collective birth "countercultural rebels have been pumping out 'subversive' music, 'subversive' art, 'subversive' literature, 'subversive' clothing." There is so much

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<sup>48</sup> Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 34-35.

<sup>49</sup> Heath and Potter refer to these agents as "the system," which I believe to be too vague a term.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Employing Foucault's discourse theory, I interpret and re-employ Heath and Potter's assertions through this lens, as the condition they describe illustrates the ways in which discourse is shaped over time not only by corporate agents, but also through the "complicity" of consumers. This ultimately creates what Heath and Potter term the "total ideology" of counterculture.

subversion, write Heath and Potter, “yet the system seems to tolerate it quite well.”<sup>51</sup>

Seventies “women’s lib” was both a marketable fashion statement and a churlish caricature that was appropriated, disseminated, and re-shaped as a shadow of the liberal and radical feminisms that inspired it. Both concoctions—the fashion and the caricature, helped keep feminists’ goals and desires at bay, thereby ensuring that ordinary people continued to, in Adorno’s words, “toe the line.”

At the same time, however, the theories and objectives—the more authentic spirit—of the women’s liberation movement were put forth through the books, educational materials, and media created for GenX youth. Indeed, these materials provided GenXers with the substance of seventies feminism. However, as “women’s lib” was blatantly (often inaccurately) portrayed and debated through adult pop culture, feminism was quietly disseminated through media created especially for children. And often it was put forth in a manner that made it seem as if the goals of feminism had already been achieved. Like plankton in the ocean, or fluoride in tap water, feminism was, in this context, invisible. However, as I discuss in chapter two, feminism’s impact on GenX was palpable.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 35.



## CHAPTER TWO

### “Generation X and the 1970s Pop Cultural Discourse on Feminism”

*A person should do what she likes to—a person’s a person that way.*

Billy De Wolfe, *Free To Be... You and Me*,  
“Don’t Dress Your Cat in an Apron”<sup>1</sup>

As “women’s lib” was being co-opted by marketing gurus and caricatured by media moguls in the realm of adult popular culture, the goals and theories of feminist activists and scholars pervaded books and media produced for children of the 1970s. In school, textbooks were filled with images of women police officers, firefighters, and construction workers, as well as male cooks, childcare givers, and teachers. On television, cartoon characters such as Scooby Doo’s “Velma” shrewdly solved crimes, or, on *The Electric Company*, women like “Vi” of “Vi’s Diner” skillfully ran their own businesses. In these contexts, empowered women were not depicted as angry or irrational “libbers”; instead, gender inequality appeared to be a problem of the past. Feminism was at work, but it was

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<sup>1</sup> Billy De Wolfe, “Don’t Dress Your Cat in an Apron,” *Free To Be... You and Me* (Arista, 2006), Track 4.

imperceptible. Feminism ubiquitously permeated GenX children's visual culture. This chapter reveals the role seventies and eighties textbooks, public television, and other media espousing gender and racial tolerance and equality played in shaping GenXers worldview on gender and race. The cultural discourse on gender and the women's movement of the late sixties and seventies contributed to GenXer's ideas about gender, and, subsequently, their conceptions of feminism. However, materials that were made for and marketed to children projected an idyllic world where women and men of all races and classes worked and lived equally and amicably alongside white privileged men.

Taken together, the television programs and media produced for GenX youngsters and those created for their parents projected a paradoxical conception of feminism. In the realm of adult pop culture, characters like Maude Findley ranted about women's reproductive rights, sexual equality, and "male chauvinist pigs." At school, textbooks portrayed women and men performing a variety of jobs and roles, and girls and boys playing actively side by side, neither gender more skilled, empowered, or confident than the other. The scholars and writers who produced the textbooks, television programs, and children's books of the seventies were cognizant of the spirit and ideology of the women's liberation movement and the material was imbued with feminism and an illusion of gender parity. Because of this GenXers were left with the impression that when they became adults everyone would have equal opportunities. This also created the potential for Xers to be skeptical of claims made by the "libbers" they saw on television and media created for their parents; Maude's rages, for instance, seemed overly dramatic, her claims of sexism, baseless. Rightfully so, for young Xers, feminism and "women's lib" were incongruous notions.

## ***Race and Class and GenX Childhood***

Many of the educational and pop cultural sources I examine and take apart were created by white, highly educated, middle-class people, yet they reached beyond such privileged realms. For this reason, it is important to begin this chapter with caveats about race, and subsequently, class. *The Electric Company* (TEC), an educational television program that I later discuss in greater length, is an ideal source for airing issues of white middle class privilege. TEC was broadcast on the Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) Children's Television Network from 1971 to 1977. The show was designed as a classroom tool to teach reading skills to second, third, and fourth graders, and it reached a wide range of children, airing twice a day, once during school hours and once after school. Within two months of the show's 1971 premiere, it was used by 18,811 schools, or nearly one quarter of second through fourth grade public school classrooms, including 70 percent of the nation's urban schools.<sup>2</sup> TEC's creative team and advisory committee, assembled by Harvard University Professor Gerald Lesser, employed the latest social and pedagogical theories on the ways in which race, class, and, to a lesser degree, gender, influenced children's learning capacity. Lesser's own research informed the project, and TEC creators also employed the theories of scholars such as William Leboy, a University

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<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Podrazik, "It was 1971," from *The Best of The Electric Company* (Sesame Television Workshop [DVD insert], 8-18), 15. We should be careful about making assumptions that urban schools were always mostly black or latino/a. While many of the nation's northern school systems had yet to "vigorously" desegregate, some large districts in the northeast were racially diverse. For instance, Jonathan Kozol reports that in New York City in 1970, "a substantial number of white students still attended [the city's] public schools." For an overview of the history of desegregation, see Robert Lowe, "The Strange History of School Desegregation," *Rethinking Schools Online*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring 2004) viewed online at [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18\\_03/stra183.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_03/stra183.shtml) (accessed August 1, 2008). Jonathan Kozol, "Still Separate, Still Unequal: America's Educational Apartheid," *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 311, No. 1864 (September 2005, 41-54), 45.

of Pennsylvania linguist who studied the structure of Black English.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite the creative teams' intent, they wrote from their privileged positions, as highly educated people who grew up with, or learned to navigate, a world shaped by white middle or upper-middle class social conventions. Carefully crafted constructions of racial "difference" such as those portrayed on TEC shaped white, suburban children's views of non-Caucasian people; correspondingly, in racially diverse schools where *The Electric Company* was sanctioned as part of the curriculum, students of color may not have seen their own cultural norms and behaviors aptly portrayed on screen. Even the most "accurate" renderings of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity could be problematic when created by white writers and disseminated through programs, network news, and channels owned and operated by white elites.<sup>4</sup>

Media studies scholars Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki argue that racial hierarchies and distinctions "reside deep within the White American psyche," rendering even the best of intentions problematic, particularly when African-American women actors perform scripts written by white men and women, or are rendered in cartoons illustrated by whites. For this reason, we must be mindful of the limitations inherent in even the best intentions. White, often male, renderings of black women in "progressive," feminist sanctioned settings, no matter how meticulously constructed, did not fully reflect the lived realities of the subjects, or the visions of equality they imagined

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview, *Electric Company* executive producer Sam Gibbon explains that accents and dialects were acceptable when used informally in skits, however, words would never be misspelled in print to reflect accents. The message the creative team wanted to send to young viewers who shared some of the actors' speech patterns was that "your language, too, can be rendered in print, and if put in print it can be read by everybody." (See "Creative Team Remembers," from Special Features on Disc 3 of *The Best of the Electric Company* [Sesame Workshop, 2006]).

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2-3, 72, 54-55, and 60-61.

for themselves. However, people such as Lee Chamberlain and Morgan Freeman brought TEC characters to life; “Vi” and “Easy Reader,” were therefore collaborative projects, not merely one-dimensional creations of the writers. Overlooking this collaboration undermines the actors’ agency as creative professionals who shared the goals as the writers, directors, and producers of the program.

As I discuss in the introduction, Generation X is most often imagined as a white, middle class, and, often male, phenomenon. And at various points in subsequent chapters I address the paradoxes inherent in this construction, and what role this served as X emerged as a generational identity. Social class, however, comes into play as a category of analysis in this chapter, particularly as I examine the books, television programs, and media parents made available to their children in the seventies and early eighties. Moreover, class is central to the ways in which young Xers read and perceived the images and language put forth in classroom textbooks, and to what and how much they read at home.

My position on class is informed by Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*.<sup>5</sup> Lareau convincingly argues that a person’s social class determines the kind of childhood she will experience and, consequently, the types of opportunities available to her during college (if she is raised in a middle class family, where attending college is the presumptive step one takes after high school) and in adulthood. Middle-class families practice “concerted cultivation,” where parents actively

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<sup>5</sup> As discussed in the introduction, it is difficult to unravel the intersectionalities of identity categories (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), and I am aware of and convinced by the works of scholars who assert that there is, in George Lipsitz’s words, a “possessive investment in whiteness.” That said, Lareau’s argument is particularly useful here, she convincingly speaks to “concerted cultivation” and “natural growth,” phenomena that explain how children are socialized—or, educated, at home and in their communities based on social class.

engage their children in conversations about current events, social situations, and future goals. In this structured context, children become adept at conversing with adults and at navigating—at times even challenging, school regulations and authority figures such as teachers and administrators. Parents practicing “concerted cultivation” carefully select and screen reading materials, television programs, films, and other media that promote assimilation into the mores of middle-class life.

Children born into working-class or poor families are, according to Lareau, more apt to experience “natural growth,” which means that their activities are less parent-directed and, instead, centered on creating resourceful, self-driven entertainment and educational experiences. Often in this context, youngsters orbit communities consisting of neighbors and extended families where they play and learn independently or with peers. Unlike their more affluent cohorts, their days are less structured, encompassing periods of unsupervised free time. Children of poor or working-class families do not often have the opportunities to develop skills needed to communicate with adults. Instead, they learn—often from the adults in their family and community, to distrust teachers and school administrators, and to experience feelings of powerlessness when they must negotiate with school policies and personnel.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this section is centered on the middle class, which, as I established in the introduction, is a marker of GenX identity. Parents of GenXers sought books and media to help shape their children’s views on gender and racial tolerance and equality, and to demonstrate that girls could be the hero of the story, and they had the power within them to do anything they chose. Xers who encountered educational materials and aids such as

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<sup>6</sup>Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 1-11.

The Electric Company in the classroom interpreted them differently than their less affluent peers. In a dual-parent middle-class white family, a textbook photograph depicting a woman repairing a refrigerator might have been seen as uncharacteristic, but empowering, particularly for young girls. However, for a girl from a single-parent, working-class, family, the idea that mother could wield a wrench may not have been a novel concept, particularly if the family could not afford to hire someone to repair an ailing appliance.

The focus on the middle-class is central to examining and understanding Generation X as a social, historical construction. Generation X was initially “identified” in the late 1980s by advertisers who were paid to market products to those of us with disposable income, who were born in the wake of the Baby Boomers (before the “Generation X” moniker caught on, the generation was labeled “Baby Busters”).<sup>7</sup> As an identity, GenX gained momentum in the early nineties and became a cultural phenomenon that, I argue in chapter three, was a response to the condition of postmodernity and the erosion of white, middle-class male hegemony. Indeed, in educational materials and pop culture created for children of the seventies, the post-World War II vision of affluent, patriarchal homogeneity appeared to be obsolete. Paradoxically, however, as the GenX identity took hold in nineties popular culture, it paradigmatically surfaced as white, male, and middle class.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, William Dunn, *The Baby Bust: A Generation Comes of Age* (Ithaca, NY: American Demographics Books, Inc., 1993).

### ***Feminism on the Page: Textbooks***

A middle class white boy opening a textbook such as *Growing in Health: Health and Physical Fitness* would see a reflection of himself in the first illustration, which depicts a blonde-haired, blue-eyed young man leading a group of four children on a walk through the woods.<sup>8</sup> The leader and a red-haired boy flank two girls—one of them brunette, the other blonde, who, incidentally, bend over to smell a flower. The four children are white, well dressed, and obviously happy.

Not all children reading this textbook would find themselves represented in the illustrations. An African-American girl thumbing through the text would not find an illustration of a child that looked like her. The attitudes put forth in the health textbook also may not have made sense in the context of her personal experiences. An illustration in a section on mental health shows a variety of young white smiling children happily working with others, grooming themselves in front of mirrors, and shaking hands with their peers. Amid the bright yellow hodgepodge of images is the following text: “An attitude is a special thing; it’s how you can feel about everything. It can make you sad or make you glad; it all depends on you!”<sup>9</sup> This student would have been familiar with the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” message inherent in this directive. However, she would have been less likely than her white, middle-class peers to accept it as true, particularly if she watched the adults in her life struggle to make ends meet financially despite hours of hard work and plenty of “positive” attitude. More injuriously, the

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<sup>8</sup>Oliver E. Byrd, M.D., et al. *Growing in Health: Health and Physical Fitness* (River Forest, IL: Laidlaw Brothers Publishers, A Division of Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



student might have felt as if there was something inherently wrong with her and her family and neighbors because they were still poor despite doing everything “right.”

In 1963 (the year in which *Growing in Health* was published), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not yet a reality. While *Brown v. Board of Education* made “separate but equal” educational facilities illegal in 1954, desegregation was not fully enforced in the South until 1968, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Secondary Education Act of 1965. Unequal access to education was one factor in the disproportionate wages and quality of life between African Americans and whites, which was significant. In the sixties per capita income for whites was nearly twice the figure for blacks. Data from the late sixties reveals that African Americans were disadvantaged across the board: by 1968 more than fifty percent of black families lived one-and-a-half times below the poverty level, compared to twenty-five percent of white families.<sup>10</sup>

A white middle-class girl perusing the same text would have seen a symbol of herself on almost every page of *Growing in Health*. Of course, she may not have felt as happy as the girls in the book appeared to be, or, for that matter, as thin, well groomed, or attractive. And she would’ve been more likely to see herself getting cooking or cleaning lessons from her mother or canning in “home economics” class, as opposed to learning first aid while camping, being a “life saver” in a burning home, or demonstrating the rules and techniques of softball. White girls are often depicted gaily clapping, laughing,

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<sup>10</sup> Goodwin Liu, “Education and Opportunity: A Forum on the Kerner Commission Forty Year Report,” Stanford University, October 3, 2008. ([http://edpolicy.stanford.edu/pages/events/kerner/materials/ppts/kerner\\_liu.pdf](http://edpolicy.stanford.edu/pages/events/kerner/materials/ppts/kerner_liu.pdf), accessed July 23, 2009), 1.

and looking on as boys pushed in their chairs, played guitar, and took the lead while dancing.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the text, of course, pronouns are masculine and chores are gendered (“Mom” does the dishes, “Dad” mows the lawn). And, based on the illustrations in a section titled “Respect for Rights,” American ideals and “Rights Common to Everyone” (“Right to Free Speech,” “Right to Worship,” “Freedom from Want,” and “Freedom from Fear,” the four freedoms declared by FDR and famously illustrated by Norman Rockwell) appear only to extend to affluent whites. On the surface, the images in *Growing in Health* give the impression that elementary students were all white and middle class. However, they are part of a broader paradigm wherein whiteness and masculinity stand in as normative. In this context, girls, women, and people of color identified as part of “mankind.” Ultimately, *Growing in Health* reinforced “traditional” gender roles, post World War II values about the centrality of the suburban nuclear family, and—most notably, underscored white patriarchal hegemony, which, by 1963, had only begun to be challenged.<sup>12</sup>

While feminist activists did not always have a place at the political table in the seventies, organizations—most notably NOW, and off-shoots such as the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL), waged numerous battles in courts, and created a wide range of taskforces emphasizing the need for more accessible and affordable daycare centers, the repeal of abortion laws, and more equitable tax and divorce laws.<sup>13</sup> Organized spectacles such as the King-Riggs “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match of 1973,

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<sup>11</sup> Oliver E. Byrd, M.D., 64, 92-93, 144, 120, 50, 44, and 54.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>13</sup> Rosen, 83.

and guerilla-style acts such as the May 1970 sit-in at the offices of the Ladies' Home Journal, where 200 women convened, demanding that the magazine include a section on women's liberation and establish an on-site daycare center for its employees kept feminism—or, as the media termed it, “women's lib,” and, more importantly, gender inequality, in the headlines.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this activism had tremendous impact in the political arena, as abortion was legalized in all 50 states, Title IX was enacted in 1972, and the Equal Rights Amendment, which ultimately failed to meet its 1982 deadline, was met with broad support, as 35 states ratified the ERA in 1972 and 1973.<sup>15</sup>

As feminist activists and scholars challenged gender stereotypes, the ways in which women and men and boys and girls were depicted was significantly altered. School textbooks reflect this change and because they were connected to the influential, authoritarian realm of school and to teachers, the messages on gender and racial equality were significant and particularly credible to young students. Textbook publishers implicitly sanctioned feminist theory and ideals about gender equality and school boards in various parts of the country selected the texts for the districts that they served.<sup>16</sup>

Excerpts from McGraw-Hill's “Guidelines for the Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 300-303.

<sup>15</sup> David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70's* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 247.

<sup>16</sup> I studied a number of textbooks published between 1970 and 1980 while conducting research for this chapter. The images and language that I specifically and, at times, generically describe come from the following textbooks: Margaret Early, et al., *Goals in Reading* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970); Leo Fay, et al., *Red Rock Ranch (Reading Level 6)* (Chicago, IL: Lyons & Carnahan Educational Division, Meredith Corporation, 1972); Martha J. Davis and M. Yvonne Peeler, *Lessons in Living for the Young Homemaker* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Company, 1970); Carl B. Smith and Ronald Wardhaugh, *Full Circle* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980); Edmund H. Henderson, et al., *Houghton Mifflin Spelling* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980); Joan Schreiber, Scott, *Foresman Social Studies* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979); William K. Durr, et al., *Medley* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976); Henrietta Flack and Louise Fernandez, *Exploring Homemaking and Personal Living* (Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977); Marion B. Pollock, et al., *Health: A Way of Life* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979); Paul F. Brandwein and Nancy W. Bauer, *The United States: Living in Our World and The Earth: Living in Our World* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980); Herbert Gross, et al., *Exploring Our World: Regions* (Chicago, IL: Follett Publishing Company, 1980).

Hill Book Company Publications” were printed in the October 10, 1974 edition of *The New York Times Magazine*. In the introduction, an anonymous Times writer explains that the guidelines were circulated in memo form to 8,000 of the company’s authors of textbooks, and also “reference works, trade journals, educational materials, and children’s books.” The provocative document addresses feminine and masculine roles and stereotypes, asserting from the onset: “Men and women should be treated primarily as people, not primarily as members of opposite sexes. Their shared humanity and common attributes should be stressed, not their gender difference. Neither sex should be stereotyped or arbitrarily assigned to a leading or secondary role.”<sup>17</sup>

Along with asserting that women should not be typecast as homemakers and secretaries (even though, as the writer asserts, it’s fine for them to choose those roles), the memo made it clear that men should not constantly “be subject to the ‘masculine mystique’ in their interests, attitudes, and careers.” Girls and boys were to be depicted excelling and showing an interest in a variety of courses of study. The memo encourages writers to show girls engaging in mathematics, mechanical skills, and athletics, and, likewise, boys “should never be made to feel ashamed of an interest in poetry, art, or music, or for an aptitude for cooking, sewing, or childcare.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the ways in which men and women were to be portrayed the memo endorses the use of gender-neutral terms such as “mail carrier,” “fire fighter,” and “camera-operator.” Memo writers also advocate using gender-neutral pronouns and

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<sup>17</sup>“Man! Memo from a Publisher,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1974, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0B10FA3E591A7A93C2AB178BD95F408785F9&scp=1&sq=McGraw-Hill%92s%201974%20policy%20statement%20on%20sexes&st=cse> (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

sentence constructions. A column labeled “NO” lists a series of egregious sentences, such as, “The average American drinks his coffee black.” Correspondingly, under a column labeled “YES,” the corrected sentence reads: “The average American drinks black coffee” and “Most Americans drink their coffee black.”

McGraw-Hill writers learned that phrases such as “the men and the ladies” should be substituted with “the men and the women,” and that “husband and wife,” should be used instead of “man and wife.” Use of the title “Ms.” is encouraged, and the company memo also dictated that men should not always come first “in order of mention.” “Instead,” the document states “alternate the order, sometimes using women and men, gentleman and ladies, she or he, her or his.”<sup>19</sup>

Changes similar to those put forth in the McGraw-Hill memo are evident in textbooks from a number of publishers.<sup>20</sup> Writers of the Follett Publishing Company’s *Exploring Our World: Regions* text make a point of using “people” to describe women and men of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities, unless they are referring to a specific person, such as Navajo student Bob Woods, or Manu and Leela, who live and work in India. In such cases they refer to the individuals by name or as “she” or “he.” Additionally, students are instructed to conduct an experiment that involves “making a human figure out of clay or plastic.” Women are depicted as police officers and environmentalists, and men and women shown doing a variety of tasks are referred to as

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> I am aware that range and diversity of public and private schools in the U.S. makes it difficult to say with certainty that school boards and administrators in all regions of the country purchased these texts for their students. I chose a sampling of textbooks (and, subsequently, publishers) based on what was available to me, and, while most of the publishers are well-known, I do not have the data on where these texts were used and how well the titles sold at the time of publication. That research is beyond the scope of this project. For my purposes, the textbooks (along other media such as children’s books and television) serve as one more illustration of the shifting discourse on gender and feminism.

“workers.” When images of men performing skilled or titled jobs appear, their titles are gender-neutral. They are, for instance, “broadcasters,” “loggers,” and “sanitation workers.”<sup>21</sup>

Houghton Mifflin’s Medley reading text features a nonfiction story on the first woman astronaut, Valentina Terseshkova of the then Soviet Union, and a fictional story about “Cinder Ellie,” who competed and won a race in which she was the only girl. A cartoon illustration accompanying a “skill lesson” on using an encyclopedia features “Ms. Dictionary” and “Mr. Encyclopedia.” And a lesson on reading syllable marks shows a Black woman construction worker hammering the first syllable mark into the word “pantomime,” saying “I’ll hit this one hard,” next to a white male colleague, who pounds the second mark in at the end of the word, saying, “I’ll hit this one easier.”<sup>22</sup> The message put forth in the non-fictional and fictional stories and the illustration of the syllable-defining construction workers is clear: women and men can and do perform the same tasks and often women complete these tasks effortlessly, even when “hitting harder” or racing against a pack of boys is required.

Along with Houghton Mifflin and Follett Publishing Company, textbooks produced by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Prentice-Hall, and Scott, Foresman and Company depict girls mowing lawns, washing cars, and taking the lead in bicycle races. Likewise, girls sport baseball uniforms and equipment, prepped for various roles, including pitcher, batter, and catcher. Boys also engage in these activities, as well as food preparation, gift wrapping, and, listening to and taking directions from their female peers. Women of various ages and races are doctors, firefighters, police officers, and

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<sup>21</sup> Gross, et al., 89, 7, 10, 230-238, 27, 43, 100, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Durr, et al., 91-95, 98, 356.

construction workers, while men serve food to children, push strollers, grocery shop, and sit in conference rooms actively listening to professional women lead what appear to be very important meetings. In Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's *Living in Our World* series, contemporary social scientists (geographers, social workers, cultural anthropologists, etc.) appear throughout the texts, and the majority of them are white women and people of color.<sup>23</sup>

These images of gender equality may not have matched what young Xers experienced at home and in their communities. Perhaps most of the doctors and dentists they encountered were white men, and they rarely saw women police officers or construction workers on the streets of their communities. At home, fathers may have sat idly at the dinner table waiting for mothers to cook and serve the family dinner. Women may have been homemakers, but it was more likely that they held traditionally female jobs such as secretaries, store clerks, or nurses.<sup>24</sup> Despite the realities, however, the images, stories, and language put forth in many of the textbooks propagated the notion that "somewhere" women were highly regarded physicians, strong and respected construction workers, and brave astronauts. In fact, while women were breaking into numerous professional fields in greater numbers, in truth, the change did not correspond with what was portrayed in textbooks.

An elementary student a text from the *Living in Our World* series, for instance, might assume that there were many more female social scientists than male ones, for, as I

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<sup>23</sup>See Paul F. Brandwein and Nancy W. Bauer, *The United States: Living in Our World and The Earth: Living in Our World* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980).

<sup>24</sup> By 1975, sixty-four percent of all mothers with children between the ages of six and 17 worked outside of the home. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, Report 985, Table 7: Employment status of women by presence and age of youngest child, from *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, May 2005, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2005.htm> (first accessed March 20, 2008).

mentioned earlier, a majority of those featured in the texts were women. In reality, however, throughout the seventies, more men than women were still entering four-year colleges, and statistics from 1970 reveal that far fewer women held health and social sciences jobs. The educational gulf widened as the level of education increased, as more men entered graduate school and women made up 20 percent of students studying law, medicine, and theology.<sup>25</sup>

Writers for textbook publishers such as McGraw-Hill clearly had the best of intentions when they addressed gender equality. The writers of the McGraw-Hill memo asserted that their guidelines were a “way of solving...the problems of sex discrimination.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, rather than providing a snapshot of reality, publishers attempted to resolve these problems by suggesting an ideal world where women and men had the same opportunities in the public realm, and equally shared domestic responsibilities in the private sphere of the home. Unlike the overt feminist messages GenXers absorbed through adult popular culture, publishers projected a “postfeminist” world where gender harmony reigned. Textbooks were just one of the vehicles in their young lives that propagated this notion, yet they may have held the most sway. Regardless of their home life, children spend a bulk of their school day with these

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<sup>25</sup> A U.S. Department of Education report on trends and education equity for girls and women reports that in 1970 women lagged behind men significantly in all fields of the health and social sciences; by 1974-75 37.3 percent of four-year college students studying the social sciences and history were female. This report also indicates that between 1973 and 1981, fewer women than men were enrolled in four-year colleges upon high school graduation. In 1975, 54.3 percent of undergraduate students were male, compared with 45.7 female, 55.4 percent of graduate students were male and 44.6 were female. In the same year, 20.7 percent of students entering medical fields, law, and theological professions were women, while men encompassed 79.3 percent of those students. See Catherine E. Freeman, National Center for Education Statistics, *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls & Women: 2004* (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences NCES 2005-016), 78, 69-70. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005016.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2008).

<sup>26</sup>“Man! Memo from a Publisher,” *The New York Times Magazine*.



textbooks; as school-sanctioned apparatuses, the representations they put forth were interpreted by our young minds as “truth.”

### ***Feminism on the Page: Children’s Literature***

Popular children’s books of the 1960s looked very much like the textbooks of the era; the images they contained often reflected white middle class suburban cultural hegemony. In Random House’s Beginner Books Division, which featured a variety of titles by authors such as Dr. Seuss, Al Perkins, and Nancy and Eric Gurney, masculine pronouns were commonly used to refer to boys and girls. The characters in these books were Caucasian, and the protagonists were mostly masculine.<sup>27</sup> By the mid seventies, however, middle-class parents looking for books that reflected gender parity and a feminist spirit had many more options. One of the most well known and accessible choices was Marlo Thomas and the Ms. Foundation’s *Free To Be... You and Me*, published as a book and aired as a television special in 1974, following the release of the 1972 record album. Of course, not all books advocating gender equality were adapted for primetime television, but many were promoted through organizations such as Feminists on Children’s Media (originally affiliated with NOW’s New York Chapter), which published and distributed extensive bibliographies and catalogs—most notably *Little Miss Muffett Fights Back* of 1971, highlighting “non-sexist books about girls for young readers.”

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<sup>27</sup> For examples see Nancy and Eric Gurney, *The King, The Mice, and The Cheese* (New York, NY: Beginner Books, A Division of Random House, 1965); Al Perkins, *Don and Donna Go To Bat* (New York, NY: Beginner Books, A Division of Random House, 1966); Theodor S. Geisel, *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* (New York, NY: Beginner Books, A Division of Random House, 1960); Al Perkins, *The Nose Book* (New York, NY: Beginner Books, A Division of Random House, 1970).

Feminists on Children's Media defined themselves as "a collective of [librarians, editors, publishers, and parents] interested in upgrading the portrayal of girls and women in children's literature and other media." They charged themselves with finding

...positive and non-stereotyped portrayal[s] of girls and women, [those involving]: girls and boys participating equally in both physical and intellectual activities; female characters leading active and independent lives; girls having a variety of choices and aspiring to a variety of goals; male characters respecting female characters and responding to them as equals.

*Little Miss Muffett Fights Back* is an annotated catalog of books for children of all ages. Arranged by categories such as picture books and autobiography, it includes literature written up to 1971, and as early as 1865.<sup>28</sup> Some of the books listed have overtly feminist themes; Phoebe of *Phoebe's Revolt* (1968), rebels "...against the curls, bows, frills, lace, and ruffles of her Victorian dresses and wants to wear her father's clothes," and the heroine of *The Practical Princess* (1969) "is [a] commonsense princess who rescues the prince." Others are centered on the lives and experiences of girls, including Momo of *Umbrella* (1958), who "proudly goes to and from nursery school with her new birthday gifts – red boots and an umbrella," and Mary Jane, the title character (1959) who "is the first black girl to attend the newly integrated school in her town."<sup>29</sup>

The influence of organizations such as Feminists on Children's Media is evident in books offered through publishing giants such as Scholastic Book Services, whose business began to flourish in 1968, just as the women's liberation movement began to

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<sup>28</sup> Feminists on Children's Media, *Little Miss Muffett Fights Back* (New York, NY: Feminists on Children's Media, 1971), front cover; Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is listed on page 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 3, 9, 25.

emerge.<sup>30</sup> The company's popularity and subsequent success came from the Scholastic Book Club, which, in reality, was less a club than it was a savvy marketing device. The "club's" publication, The Weekly Reader, a newsprint catalog-order form, became a mainstay of the seventies classroom. Distributed to students by their teachers, The Weekly Reader listed hundreds of inexpensive new and classic book titles for children. For as little as fifty cents, children could purchase a book that would be delivered to her or his classroom within a month. As with school textbooks, teachers were intermediaries in disseminated these learning tools, giving credence to messages on the gender and racial equality presented through them.

Scholastic published many of the books listed in *Little Miss Muffett Fights Back*, including the *Pippi Longstocking* series (first issued by Viking in the fifties), Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* (originally published by Harper & Row in 1932), and *Baby Island* (initially issued by Macmillan in 1937).<sup>31</sup> Other Scholastic titles reflected the goals of Feminists on Children's Media, as they were centered on girls as empowered, lead characters. Moreover, Scholastic books reflected racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity in titles such as *Susan*, the story of a native American girl learning to navigate life in her new urban hometown, *Trina*, the tale of a Spanish-speaking immigrant who lives in a train boxcar with her family, the Newberry Award-

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<sup>30</sup> In 1968 Scholastic opened a 2,000-employee warehouse and distribution center in Missouri. The expansion paid off; by 1984 Scholastic was the largest distributor of children's books in the world (see <http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/people/milestones.htm>, accessed September 23, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> The influence of the *Pippi Longstocking* series on the psyches of young girls growing up in the seventies cannot be underestimated. Third wave feminist riot grrrls credit Pippi's clunky shoes, knee-socks, bangs and braids with their fashion aesthetic, and germinal riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney and collaborators Kaia, Eileen Myles, Tattle Tale, Ruby Falls, and Azalai Snail named their record label and 1994 compilation LP, *Move into Villa Villakula*, after Pippi's home (see villa villakula records, *Move into Villa Villakula* [Boston, MA: villa villakula records, 1994]). Likewise, the *Little House* series gave children insight into the country's "pioneer past" through the eyes of young Laura Ingalls Wilder; the books inspired a television series that aired from 1972-1983 on NBC.

winning book *Summer of the Swans*, about Sara, a middle class white girl navigating adolescence while taking care of her disabled younger brother, and *Adopted Jane*, the story of an orphaned white girl looking for a permanent family.<sup>32</sup> Through Scholastic books, readers saw the social and cultural changes brought by the feminist movement, the civil rights and disability rights movements, and a celebration of individuality and difference that was not represented, much less promoted, in the fifties and early sixties. Scholastic's "Weekly Reader" presented a world where girls' stories and experiences were as interesting and important as those of their male peers.

The impact of feminism on children's literature went beyond what was published by Scholastic Book Services. Authors re-interpreted fairy tales through a feminist lens; niche and mainstream publishers printed numerous collections of feminist fairytales in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, including Rosemary Minard's *Womenfolk and Fairytales* (1975), Jay Williams' *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairytales* (1969), Francesca Contarelli and Nella Bosnia's *The Five Wives of Silverbeard* (1977), and the Feminist Press' *Tatterhood and Other Tales* (1978). In reworking fairytales to make strong female characters the center of the story, feminist writers and publishers subverted a literary history of framing women and girls as "heroine," the "diminutive subset" of the masculine fairytale hero. As children's book author Jane Yolen writes in a recent compilation of feminist folktales: "...the Victorian folk tale anthologists would have us believe [that]...the heroine is the one who carries spears but does not hurl them. The one who dresses well but does not dirty her nails in a fight. [She

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<sup>32</sup> See Barbara C. Smucker, *Susan* (New York, NY: Scholastic Book Services, 1970); Patricia Miles Martin, *Trina* (New York, NY: Scholastic Book Services, 1972); Betsy Byars, *The Summer of the Swans* (New York, NY: Scholastic Book Services, 1974); H.R. Daringer, *Adopted Jane* (New York, NY: Scholastic Book Services, 1972).

is] the one who lies down in a glass casket, until revived by an awakening kiss.”<sup>33</sup>

Authors such as Judy Blume made heroes out of ordinary girls such as thirteen year old “Margaret,” whose girlhood struggles with puberty and religion resonated with millions of young readers, while Charlotte Zolotow challenged gender in terms of children’s play, in *William’s Doll* (1972), the story of a five year old boy who wants a doll of his own to “hug...and cradle...in his arms.”<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the variety of books challenging conventions around gendered play and activities increased; characters such as Pippi Longstocking demonstrated that girls could be physically and emotionally strong, as well as adventurous, and William (of Zolotow’s *William’s Doll*) showed that boys could enjoy nurturing. Such sources suggested that gender stereotypes were a thing of the past, and that gender parity had already been achieved.

### ***Feminism Screened: “PBS Kids”***

One outcome of the Civil Rights movement was the emphasis on education as an arena where racial and class disparities could be ameliorated. Sixties educators and child psychologists began to explore nontraditional venues for educating American children, particularly television, as research on the relatively new medium indicated that preschoolers were watching as many as fifty hours of television each week. “Even if one discounts [the highest] estimates,” writes Children’s Television Workshop co-founder

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Yolen, “Foreword: The Female Hero and the Women Who Wait,” in *Fearless Girls, Wise Women & Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales from Around the World*, Kathleen Ragan, ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, xvii-xix), xvii.

<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Zolotow, *William’s Doll* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1972), 5.

Lloyd Morrisett, “it becomes clear that for young children the one activity that engages them most of the time, aside from sleeping, is watching television.”<sup>35</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney, a researcher at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, began to explore how television could be used as a teaching and socialization tool for pre-kindergarten children. By 1968, 97 percent of all American households owned at least one television set; TV was equally accessible to children of nearly all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.<sup>36</sup>

Following an extensive 1968 study, Cooney and Morrisett founded the Children’s Television Network (CTW), which was funded by public foundations and affiliated with PBS. Along with Head Start, CTW was a product of broad education policies of the early 1960s, which were centered on stimulating the educational development of pre-school children from low-income families.<sup>37</sup> *Sesame Street*, the Workshop’s first venture, premiered on November 10, 1969; it was the culmination of work by educational advisors, researchers, and television producers, all of whom collaborated as equal partners.<sup>38</sup> The CTW team employed techniques such as quick editing, colorful cartoons, and catchy tunes, used by network television writers and producers to keep children engaged and in their shows and commercials. As Cooney plainly writes, “If television can sell extra millions of boxes of breakfast cereal, it can most certainly enhance the learning of millions of young children who eat that cereal.” The CTW term put TV to use on its own terms, however. *Sesame Street* creators simultaneously appropriated the

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<sup>35</sup> Lloyd Morrisett, “Introduction” in Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons From “Sesame Street”* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1974), xxii-xxiii.

<sup>36</sup> Edward L. Palmer and Shalom M. Fisch, “The Beginnings of *Sesame Street* Research,” in “*G*” is For Growing: *Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*, Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio, eds. (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001, 3-23), 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>38</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney, “Preface,” in Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons From “Sesame Street”* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1974), xv-xvi; “Children’s Television Workshop, Administrative History/Information,” National Public Broadcasting Archives, University of Maryland, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/NPBA/subinfo/ctw.html/> (accessed August 28, 2008).

pace and aesthetic of commercial television while accepting the medium's limitations, providing "good quality TV" in a realm that brimmed with "stale (and often ill-conceived) cartoons shows, ancient Westerns, and other vapid material."<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Gerald Lesser of the Harvard Graduate School of Education served as the initial Chairperson of the CTW Advisory Board, overseeing *Sesame Street* and assembling the committee that would eventually advise *The Electric Company's* creative team. Lesser's research on television and early childhood learning put him at the top of a short list of potential academics to chair the CTW Board, as few scholars were studying the effects of television on childhood education and social development. Equally influential was Lesser's work on the ways in which race, class, and, to a lesser degree, gender, influenced children's educational development and capacity. His 1965 study, *Mental Abilities of Children From Different Social-Class and Cultural Groups*, was groundbreaking for its sensitivity to the combined impact these identity categories had on student performance on numerical and spatial-conceptualization, and verbal and reasoning tests. Lesser tested lower and middle class Chinese, Jewish, Black, and Puerto Rican children, analyzing the scores of girls and boys within each of these cultural and socioeconomic groups.<sup>40</sup> His work was at the center of the multicultural, class-conscious spirit of these early CTW programs, and, as Lesser asserts, "recognizing and respecting

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<sup>39</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney, "Sesame Street: The Experience of One Year," *Television Quarterly*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (Summer 1970: 9-13), 9, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Cooney, "Preface" in Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons From "Sesame Street,"* xvii. Gerald S. Lesser, et al., *Mental Abilities of Children From Different Social-Class and Cultural Groups*, from the *Monographs of the Society For Research in Child Development* series (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Serial No. 102, 1965, Vol. 30, No. 4). See also Denise B. Kandel, Gerald S. Lesser, *Youth in Two Worlds* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1972).

the individual differences among children now has become one of education's most cherished chestnuts."<sup>41</sup>

Cooney, Lesser, Morrisett, and their interdisciplinary team of scholars, educators, and television producers put individual differences front and center on Sesame Street, assuming that the show's primary audience member was what Cooney called, "the 'disadvantaged' child." Acknowledging the label as a "disturbing expression," Cooney and her colleagues explored the racial, class, and regional dimensions of underprivileged preschoolers, many of whom came from urban-dwelling families. Children born into middle- and upper-class families, explains Cooney, "can fend for themselves intellectually, [as their] homes tend to be more stable; books, games, and parent-contact are more available." Additionally, by the late sixties and early seventies, new nursery and preschools were proliferating in more affluent communities, giving economically privileged children an advantage not available to their urban-dwelling, impoverished peers.

Aside from the primary goals of teaching basic counting skills and number and letter identification to preschoolers, *Sesame Street's* creative team wanted a program that visually reflected its audience.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, the show was set on an urban street, most film segments were shot in the city, and the children and adult actors were racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse. Girls and boys equally engaged in learning activities, as well as sports and games; like the textbook images of the seventies, girls were shown already as empowered and as active as their male peers. The positive

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<sup>41</sup> Gerald S. Lesser, "Introduction," *Psychology and Educational Practice*, Gerald S. Lesser, ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1971, 1-8), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Cooney, "Sesame Street: The Experience of One Year," 11-12.



depictions of diverse children interacting in urban settings gave young viewers an idealized view of childhood socialization. These images fulfilled another goal, which was to give youngsters, “a better awareness of themselves and the world around them.”<sup>43</sup> However, the depictions were less reflective of their world than utopian, making it seem as if children could safely play in urban neighborhoods without being encumbered by the realities of traffic, congestion, crime, and grime, of city life in the seventies. Urban dwelling children who were confined to apartments probably would have told a different story about their daily activities and “the world around them.” *Sesame Street*’s audience also included middle-class, suburban and rural-dwelling youngsters, as viewing statistics reveal that seven million of 12 million American children between the ages of three and six watched Sesame Street on a daily basis, “in their homes, neighborhood viewing centers, Head Start and day-care centers, and...classrooms.”<sup>44</sup> For more privileged viewers, the idealized images of urban childhood created a positive, though not entirely accurate, sense of the world outside of suburban and rural America.

On *Sesame Street* “difference” across gender and racial lines dissolved, as white girls and women and people of color were the primary leaders and actors on the show. Young viewers of the premiere episode watched Gordon, an African-American teacher, give Sally, a Latina child who is new to the neighborhood, a tour of *Sesame Street*, introducing her (and, subsequently, the television audience) to the show’s regular cast of human and puppet characters. After introducing Sally to us, Bob, the shop teacher, Mr. Hooper, the store owner, and Gordon’s spouse Susan, Gordon calls two other children,

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<sup>43</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney quoted in “Original Sales Pitch Reel,” *Sesame Street Old School (1969-1974)* (Sesame Workshop, 2006), disc 1 bonus features.

<sup>44</sup> Cooney, “*Sesame Street: The Experience of One Year*,” 10-11.

Oriana, a White girl, and Ronald, an African-American boy, to greet their new neighbor. It is telling that within the first few minutes of the first episode the only white males are adults. Like the images that peppered school textbooks of the 1970s, CTW's first segment of *Sesame Street* was the embodiment of gender and racial diversity and equality, particularly among the child characters. This was a clear reflection of Lesser's research and his conviction that educators should embrace, respect, and accommodate the individual student's class and cultural background, as well as their "sex."<sup>45</sup>

In film clips demonstrating concepts such as "through," "over," and "under," boys and girls lead groups across urban playgrounds, streets, and sidewalks. In episode one of *Sesame Street*, a black boy directs a line of children—two white boys at the center, flanked by a black girl, through a series of tunnels and drainpipes, and over and under piles of construction materials and work sites. All four young people actively traverse the urban obstacle course; the girl is as lively, curious, and strong as her male peers. In season two, episode 131, the letter "J" is emphasized in a film segment showing children jumping rope, jumping off playground equipment, and jumping on a beach. Of the approximately 20 children shown, eleven are girls (two are Black, nine are White), and nine are boys (four are boys "of color," five are white).<sup>46</sup> All of the children are actively engaged in the same activities, with no one "out-jumping" or appearing to be more coordinated or proficient than anyone else.

While gender and racial diversity clearly reigned on *Sesame Street*, and most of the children's activities were gender neutral, there were exceptions. A film segment that

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<sup>45</sup> Writing in the sixties and seventies, Lesser used "sex" to describe "gender," which we contemporarily connect to the socially constructed "feminine" and "masculine" identities.

<sup>46</sup> In some cases only the children's feet are visible, making it difficult to know whether or not these are other children, or the feet of those fully depicted.

appeared on episode 131, titled “Henson’s Dollhouse,” features two girls – one white, one Asian, serving tea to their dolls in a house Muppet creator Jim Henson built for his own daughters. The girls laugh playfully as a pair of curious cats wander through the dollhouse, ruining their table setting. More disconcerting as far as gender stereotyping and parity are concerned are Jim Henson’s Muppets, for, in the show’s nascence, nearly all of the most popular puppets (Cookie Monster, Count von Count, Ernie and Bert, Oscar the Grouch, Grover, and Hairy Monster, etc.) were male, except for the ambiguously gendered Big Bird. While these puppets had carefully crafted personalities that were maintained through a variety of situations, it is bewildering that the majority of these bearers of significant social and educational lessons were male and seemingly white.<sup>47</sup> While white boys and men were not always center stage, masculinity and whiteness still entered the dialogue through Henson’s Muppets. Ultimately, they may have most clearly elucidated Lesser’s theories; non-white, affluent male students did learn differently than their most privileged peers, but all students learned to navigate a world of knowledge that was created and largely perpetuated by the affluent, white patriarchy.

*Sesame Street* became the model for educational television. For more than four decades, however, using television as a pedagogical tool has been criticized and debated. It is undisputedly connected with GenX, and as the generation was labeled and studied in the late eighties and nineties, *Sesame Street* and its commercial television equivalent, *Schoolhouse Rock*, which began airing on Saturday mornings in 1973, took part of the blame for the generations’ allegedly short attention spans and low standardized test

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<sup>47</sup>For detailed descriptions of each Muppet’s personality traits see Lesser, *Children and Television*, 126-127.

scores.<sup>48</sup> Aside from influencing GenXers' learning style, the "television-as-teacher" phenomenon—particularly *Sesame Street*, and as I discuss below, *The Electric Company*—also informed the ways in which Xers understood race and gender. Racially diverse groups of girls and boys effortlessly and carelessly traipsed through urban playgrounds and streets as if these environments were hazard-free, no doubt causing the most disadvantaged urban-dwelling viewers to question their own activities or lack of activity, and providing utopian images of city life for suburban and rural viewers. Like many of the textbooks published in the seventies, *Sesame Street* projected a world that did not exist.

Just weeks after Cooney and the CTW team's first project aired, they learned that federal funds were available for a show that would teach reading skills to seven- to ten-year-old children, particularly those who were having difficulty in the classroom. As with *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company* (TEC) was one of the most researched children's programs on television; for nearly two years the team working to produce the show pondered all aspects of the question: "How could television be used to teach reading?"<sup>49</sup> Cooney and her team again called on Lesser for guidance, who helped assemble a distinguished group of educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociolinguists, reading experts and librarians, as well as popular writers such as Maurice Sendak, Rod Serling, and Ray Bradbury. The results of their efforts first aired on PBS on November 10, 1971, exactly two years after the premiere of *Sesame Street*. Like its predecessor, TEC borrowed techniques from commercial children's television, including quick

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<sup>48</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss chart the decline of mean SAT scores between 1952 and 1992; see *13<sup>th</sup> Generation: America's 13<sup>th</sup> Generation, Born 1961-1981* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), 68-73.

<sup>49</sup> Walter J. Podrazik, "It All Began in 1970," from *The Best of the Electric Company* DVD, liner notes, 10 (Sesame Workshop, 2006).

editing, and a multi-media mix of film, cartoons, music, and staged interactions among a diverse cast of child and adult characters.

TEC had an even greater impact than Sesame Street on young Xers' views on gender equality and tolerance, privilege, and acceptance across class and culture. On a pragmatic level, it reached a greater number of children. As I said previously, within two months of TEC's debut, it was being screened in nearly one quarter of second, third, and fourth grade public school classrooms, including 70 percent of the nation's urban schools.<sup>50</sup> Again, Lesser's theories on diversity and learning were put into practice; this time, however, they showed the influence of the aims and theories of the women's liberation movement. The show debuted following a mass media blitz over "women's lib," which featured numerous early seventies spectacles such as the aforementioned sit-in at the Ladies Home Journal, as well as smaller, but no less notorious actions such as Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell's (WITCH) 1970 hexing of Wall Street, which coincided with an inexplicable stock market decline.<sup>51</sup> And feminist groups—if not their philosophies, then clearly their names, such as BITCH, Redstockings, and Uppity Women were the subject of television and print news stories.

Feminist ideology and theories pervaded the academy and other realms in which intellectuals and educators traversed; while still in their nascence, women's studies and

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<sup>50</sup> Podrazik, 15. We should be careful about making assumptions that urban schools were always mostly black or latino/a. While many of the nation's northern school systems had yet to "vigorously" desegregate, some large districts in the northeast were racially diverse. For instance, Jonathan Kozol reports that in New York City in 1970, "a substantial number of white students still attended [the city's] public schools." For an overview of the history of desegregation, see Robert Lowe, "The Strange History of School Desegregation," *Rethinking Schools Online*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring 2004) viewed online at [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18\\_03/stra183.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_03/stra183.shtml) (accessed August 1, 2008). Jonathan Kozol, "Still Separate, Still Unequal: America's Educational Apartheid," *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 311, No. 1864 (September 2005, 41-54), 45.

<sup>51</sup> Rosen, 204.

women's history programs took root at this time.<sup>52</sup> TEC reflected the changes brought by the proliferation of feminism, as Asian, Black, Latina, and white women were depicted as highly empowered characters. While the same is true for men of color, TEC's white male characters were most often portrayed as silly and childish, and were usually the butt of jokes, or portrayed as incompetent learners who required repeated explanations and exhaustive instructions. In fact, writers went well beyond gender equality, as white patriarchal authority was frequently mocked in skits and through characters such as J. Arthur Crank, a crotchety man who wore ill-fitting plaids and a misshapen hat. Personalities such as Crank, and sketches depicting men of color and women as intelligent, self-possessed hipsters stealthily made racial equality and feminine dominance seem routine, at least on screen. TEC's cast included Judy Graubart, Rita Moreno, Hattie Winston, Morgan Freeman, Bill Cosby, and an equally heterogeneous array of child performers, many of whom were part of the show's band, "The Short Circus."

Aside from being made fun of, white boys and men were sidelined, as women, girls, and people of color took center stage. In an episode that initially aired on November 5, 1971, members of The Short Circus perform the song, "I'm just a clown, who's feeling down." Three girls—one Asian and two African-American, play

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<sup>52</sup> For an overview of the history of the sub-field of women's and gender history, see Joan Hoff, "Agency and Collective Action vs. Diversity and Difference," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 19-25; for details on the emergence of women's studies programs, see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Women's Studies," in *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*, Wilma Mankiller, et al., eds. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998, 651-652), 652.

instruments and sing the song; the trio is joined by an African-American boy, who plays tambourine, and, in the background, a white boy plays the drums.<sup>53</sup>

When white men are the focal point, they are often the brunt of the joke or a slapstick prank such as taking a pie to the face. In a skit that originally aired on April 3, 1974, a heterogeneous group of adults gathers around a table, preparing to eat dinner. The white male host, “Greg,” welcomes his guests and then commandeers a plate of grapes, selfishly shoving them into his mouth. Greg’s guests, all of whom are either women and/or people of color, exclaim: “Greedy Greg grabbed the green grapes.” A lesson on the letter “G,” the sentence appears above the scene as the appalled diners repeat it several times.

In an episode that aired in October of the same year, Rita Moreno plays a theater director in a skit featuring the letter “Q.” The director implores one of three white male actors to say, “To the Queen,” as all of them raise their glasses to toast Her Majesty. Besides Moreno’s character, all of those with the most authority and composure are people of color or female, or both. White actor Judy Graubart activates the clapboard and announces each as the men continually get their lines wrong, and Morgan Freeman, irritated by the actors’ incompetence, impatiently holds the cue card. At the last failed attempt, the man says, “At the queen,” and all three men toss the liquid from their goblets at her. The queen, played by African-American actor Hattie Winston, storms off stage. It is undoubtedly degrading to have liquid tossed in one’s face, however, Winston performs outrage over the white man’s incompetence and this sentiment is echoed by the director, who angrily shouts, “Do you know what you just did?” The man finally gets his

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<sup>53</sup>*The Best of The Electric Company*, Episode 10 (original broadcast date November 5, 1971) (Sesame Workshop, 2006), disc 1, track 2.

line right when he finishes her sentence, saying, "...to the queen?" For the sake of the young viewers, "To the Queen" is then repeated several times by the male actor as the director and crew roll their eyes and throw their hands up in frustration.<sup>54</sup>

White men not only play fools on TEC, they are also foes. "The Spoiler," a masked man in a costume with an "S" emblazoned on the front, is the nemesis of Spiderman.<sup>55</sup> And, more often, they are undercut because of their own arrogance or ignorance. In episode 72A, "Sheriff Steinberg" squabbles with a sentence. The sentence "My name is Kathy" appears next to him on screen. After asserting that he is "getting ready to clean up this town," the sentence pushes him several times; the sentence ignores his responses—"Scram!" and "It's gonna be me or you," and the buffoonish sheriff calls for a showdown. In the end "My name is Kathy" fills the entire screen, and Sheriff Steinberg is present through his voice alone, as he dejectedly says, "Well, you can't win 'em all."<sup>56</sup>

In a 1977 skit that echoes the riddle of the doctor who cannot operate on her injured son for the way it reveals ingrained, therefore opaque, gender stereotypes, Morgan Freeman approaches a white man selling neckties on a street corner. Freeman asks for assistance, explaining that he is looking for a tie for his niece. The tie salesman laughs at Morgan, informing him that women do not wear ties. A moment later, the niece appears wearing a police officer uniform, accented by a traditional necktie. The punch line underscores the tie seller's ignorance, as a man with a Scottish accent approaches the

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<sup>54</sup> *The Best of The Electric Company*, Episode 391 (original broadcast date October 21, 1974) (Sesame Workshop, 2006), disc 3, track 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *The Best of The Electric Company*, Episode 72A (original broadcast date January 27, 1976) (Sesame Workshop, 2006), disc 4, Track 2.



group and says to Freeman's niece: "Officer, can you tell me where I can buy a skirt for my brother?"<sup>57</sup>

TEC undermined white masculinity, presenting it as an outmoded identity, a social construction connected to post World War II white suburban hegemony, tied to the moment before the Civil Rights, gay rights, and women's liberation movements opened the flood gates. Beyond placing women and girls in positions of authority and framing them as active agents, TEC writers used gender-neutral language, and depicted women, and to a lesser degree, men, performing a variety of traditionally gendered jobs and tasks. Furthermore, the hippest and most intelligent characters were most often white women and women and men of color, while white men were frequently shown to be foolish and inept. They scrapped the idea of authoritative knowledge and treated young viewers as equals who were in on the joke. But again, the joke was often on the show's white male characters.

Unlike the adults in their lives, who watched Maude Finley and Archie Bunker wrangle over gender equality and "women's lib," youngsters viewing TEC saw a world where women already had the upper hand on all fronts. In this context, feminist activists and scholars did their jobs so well that it appeared as if gender and racial equality had been achieved. While adults were grappling with the demands of second wave feminists and coming to terms with "women's lib," children of the seventies watched a fictional, post-feminist world where women and girls and nonwhite men and boys dominated. Heavy-handed lectures on gender and racial equality were unnecessary, as tolerance and

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<sup>57</sup> Episode 130B (originally aired on April 15, 1977).

cooperation across gender, racial, and generational lines (especially for women and girls and nonwhite people) were put forth as realities that were already in place.

### ***Feminism Screened: TV Specials and Saturday Morning Television***

The primary goal of CTW was to educate and socialize preschoolers and early readers; recognizing difference across race, class, and gender and adapting methods accordingly was part-and-parcel to the pedagogical theory of the sixties and seventies. Moreover, since the Workshop's target audience was urban-dwelling, poor and working-class children, Cooney and her team recognized that their goal of using television as a teaching tool could best be met if the scenes and actors reflected the lived realities of their viewers. Imprinting feminist ideals and a spirit of racial tolerance on a generation of middle class youngsters was an important, but ancillary outcome. Other projects and television programs such as Marlo Thomas and the Ms. Foundation's *Free To Be... You and Me* (FTBYM) record, book, and one-hour show, and "After School Specials," put tolerance and acceptance of gender and racial diversity front and center.<sup>58</sup>

In the early seventies, Marlo Thomas' niece Dionne asked her aunt to read her a bedtime story. Thomas, famous for playing the lead character on *That Girl* from 1966-1971, scanned the child's bookshelves for inspiring stories that challenged gender and racial barriers and stereotypes. She did not see any. Instead, Thomas asserts, she found books that served their purpose: "they put [Dionne] and her mind to sleep." When she took her search to Manhattan bookstores and was unable to easily locate books that were, in her words, "truly humanist in feeling as well as well-written, amusing, or touching

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<sup>58</sup> ABC's "After School Specials" aired intermittently at 4:00 p.m. from 1972 to 1996.

[and] totally free of stereotypes of sex, class, or race,” she took matters into her own hands. “I thought why not create something that untells all of those lies?” With that goal in mind, she approached Ms. Foundation’s Gloria Steinem and Letty Cottin Pogrebin, who agreed to work with Thomas on a record album. FTBYM was released in 1972, selling more than 500,000 copies. Thomas got her book and a television special in March of 1974, which aired that same day the book was available in stores.<sup>59</sup>

Like the CTW projects, the FTBYM television special used a variety of media to teach and empower children. Puppets, cartoons, skits, and film shorts featuring solo and group musical performances demonstrated that girls and boys, men and women were free to be whoever they chose to be, even in a world ruled by gender stereotypes. Fast-paced, colorful, and humorous poems, stories, and skits put the laugh, according to Pogrebin, “on old constraints and worn-out conventions.”<sup>60</sup> Skits and musical numbers featured contemporary celebrities such as Cicely Tyson, Dionne Warwick, Alan Alda, Harry Belafonte, Mel Brooks, Roberta Flack, Rosey Greer, and Michael Jackson, whose talents were well known to the adults; their involvement served as an endorsement of the project and to the ideas put forth on the record and in the book.

Feminists at the helm of the project rigorously scrutinized the song lyrics, scripts, and images put forth in FTBYM. A memo written by Letty Cottin Pogrebin of *Ms.* to Thomas and her team illustrates the level of attention given to the project. Upon reading a script that had been modified so that schools and community groups could

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<sup>59</sup> Marlo Thomas, “This is The Foreword,” *Free To Be... You and Me, The Parent Volume* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987, 7-9), 7; *Free To Be... You and Me* DVD (Hen’s Tooth Video, 2001), liner notes cited; *The First Ms. Reader: How women are changing their lives – in work, sex, politics, love, power, and life styles* (New York, NY: Warner Paperback Library, 1973), 269); *Free To Be... You and Me* (Hen’s Tooth Video, 1974 [remastered DVD, 2001]).

<sup>60</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “A Note to Parents and Other Grown-up Friends,” *Free To Be... You and Me, The Parent Volume* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987, 12-13), 12.

perform it on stage, Pogrebin addresses the recommended ages of the girl and boy performers for the song “When We Grow Up.” She writes: “It troubles me (though not profoundly) that ‘Michael’ is the one who might be 12 or 13 rather than 12. The cliché of the older boy/younger girl might be properly challenged, even on a subliminal level...”<sup>61</sup>

In the same memo, Pogrebin addresses the use of the word “tomboy”:

Please do not use the word ‘tomboy’ in script descriptions, even in the sense of “tomboy image.” A “tomboy” is a word that defines a girl as a boy. It’s like describing a smart woman as ‘mannish’. Let’s use adjectives that capture the quality you want the girl to have: active, lithe, athletic, high-spirited – instead of using the ‘oppressor’s’ terminology.<sup>62</sup>

Likewise, the names of characters were carefully dissected. Pogrebin cites sociological trends on the impact names have on boys and girls:

[P]arents name their daughters cutesie or unusual or slightly exotic names, but their sons no-nonsense simple and direct names. Some experts think this is a way of giving a girl some gift of differentiation because she is unlikely to distinguish herself by her accomplishments. A boy, on the other hand, is expected to make his mark substantively. Other experts say parents want to be cautious about burdening a boy with a name that might embarrass him or that might seem less than 100% all-American to help him be accepted in the mainstream power centers. I’m not necessarily suggesting a change in the names of our characters; just that we consider the implications.<sup>63</sup>

On a broader scale, FTBYM explores gender norms at a moment when feminine and masculine roles and traits are challenged and expanded. Both parents and young people perform a variety of roles and cartoon characters address the tension that occurs when boys and girls and women and men test conventions. A musical film

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Jackson was paired with Cicley Tyson in this segment of the television special.

<sup>62</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “Memo to Carolyn Rossi [cc: Marlo Thomas, Selinda Melnick, Gloria Steinem, Bob Levine, Geoff Menin] on Characters and Characterization, Free To Be... You and Me Script,” dated December 10, 1980, Gloria Steinem Papers, Sophia Smith Women’s History Manuscripts at Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

featuring song writer Carol Hall's "Parents Are People," features Marlo Thomas and Harry Belafonte as parents equally sharing responsibilities and breaching stereotypes:

Some mommies are ranchers  
Or poetry makers  
Or doctors or teachers  
Or cleaners or bakers.  
Some mommies drive taxis  
Or sing on TV.  
Yes, mommies can be  
Almost anything they want to be...  
Some daddies are writers  
Or grocery sellers  
Or painters or welders  
Or funny joke tellers.  
Some daddies play cello  
Or sail on the sea.  
Yes, daddies can be  
Almost anything they want to be.<sup>64</sup>

In "Parents Are People" Thomas and Belafonte perform a variety of jobs and roles (including that of parent), exploring their own personal goals and desires. Parenting is depicted as one choice among many, a responsibility that, when shared, allows women and men to reach their fullest potential. Given the rise in divorce rates in the seventies and the move toward less traditional lifestyles, FTBYM writers were careful not to portray Belafonte and Thomas as a couple; in a scene filmed on a city street, each pushes a baby carriage, giving the impression that they are friends on a walk with their own respective infants.<sup>65</sup>

Author Betty Miles' story *Atalanta* is animated on the TV special. The story features a young princess, who is described as "bright...and...clever, and [someone who] could build things and fix things... wonderfully..." and her father, a king. In

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<sup>64</sup> Carol Hall, "Parents Are People," *Free To Be...You and Me, The Parent Volume* (48-53), 48-49.

<sup>65</sup> The fact that Belafonte is black and Thomas is white may also contribute to the writers' decision to keep the characters' relationship seemingly platonic. That they are paired might also signal an attempt by the writers to imply a romantic relationship without being controversial.

keeping with monarchical norms, Atalanta's father tells his daughter that it's time she got married, and that he plans to choose a suitor. The princess, however, has other ideas: "You don't have to choose, Father...I will choose. And I'm not sure that I will choose to marry anyone at all." After some debate, where the king asserts, "Of course you will [marry]...it's what people do." They compromise: the king suggests holding a race and the winner will "win" Atalanta's hand in marriage. The princess agrees, but only on the condition that she can also compete. If she wins the race, she declares, she will earn the right to make the decision on her own. In the end, Atalanta and "young John," a boy from the village, cross the finish line together. John tells the king that he ran the race so that he could talk with the princess, for, he says, "I could not possibly marry your daughter unless she wished to marry me." After spending the afternoon together the young people decide that they both want to see the world before settling down, and the following day John "sail[s] off to discover new lands," and the princess "set[s] off to visit great cities." As friends, the story concludes, "...it is certain that they are both living happily ever after."<sup>66</sup>

Atalanta turns the traditional princess fairytale upside-down, thereby challenging the historically entrenched trope of heroine as the inferior subset of the "true" masculine hero, as Atalanta's intelligence and strength are emphasized, and her appearance is not mentioned at all. And, unlike most princesses, she does not need a knight in shining armor to make her life complete. Moreover, the king's plan is undermined by his both daughter and also by John, her equal in the race that was to decide her fate. John undermines the patriarchy by being respectful of Atalanta's wishes, and recognizing and understanding her desire to see and learn about the world. They do

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<sup>66</sup> Betty Miles, "Atalanta," *Free To Be...You and Me, The Parent Volume* (128-135), 128, 135.

not completely eliminate marriage as a possibility—“perhaps someday they will be married, and perhaps they will not,” yet it is not the primary focus of either of their life goals.<sup>67</sup>

FTBYM also takes on the gendered conventions around children’s toys and play. Author Charlotte Zolotow’s book, *William’s Doll* is transformed into an animated musical for the television special. William, a five-year-old white boy, wants a doll to, “to wash and clean and dress and feed,” and, as the lyrics make clear, “...to give a bottle to, and put to bed when day is through.” When William’s best friend and brother learn about his wish, they label him a “sissy,” asking, “Why should a boy want to play with a doll?” William’s parents resist his request, showering him with “masculine” toys such as marbles and balls in an effort to divert his interest.

It is William’s grandmother who meets his need and quells his parents’ anxiety over their son’s request; she buys him a doll and explains that “William wants a doll so when he has a baby someday, he’ll know how to dress it, put diapers on double, and gently caress it to bring up a bubble, and care for his baby as [every] good father should learn to do.” In the end, the chorus, which was initially sung tauntingly (“William wants a doll, William wants a doll!”), is changed and sung in celebration: “William has a doll! William has a doll! ‘Cause someday he may want to be a father, too.”<sup>68</sup> The feminism in FTBYM has its limits, however, as William is not also given a toy oven, vacuum cleaner, or broom. As a nurturing father he is well within the bounds of seventies masculinity.

Girls and boys also learn that expressing emotion is normal and healthy. Rosey Greer sings Carol Hall’s “It’s All Right to Cry,” as photographs of crying children and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>68</sup> Shelton Harnick and Mary Rodgers, “William’s Doll,” *Free To Be... You and Me, The Parent Volume* (78-85), 78-85.

adults intermittently flash on screen. Greer's performance is particularly inspiring; a professional football player and former bodyguard for Robert Kennedy, his impressive physical presence effectively demonstrates to young viewers that even the most masculine men can be comfortable with their own and other's emotional vulnerabilities. Greer was the ideal face for the song, as off the field he developed a passion for needlepoint, authoring a book on the topic, *Rosey Greer's Needlepoint for Men*, in 1973. The popularity of the book led to several talk show appearances, and inspired a trend among men, many of whom were inspired to take up needlepoint and sewing.<sup>69</sup> While the book's publisher mindfully asserts that Greer's "...needlepoint is unique because it is masculine—as frankly and boldly as he is," Greer earnestly embraces the craft, researching its history, sharing his experience of being taught by women at a shop in Beverly Hills, and highlighting the work of other men and boys, and dedicating the book to his son. "To my son L'il Ro," he writes, "...I care what you become, but most of all, I want you to be yourself..."<sup>70</sup> Young viewers and their parents were more apt to embrace the spirit of FTBYM's "It's All Right to Cry" because Greer, who was so confident in his own masculinity that he published a book on needlepoint, performed it. The song would not have had the same impact if it was sung by Alan Alda, for instance, who was very involved in the television production, voicing several animated characters, including the king in *Atalanta*. In the seventies Alda represented the epitome of "women's lib"-inspired emasculation.

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<sup>69</sup> While I have no childhood memories of Greer's book, it seems that I might be the exception. After purchasing a used copy of Greer's book and displaying on my coffee table, nearly everyone who sees it shares their memories of the Greer's needlepoint; many men tell of their attempts at becoming proficient at needlepoint.

<sup>70</sup> Carol Hall, "It's All Right to Cry," *Free To Be... You and Me, The Parent Volume* (90-95); Rosey Greer, *Rosey Greer's Needlepoint for Men* (New York, NY: Walker and Company, 1973), dust jacket, front flap, 7.



FTBYM is an inimitable example of a project that put individuality and identity acceptance front and center. The television special became a cult classic, intermittently airing on HBO throughout the 1980s. In the feminist arena of gender politics, its creators left few stones unturned. With the aid of women like Pogrebin of the Ms. Foundation, Thomas created a world where people could celebrate their individuality and express their emotions and desires without judgment, but not without struggle. FTBYM was an empowering tool, but like the textbooks in GenX classrooms, the society it depicted did not yet exist. It was nonetheless present in Xers' imaginations and the images and sentiments put forth in the FTBYM project contributed to their understanding of gender as they grew into teenagers and young adults.

In 1972 television executives at ABC explored a largely untapped market—the young teen viewer, age 12 to 15. At the time, Saturday mornings were devoted to children, and primetime evening hours to adults; the network established a time—4:00 p.m., and a series, “After School Specials,” for the neglected demographic. The programs aired intermittently from 1972 to 1996, addressing challenging teenage issues such as divorce, parental alcoholism, unplanned pregnancy, bullying, racial and gender difference, foster care, and suicide.<sup>71</sup>

Producer Martin Tahse is largely credited for establishing what would be recognized as the prototypical “After School Special,” for he created 26 episodes between 1974 and 1989. Tahse set clear standards for his productions: young people

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<sup>71</sup> See Joanna Weiss, “The strange afterlife of the After School Special: These cautionary tales for teens may be easy to make fun of, but their influence lingers on in unexpected ways,” *The Boston Globe* (January 1, 2006 edition) [http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2006/01/01/the\\_strange\\_afterlife\\_of\\_the\\_after\\_school\\_special/](http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2006/01/01/the_strange_afterlife_of_the_after_school_special/) (accessed October 25, 2007); Tahse’s first special, aired in 1974, and was based on the novel by Betsy Byars, *Pssst! Hammerman’s After You!*

were always the center of the story, with adults staying on the periphery as either concerned helpers or the reason for the drama. Tahse demanded that lead characters look like their viewers, with clothing and hairstyles that were ordinary, yet not out of style. Most importantly, the protagonists worked through the drama in their lives on their own, and, while everything did not always work out perfectly in the end, the resolution brought greater knowledge and insight, imparting a life lesson to viewers. Writers often dismiss “After School Specials” as the epitome of seventies and eighties camp television. However, the series was ground-breaking, and served as the forerunner to teen and young adult dramas such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *My So Called Life* of the nineties, and the more recent *OC*.<sup>72</sup>

Teen and adolescent viewers of the “After School Specials” watched actors such as Rob Lowe, Kristy McNichol, Eve Plumb, Felicity Huffman, and Dana Plato performed roles addressing the social and familial problems of the era; in doing so they also learned lessons on tolerance for gender, race, class, and physical difference. Tahse’s worldview was clearly white, as African Americans and Latino/as most often played supporting roles amid homogeneously white, middle-class settings. However, stereotypical notions of gender—often masculinity, are challenged.<sup>73</sup>

*A Special Gift* aired in 1979, featured Peter, a white adolescent boy living in rural California. Peter excels at ballet, much to his father Carl’s chagrin. The drama

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Among Tahse’s productions there are exceptions to this homogeneity; for instance, *Gaucha*, which aired in 1978 was focused on a Puerto Rican teenager and his urban-dwelling family and his struggles with coming to terms with his racial identity; *Thank You Jackie Robinson* (1978), set in the 1950s, is about a young white boy’s relationship with an aging African-American man who works as a cook in his mother’s restaurant (their friendship stems from their love of baseball and devotion to Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers); and, in *The Gold Test* (1980), a white teenage girl who dreams of being an ice skating Olympiad comes to terms with a diagnosis of debilitating arthritis while helping a basketball-loving African-American boy regain his confidence after a surgery that helps to heal his malformed legs.

mounts after Peter returns from school carrying his point shoes and walks past Carl and his hyper-masculine friend, who stopped by to drop off a part for the tractor. An awkward conversation about Peter's shoes ensues and, despite Peter's assertion that some members of the Dallas Cowboys football team take ballet, the friend departs, declaring: "I always thought he was just one of the guys, Carl." Acting against his father's order that he no longer dance ("Boys play basketball, girls dance," asserts Carl), Peter auditions for a part in the Los Angeles Ballet's production of the Nutcracker. Peter gets the part but his secret is revealed when a sprained ankle requires that his parents pick him up mid-rehearsal. After Peter recovers, he confronts his father. An argument ensues, and Carl finally admits that his resistance to Peter's dancing is based on his own childhood humiliation after being harassed by a group of boys for performing a song (which he sung soprano) in the church choir's Christmas concert. In the end, Carl apologizes, admitting that he was "wrong to forbid [Peter] from dancing."

Eventually, Carl becomes fully liberated from his stringently gendered worldview when he sees his son on stage at a dress rehearsal. In the final scene of *A Special Gift*, Carl, who is clad in overalls, a red flannel shirt, and a straw hat, wanders unexpectedly into the theatre where his son performs. Awestruck, the father stumbles upon the choreographer, saying, "He's good." After asserting, "He's more than good," the choreographer asks if Carl knows the boy. With a wondrous look on his face, Carl proudly asserts, "He's my son." With that, the camera focuses on Peter, who gracefully bows as the dance sequence comes to an end.

*A Special Gift* communicates that rigid notions of masculinity should be a thing of the past, of Carl's generation. Although Peter is not free from the same kind of teasing

his father experienced, his friends, who come to appreciate the athleticism of ballet, stand up to the school bullies, who tease Peter and accuse him of “wearing a skirt.” And, while Carl carried the emotional pain of being teased for singing soprano into adulthood, Peter was prepared to confront those who would be critical of his decision to be a dancer. In a climactic argument with his father, Peter says: “I will dance, so you’ll just have to live with it and what people think about it, same as me.” In late seventies America, rebellion against traditional gender norms was acceptable in a way that it was not for Carl, who came of age in the post World War II era of conformity.

In *Schoolboy Father*, which aired in 1980, Rob Lowe plays high school student Charles Elderberry who considers raising a baby he fathered with Daisy Dallinger, whom he dated at summer camp. Charles’ desire to father the child stems from his own family situation, as his parents were divorced when he was a toddler and his father abandoned him. In a complete twist on the teen-single-parent trope, Daisy is vehemently opposed to Charles raising the baby, because she wants “it” completely out of her life. Over Daisy’s objections, the social worker handling the case lets Charles and his mother have custody of the baby for a two-week trial period. Expectedly, Charles’ mother must frequently take over parental duties, as the teenager fails to heat up the infant’s formula or change his diaper, and, worse, when an immature Charles is caught yelling “Be quiet!” because the baby won’t stop crying. After a number of heated discussions, Charles and his mother agree that he is not ready to raise a child, and, in the final scene, the social worker arrives at the family’s home to take the infant from the teary-eyed teenager.

The characters in *Schoolboy Father* transcend traditionally gendered behavior; rather than swooning over her newborn grandson, Charles’ mother level-headedly tells

her son that she is not willing to raise another child on her own. Daisy never sheds a tear over the idea of putting her baby up for adoption and, in fact, angrily derides Charles for foiling her plan. And Charles, who is depicted in the opening scenes as a carefree, vintage car-loving teenage boy, is the last to admit that his fatherhood scheme is not going to work out. Ultimately, Charles' reactions and emotional responses to the situation are the most typically "feminine," as he sheds tears, worries about his son, and expresses sadness over his own fatherless past. Paradoxically, it is a group of five girls, led by "Lucy" (Dana Plato), who shun Charles over his new role as a parent. They corner him at his locker, saying, "Everyone's talking, but you don't really have a baby do you?" When he responds affirmatively, "Yes, he's great—you want to see a picture?"—the girls quickly retreat, whispering cattily to one another. Conversely, Charles' best friend Jeff is supportive, a fact that is underscored by Charles, who, poignantly thanks his friend for "sticking with [him]."<sup>74</sup>

The narrative of *Schoolboy Father* undermines stereotypes about the options and outcomes surrounding teenage unplanned pregnancy. The emphasis was not necessarily about a "happy" ending, but about the emotions and struggles teenage boys and girls face as they make choices for themselves and the infants that they relinquish to adoption. Here the teen parents' reactions to the birth of their child were primarily based on their family histories, rather than their gender. Charles wanted his son to have the father that he didn't have, and, while the viewer is given little background on Daisy's family situation, it is implied that her two-parent family was mired in dysfunction, therefore, getting rid of her baby through adoption was the best way to ensure that her

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<sup>74</sup> "Schoolboy Father," *Martin Tahse High School: After School Specials* (Brentwood Home Video and Martin Tahse Productions [DVD collection], 2005), disc two, episodes 1979-80.

baby's childhood would be better than her own. When gender entered the picture, stereotypes were patently challenged, as evidenced by Charles' sadness and tears after handing his son over to the social worker, Daisy's angry outbursts, and Lucy and her friends' disdain for Charles' new role as a single parent.

Like *The Electric Company* and *Free To Be...You and Me*, the "After School Specials" gave the impression that gender diversity and tolerance across class, and, to a lesser extent, racial lines were expected standards. This message was not directly conveyed in an authoritarian manner. Instead, young adult actors who looked like viewers and their friends "performed" tolerance on screen. It was normal to be a sensitive boy like Charles, a confident dancer like Peter, or an angry, defensive girl like Daisy. Seventies adolescents saw their "peers" work through some of the difficult issues of their day – divorce, unplanned pregnancy, teen suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse, on their own, most often with little input from parents and teachers. As dramas, the After School Specials had endings, but, as was the case for young Xers navigating the social terrain of the seventies, they were not always happy ones.

Educational programs such as FTBYM and those created by CTW are very different in scope and purpose from commercial television shows made for and marketed to children. Beginning in the early sixties, network executives and advertisers began to see Saturday morning as a prime time to reach children. However, the market did not truly flourish until the seventies. In 1964, for instance, cartoons such as *Underdog*, *Quickdraw McGraw*, and the *Mighty Mouse Playhouse*, and the religious claymation show, *Davey and Goliath* shared the screen with adult-focused movies, and programs such as *Frontiers of Knowledge* and *Religious Leaders of Our Time*. Local ultra high

frequency (UHF) channels such as New York's WPIX, Channel 11, offered a weekly show called "Community Dialogues," and programs focusing on national politics, such as *What Everyone Should Know About Communism*.<sup>75</sup> However, by 1974, children's shows made up the bulk of Saturday morning programming. Cartoons such as *Sabrina the Teenaged Witch*, *Superfriends*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, *Brady Kids*, and *Josie and the Pussycats* shared the screen with classics like *Bugs Bunny*. And on ABC, "School House Rock" segments interspersed between shows taught children everything from basic math and grammar to history and social studies.<sup>76</sup>

The gender dynamic put forth through Saturday morning television reflected a move toward liberal feminism, as female characters were integrated into largely masculine tropes and narratives. The *Wonderwoman* of seventies television is a typical example of this; while her behavior largely mirrors the rest of the heroes on *Superfriends* (Batman and Robin, Superman, and Aquaman), her outfit was "sexy," revealing cleavage and long legs. Saturday mornings had a fair share of female lead characters, including Sabrina, of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and Josie of *Josie and the Pussycats* and the *Pussycats in Outer Space*.<sup>77</sup> As these characters navigated various mysteries of human, supernatural, and extraterrestrial worlds, they were always depicted as ideally feminine, with fashionably coiffed hair, donning fashionable clothes. By the end of an episode, female characters always defeated the enemy or solved the crime. While doing so, however, they always looked pretty or cute, or even sexy.

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<sup>75</sup> "Television This Week," *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 27, 1964.

<sup>76</sup> "Television This Week," *The New York Times*, Sunday, May 19, 1974.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066707/> Sabrina the Teenage Witch, TV Series 1972-74; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065307/> Josie and the Pussy Cats, TV Series 1970-72; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068088/> Josie and the Pussy Cats in Outer Space, TV Series 1972-74 (Hanna-Barbera) (accessed June 12, 2008).

*Scooby-Doo*, the long-running series that began airing on CBS in 1969, made a feigned attempt at including a smart, female lead character. This animated show features a talking dog, his owner, a scruffy teen nicknamed “Shaggy,” and their friends Velma, Daphne, and Fred. While Shaggy and Scooby fulfill the comic element of the show, often diverging from the group in search of food to sate their insatiable hunger, Velma, Daphne, and Fred provide the brains of the operation. Velma, the smartest of the three, often unravels the mysteries in which the group often finds themselves enmeshed. Velma’s brains, however, are matched by Daphne’s good looks (the trim-figured, pert-lipped redhead dons a body-skimming purple mini-skirt, matching tights, and tiny, fashionable shoes). Velma is plain in appearance, rendered with short hair, and lash-less eyes hidden behind thick, dark-rimmed glasses. Ultimately, *Scooby-Doo* reinforced gender norms and ideas about beauty as currency; smart girls are useful, however, handsome hipsters such as Fred would probably not date them.

On Saturday morning TV, network producers and advertisers proliferated a combination of liberal feminism and a watered-down version of cultural feminism, which embraced and celebrated “feminine” traits, virtues, and, in this case, physical appearance. Unlike the goals of *Sesame Street* and TEC and those of FTBYM, which were to educate, empower, and socialize children, the goal of the networks was to sell the products advertised during the Saturday morning lineup.

The cultural discourse that seventies children traversed created the impression that the aims of the women’s liberation movement had been achieved. In textbooks children saw numerous examples of successful women sociologists, doctors, and astronauts. Language was gender neutral. And girls and boys actively played and worked together



on ball fields and courts and in home economics and wood shop classrooms. On public television, white women and girls and people of color were the stars; they learned the fastest, were the funniest, hippest characters. They were the people that young viewers wanted to emulate. Network children's television was largely a muddle of reruns from the fifties and sixties, as well as insipid cartoons. However, it sometimes featured programs and specials such as "After School Specials" and FTBYM, which forthrightly challenged gender and racial stereotypes. Moreover, there was no shortage of female characters on Saturday mornings, and, while most were conventionally pretty, many were also empowered, at least within the bounds of contemporary feminine ideals. Combined, mainstream television and book publishers such as Scholastic Books Services provided boys and girls characters with which they could identify, creating what appeared to be a level playing field.

Paradoxically, as adult popular culture reflected its audiences' struggle to come to terms with the changes brought by the women's liberation movement, the texts children read and the pop cultural discourse Xers navigated made it seem as if the aims of second wave feminism had been attained. Perhaps feminists did such a thorough job of convincing Generation X that girls and boys and men and women were equal that by the time they reached young adulthood, many of them saw feminism as a baseless, ineffectual relic of another generation. These images of feminism and gender equality influenced the generation's feminism; when they eventually claimed a feminist identity they did so under the guise of an allegedly new wave of feminism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “‘Growing Up Postmodern’: Gender and Generation X”<sup>1</sup>

*We know there’s not one way, one light, one stupid truth.*

Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill<sup>2</sup>

*I feel sort of fuzzy again.*

Tammy Ealom of Dressy Bessy<sup>3</sup>

GenX children navigated and, to varying degrees, benefited from the changes brought by the social movements of the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s. By 1973, school desegregation was being implemented in the North, five years after it was legally imposed on the South.<sup>4</sup> Young people who did not experience integration first hand were given the impression that racial parity was the norm, as publishers mindfully included drawings and photographs of African-American, Asian, and Latino/a children and adults in

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter title is borrowed from Ronald Strickland’s *Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young*, Strickland, ed. (New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bikini Kill, “Jigsaw Youth,” *The CD Version of the First Two Records* (Kill Rock Stars, 1994), Track 10.

<sup>3</sup> Dressy Bessy, “Fuzzy,” *Little Music* (Kindercore, 2003), Track 7.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lowe, “The Strange History of School Desegregation,” *Rethinking Schools Online*, Volume 18, No. 3 (Spring 2004) [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18\\_03/stra183.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_03/stra183.shtml) (accessed August 15, 2008).

textbooks and children's book. As illustrated, diversity pervaded PBS's "Children's Television Workshop" programs and, by 1970, toy companies began producing racially diverse dolls; Mattel debuted "Christie," the first African-American Barbie doll in 1968 and in 1970 Hasbro widely produced and distributed a Black G.I. Joe action figure.<sup>5</sup>

As they reached their teen and young adult years in the eighties and nineties, the diversity GenXers came to recognize and celebrate as children became culturally and academically codified under the rubrics of "multiculturalism" and "identity politics." At this stage in their lives, GenXers were fully fluent in the language of diversity; they understood the complex intersections of social constructed categories of identity. Young feminists subsequently found mid-twentieth century articulations of collective social activism impracticable. They gained more nuanced perspectives on gender identity, yet they subsequently lost communality with other women. GenX feminism is an instance of political activism in a historical moment that was marked by near paralysis over issues of subjectivity. In unhinging the myth of a possibility of a universal, gendered identity, GenXers were left with recreating a feminism of "contingency." This is the focus of the final chapter of this dissertation.<sup>6</sup>

The present chapter describes the postmodern condition and the affect it had on shaping GenXers' worldview and, subsequently, their views on feminism and femininity. This condition is ambiguously defined by French theorist Jean-François Lyotard, as "an incredulity toward metanarratives," or skepticism of comprehensive views of culture and

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Deutsch, *Barbie the First 30 Years, 1959 Through 1989 and Beyond* (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 2003), 212. Mattel introduced "Colored Francie" in 1967, but this doll was created by using the same mold as the white version of Francie—the only thing that changed was the doll's skin tone. Collectors therefore concur that Christie was the first African-American Barbie because the doll's facial features more clearly reflected those of people of African descent.

<sup>6</sup> See Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodern'," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan Wallace Scott, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 3-21).

history.<sup>7</sup> While it is difficult to disentangle the French postmodern and post structuralist theories from the mid-twentieth century European and American social movements, it is clear that those turbulent decades of activism created a cultural and intellectual environment that was open to the ideas of theorists such as Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, whose works were being widely translated and debated in American universities by the end of the 1970s and through the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

Metanarratives were clearly insufficient a tumultuous two-decade struggle for gender, racial, and gay/lesbian rights. As a cacophony of marginalized voices entered the discourse, modern, Western ideals such as “progress,” “universality,” and “truth” became practically and theoretically suspect. The mood of the last two decades of the twentieth century was a response to the gains made by activists of the mid-twentieth century. The world Americans knew was significantly reordered in the late twentieth century, following the advances toward gender and racial equality. Ronald Strickland asserts that

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am specifically referring to Jean-François Lyotard’s definition in his 1979 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He writes, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (See “Introduction,” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [Manchester University Press, 1984], xxiv-xxv). As an “ism,” postmodernism “refers to the cultural and... artistic manifestations of [a] period” (See David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* [New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001], 305-309; and Lyotard, 14-23).

The term “metanarrative” is commonly used by cultural studies practitioners, particularly those scholars studying and employing postmodernity and postmodern theory. Metanarratives are all-encompassing “stories” that attempt to broadly explain history and human experience.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the “American domestication” of French theory and the impact it had on identity politics in eighties and nineties, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Cusset charts twentieth century intellectual imbrications between the U.S. and France, which he asserts, began in the years preceding World War II (with exiled French artists and intellectuals) and after the war (with intellectual/artistic groups and currents such as the Annales school of historical analysis, Surrealism, and Sartrean existentialism) (Cusset, 17). He also elucidates the ways in which French theorists influenced American culture and politics, and how—by the 1990s—their ideas were integrated into U.S. culture and pervaded the country’s political and intellectual discourses. While the “official” American introduction to post World War II French theory took place at Johns Hopkins University at the “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” conference, the “domestication” of French theory did not begin until the 1970s when American scholars first began using the ideas in their own work (see Cusset 29, 54).

in political, and I would add, cultural, terms the postmodern condition is no more revolutionary than it is reactive.<sup>9</sup>

The weight of the modern era bore as heavily on Xers as it had on the Boomer activists and educators who sought to dismantle it. The Boomers' legacy was momentous, yet Xers were charged with making sense out of this new world order. As children, they were fed messages that made them believe that fairness, harmony, and equality had already been achieved. As teens and young adults they watched, and perhaps contributed to, the breakdown of the ideologies that put white European males at the center of history and promised "progress" and all of the economic and technological advantages that accompany it. GenXers entered their teenage and young adult years amid this reactive moment in American history.<sup>10</sup>

### ***"Jigsaw Youth": The Inevitable Plurality of Meaning***

The GenX ethos is wrought from what Canadian scholar Terri Susan Zurbrigg identifies as the "lack of an applicable grand narrative." The generations' angst and

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<sup>9</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*; Ronald Strickland, "Introduction: What's Left of Modernity?," *Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young*, Ronald Strickland, ed. (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, 1-14), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Feminist theorist Patricia Waugh describes postmodernism as a "theoretical and representational 'mood'," one that encompasses aesthetics and the "spheres of the 'cognitive'...and the 'practical' or moral." See Patricia Waugh, "Introduction," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Patricia Waugh, ed. (London and New York: Edward Arnold: A Division of Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, 1-10), 1. I am aware of the debates among historians and others regarding the claim that postmodernity is a break from modernity, or an era that arises following the modern period. Many historians accept David Harvey's argument – that postmodernity is a phase of modernity. However, feminist historians and theorists such as Rita Felski contend that Harvey's premise relies on Marxism – a grand narrative/theory – to map the trajectory of modernity. Felski contends that this is problematic as far as gender and modernity (or postmodernity) are concerned, as Marxism is clearly connected to the Enlightenment and its full articulation of public (male) and private (female) spheres. Moreover, Felski recognizes that the siting of postmodernity within the frame of modernity re-grounds it in the context of a master narrative, which undermines Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernity ("Simplifying to the extreme," he writes, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.") (See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990], 173-188, \*Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [New York and London: New York University Press, 2000], 194-195, and Lyotard, xxiv-xxv).

penchant for irony signals an emotionally guarded mourning of the promises of the Enlightenment project.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, postmodern theory and its colloquial manifestations ("multiculturalism," for instance) made generalized explanations of experience based solely on gender or on race suspect. The emergence of postmodern theory in France generally corresponds with the rise of the second wave feminist movement in the United States, and its subsequent questioning of patriarchal power structures and gender inequality. As Lyotard's translated works (along with those of other French postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard) hit the shores of the U.S. in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the waning women's liberation movement was itself being critiqued and re-evaluated by lesbian feminists and women of color as hegemonically white and middle class. Therefore, second wave feminism itself was a grand narrative ripe for "deconstructing."<sup>12</sup>

Poststructuralist thought centers on the "inevitable plurality...of meaning" and identity, making essentialist, binary notions unstable and variable.<sup>13</sup> Cultural feminism, "the ideology of a female nature or female essence re-appropriated by [second wave] feminists...to revalidate undervalued female attributes" and, in many cases, endorse separatism based on sex, became contentious terrain in the postmodern era.<sup>14</sup> "Woman" as a patently definable sign and distinct social category was problematized by plurality,

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<sup>11</sup> Terri Susan Zurbrigg, *X = What?: Douglas Coupland, Generation X, and the Politics of Postmodern Irony* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), 26.

<sup>12</sup> In her 1988 essay "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff provides an especially cogent definition of "deconstruction." She writes: "[The] term is principally associated with Derrida for whom it refers specifically to the process of unraveling metaphors in order to reveal their underlying logic, which usually consists of simple binary opposition such as between man/woman, subject/object, culture/nature, etc. Derrida has demonstrated that within such oppositions one side is always superior to the other side, such that there is never any pure difference without domination. The term 'deconstruction' has also come to mean more generally any exposure of a concept as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality." See footnote 24, page 415. *Signs*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring, 1988), 405-436.

<sup>13</sup> Macey, 309.

<sup>14</sup> Alcoff, 408.

difference, and subjectivity. Judith Butler sees the postmodern moment as an opportunity for denaturalizing sex, for arguing for a nonessential, tenuous notion of "woman." She calls for "recast[ing] the referent as signified, and authoriz[ing]...the category of woman as a position of designatable [sic] resignification." In this frame, the body itself becomes a malleable site, a place where gender is performed. This, Butler contends, "is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman."<sup>15</sup> GenX/third wave feminists' worldview, which encompassed plurality and difference, and the broadening possibilities of "woman," was at the core of their skepticism of rigid proclamations on gender and sexuality. Yet, as discussed at length in chapter four, when "third wave" feminism emerged in the early nineties, it, too, was paradoxically compromised of mostly white middle-class young women.

Declarations about the innately oppressive nature of heterosexual relationships and sexuality, such as Jill Johnston's claim that heterosexual intercourse is the "staple nuclear unit of oppression," or Andrea Dworkin's assertion that "Being owned and being fucked are...virtually synonymous experiences...he owns you inside out," were alien to GenXers, who, as children, were taught that gender parity had been achieved.<sup>16</sup> Adding to their skepticism was the way in which many second wave writers and thinkers dogmatically espoused their principles. The tone and manner in which they put their convictions forth paradoxically mirrored many of the doctrinaire patriarchal institutions and attitudes they sought to undermine.

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," in *Feminists Theorize the Political* Joan Scott and Butler, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 14-19. My understanding of Butler's argument also comes from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [originally published in 1990]).

<sup>16</sup> Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation* (New York, NY: A Touchstone Book Published by Simon and Schuster, 1973), 149; Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 224; *Intercourse* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 82).

The younger generation treated the unconditional declarations of many Boomer feminists with suspicion and cynicism, and even hostility. Kathleen Hanna, a well-known third wave feminist and front woman of the riot grrrl band Bikini Kill, worked her way through college as a sex worker. In an interview, Hanna reflected on an exchange she had with radical second wave feminist and anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin in the early 1990s. Hanna attended a lecture given by Dworkin at Evergreen State College, where Hanna was a student: "Before the lecture, I didn't even know who Dworkin was, so I read her books," Hanna recalls. "When I stood up [at the lecture] and said I was a sex worker and a feminist, Andrea Dworkin said that I wasn't a feminist, she replied—I kid you not—'You've been duped by the patriarchy'." Hanna recalls being angry at Dworkin's dismissive comment, and crying publicly over it. She says, "Here she was standing up in front of all of these people basically saying that my reality wasn't even there... I totally love myself... just because I've been a sex-trade worker doesn't mean I'm going to be 'paying for it' for the rest of my life."<sup>17</sup>

Hanna's reaction to being judged and devalued by an influential second wave feminist illuminates the root of the GenX feminist mindset. Women of Hanna's generation grew up navigating a culture in which identity was accepted as multi-layered, and individual choices were personal, and based on "realities of intersectionality."<sup>18</sup> Her remark, "[Dworkin was] basically saying that my reality wasn't even there," reveals that Hanna is fully cognizant of what feminist theorist Linda Alcoff describes: "individual

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<sup>17</sup> Andrea Juno, "Kathleen Hanna: Bikini Kill," in *Angry Women in Rock, Volume One* (New York, NY: Juno Books, 1996), 93-96.

<sup>18</sup> Feminist and cultural theorists employ the phrase "realities of intersectionality" ubiquitously. Most recently, my thinking on the phrase has been influenced by Layli Phillips use of it, as well as her phrase "vectors of difference." (See Layli Phillips, "Introduction," *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips, editor (New York and London: Routledge, 2006, xix-lv), xxxviii.



intentions [are] constructed within a [broader] social reality."<sup>19</sup> From Hanna's perspective, Dworkin not only disrespected her, she discounted the discourses, power structures, and forces of history that propelled Hanna into sex work. Dworkin was commenting on, and critical of Hanna's employment based on a stringently defined conception of feminism; performing sex work was incompatible with being feminist. While the exchange between Dworkin and Hanna is an extreme example (given the former woman's activism on sex work, and the latter's public interviews on her work in this arena), it serves as a clear illustration of the shift in attitude across feminist generations. Hanna also criticizes Dworkin for her "racist and elitist strategies" on pornography legislation and reform. Hanna reveals her tacit recognition that "subjective experiences are determined in some sense by macro forces" when she asks: "Who are the women most affected by the [anti-pornography] laws she is helping to enact? Poor women, women of color, women who are already discriminated against."<sup>20</sup> Hanna's skepticism of Dworkin's point of view reflects a nuanced understanding of gender as one category of identity that intersects with many others.

Historian and African American Studies scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham further elucidates this insight in her essay "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," one of the germinal texts critiquing the essentially white character of second wave feminism. She argues that for African-American women, "race has an all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of the other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality." In this frame, "woman" is not a clear, unadulterated subject position, but rather one social category among others."

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<sup>19</sup> Alcoff, 416.

<sup>20</sup> Alcoff, 416; Juno, 93-96.

Higginbotham calls for a “rejection of gender-based dichotomies that lead to a false homogenizing of women.”<sup>21</sup> Hanna’s reaction to the assertion that she has been “duped by the patriarchy” for believing that she can be both a sex worker and feminist reveals her understanding of womanhood as a multifaceted, heterogeneous category of identity. As a poor, young student working her way through college, Hanna garnered an understanding of the socioeconomic circumstances that frequently compel poor women to work in the sex trade. She was angry at Dworkin’s dismissal of these realities because she experienced the inequitable social structures founded on the subjugation of people based on race, class, gender, and other “subordinate” categories of identity.

In Bikini Kill’s 1992 song “Jigsaw Youth,” Hanna expresses the anger she feels over being judged for performing sex work: “I can sell my body if I wanna; God knows you’ve already sold your mind. I may sell my body for money sometimes... U [sic] think that I don’t know? I’m here to tell you I do. You think that I don’t know – don’t know the truth about you? ...Jigsaw, Jigsaw Youth – we know there’s not one way, one light, one stupid truth...”<sup>22</sup> Aside from being a song about asserting her right to use her body for financial gain, “Jigsaw Youth” also addresses the complexity of identity. Indeed, the jigsaw puzzle is a clever metaphor for the fragmented self.

*Jigsaw* was also the title of a fanzine (zine) Hanna contributed to in the early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> In issue four, she uses the jigsaw puzzle as a metaphor to describe GenX

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<sup>21</sup> Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” in *Feminism & History*, ed. by Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 183-208).

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Hanna, “Jigsaw Youth,” from *Bikini Kill: The C.D. Version of the First Two Records* (Olympia, WA: Kill Rock Stars, 1994), track 10.

<sup>23</sup> Fanzines—commonly known as “zines,” are self-produced publications that are often low-tech, in that they are done at home on a typewriter, word processor, or—beginning in the nineties, computer. Zine creators (often called “zinesters”) produce a small number (from a few as a dozen special editions, to several hundred) and distribute them through the mail, often trading with other zine makers or charging a small fee to cover the cost of printing and shipping. Zines have a long history in the twentieth century,

women's experience: "We live in a world that tells us we must choose an identity, a career, a relationship, and commit...as if we don't live in a world of constant flux... To be a stripper who is also a feminist...[this is a] contradiction I have lived. Every fucking 'feminist' is not the same, every fucking girl is not the same, okay???"<sup>24</sup> Hanna's anger illustrates the frustration she felt traversing a culture where, contrary to what the school textbooks and educational programs of her childhood portrayed, gender equality had not yet been achieved. Hanna chose sex work as a way to support herself and pay for college. In her words, "I'd rather be making twenty dollars an hour as a sex trader worker than five dollars an hour as a waitress."

Hanna was resolute about being "out" as a sex worker. She did not attempt to glamorize the experience, rather, she "wanted other women who work in the...industry to remember that we can be sex-trade workers *and* be philosophers, writers, musicians, artists, or whatever." The anger she expressed in *jigsaw* was also fueled by a sense of frustration, over her belief that Dworkin and other anti-pornography groups and activists were attempting to legislate morality, and were also patronizingly speaking for oppressed women, and making categorical assumptions about sex workers based on stereotypes.<sup>25</sup>

Rebecca Walker, daughter of renowned author Alice Walker, echoes Hanna's sentiments in the introduction to her 1995 book, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Rebecca Walker reveals her deep-seated desires, which did not mesh with the definitive notions of feminism handed down by her mother and her

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emerging first in the 1930s from the science fiction subculture. The zine re-emerged in the seventies in the punk music scene, and by the late eighties and early nineties, there was a profusion of zines published on topics ranging from thrift store shopping to popular culture. Feminist, or riot grrrl, zines were ubiquitous in the nineties. The late twentieth century zine explosion is connected to the rise of the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement/subcultures.

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Hanna, "Jigsaw Youth," from *jigsaw fanzine* (No. 4: Spring 1991 [Olympia, WA]), not paginated.

<sup>25</sup> Juno, 94, 96.

mother's iconic feminist friends and colleagues. "My existence was an ongoing state of saying no to many elements of the universe," she writes. Certain parts of herself, she goes on say, "were hidden deep down... [c]uriosity about pornography, attraction to a stable domestic partnership...interest in the world of S/M, a love for people who challenged and sometimes flatly opposed my feminist beliefs...[these things] represented contradictions that I had no idea how to reconcile."<sup>26</sup> Fittingly, Rebecca Walker was the first to publicly coin the phrase "third wave"; she declared the rise of a new wave of feminism in an essay she wrote for *Ms.* in 1992, proclaiming, "I am the third wave."<sup>27</sup> As the daughter of a famous feminist, she needed to establish a break with the second wave, a movement she knew intimately (her godmother is Gloria Steinem, and bell hooks and Angela Y. Davis are also among the women who orbit her mother's social circle).

Aside from the fame surrounding her mother's powerful network of second wave feminists, Walker's experiences as a young feminist reflect the complex reality of Hanna's metaphorical puzzle. Pertinently, as the daughter of an African-American woman and a white, Jewish man, Walker embodies the convolution of late twentieth century identity politics. The contradictions that Hanna and Walker describe are reminiscent of the metaphysical inscrutability French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva addresses in her 1986 germinal essay, "Women's Time." Kristeva posits that women born during and after social and political gains of the women's movements in Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s have been put to the task of "reconciling maternal time (motherhood) with linear (political and historical) [patriarchal] time." She does not

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<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1995), xxx-xxxi.

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Walker's essay, "Becoming the Third Wave," appeared in the January 1993 issue of *Ms.* Walker worked for *Ms.* for a number of years as contributing editor.

identify this group, or generation, in terms of chronology; rather they are part of a “signifying space” where maternal and linear time co-exist. Moreover, she writes, “this third attitude, which I strongly advocate...the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. [For,] [w]hat can ‘identity’, even ‘sexual identity’, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?”<sup>28</sup> For Kristeva, who casts the personal, or psychoanalytic, in terms of poststructuralist theory, the subject is perpetually in process. She maintains that, given the instability of identity, there is not a singular, unified feminist voice; “individual difference is allowed free play.”<sup>29</sup>

The fluctuating nature of gender and feminist identity that Kristeva articulates is echoed in an anonymously written piece from the third wave feminist zine *Blistering Holiday*:

Feminism is full of its own little contradictions. The theories are full of variations, and feminists have anything but identical ideas. What’s wrong with this picture? Nothing. Feminism involves a gathering of ideas in regards [sic] to the roles, rights, and powers of womyn and these ideas do not exist in perfect conjunction with each other.<sup>30</sup>

This writer offers an optimistic, liberating view of GenX feminism, evoking Linda Alcoff’s 1988 contention that the critiques around subjectivity brought forth by postmodernists and poststructuralists were attractive and useful to feminists for two reasons. Echoing Kristeva, Alcoff asserts that they held out a “promise of an increased freedom for women; ‘free play’ of plurality of differences [was] unhampered by any

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<sup>28</sup>Kristeva uses the term “sexual” in relationship to male and female, not in the gay/straight/bisexual sense of the word. Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, Tori Moi, editor, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986, 185-213), 209-211. (“Women’s Time” was originally published in France in 1979.)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>30</sup>Anonymous author, “Feminism is full of its own little contradictions,” *Blistering Holiday* (New Orleans, LA), not paginated, undated (circa 1995). From the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

predetermined gender identity." Furthermore, she writes, by exploring "the construction of subjectivity, we can learn a great deal about the mechanisms of sexist oppression and the construction of specific gender categories by relating these to social discourse and by conceiving of the subject as a cultural product."<sup>31</sup> The subjective cultural product Alcoff articulates was a direct result of the post World War II social movements. The erosion of Euro-American Enlightenment ideas of "universality" and "truth" led to an acknowledgement and celebration of individual identity.

***"White Boy, Don't Laugh, Don't Cry...Just Die"***<sup>32</sup>

As GenX feminists challenged essentialist notions of womanhood and clear-cut articulations of femininity, young white men of the 1990s struggled to come to terms with what Michael Kimmel describes as a "deeper more authentic version of masculinity than the one on offer from the consumer economy."<sup>33</sup> The white GenX man was in a paradoxical identity crisis. His chances at attaining the American dream dwindled with the decline of the middle class. He also understood his father's world, which was dependent upon that dream, as empty and meaningless. Xers understood themselves to be, in words of Tyler Durden, the protagonist of GenX writer Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, "the middle children of history...with no purpose or place; we have no great war, no great depression; our great war is a spiritual war, our great depression is our lives."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Alcoff, 418.

<sup>32</sup> Bikini Kill, "White Boy," *Bikini Kill: The C.D. Version of the First Two Records* (Seattle, WA: Kill Rock Stars, 1994), Track 7.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 220.

<sup>34</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2005), 141.

X men were also seemingly marginalized by the feminism and multiculturalism. They longed for their place at the helm as “universal subject,” and they reveled angrily over their “de-centered” status. In reality, however, white male privilege had been challenged, but not unseated. In and of itself, the slacker archetype is evidence of this. When rendered in popular culture, Generation X was most often reduced to a one-dimensional caricature, the slacker. Slackers were alienated, cynical, angst-ridden white males, who were sometimes angry, and almost always lacking in confidence and ambition. The slacker archetype was quickly co-opted by Madison Avenue advertising executives, who, amid cultural climate of identity politics and multiculturalism, struggled to come to terms with a new market segment. Karen Ritchie, group media director for General Motors Worldwide advised colleagues at the Magazine Publishers Association annual meeting October of 1992:

[Generation X] is a fragmented generation in just about every way. To start with, it is racially and ethnically diverse. In its prime, Generation X will be a generation of four minorities: Afro-American, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and whites. Minority marketing will have little relevance to these people, because all marketing will be minority marketing. The Boomers represented the last WASP generation in America, and with their passing we will see a dramatic shift in the balance of power.<sup>35</sup>

Despite Ritchie’s prescient assessment of the budding consumer generation as diverse and disjointed, advertisers adhered to the status quo, concocting a homogeneous image of the “Baby Buster” (as the generation was initially termed), and then creating advertisements that allegedly appealed to them.

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Ritchie, “Get ready for 'Generation X': Soon the primary market, and very unlike aging Boomers,” *Advertising Age* (November 9, 1992), 21.

In the summer of 1993, *USA Today* reported on the new marketing ethos and aesthetic. “TV is plastered with ads heavy on style and short on substance, featuring young hipsters dressed in grunge clothing,” writes reporter Gary Strauss. Advertisements, he writes, include “in-your-face, over-amplified dialogue...[p]ump-up-the-volume, heavy metal, rap or hip-hop music, [and]... jerky, angle video in rapid flashes.” Strauss addresses the slacker in his article, locating the character in a Subaru advertisement. The company’s “What to Drive” ad campaign featured “Kid,” a white “hyperkinetic, 20ish punkster,” who, in the writer’s words, is “...almost incoherent as he prattles over the Impreza’s relevance, comparing the car to punk rock.” Strauss ends his summary of the ad, emphasizing the absurdity of the comparison: “A car that’s like punk rock? Punk rock?”<sup>36</sup>

In spite of skeptical assessments of television commercials and print ads directed to mythologized punk rock slackers, the mass media perpetuated and expounded the GenX stereotype. *Business Week* declared, “The Busters are here—and they’re angry,” in another issue of the publication, a writer asserted, “Busters don’t vote.” An article on Generation X in *The Economist* was simply titled, “Oh, grow up.” *Automotive News* claimed that GenXers were “...not optimistic about the future...[and] not tolerant of hype and empty promises.” *The Boston Globe* asserted that “ ‘Baby busters’ resent life in Boomers’ debris,” and a writer for the *New Hampshire Weekly* imaginatively reported that, “Tree planting is a classic Generation X job. They go out into the woods to work and play hard. They have no commitments. They get filthy. They earn between \$ 5,000

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<sup>36</sup> Gary Strauss, “X marks advertisers’ spots: Discerning post-boomers elusive target,” *USA Today* (June 7, 1993), Money Section, 1B.



and \$ 10,000 in six months.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the race to contain and qualify a fragmented generation was on.

Cultural theorist Neil Nehring fittingly connects the GenX-slacker phenomenon to something more significant and widespread than selling cars and ad space. Generation X, he asserts, was evidence of a “proliferation of academic postmodernism into mass culture.” During the 1980s and early 90s academics and journalists—fueled, I would add, by the advertising industry—“willed a hopeless postmodern condition into being,” resulting in the unlikely dispersion of obscure French theory into popular culture and consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Generation X, replete with angst and apathy, was cast as living manifestations of the failures, indeed, the end, of modernity. Compared to Baby Boomers, who witnessed or participated in the political activism of the 1960s and 70s, Gen X teens and young adults seemed politically disengaged, indifferent, and self centered. Academic elites fostered the discourse that allowed the full manifestation and dispersion of the alienated Gen X character, and marketing and entertainment industries latched on to the slacker because, as Nehring says, they believed that the archetype was “just good for business.”<sup>39</sup>

In his assessment of the dispersion of postmodern theory into mass culture, Nehring fails to recognize the ways in which the mainstream manifestation of the alienated, cynical GenX slacker reflects the theoretical articulation of the postmodern condition. Patricia Waugh and other feminist postmodernists argue that women and non-

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<sup>37</sup> Laura Zinn, “Move Over Boomers,” *Business Week*, December 14, 1992, 74; “Oh, Grow Up,” *The Economist*, December 26, 1992, 29; Mary Connelly, “Who is Generation X? No one can agree,” *Automotive News*, October 18, 1993, 2i; Mark Muro, “Complaints of a new generation: ‘Baby Busters’ resent life in Boomers’ debris,” *The Boston Globe*, (November 10, 1991, Metro/Region Section), 1; Rebecca Haas, “Introducing Those of Generation X,” *New Hampshire Weekly*, December 29, 1991, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Nehring, xiii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-13.

white individuals did not lament the end of modernity and the angst over the death of a “universal subject.” “Those who have been systematically excluded from the constitution of [the] so-called ‘universal subject’,” she writes, “are unlikely either to long nostalgically for what they have never experienced... or to revel angrily or in celebratory fashion in the ‘jouissance’ of its disintegration.”<sup>40</sup> It is paradoxical, yet predictable, that the quintessential GenXer would be imagined as alienated, shiftless, white and male.

Contrary to Nehring’s assertion, in reality, the GenX slacker was not always good for advertising agencies and corporate profits.<sup>41</sup> He was, however, reflective of a broader cultural discourse. Angst-ridden, alienated men such as Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails (fittingly identified as “NIN” on t-shirts and album covers, referencing the French “nin,” or “nothing”), and Beck wrote and performed songs about their under-dog status and remorse over being white and male. And the quintessential slacker was portrayed in films by characters such as convenience and video store workers Dante Hicks and Randal Graves of *Clerks* (1994), Cliff Poncier of *Singles* (1992), and the aimless array of Austin, Texas misfits in Richard Linklater’s low-budget film, *Slackers* (1991).

GenX men, it seemed, were in the midst of a crisis of self-confidence. In 1994 Beck’s first single, “Loser,” from the platinum album, *Mellow Gold*, hit the airwaves; in it he sardonically declares (in Spanish and English), “I’m a loser baby, so why don’t you kill me?” Kurt Cobain’s journals lay bare the preliminary lyrics for the Nirvana song

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<sup>40</sup> Patricia Waugh, “Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory,” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Patricia Waugh, ed. (London and New York: Edward Arnold, A Division of Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, 189-204), 194.

<sup>41</sup> In his *USA Today* article, Strauss reports that, Subaru, “buoyed” by its MTV-style, “Kid”-starring advertisement, “...hoped to sell 5,000 Imprezas a month [to] many...first-time buyers in the 20s. But since [the] March 1 [1993 launch of the ad], sales are 50% below target.”

“No Apologies” (originally titled “I Like Girls”). He repentantly writes: “What else should I say? All my words are grey; what else could I write? I’m sorry I am white” (ultimately, the line became, “What else could I write? I don’t have the right”). In the single “Yellow Brick Road,” rapper Eminem recalls feeling unpopular and alienated as a white male teenager in the 1980s: “We don’t fit in crackas is out...Blackness is in, African symbols and medallions represents black power and we ain’t know what it meant.”<sup>42</sup>

Films featuring 20-something white men wallowing in existential crises were also ubiquitous in the early nineties. Linklater’s *Slacker* epitomized this trend. Within the first five minutes of the film, a young man runs over his mother with the family car and drives the vehicle home, parking it prominently on the street in front of his house. As he waits for the police arrive, he ritualistically cuts photos of himself out of a high school yearbook, lights them on fire and extinguishes them by placing them in large votive candles, and switches on a movie projector, which plays a grainy childhood film of his mother pushing him on a tricycle. As the scene ends, he dispassionately greets officers, who arrest him; he enters the police car, it drives off. It is one of many ambiguously connected scenes in a film featuring white men who have given up on life, or are aimlessly trying to find their way in the world.

In the early nineties, as GenX men wallowed in their collective crisis of identity, their elders, feeling the same angst, incited a “men’s movement.” Loosely led by poet and author Robert Bly, many men took to the woods, explains Kimmel, “donning totemic

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<sup>42</sup> The full stanza became: “What else should I say? Everyone is gay; what else could I write? I don’t have the right.” (See Kurt Cobain, “All Apologies,” Nirvana, *In Utero* [Los Angeles, CA: A & R Records, 1993], track 12. Kurt Cobain, *Kurt Cobain: Journals* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, A Member of Penguin Putnam, Inc., 2002), not paginated. Eminem, “Yellow Brick Road,” *Encore* (Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records, 2004), track 4.

animal symbols [and] reclaiming ancient myths of male bonding...hop[ing] to tap into some primitive stream of essential masculinity [that was] long buried by the feminizing worlds of work and home.” These “weekend warriors” paradoxically suffered because women “maintained a monopoly on themes like oppression and powerlessness.” Evoking an eighteenth century exchange between John and Abigail Adams, wherein the president responded to his spouse’s plea for gender equality, with the infamous line, “We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat,” one men’s movement advocate asserted: “But women aren’t victims... We all know the power of women.”<sup>43</sup>

The reality, of course, was that the cultural discourse on white masculinity was being challenged by thirty years of activism and two decades of postmodern theory and the mainstream profusion of identity politics. White males still wielded the most power; their anxiety stemmed from the new pressure they felt over having to relinquish their privileged status, their sense of entitlement. Kimmel astutely sums up the phenomenon, which he calls a “new ideology of unfairness,” by recounting a conversation he had with three “angry white males” on a talk show with the title “A Black Woman Stole My Job.” He writes:

I asked the men to consider just one word in the title of the show: the word ‘my’. What made them think the job was theirs? Why wasn’t the show titled ‘A Black Woman Got the Job’ or ‘A Black Woman Got a Job’? It’s because these guys thought that those jobs were “theirs,” that they were entitled to them, and that when some ‘other’ person (black, female) got the job, that person was really taking ‘their’ job.<sup>44</sup>

White GenX men did not have the same delusions. They came of age as young adults in a period when the middle class was decreasing, as were career opportunities.

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<sup>43</sup> Kimmel, 208.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 221.

As children, GenX women and people of color were told that they could do anything. They were, as illustrated in Chapter two, in Marlo Thomas' words, "Free to Be... You and Me." Concurrently, white males were the butt of jokes on public school-sanctioned public television. *The Electric Company's* white, cantankerously foolish J. Arthur Crank was hardly a desirable role model. Morgan Freeman's Easy Reader, conversely, was the hippest character on the show, as he jogged effortlessly through New York City streets grooving to his own theme song. Children's authors Charlotte Zolotow and Tomie dePaola sought to transform masculine stereotypes, asserting that it was "alright to cry," and that boys who danced and liked to perform on stage were not "sissies." GenX white men grew up amid the seventies and early eighties response to second wave feminism and the pop cultural proliferation of multiculturalism.

The hipness Morgan Freeman exuded as "Easy Reader" in the seventies prefigured what emerged exponentially in nineties popular culture. In pop music, genres such as punk and heavy metal were unseated by rap and hip hop as transgressive bastions of cool rebellion. Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac Shakur were "bad" men, and real life "outlaws." The coolness they exuded seemed authentic in a culture that, as writer Donnell Alexander explained in 1997, is "oblivious to its coolness shortage because it [has historically] processe[d] cool through a perspective of whiteness." Hip hop, he writes,

negates the hopelessness of the postmodern sensibility at its most cynical...[it is an example of what] kept the sons and daughters of Africa in touch with life's essential physicality, more in touch with the world and what it takes to get over in it: People are moved, not convinced; things get done, they don't just happen. Life doesn't allow for much fronting...and

neither does hip hop. [It] allows for little deviation between who one is and what one can ultimately represent in expression.<sup>45</sup>

In nineties pop cultural discourse, black men were living “authentic,” hip lives in urban neighborhoods, which were imagined as a new masculine frontier. Indeed, the sensationalized world of “turf wars,” gang battles, and “ganstas” “living large” projected on MTV did not accurately represent the real life crime and poverty.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in the context of the middle-class American dream in which white GenX men were reared, it represented a space of possibility, the kind of place that, according to Donnell Alexander, breeds coolness. For GenX white men, who grew up in the seventies and eighties watching television shows that made them and their fathers the butts of jokes, masculinity and hipness were mutually dependent propositions. And authentic coolness—not the variety that advertising agencies were attempting to manufacture, was the purview of African-American men. To again invoke Eminem: “crackas was out.”

Of course, GenX men’s masculinity crisis also affected their heterosexual relationships. In “I’m Finding it Harder to Be a Gentleman,” Jack White, singer and songwriter of the band The White Stripes, cleverly speaks to the situation. Addressing a feminine romantic partner, he writes: “...all the manners that I’ve been taught have slowly died away, but if I held the door open for you, it wouldn’t make your day.” He underscores the demise of his father’s generation’s masculinity, ending the song with the following stanza: “Well, I never said I wouldn’t throw my jacket in the mud for you, but my father gave it to me, so maybe I should carry you. Then you said ‘you almost

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<sup>45</sup> Donnell Alexander, “Cool Like Me: Are Black People Cooler Than White People?,” *Might* (Number 16, July/August 1997, 44-53), 49.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, the pop cultural discourse also did not address the systemic racism and white privilege that tolerated a poverty rate (for African Americans) of 33 percent. See Alexander, 46.

dropped me', so then I did, and I got mud on my shoes."<sup>47</sup> From White's perspective, he cannot win. Even as he eschews his father's masculine tactics and tries to behave in a manner that he deems as appropriate, his partner questions his solution to the metaphorical mud puddle of late twentieth century gender politics. Ultimately, he fulfills her expectation, dropping her and denigrating himself (dirtying his shoes) in the process. For white GenX men, the postmodern condition was colored by childhoods spent as the reviled subject. Second wave feminist ideals pervaded the media these men consumed as boys, and celebrations and affirmations of racial diversity left them feeling alienated and insignificant. Ironically, their young adult angst, conveyed through popular music, advertisements, and film, was the defining feature of Generation X and the archetypical slacker.

***"Re: Post"*<sup>48</sup>**

The postmodern condition, which French theorist Jean-François Lyotard describes as "an incredulity toward metanarratives," is central to the "third wave" feminist/Gen X mindset. However, the state of postmodernity played out in multitudinous forms under the visual, cultural rubric, "postmodernism." Postmodernity is defined as the social and political characteristics of an era, while postmodernism is manifested in the art, architecture, popular culture—essentially, the visual style of the period. Throughout the 1980s cultural theorists such as Birmingham School scholar Dick Hebdige, attempted to define the postmodern. As a style, he asserts, it could be evidenced in the "décor of a

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<sup>47</sup> Jack White/White Stripes, "I'm Finding it Harder to Be a Gentleman," *White Blood Cells* (Third Man Records), Track 3.

<sup>48</sup> This subheading is an appropriation of the title of Hal Foster's 1982 essay, titled "Re: Post," which was reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Presentation*, edited by Brian Wallis (New York, NY: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 189-201).

room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of...a ‘scratch’ video, [or] a television commercial.” But unlike visual styles of previous eras, postmodernism was most fully manifested in the “intertextual” relations between these entities. He describes this phenomenon as a “‘predicament’ of reflexivity, a proliferation of surfaces...a process of cultural, political, or existential fragmentation and/or...the ‘de-centering’ of the subject.” Echoing the multi-layered identities, or “realities of intersectionality,” postmodernism is a pastiche of surfaces and images, reflecting an “implosion of meaning...[and] sense...of ‘placelessness’...”<sup>49</sup>

This visual, atmospheric character of the postmodern is at the core of the generational zeitgeist of women and men who came of age in the U.S. in the eighties and nineties. It is conveyed in Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, the novel after which the generation was named. Throughout the book, Coupland cleverly names and articulates trends that are reminiscent of Hebdige’s definition of postmodernism. He identifies “decade blending” in fashion as “the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood: Shelia,” Coupland elucidates, “[equals] Mary Quant earring (1960s) + cork wedge platform shoes (1970s) + black leather jacket (1950s and 1980s).” He applies this convergence of style to music, identifying the GenX pursuit of “musical hairsplitting,” which is “the act of classifying music and musicians into pathologically picayune categories: ‘The Vienna Franks are a good example of urban white acid folk revivalism crossed with ska’.”<sup>50</sup> Coupland’s phrases and definitions illustrate a variety of issues connected to the postmodern-Gen X worldview: the convergence of history, the

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<sup>49</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 181-182.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 15, 85.



ironic collusion – what has been characterized as the knowing wink of an eye – of camp, the nihilism of the late/post-Cold War era, the skepticism of language as a tool for conveying meaning, and, indeed, the ambiguity of meaning itself.<sup>51</sup>

French theorist Paul Virilio argues that demographic generations have given way to generations of reality. “There is,” he says, “no longer any single reality that we can think of as given once and for all... generations of realities are connected to generations of images.” If, in the Derridaian sense, images are—like language—instable, mutable signs, then meaning and, ultimately, the self are constitutionally unstable, making for a generational “reality” based on an ever-evolving patische of mutable images that constitute the late twentieth century cultural landscape.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, GenX’s “physical and linguistic space” was, as Bran Nichol aptly describes it, “colonized by the discourses of mass media.”<sup>53</sup> The language of television and advertising was therefore integrated into the psyches of the generation who came of age alongside cable television.

The early 1990s zine *Aim Your Dick: A Journal of Anarcha-Feminists Hot to Kick Patriarchal Ass* is a prime example of the postmodern visual landscape of pop, print, and consumer culture. A virtual collage of mutable images, it is comprised solely of newspaper clippings and cartoons, which the producers creatively juxtapose and comment on (in the margins via scrawled handwriting—often complete with multiple

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<sup>51</sup> See Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in *Susan Sontag: Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001, 275-292). Sontag provides a lengthy, colorful definition of camp in this essay. At the beginning of the essay she writes: “...the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.”

<sup>52</sup> Jérôme Sans, “Interview with Paul Virilio,” *Flash Art* Number 138 (January-February 1988), 57; and Donald D. Palmer, *Structuralism and Poststructuralism for Beginners* (New York, NY: Writers and Reader Publishing, Inc., 1998), 140-142. (See also Christopher Norris, *Derrida* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987]).

<sup>53</sup> Nicol, Bran, ed. *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, 1-13), 6.

exclamation points). Amid an iteration of the political cartoon *This Modern World* by Tom Tomorrow, articles from unidentified sources, including “Fraternities Fester with Societal Ills,” “Meat Eatin’ Bambi Hunter Speaks Out,” and a statistical piece from the American Bar Association on sexual assault, is an article from *The New York Times* by Jim Frederick, a Columbia University student.

Frederick’s essay, written in 1993, is on Gen X’s proclivity for using the word “like.” He contends that “like” serves a variety of purposes, namely that it illustrates the speaker’s heightened receptivity, “offer[ing] the listener added levels of color, nuance, and meaning.” It also replaces the subtle gaps between phrases; “in our frenetic society,” he writes, “silence is no longer powerful, but completely alien, the dramatic pause doesn’t carry much rhetorical clout.”<sup>54</sup> Frederick’s essay ultimately reveals the ways in which “like” is a symptom of the breakdown of language as a tool for conveying meaning. Similar to its more academic cousin, “sort of,” “like” is a qualifier put forth by a generation of people who innately understand that meaning and language are variable, that “truth” is elusive. As a conversational tool of the postmodern condition, “like” tacitly signals that approximation is as clear as it gets.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jim Frederick, “We, Like, Like How We Talk,” originally published in *The New York Times* (1993), reprinted in Marike and Mimi, *Aim Your Dick: A Journal of Anarcha-Feminists Hot to Kick Patriarchal Ass* #2, circa 1993, n.p.

<sup>55</sup> One could employ Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra in relationship to the use of “like.” In “The Precession of the Simulacra,” he argues that the “edifice of representation” has preceded toward a condition of hyperreality, or the “hyperreal.” Baudrillard explains that the precession of the simulacra unfolds in the following way: “...simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. These would be the successive phase of the image: it is a reflection of a basic reality; it masks and perverts a basic reality; it masks the *absence* of a basic reality; it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.” In this frame, the profuse use of “like” among Gen Xers may be reflective of the third phase (“it masks the *absence* of a basic reality”); in a world where signs, images, and language – ultimately, meaning – are tenuous and unstable, referring to things or situations as having or being “the likeness of” acknowledges this condition, this awareness of the nonexistence of basic reality. (See Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of the Simulacra,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis [New York, NY: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 253-281], 256-257).

GenX writer Alison Bechdel describes a more personal response to the instability of language in her graphic novel, *Fun Home*. In reviewing her earliest written works (she began keeping diaries in 1970 at age ten), Bechdel recognizes what she describes as a “sort of epistemological crisis.” Amid sentences recounting the banal occurrences of her childhood days, she notes, that “the minutely-lettered phrase ‘I think’...[crops] up between my comments.” For Bechdel, “I think” was a qualifier, a precursor to “like,” as she interprets the insertion of the phrase as an acknowledgement of the end of truth and objectivity. “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true,” writes Bechdel, “all I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those.” Ten-year-old Bechdel recognized that even the most “sturdy” nouns, words like “popcorn” and “paper,” “faded to faint approximations under [her] pen.”<sup>56</sup> Bechdel’s interpretation of the hesitancy she showed as a young writer is apt amid the condition of postmodernity and the visual and auditory panoply of popular culture.

***“I want [your] MTV”?*<sup>57</sup>**

Music Television (MTV), which began broadcasting on cable television in 1981, epitomizes an ever shifting bricolage of visual and auditory signs. MTV’s influence on popular music and culture is central to the Gen X world view, as it both reflected and shaped the postmodern landscape of the 1980s. However, while it displayed and perpetuated the postmodern ethos, the music channel’s target audience was anything but

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<sup>56</sup> Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 141.

<sup>57</sup> “I want my MTV!” was a station identifier in the early days of the channel’s history. Rock luminaries such as Peter Townsend of The Who, Billy Idol, and all three members of the band The Police made the declaration enthusiastically to promote and identify the station between music videos, VJ banter, and commercials.

diverse and eclectic; its assumed gaze was white and male. Coded representations of young, white, male adolescent culture prevailed through MTV's short films, promotions and contests, and station identifiers. Plainly, "boys' distinct peer relations, leisure activities, sexual fantasies, and on occasion, contradictory experiences" were reflected through principal characters such as Randy of the Redwoods, Joe of the short film, "Joe's Apartment," and Jimmy the Cab Driver, among others.<sup>58</sup>

If, as Virilio posits, generations of realities are connected to generations of images, MTV set the speed and tenor at which these images were consumed, creating a bacchanalian visual menagerie. MTV not only presciently declared that "video [would kill] the radio star," it mapped a new visual terrain where fashion, art, music, and, notably, history, collided.<sup>59</sup> Music videos for songs such as Madonna's 1989 "Express Yourself," which visually references Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, and station identifiers such as the ubiquitous altered clip of the first moon walk, wherein a black and white astronaut (in the realm of MTV Neil Armstrong was a faceless agent) plants a colorized, animated flag bearing the MTV logo on the moon, blur historical boundaries, making all visual detritus ahistorical and ripe for appropriation.

Following the advent of MTV, the speed at which images barraged viewers increased exponentially. Throughout the 1980s, MTV was the most obvious proliferator of media techniques that included "an increase in primary colors... rapid film and tape editing... and devaluation of plot in favor of sequences of immediately arresting

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<sup>58</sup> Lisa A. Lewis, "Being Discovered: Female Address on Music Television," in *Jump Cut, A Review of Contemporary Media* (Number 35, April 1990, 2-15), accessed online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC35folder/GirlsMTV.html> (accessed on October 24, 2007). For primary sources, see *I Want My MTV*, a video compilation of on-air promos, short films, and station identifications from the 1980s and early 1990s (New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> The first music video played on MTV was a video of the Buggles' 1979 New Wave single "Video Killed the Radio Star." ("Video Killed the Radio Star" was written and produced by Trevor Horn, and was released in September 1979 as a seven-inch single by Island Records.)

images... contemporary graphic illustration of content as form [creates a sense of] ocular shock [as opposed to] plot development or complexity.”<sup>60</sup> Advertisers and network television producers soon followed, punctuating even the most placid sitcoms with hectic movement and erratic film editing techniques.

MTV was a vehicle for female artists’ music and videos, as tough, creative, empowered women such Tina Turner, members of The Go-Gos, Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, Cyndi Lauper, Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics, and Madonna aired throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. They, however, were like guests amid the larger masculine narrative, which was established through short films, cartoons (most notoriously, *Beavis & Butt-Head*), and station identifiers.

Joe, the young, white protagonist of the short film, “Joe’s Apartment,” epitomizes the GenX spirit of white, middle-class GenX masculinity. Like Cobain, Eminem, and characters from *Slacker* and *Clerks*, Joe’s identity as an alienated, angst-ridden white male is emphasized in “Joe’s Apartment.” It opens with Joe preparing for a date; as he tightens his tie, he converses with the swarm of cockroaches that inhabit his ill-kept New York apartment. Upon learning of his date, the roaches goad him about “getting lucky,” assuring him that he shouldn’t worry about their presence and mischievous antics. As Joe leaves, he tosses them a piece of raw meat (which the vermin collectively devour in seconds), as an incentive to behave themselves if he brings his date home.

Predictably, after their rendezvous, Joe and the young woman return and havoc ensues as the roaches turn on the stereo, crowd beneath the pillow on which the woman sits, and move peanuts and glasses of wine across Joe’s cluttered coffee table.

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<sup>60</sup> Steve Barnett and JoAnn Magdoff, “Beyond Narcissism in American Culture of the 1980s,” *Cultural Anthropology*, (Vol. 1, No. 4, November 1986, 413-424), 417.

Despite the pests' antics, Joe's date is initially oblivious to their presence. But at the moment he leans in to kiss her, the army of roaches that has gathered on the light fixture above slip from their perch and land, en masse, on top of the young woman, who runs screaming from the apartment.

In one sense, the woman is simply a prop to underscore stereotypes on bachelorhood, as the vermin are more at home in Joe's apartment than the clean, polite, well-dressed young woman. Jokes about single men and unkempt bachelor pads are common and accessible to both male and female viewers. However, fully entering the MTV discourse required female viewers to assume a stereotypically masculine mindset in order to grasp Joe and the cockroaches' sexual innuendos. Film and popular music theorists, employing Freud's, and subsequently, Laura Mulvey's ideas, suggest that the act of association in this model requires that women viewers identify with the "central point of a representation," or the protagonist. Often, however, as is the case with Joe of "Joe's Apartment," the protagonist is an ordinary, though hopeless, "everyman," who is the victim of his own failures. The cockroaches emphasize his shortcomings and exacerbate his unfortunate situation. He acquiesces to their antics, showing little concern for his distraught date, who is objectified and terrorized by the roaches; like Joe, she is a victim of their antics. The woman serves as a tool to underscore Joe's failed masculinity, as his filthy roommates kept him from "scoring." After the young woman bolts from his apartment, Joe stands dejectedly in the doorway, as the cockroaches say, "There'll be others, Joe." He flatly replies, "Yeah, I guess you're right."

While MTV emerged as a space where women and non-white Euro-Americans' art and music could be featured, the channel's target audience was imagined as white and

male. Mulvey's theory nonetheless applies, as female viewers of "Joe's Apartment" would have likely identified with Joe, the protagonist, who reflected the early nineties hegemonic, GenX-masculine discourse. Paradoxically, however, identifying with Joe meant grasping the discourse of white male alienation, even powerlessness. Joe is not sexist, yet sexism is present through the behaviors and attitudes of the cockroaches, as they collectively comment on Joe's date's appearance and eventually cascade from the light fixture into her lap, which is barely covered by a very short skirt. The cockroaches' sexist attitude and behaviors are repelling and they are traditionally masculine, but, interestingly, they come from a reviled life form. Joe neither participates in nor eschews these attitudes, and women viewers comprehending the story through Joe's eyes may have empathized with the confused, dejected protagonist.<sup>61</sup> GenXers grew up with narratives that gave them the impression that gender equality had been achieved. As teens and young adults, they grappled with their own gendered identities. Joe, and perhaps the white male viewers of "Joe's Apartment," yearned for "traditional" masculinity that could be established through sexual prowess or career success. The cockroaches—markers, of course, of filth and poverty—symbolized Joe's failure to veritably attain manhood, as they lurked in the crevices of his apartment and consciousness, always spoiling his masculine performances.

Navigating femininity in an era dubbed "post feminist" was no less challenging for GenX women.<sup>62</sup> Becoming empowered often meant appropriating sexist attitudes and

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<sup>61</sup> Dave Laing, "Listening to Punk," in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1997, 406-419), 416-417. See also Sean Cubett, "Maybellene: Meaning and the Listening Subject," in *Popular Music: A Yearbook: Performers and Audiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>62</sup> The post-feminist debate focused on issues of victimization, autonomy, and responsibility. Post-feminists, such as Wolf, writes Sarah Gamble, are "critical of any definition of women as victims who are

behaviors and applied them to their interactions with men. In her published diaries, Courtney Love, actor and front woman of the band Hole, writes about a sexual encounter with “C”:

The fucking went fairly well... I decided he was a little masochist [and] used my skills, learned in Japan [and] at the Dominatrix Palace to humiliate him. I’ll never fuck him again. I didn’t take his number more than three blocks before I threw it away... it’s fun to fuck. But I am like a guy. I don’t want any emotion or commitment from 90 [percent] of them.<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, Love views this behavior, her attitude about sexual conquests as masculine. Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, equates this state of mind with a gendered form of Uncle Tomming.<sup>64</sup> For Love to act like a man, she must assume that there is “an inherent manliness to which [she] can aspire.”<sup>65</sup> In doing so, she is connecting with the power associated with “manliness.” She engages in gendered Tomming because she recognizes that the “hero” of the patriarchal metanarrative is powerful; she not only seeks to identify with “him,” she replicates his sexist beliefs and behaviors, applying them to her own sexual encounters with men. This strategy Love employs and describes is an entrenched phenomenon that is rooted in the nineteenth century, as women have historically sought to demonstrate their strength by using others sexually.

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unable to control their lives. (See Sarah Gamble, “Postfeminism,” *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, Sarah Gamble, ed. [New York and London: Routledge, 2001, 43-53], 43-44).

<sup>63</sup> Courtney Love, *Dirty Blonde: The Diaries of Courtney Love* (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2006), not paginated.

<sup>64</sup> “Tomming” is derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and refers to exaggerated performance of racially proscribed behaviors; Tom, one of the central characters in the book, exaggerated his behavior – his “blackness” – while in the presence of his slaveholding master. “Tomming” is more loosely associated with adopting or exaggerating a socially constructed category of identity.

<sup>65</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2005), 106-108.



Despite the multiculturalism and diversity that was at the core of the GenerationX mindset, MTV, the pinnacle of the postmodern ethos and aesthetic, spoke most directly to white, middle-class boys and men. In order to fully enter the discourse, female viewers had to perform a psychological transgender masquerade.<sup>66</sup> In doing so, they were susceptible to a paradoxically hegemonic brand of alienation, one that was celebrated in and perpetuated by MTV and popular culture. Ironically, GenX women who grew up learning that they could do anything, were, in adolescence and young adulthood, left with decoding and psychologically “donning” a purportedly de-centered, masculine subject position. Like Grunge music and the “slacker” identity and lifestyle, MTV’s ethos was white and male. It reflected what Patricia Waugh’s prescient observed at the onset of the nineties. She asserts that white males either nostalgically longed for their former state of universal subject-hood, or “revel[ed] angrily in [the] disintegration” of that subject position.<sup>67</sup> In many ways, the pop cultural discourse of the postmodern moment centered on the angst young men experienced as they came to terms with late twentieth century masculinity in at a time when multiculturalism and gender equality were allegedly the order of the day.

At its core, the postmodern condition was a reactive phenomenon, one that came in response to the challenges brought by the post-World War II movements for rights and equality. Clearly, modern, Enlightenment ideas of universality, truth, and progress would no longer suffice in an atmosphere of multiculturalism and gender equality. Third wave

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<sup>66</sup> See Judith Halberstam, “Oh Bondage, Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy,” in Matthew Rottneck, , ed. *Sissies & Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity & Homosexual Childhood* (New York: New York University Press 1999), 153–179.

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Waugh, “Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory” (excerpt), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Patricia Waugh, ed. (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1992, 189-204), 194.

women traversed a post-modern, post-structuralist world that provided them with the experience to doubt and question stringent ideas about gender, identity, and feminism. While these experiences expanded the feminist discourse, they also set the stage for what on the surface appeared to be a new (third) feminist wave. Yet this wave—this postmodern feminism—was also reactive. Fundamentally, many of the issues fought in the seventies by second wave feminists remained the same, or continued to be challenged by highly organized, well funded right wing politicians and pundits. On the surface it seemed that the third wave sought to define itself based on what its foremothers were not. Ironically, many third wavers were reacting to stereotypes of seventies feminists as hairy-legged, butch lesbians, who lacked humor and sex appeal. GenX women had the tools and insights to question the second wave feminist metanarrative, yet, as we will see in the next chapter, some of what has been defined as “third wave” and “feminist,” was, in fact, symptomatic of a generation of women who grew up in an era of mass marketing and excessive consumption. Moreover, Xers were born at a moment in history when the discourse on femininity bore traces of post-World War II-Cold War politics. The domesticity that feminists of the sixties and seventies challenged took on new meaning for white, middle class X women, who, as heirs of the second wave and products of the postmodern condition, playfully proliferated archetypical images of 1950s femininity, and embraced “girlie” culture and traditionally feminine pursuits such as sewing, knitting, cooking, and mothering.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “‘Typical Girls’?: GenX Feminism and Gender Contingency”

*Who invented the typical girl? Who's bringing out the new improved model?*

Ari Up, The Slits<sup>1</sup>

*I am the girl you know, I lie and lie and lie...*

Courtney Love, Hole<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1992, Lynn Hirschberg interviewed Courtney Love, GenX feminist and front woman of the band Hole, for a piece that would appear in *Vanity Fair*. Hirschberg begins her article by describing Love's entrance into the Los Angeles restaurant where the two women agreed to meet for the interview:

Courtney Love is late...She's nearly always late... When she does show up, she *shows* up. When you're an hour late, you can really make an entrance. She's tall and big-boned and her shoulder-length hair is cut like a mop and dyed yellow-blonde. The dark roots show on purpose—nothing about Courtney is an accident—and today she's attached a plastic hair clip in the shape of a bow to a few strands. She's wearing black stockings with runs in them, a vintage dress that's a size too small...[h]er

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is from the song “Typical Girls,” which was first released on The Slits' 1979 album, *Cut* (Island Records).

<sup>2</sup> This quote is from the song “Miss World,” which was first released on Holes' 1994 album, *Live Through This* (Geffen Records).

skin...is powdered...pasty-white, and her lips are painted bright red. She has beautiful round blue-green eyes, which she has carefully made up, but the focus is on her mouth. She's all lipstick. And talk.<sup>3</sup>

Hirschberg's description entwines Love's behavior with her appearance; both defy decorum, restraint, and feminine convention. Love's tardiness, her incessant talking—which Hirschberg describes as “verbal pyrotechnics”—are conventional behaviors for a rock star; they are part of Love's performance for a role for which she yearned. Yet, while her actions fit the rock star trope, they were nonetheless worth noting—Love was a woman, and, by 1992, she had already publicly established herself as “bad girl.” She was, as Hirschberg reports, a loud mouth. She used drugs indiscriminately. She worked as a stripper. She pursued Kurt Cobain, marrying him in the winter of that year. Love's story and her behavior on and off stage undercut conventional standards of femininity.

Likewise, her appearance contrasted with archetypical feminine beauty, particularly for female pop stars. In the eighties and early nineties, mainstream women performers were physically fit, “sexy,” and well coiffed. By the late eighties even Madonna began sculpting her body to fit ideal beauty standards, even as she challenged conventional ideas about female sexuality. While Love's dark roots, vintage “babydoll” dresses, smeared on lipstick, and little-girl hair clips were connected to the ethos of punk, they also told another story. Like a toddler playing dress up, Love took the signs of feminine beauty—the blonde hair, the red lips, the carefully made up eyes—to the extreme. Unlike children playing dress up, when women like Love smeared on lipstick or let dark roots show beneath platinum blonde (or blue or pink) hair, it signaled insight. These signs were an affront to prevailing notions of beauty and feminine display, they

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, “Strange Love,” *Vanity Fair* (September 1993, 230-233 and 296-299), 230-231.

served as props that communicated that Love, like so many young feminists in the nineties, understood that gender was a performance—it was a burlesque, a site of play.<sup>4</sup> As Debbie Stoller, co-founder of the GenX feminist magazine *Bust* perceptively explains: “it’s...clear to us...that fashion is...costume... that femininity is a masquerade, and that sometimes we *like* to play dress up.”<sup>5</sup>

Courtney Love embodied many of the contradictions associated with GenX femininity. They not only unhinged the myth of a possibility of a universal gendered identity, they also understood womanhood as a site of contingency and free play. In the mass media GenX feminism is often narrowly defined and imagined as “girlie,” which casts younger feminists as fashion-fun-loving, sex positive women who embrace thong underwear and find empowerment buying pink cordless drills, blenders, and vibrators. This caricature is contrasted with older, second wave feminists, who, for more than thirty years, have been misrepresented as hirsute, irrational, man-haters. This chapter elucidates the complexities of GenX feminism, exploring it as an instance of political activism. As illustrated, GenXers were clearly influenced by popular culture images and paradoxical messages about “women’s lib” and feminism. Their worldview was wrought by the postmodern condition, and as explained below, by anti-feminist backlash of the late seventies and eighties, and the cultural wars of the nineties.

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<sup>4</sup> My understanding of Butler’s argument also comes from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999). See also Marion Leonard, “ ‘Rebel Girl, You Are the Queen of My World’: Feminism, ‘subculture’, and grrrl power,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, Shelia Whiteley, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 230-256), 233-237.

<sup>5</sup> Debbie Stoller, “Feminists Fatale: BUST-ing the Beauty Myth,” in *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, Marchelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, eds. (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999, 41-47), 42.

### ***Mourning the Privileges of “Normative” Identity***

GenXers became teenagers and young adults amid the uproar of conservatives such as Senator Jesse Helms, “traditional” education advocate Lynne Cheney, media pundit Pat Buchanan, and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who decried the alleged demise of American ideology, history, and values. They watched progressives and intellectuals such as Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center director Dennis Barrie, performance artist Karen Finley, Smithsonian Museum curator Michael Neufeld, and scholar Stanley Fish fight controversial battles over freedom of speech and expression, and for expanding America’s historical narrative to include diverse voices and perspectives. This tension is inherent in the generation’s feminism.

By the mid-seventies, the quintessentially white, middle class family had been transformed by the women’s rights movement. Moreover, legal mandates such as desegregation and affirmative action challenged conservative Americans’ beliefs in individualism. The rise of collectivism—the state “organ[ization] of social and economic life in the name of public welfare and the social good”—challenged ordinary conservatives’ beliefs in “bootstrap” individualism.<sup>6</sup> As they mourned the erosion of the privileges of normative (white male) identity, they looked for a model for their vision of American tradition and social order.<sup>7</sup> They found that vision in the era immediately following World War II, which was, fittingly, a time when gender order was seemingly restored.

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7-14.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase “privilege(s) of normative identity” is from Nancy Warehime’s book, *To Be One of Us*. (see *To Be One of Us: Cultural Conflict, Creative Democracy, and Education* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993], 160).

During the war, the U.S. government waged a publicity campaign to compel women to leave their homes and feminine jobs in order to fill industrial positions left vacant by men fighting the war. At the war's end, government-produced propaganda informed women that it was their patriotic duty to give their well-paying jobs back to men. The war was fueled by women's labor; yet, their collective success and competence in the masculine arena of industry threatened traditional social order and male authority. Ultimately, though in many cases begrudgingly, for nearly two decades after the war, it appeared—at least in newly created white suburbs—that patriarchy was restored, and that the husband's will was the “will of the entire family.”<sup>8</sup> In the nineties, this conservative vision of social order stood as a foil for the ethos wrought by multiculturalism, diversity, and identity politics. It weighed heavily on the collective consciousness of GenX and on the generation's ideas about gender and feminism. While this vision was at odds with the gender equality GenXers came to know as children, it dominated their teen and young adult years, as conservatives and progressives waged the culture wars during the eighties and nineties.

Right-wing Americans viewed feminism and feminist women as prime enemies in the early years of these “wars.”<sup>9</sup> They instigated a backlash against feminism, disseminating anti-feminist vitriol into the American cultural discourse. Conservatives' efforts paid off; as Xers came of age as young adults, they were initially skeptical of feminism, often publicly decrying the movement. In *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, and not surprisingly, *The National Review*, young women called feminism a “mistake” and the “great experiment that failed.” They argued that their generation was

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), 294.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

“the human sacrifice” of the women’s liberation movement, and that they were “duped by feminism.”<sup>10</sup>

Even GenX women who did not see feminism as a failure or a mistake found it limiting and short-sighted. As subjects of the postmodern condition, Gen Xers knew that gender was a complicated proposition, and many young women were wary of joining forces to organize around an unambiguously articulated conception of womanhood. As GenX feminist Jennifer Drake explains: “Our introduction to feminist thought and action [was]...strongly shaped by the critiques of the movement by women of color.” Paradoxically, the illuminating moments Xers experienced as they explored women’s history were clouded by the fact that most of the feminist writers of previous generations were white and middle or upper class. “Reading Elizabeth Cady Stanton...Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, [and] Adrienne Rich...alongside Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga’s *This Bridge Called My Back*...[and] Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*,” writes Drake, “we understood that the personal was political.” As members of Generation X, they instinctively knew that that they should also “ask ‘which personal?’ and ‘whose political?’.”<sup>11</sup>

This skepticism, coupled with what writer Katha Pollitt characterizes as second wavers’ “organizational lock” on feminism, incited Xers to claim a “third wave” of feminism in the early nineties.<sup>12</sup> Second wave and GenX feminists share many of the same goals and both generations grappled with postwar articulations of the American dream, which hinged on traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. While elder

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Drake, “The Mis/Education of Righteous Babes: Popular Culture and Third-Wave Feminism,” in *Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young*, Ronald Strickland, ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, 181-203), 181.

<sup>12</sup> Katha Pollitt, “Amber Waves of Blame,” *The Nation* (June 15, 2009), 10.



feminists took on this myth—indeed, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* on white middle-class women’s sense of alienation and discontentment inspired the first spate of second wave feminism—GenXers grappled with it second hand, as it was the conservative foil to the Right’s perceived “end” of traditional morals and values.

GenX and second wave feminisms differ because the former generation came of age amid the postmodern condition, at a time when, according to philosopher Paul Virilio, “generations of realities are connected to generations of images.”<sup>13</sup> They were, therefore, unwittingly indoctrinated into the spirit of feminism through seventies popular culture. Children’s books and television taught them that men and women were equal. The feminist backlash, which was largely perpetuated by the mass media, incited GenXers’ skepticism of feminism. Finally, however, through mainstream and academic proliferation of postmodern theory, GenX feminists understood gender, and therefore feminism, as a contingent proposition, as a site of free play and ambiguity. Young women like Courtney Love transgressed the bounds of traditional femininity, often turning the very signs of femininity in on themselves. Others “reclaimed” the female pursuits that many feminists of the seventies eschewed, re-imagining sewing, knitting, cooking, and mothering as empowering, rewarding endeavors.

### ***The Backlash and the Culture Wars***

The generation that spent its childhood learning from textbooks written in gender-neutral language, carefully depicting empowered, competent female sanitation workers, social scientists, and astronauts, spent its teen and young adult years amid the backlash against feminism. In her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against*

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<sup>13</sup> Jérôme Sans, “Interview with Paul Virilio,” *Flash Art* Number 138 (January-February 1988), 57.

*American Women*, Susan Faludi exhaustively details the ways in which American politicians, pundits, popular culture, and corporations of the late seventies and eighties blamed feminism and feminists for a range of social ills, branding feminism a cataclysmic mistake. When her book was published in 1991, it was revelatory for young women; it is one of the texts that galvanized GenX feminism. Of course, the cultural critique of feminism did not end in the early nineties. Throughout the decade, conservative personalities such as Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh decried the women's movement, and major newspapers and magazines published stories discrediting feminism. In June of 1998, for instance, feminism made the cover of *Time* magazine. The headline—"Is Feminism Dead?," appeared below images of three feminist leaders (Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem), and one of Ally McBeal, the fictional television character played by Calista Flockhart. Reflecting Faludi's backlash thesis, and the images and messages put forth in the mass media in the seventies, *Time* writer Ginia Bellafante asserted that feminism "has devolved into the silly." Her late nineties twist on Faludi's antifeminist backlash theme is that the movement was "wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession." Bellafante spectaclized feminism, presenting it as a faction of self-indulgent celebrities or psychologically wounded riot grrrls who asserted a "brash, bratty sense of [pre-adolescent] self-control."<sup>14</sup> While the essay establishes a clear definition of feminism—the idea that women "can choose to be anything—the President or a mother, or both," it perpetuates the critique it puts forth, focusing solely on the squabbles and foibles of famous feminists (as well as fictional ones such as Ally McBeal), instead of the achievements of American feminists.

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<sup>14</sup> Ginia Bellafante, "It's All About Me!," *Time*, Volume 151, Number 25 (June 29, 1998), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988616,00.html> (accessed August 9, 2009).

According to Faludi, the key message of the antifeminist backlash is that feminism made women unhappy; the accomplishments of the women's movement "turned [women] into unloved, unhappy fast-trackers, [who were] 'dehumanized' by careers and 'uncertain of their gender identity'." Law enforcement officials, reports Faludi, claimed that "female independence [led to] rising female pathology...[and] crime."<sup>15</sup> As a cultural example, Faludi asserts that in the eighties Hollywood portrayed career women as homicidal (Glenn Close's character in *Fatal Attraction*) or passive "love slaves" (Kim Basinger's role in *9 ½ Weeks*). Even powerful heroines such as the space engineer Sigourney Weaver played in *Aliens* were ultimately maternal. In Weaver's case, writes Faludi, she protects "[an alien] child—who calls her "Mommy"—from female monsters."<sup>16</sup>

Scholars studying late twentieth century American feminism frequently cite Faludi's *Backlash*, due to her exhaustive research and strongly argued thesis. The prevailing message in the late seventies and eighties was that feminism made women unhappy, that the gains for women came, in news anchor Peter Jennings' words, "'at a formidable cost to them'."<sup>17</sup> However, there are exceptions to Faludi's antifeminist backlash narrative.

Some filmmakers of the eighties produced movies that counter Faludi's claim, depicting women as complex, empowered agents who seek independence and personal and professional fulfillment. Director Susan Seidelman's film *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), for instance, focuses on suburban housewife Roberta's dissatisfaction with

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), xii-xiii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

her monotonous life. Through newspaper personal ads, Roberta crosses paths with Susan, an urban vagabond. While in New York City, Roberta develops amnesia and, through a series of events, is mistaken for Susan; she ultimately comes to, but her experience only underscores how unsatisfied she is with her life in suburbia.

An underlying theme in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is the separation between the domestic and public realms and Roberta's dissatisfaction with the monotony of her life as a suburban wife. Susan navigates New York's gritty neighborhoods, shops, and nightclubs, and emerges as a hero, as, with Roberta's help, she solves a crime involving stolen ancient Egyptian earrings. Consequently, *Desperately Seeking Susan* is a feminist story; both Susan and Roberta emerge as powerful accomplices, and Roberta relinquishes her life of comfort for the freedom and autonomy of the city.

*9 to 5* (1980), which stars Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, and Dolly Parton, is another categorically feminist film. It centers on the travails of a trio of female office workers, who are sexually harassed, denied promotions, and verbally abused by their white male boss. Over drinks and marijuana, the women share fantasies of how they would "off the boss." While every fantasy is different, all of the women deliver the same message—the boss is being poisoned, shot, or roped and roasted because he is a "sexist, egoistical bigot."<sup>18</sup> Their fantasies partially materialize when, through a series of gaffes involving coffee and rat poison, they kidnap their boss, reforming the office environment while he is held captive in his home—where, fittingly, he is tied up and left alone with daytime television and soap opera magazines.

Ultimately, films such as *9 to 5* and *The Burning Bed*, a film about a woman who kills her husband to save herself and her children from physical abuse, illustrate the

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<sup>18</sup> *9 to 5* (Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1980, [2001 DVD release]).

mainstream proliferation of seventies radical feminism, as groups such as Women Armed For Self Protection (WASP) advocated violence as a means of self-protection. In 1974, for instance, WASP produced and distributed flyers stating, “Women and Men Were Created Equal...And Smith & Wesson Makes Damn Sure It Stays That Way.”<sup>19</sup> The female characters in films such as these were unhappy, however, they asserted agency—sometimes to violent extremes—in situations where their options were limited.

Beyond Hollywood, Faludi meticulously recounts the antifeminist backlash in the news media. The media’s backlash trajectory began in the mid-seventies when they “settled on a line that served to neutralize and commercialize feminism at the same time...the mass media...decided [that women] were now equal and no longer seeking new rights—just new lifestyles.” The triumphant, “career-superwoman” trope reigned, until, Faludi reports, “the media’s pseudofeminist cheerleading stopped suddenly in the early ‘80s and the press soon struck up a dirge.”<sup>20</sup> The media’s requiem on feminism is indisputable, though it was not as neatly interred as Faludi suggests. A July 1981 *The New York Times Magazine* cover story by Betty Friedan did, as she reports, begin with the declarative sentence: “The women’s movement is over.” The quote—by a “confident feminist executive friend” of Friedan’s—represents a common device for news stories, as it is meant to draw readers into an article. Friedan’s piece was, in truth, about what the potential failure of the Equal Rights Amendment might mean for the future of feminism. Ultimately, Friedan claims that “[feminists] have reached, not the

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<sup>19</sup> Woman Armed For Self Protection, New York, NY (flyer produced and distributed in Dallas, TX in 1974) from the Kate Millett Papers of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s Culture and History in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

<sup>20</sup> Faludi, 76.

beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning.”<sup>21</sup> For its part, in fact, *The New York Times* handled feminism evenhandedly throughout the eighties and the early nineties, giving writers such as Susan Bolotin more than 5,700 words in the fall of 1982 to address the intricacies of what she termed the “post-feminist” generation. They also continued to run the “Hers” column, a forum for women writers (many of whom were feminists) until 1986.

Messages about unhappily unmarried, infertile career women were ubiquitous in the early to mid-eighties, particularly on primetime television and in women’s magazines.<sup>22</sup> By opting for careers and fulfillment outside the home, women undermined their “natural” capacities for finding suitable mates and conceiving babies. Even economists, reports Faludi, “argued that well-paid working women...created ‘a less stable American family’.”<sup>23</sup> However, in the early eighties even magazines marketed to working women included articles with layered messages on working women and motherhood. For instance, in May 1980, *Working Mother* featured a story about Deborah Ann Cusick, a 27-year-old “successful...white, Protestant, single and solidly middle class [career woman],” who chose single motherhood when confronted with an unplanned pregnancy. Writer Fern Marja Eckman underscores Cusick’s “Norman Rockwell” home life, yet she also describes the ways in which the young woman’s parents adapted to their daughter’s decision, and the ways in which “almost everyone in her life rallied around her with warmth and affirmation.” Cusick says that her son is “the best thing that has ever happened to [her].” While the story supports the archetype of the selfless, devoted

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<sup>21</sup> Betty Friedan, “Feminism’s Next Step,” *The New York Times Magazine* (July 5, 1981), Section 6; Page 14, Column 1; Magazine Desk.

<sup>22</sup> Faludi, 95-111.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

mother—Cusick’s decision to forego abortion and have the baby was “a passionate tenderness for the child she had conceived”—it focuses on what the writer identifies as a trend toward single motherhood among young (19 to 31 year old) single career women.

Moreover, the article focused on the ways in which women like Cusick were happily melding work and parenthood. While Cusick was, at times, lonely, and “always tired,” Eckman described the ways in which middle-class white women were free to make choices that would not have been available to them had they not had careers of their own.<sup>24</sup> This narrative complicates Faludi’s assertion that the media simplistically portrayed single career women as unhappy and infertile. While Eckman’s essay perpetuates many tropes on motherhood, it reveals the ways in which women such as Cusick used their economic power to freely opt for single parenthood.

While the antifeminist backlash narrative that Faludi charts was more nuanced than she suggests, it was, nonetheless, palpable, and it shaped GenXers views on feminism, augmenting the messages that they gleaned from adult popular culture of the seventies. In childhood they learned that “women’s libbers” were loud-mouthed, ugly, and irrational; the backlash turned the spirit and ideology and gains of seventies feminism into a national disaster. The focus shifted from “libbers” to feminism and, subsequently, to feminists. The backlash of the eighties turned “feminism” into a derogatory term; it became the other “F-word.”

The feminist backlash was the pre-emptive battle in the culture wars. The women’s movement, reports Faludi, challenged conservative values, a way of life. In 1980, Paul Weyrich, founder of the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation,

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<sup>24</sup> Fern Marja Eckman, “A Most Wanted Baby,” *McCall’s Working Mother* (May 1980), 88, 156-159, 162-165.

“identified [feminism] as the culprit,” writes Faludi. “In the *Conservative Digest*, he warned...of the feminist threat: ‘their political power lies in the restructuring of the traditional family, and particularly the downsizing of the male or father role in the traditional family’.”<sup>25</sup> Weyrich’s apprehensions were justified, as the women’s movement and other sixties and seventies movements for rights challenged the patriarchal structure and white privilege. The ramifications of this confrontation ran deep, as it meant that the culture’s knowledge—its ideas about history, science, medicine, and education—would no longer most closely resemble the beliefs of powerful white men. The culture wars were fought over who would most prominently shape the cultural discourse of the late twentieth century.

The schools and the academy were other key battlegrounds. Debates raged around humanities education, in particular. As the histories of women, African Americans, American Indians, and other groups challenged the metanarrative of American history, progressive scholars believed that “the greatest service historians can render in a democracy... is [a continuous reexamination] of the past.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, this ran counter to conservatives’ view of history, which encompassed conventional narratives on political figures and events and military battles. Debates raged over the way American history would be taught and presented in textbooks, whether or not universities should adopt a “core curriculum in the humanities,” and how, subsequently, the voices and experiences of women and minorities would be included in the canons of

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<sup>25</sup> Faludi, 232.

<sup>26</sup> Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000), 8.



history, literature, and philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Radical feminists were, according to the author of *Tenured Radicals*, the biggest challenge to the canon.<sup>28</sup> Conservative educators such as Allan Bloom, Lynne Cheney, Carolyn Mooney, and William Bennett argued that academics—again, most notoriously feminists—abandoned the “truth,” replacing it with their own political agendas. In their view, the classics were being abandoned in favor of biased texts written by women and people of color.<sup>29</sup>

In his best-selling 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, conservative writer Allan Bloom laments the end of the “authentic values” put forth in many of the West’s classic texts. “Authentic values,” he writes, are those “...by which a life can be lived, which can form a people that produces great deeds and thoughts. Moses, Jesus, Homer, Buddha: these are the creators, the men who formed horizons, the founders of...[cultures].” According to Bloom, values such as those put forth by great men such as these, “are not rational...they must be imposed.”<sup>30</sup> Conservatives like Bloom understood the power in this imposition of values; this was the knowledge that shaped discourse and kept the privileges of normative identity intact.

The battles of the culture wars inculcated GenXers’ collective psyche, leaving many of the generation with a sense of cynicism and disdain toward feminism. Faludi’s *Backlash* exhaustively details the ways in which the feminist backlash and, subsequently, the early days of the culture wars, infiltrated the American cultural discourse. Given her account of the late seventies and eighties, it is not surprising that before GenXers could claim feminism, many would adopt “postfeminist” stances.

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Warehime, *To Be One of Us: Cultural Conflict, Creative Democracy, and Education* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Faludi, 291.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>30</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 201.

### ***Post-Feminism and “The New Female Power”*<sup>31</sup>**

The term “post-feminist” first emerged in 1982 in a *New York Times Magazine* article by Susan Bolotin. For the essay, titled “Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation,” Bolotin interviewed a number of women in their twenties; most said that they believed in women’s rights and equality, but that they did not consider themselves feminists. Bolotin reports that she consistently heard feminists described as “bitter,” “icy monsters,” and “unhappy...tortured people” who “let themselves go physically.” One woman, twenty-four-year-old Mindy Werner identified herself as a feminist. However, Werner told Bolotin that she felt judged by other feminists; she encountered “too many feminists for whom going to the bathroom [was] a political issue.”<sup>32</sup>

By the late eighties, leading feminists such as writer Naomi Wolf—whose 1991 bestselling book, *The Beauty Myth*, was, like Faludi’s *Backlash*, an activating force behind early nineties GenX feminism—called for a newly reconstructed feminism, one that served the time and evolving needs of women. Ironically, this call and the “post-feminist” era arose at the same time women of color expanded feminism to better address issues significant to them.<sup>33</sup> In 1983, for instance, Alice Walker articulated womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Womanism is centered largely on Black women’s and other women of color’s “expression[s], vision[s]...[and distinct] paths,” which, in womanist scholar Layli Phillips’ words, are dependent upon each woman’s “uniquenesses, [which] they...acquired at birth and [through] all their successive travels

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<sup>31</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It* (New York, NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Susan Bolotin, “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 1982, 28-31.

<sup>33</sup> Rosen, 276.

through different experiences since that time.”<sup>34</sup> Two years earlier, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, first through the independent publisher, Persephone Press, and later through Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Whether or not she recognized it, when Wolf spoke of reinventing feminism, she meant white, middle class, “second wave” feminism; she, like many of the women addressed in this study, unwittingly perpetuated a trope that was tied to white privilege and a historical metanarrative tied to modern, teleological “Western” ideas regarding progress.

Ultimately, the post-feminist debate focused on issues of victimization, autonomy, and responsibility. Post-feminists, such as Wolf, explains scholar Sarah Gamble are “critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their lives.”<sup>35</sup> In 1993 both Wolf and Katie Roiphe wrote books critiquing “victim” feminism. Roiphe’s *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* garnered significant media attention. Roiphe is the daughter of feminist writer Anne Roiphe, the book therefore fueled right-wing flames; the younger Roiphe was, in their view, a left-wing defector.

Wolf’s book, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*, did not receive the same attention as Roiphe’s, yet from a historical perspective it is the more significant of the two. It followed *The Beauty Myth*, which galvanized GenX feminism with its analysis of the ways in which the beauty myth prescribes behavior and, as she

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<sup>34</sup> Layli Phillips, “Introduction,” *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006, xix-lv), xxxvii.

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Gamble, “Postfeminism,” *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, Sarah Gamble, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2001, 43-53), 43-44.

explains, “keeps male dominance intact.”<sup>36</sup> *The Beauty Myth* demonstrates the ways in which women are victimized by the cultural discourse on beauty. Paradoxically echoing conservative individualism, in *Fire with Fire*, Wolf argues that new “power” feminists can “determine their own fate...if they stop thinking of themselves as passive victims of history.” While she calls for the creation of pro-woman political action committees, she also attempts to “clear away the dead weight of what is truly not working in feminism.”<sup>37</sup> The activism Wolf proposes is representative of late eighties post-feminism, in that it she encourages women to claim their “individual voices” in lieu of merging them in a collective identity, for, she posits, “only strong individuals can create a just community.”<sup>38</sup>

GenXers’ path toward feminism was not clear-cut, and Wolf’s text is compelling because it illustrates a prominent GenX woman’s feminist evolution. In the span of roughly two years, Wolf seemingly changed from a radical, “victim” feminist—a perspective that is evident in *The Beauty Myth*—to an autonomous “power” post-feminist. The newly articulated feminist identity Wolf put forth in *Fire with Fire* operated on the idea that “it [was] up to individual women to make personal choices... ‘feminist’ practices became matters of personal style or individual choice and any emphasis on organizational intervention [was] naïve.”<sup>39</sup> Ironically, as Wolf critiqued feminism as a collective effort, she failed to address the ways in which the second wave feminist movement made discussions of “power” feminism possible.

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<sup>36</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2002), 11-13.

<sup>37</sup> Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, xv.

<sup>38</sup> Wolf, 136-137.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine M. Orr, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” *Hypatia* 12, No. 3 (Summer 1997), 29-45.

The post-feminism of the late eighties and early nineties was a fitting phase for a generation who grew up learning from textbooks that women and men were equal, and from television that they were “free to be” whatever they chose to be. Ironically, because the ideas were so stealthily integrated into the ethos of seventies popular culture and children’s media, Xers did not recognize them as feminist. The anti-feminist backlash of the eighties framed feminism as a failure, as an outmoded identity. For teen and young adult Xers in the early nineties, feminism was a historical amalgamation of three decades of contentious battles over women’s rights and evolving articulations of gender.

***“Those Were the Days”: The Culture Wars and the Fight Over the American Dream***<sup>40</sup>

The culture wars were waged on many fronts, and in the last decade of the twentieth century the mass media was a key battle ground. Conservatives made great strides in the realm of public relations, by propagating a vision of traditional family values that reflected post World War II suburbia, which was imagined as solidly white, patriarchal, and middle class. In the late eighties, reports Faludi, Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich said it plainly to a group of foundation constituents: “‘We’re not here to get into politics. We’re here to turn the clock back to 1954 in this country’.” As Faludi documents, the publicity campaign Weyrich and conservative activists waged worked. “In the final years of the decade,” she writes, “when men like Weyrich picked up

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<sup>40</sup> Lee Adams and Charles Strouse, “Those Were the Days” (*All in the Family* theme song), 1970. I recognize that the “days” to which the *All in the Family* theme song refers are the 1930s, while the “good old days” era that I address is the 1950s. I believe that it is an apt subheading for this section because the song captures the sense of nostalgic longing for a time when the privileges of normative identity were more firmly intact in the cultural discourse.

their newspapers, it seemed...that...the hands of time were beginning to inch counterclockwise.”<sup>41</sup>

Hegemonic, midcentury articulations of femininity therefore weighed heavily on GenX women as they emerged as young feminists in the early nineties. After World War II, “ideal” white femininity echoed what historian Barbara Welter famously described in 1966 in regard to nineteenth-century womanhood. The “Cult of True Womanhood,” asserts Welter, was founded on “four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” and white, middle-class women were judged on how well they projected and performed these virtues.<sup>42</sup> Published just three years after Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the nineteenth century womanhood that Welter describes looks very much like the “ideal” suburban housewife on which Friedan focuses. Three of the “virtues” of “true womanhood”—domesticity, purity, and submissiveness, were at the core of the mid-twentieth century discourse on white, middle-class femininity; they were a source of contention for second wave feminists. As the words and actions of feminist sex workers, raucous riot grrrl musicians, and defiant zinesters reveal, purity and submissiveness were also sites of rebellion for GenX feminists.

Gen X women did not experience the mid-century’s version of ideal femininity and the American Dream first hand; they were not yet born at the height of post war affluence. And, as Stephanie Coontz reveals in *The Way We Never Were*, most Americans alive in the mid fifties did not experience the fantasy either—it was a nostalgic myth propagated in part by television programs on domestic life such as *Ozzie*

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<sup>41</sup> Faludi, 230.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966), pp. 151-174, 152.

and *Harriet*.<sup>43</sup> The dream nevertheless influenced GenXers' worldview, because, as literary studies scholar Bran Nicol asserts, Xers' reality was framed by popular culture. They are, he writes, "consequently unable to avoid relating everyday 'real' experience to everyday fictional experience, especially that which has been screened."<sup>44</sup> The ethos and characters of fifties television came to Xers through cable television. MTV, which debuted in 1981, and Nickelodeon's evening programming, "Nick at Night," which began airing in 1985, appropriated and recycled sitcoms from the fifties and sixties. *The Donna Reed Show* was the mainstay of "Nick at Night's" inaugural offerings. Homogeneous images of white middle class femininity and masculinity thus served as ironic foils to the complex articulations of late twentieth century gender politics and multiculturalism.

Xers proliferated mid-century pop culture images to underscore their angst over and understanding of the empty promises of capitalism and the limitations of the American dream. This angst was specifically gendered, as convention dictated that middle-class women shop for and maintain the home. Of course, as books such as Grace Metalious' 1956 *Peyton Place* reveal, the joy and confidence that the mid-century feminine and masculine caricatures projected was a masquerade. White, beautiful, and affluent, they seemed to have it all; yet, as Georganne Schreiner asserts in her research on 1950s movie star Sandra Dee, who was considered as the "embodiment of the virginal, perky, uncomplicated [1950s] girl," the true story "reveals precisely the opposite." Evoking Coontz's "nostalgia trap," Schreiner looks at the details of Dee's personal life, which undercut the mythology that "there was no incest, violence against women, eating

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<sup>43</sup> See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: NY: Basic Books, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Bran Nicol, "Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*, Bran Nicol, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002, 13-19), 4.

disorders, substance abuse, or sex outside of marriage.”<sup>45</sup> Paradoxically, GenXers’ appropriation of images like those of Sandra Dee reveal a longing for a fantasy that was sold as reality, and scorn for a society that dared to put forth the dream in the first place. The ironic depictions of the happy housewife and the fifties everyman signal a defiant assertion that white middle-class Xers refused to accept the grand narrative of the American Dream.<sup>46</sup>

Generic visions of femininity stood as a marked contrast to GenX feminists’ understanding of womanhood as complex and multidimensional. As products of the postmodern condition, Gen X feminists “call[ed] into question the ways in which... ‘examples’ and ‘paradigms’ serve to subordinate and erase that which they seek to explain.”<sup>47</sup> Like second wave feminists, they contested historically constructed notions of “true womanhood,” yet, as beneficiaries of the gains brought by their foremothers, they re-imagined domesticity as a site of creativity and feminine empowerment.

For GenX young women, the happy housewife symbolized the feminine articulation of the American Dream. It is predictable that this vision of womanhood was the standard upon which GenX women playfully and, often cynically, contrasted their understanding of femininity and domesticity; as post-Boomers, they also grappled with gendered articulations that were shaped by Cold War politics and culture. Evoking Truman’s Cold War strategy, historian Elaine Tyler May connects the mid twentieth century discourse on femininity with the broader political strategy of the containment of

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<sup>45</sup> Georganne Schreiner, “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee: Beyond White, Teen Icon,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* (Vol. 22, No. 2 [2001], 87-106), 87.

<sup>46</sup> This interpretation was inspired by Terri Susan Zurbrigg’s discussion of Douglas Coupland’s novels and his critique of the American Dream grand narrative. See *X = What? Douglas Coupland, Generation X, and the Politics of Postmodern Irony* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG and licensors, 2008), 11-12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-19. My understanding of Butler’s argument also comes from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).



Communism. Women—their appearance, sexuality, and labors, argues May, served the private realm of the home, where they were to cultivate a “warm hearth” for husbands and children in a time of Cold War uncertainty.<sup>48</sup> The happily “contained,” beautiful housewife in high heels was, of course, a ruse, one that Betty Friedan exposed in 1963 with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*.

As subjects of the postmodern condition, Gen Xers appropriated generic images of 1950s femininity and masculinity. The happy housewife and fifties everyman appeared ubiquitously in zines and liner notes accompanying mixed tapes, and on stickers and postcards produced and distributed by GenXers. The generic figures represented the generation’s understanding of the limits of the post-World War II American dream of white suburban affluence. They functioned as foils to the Xers’ understanding of gender as a tenuous, complicated proposition. And, at a time when tensions over “politically correct” versus “traditional” articulations of American history and values ran deep, the gendered caricatures stood as reminders of the truth: the metanarrative never represented the culture’s true heterogeneity.

J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, the fifties everyman figurehead of the simulated “religious” cult, The Church of the SubGenius,” was omnipresent in the late eighties and early nineties, as was the 1950s advertising aesthetic that was put forth in “Bob’s” “sacred” texts, such as *The Book of the SubGenius: The Sacred Teachings of J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs*.<sup>49</sup> The texts and the overall aesthetic of The Church of the SubGenius are reminiscent of the Dada movement of the early twentieth century. Like the Dadaists, “Church” members

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<sup>48</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), see “Introduction” and Chapter 1, “Containment at Home: Cold War, Warm Hearth.”

<sup>49</sup> See J.R. “Bob” Dobb, *The Book of the SubGenius* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., First Fireside Edition, 1987).

produced and proliferated nonsensical collages of text fragments, clip art, comics, and advertising images. The overarching theme was apocalyptic, and they imagined that the end of the world would be brought on by the mindless consumption of products and mass media, and the unequivocal acceptance of religious principles and American mores and traditions. “Bob” Dobbs epitomized late eighties and early nineties GenX irony; he was the fifties everyman, and throughout the books of *The SubGenius*, his white image, with its crew cut hair, and ever-present pipe were pasted on everything from mastodons, fifties pinup models, cartoon characters of all ages, genders, and races, and astronauts walking on the moon’s surface. “Bob’s” creators understood that powerful white masculinity pervaded all aspects of American culture and ideology. However, the ethos of destruction and Armageddon revealed their understanding that this white, “normative” worldview was waning.

Mainstream popular culture also demonstrated a fascination with the fifties ethos. In the satirical comic *This Modern World*, cartoonist Tom Tomorrow (Dan Perkins) employed a mid-fifties aesthetic, featuring caricatures of the white middle class such as news anchors, “Biff” and “Wanda.” Tomorrow used these icons to critique 1990s culture, politics, and the rise of free market capitalism.<sup>50</sup> Hollywood also took on the contrast between 1950s “innocence” and 1990s cynicism in the film *Pleasantville* (1998). Through the mysterious “zap” of a television remote control, nineties teenagers David and Jennifer enter their favorite fifties family sitcom (*Pleasantville*). The world they enter is black-and-white. Yet, as they enlighten their monochrome peers on issues ranging from sexuality to racial tolerance, color emerges, first on ordinary things such as

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<sup>50</sup> Tom Tomorrow, *This Modern World*, online archive <http://thismodernworld.com/cartoon-archive/> (accessed July 15, 2009).

trees, and later as residents takes matters into their own hands, painting a mural depicting Martin Luther King, Jr. *Pleasantville*'s message is obvious—traditional American values limited individual expression and happiness. In the cultural wars, it was clear that the creators of this film stood on the side of progressives; they used a televised version of white, middle class fifties suburbia to make their point known.

GenX feminists incorporated images of gleeful 1950s housewives and glamorous actresses in zines and, as the decade progressed, they marketed, bought, and disseminated jewelry, coffee mugs, and post cards depicting these mid-century feminine archetypes. Xers' penchant for these caricatures points, in part, to the camp ethos that is associated with the GenX worldview. Camp, according to Susan Sontag, is about façade, the surface of things. Camp is artifice and parody; it is about "things-being-what-they-are-not."<sup>51</sup> For Xers, who grew up as the privileges of normative identity were eroding, the happy housewife and fifties everyman were the epitome of camp. On the surface, 1950s America seemed to be a simpler place. In reality, however, the culture was comprised of diverging identities and world views; to use Sontag's camp quotient—things seemed to be what they were not. The prevailing discourse of the fifties was white. Those in power most directly create knowledge, which projects a particular racial, gender, and linguistic reality.<sup>52</sup> This was at the core of the nineties cultural wars and what drew GenX women and men to the happy housewife and fifties everyman caricatures.

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Picador, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 275-292), 279.

<sup>52</sup> Nancy Warehime, *To Be One of Us: Cultural Conflict, Creative Democracy, and Education* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 160.

***“You make me want to go away—you make me want to crochet!”***<sup>53</sup>

Historians of the Market Revolution in the antebellum U.S. illustrate the ways in which the shift from subsistence economy to an industrialized financial system significantly changed in the ways in which domestic labor and “feminine” crafts were perceived. Under industrial capitalism, society was ideologically divided into two gendered spheres—the public and the private, or “home” and “work.” “Women’s” work and crafts, and skills connected with the domestic realm were—to varying degrees throughout history—less valued because they were created and conducted in the private sphere, away from the sites where the business of capitalism takes place.<sup>54</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that when the second wave gained momentum in the 1970s white middle class feminists encouraged women to strive for careers in the public sphere.

White GenX feminists reclaimed and celebrated many of these “feminine” pursuits. “Girlie feminism” of the early 1990s, which focused on re-appropriating accoutrements of femininity, such as fashion, makeup, and the color pink, and embracing traditionally feminine pursuits such as knitting, sewing, and crocheting as a way to honor and inspire sisterhood, reflected the theories and ideas of feminists of previous generations. In the early twentieth century, for instance, Charlotte Perkins Gilman praised femininity, arguing that women could create a healthier, happier, more peaceful

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<sup>53</sup> Julie Ruin, “Crochet,” *Julie Ruin* (Seattle, WA: Kill Rock Stars, 1998), track 11.

<sup>54</sup> For a succinct overview of the pre-1990s Marxist historiography of this topic, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix-xvii. Boydston complicates the orthodox Marxist interpretation that “housework has been useful to industrial capitalism...in [it keeps] the paid labor force alive and tractable from day to day, year to year, and generation to generation.” She argues that, in fact, housewives worked “very hard...[and] their labors contribute[d] in substantial ways to the survival and material prosperity of their households,” xii-xiii. Also see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991).

society than the patriarchal system in which they inhabited.<sup>55</sup> More recently, cultural feminism emerged out of the women's liberation movement as a theory that recognized and celebrated the positive aspects of the "feminine" character. Historian Alice Echols explains the practical basis of second wave cultural feminism; it was a response to early seventies radical feminism and radical lesbian feminism. Cultural feminists "vilified...male values rather than men...and female bonding rather than lesbianism was valorized." It therefore created a space for heterosexual feminists, many of whom felt ostracized by the assertions of radical feminist groups like Redstockings and leaders like Kate Millett, who asserted that heterosexual relationships were fundamentally oppressive.<sup>56</sup>

"Girlie" feminism stood in stark contrast to the derogatory "women's lib" stereotype GenXers knew as children. While "girlie" resembles seventies cultural feminism, a key difference is the whole-hearted embrace of traditional female pastimes such as knitting and crocheting. Debbie Stoller of *Bust*, an early advocate of knitting and doing, "housey-girlie crafty things," began devoting a column, titled "She's Crafty," to these pursuits in the spring/summer 1997 issue of *Bust* (and which still appears in the magazine today). Since 2003, she has published three books on knitting and crocheting.<sup>57</sup> Evoking a trans-historical sisterhood, Stoller describes the feelings knitting conjures whenever she "take[s] up [her] needles":

...I would feel myself connected not only to my own mother,  
grandmother, and great-grandmother, but also to the women who lived

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<sup>55</sup> Gilman articulated this idea in *Herland*, which was published in 1915 as a serial in *The Forerunner*, a monthly magazine that Gilman wrote, edited, and published from 1909 to 1916. See "Note," in Gilman, *Herland* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), iii-iv.

<sup>56</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 244-45.

<sup>57</sup> The first iteration of "She's Crafty," appeared on page 10 of *Bust*, Issue #9 Spring/Summer 1997. Erika Bardot penned the first column, which was titled "Wake Up and Smell the Tea Bag."

centuries before me, the women who had developed the craft, the women who had known, as I did, the incredible satisfaction and sense of serenity that could come from the steady, rhythmic *click-click-click* of one's knitting needles.<sup>58</sup>

Stoller re-inscribes knitting as a significant and practical art and an empowering, “meditative and peaceful” endeavor. As a corrective to second wave feminists’ views on “women’s work,” she states, “[second wave] feminists...overlooked an important aspect of knitting when they viewed it simply as part of women’s societal obligation to serve everyone around them—they [forgot] that knitting served the knitter as well.”<sup>59</sup>

“Crafting,” as it is now commonly called, is part of the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos that emerged in the early 1990s.<sup>60</sup> Fundamentally, the goal of the DIY practitioner is to subvert the polish and packaging of corporate marketers and to connect with people who share the same interests and values. In a culture where ideas are distilled into slogans, which are then vetted by focus groups and advertising executives, creating new and unique cultural forms and sharing them with other people on one’s own terms is an empowering pursuit.<sup>61</sup>

Crafting was part of the larger generational project, the GenX push against brands and corporatism, and toward creating self-styled communities. Cultural critic Naomi Klein began writing her biting exposé of the “secrets behind corporate brands”—*No Logo*, in the mid nineties. She hoped that it would help to fuel an “outrage...[and a]...political movement, a vast wave of opposition squarely targeting transnational

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<sup>58</sup> Debbie Stoller, *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* (New York, NY: Workman Publishing, 2003), 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> DIY or “lo-fi” subcultures are not a new phenomenon. In *DIY: the rise of lo-fi culture* (London and New York: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2005), Amy Spencer states that the ethos is rooted in “[t]he 1930s sci-fi zine, the dada art zine, the chapbook created by beat writers of the 1950s, small-scale radical magazines of the 1960s, [and] punk zines of the 1970s,” 12.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

corporations,” and in many ways books such as Klein’s did just that.<sup>62</sup> While many young people took to the streets to protest the abuses of global corporations (the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” protest of the World Trade Organization conference is one of the most well-known of the decade), opting out of consumerism was another form of protest. Unlike the “politicized purchaser” of the previous generation who boycotted and protested unfair pricing or mistreated workers, crafters made their own garments, becoming politicized creators.<sup>63</sup>

As feminist crafter Leah Kramer asserts, DIY practitioners were both empowered and edified; “making things yourself,” she writes, “helps you appreciate how much work can go into things like clothing and can make you wonder how they can be sold so cheaply.”<sup>64</sup> Knitting, crocheting, and sewing were also a part of the larger DIY movement; individuals created what they needed or wanted on their own terms, outside of the arena of global capitalism. In doing so, they subverted the capitalist order and demonstrated that the personal was indeed political, as individual choices affect the lives of others, particularly for the low-paid laborers in poor countries, who are most often charged with producing cheap goods for American consumers. Crafting and other DIY activities are part of what Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman describes as a “cool revolution,” wherein a new paradigm of balance (as opposed to excess—in this case, excess consumption, waste, and, in many cases, corporate oppression) arises and is

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<sup>62</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (New York, NY: Picador, 2000), xx.

<sup>63</sup> The phrase “politicized purchaser” comes from Lizabeth Cohen. See Chapter 8, “Politics: Purchasers Politicized,” in *The Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 2003, 345-397).

<sup>64</sup> Spencer, 68-69.

sustained individually, with the goal of gradually and “coolly transform[ing] society and eventually the polity.”<sup>65</sup>

While many GenXers did not take to the streets to protest the exploitive practices of corporations, many abstained from indiscriminately consuming by making their own garments, often in social settings. Commenting on the spirit of the “stitch ‘n bitch” knitting groups that Stoller’s work inspired in the nineties, Kramer explains that creative pursuits, especially when done collectively, can be extremely empowering. “When you get a bunch of creative, strong-minded women together,” she says, “things happen!”<sup>66</sup> Like second wave feminists who espoused and practiced “personal is political” principles, GenX feminists and DIY practitioners exemplified the ethos of a “cool revolution.” By taking over the means of production and creating useful, handmade items, they “turned politics on its head [demonstrating] that the best way to build a healthy society [is] from the bottom up.”<sup>67</sup> Crafting, like writing and publishing a zine or making and distributing one’s own music, was a rejoinder to the alienation wrought by late twentieth century consumer society. The DIY movement is a direct response to the assertion Douglas Coupland puts forth in *Generation X*: shopping is not a creative endeavor.<sup>68</sup>

### ***“Your Words No Longer Excite Me”*<sup>69</sup>**

Language was another site where Gen X feminists transgressed middle-class decorum, historically entrenched articulations of “true womanhood,” and the standards

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<sup>65</sup> Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolutions: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, A Member of Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998), 95.

<sup>66</sup> Spencer, 68-69.

<sup>67</sup> Thurman, 95.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas Coupland, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Misty, *Just Like a Girl*, #3, circa 1990, 20.





adoption of the term signaled their desire to commemorate girlhood.<sup>73</sup> The embrace of “girl” or “grrrl” reflects also something deeper, which is connected to the GenX worldview. Stoller clearly articulates this in the inaugural issue of *Bust*: “I suppose what it comes down to is that the dichotomy of me is what makes me who I am and allows me to feel comfortable in the realm of my girl mind while existing in the frame of a woman.”<sup>74</sup> Stoller honors her “girl” psyche, rectifying it with the physical and emotional aspects of womanhood. Ultimately, “girl” is about identifying and honoring another aspect of feminine identity.

The generational recognition of the instability of language allowed for the creation and/or reclamation of meaning; they subversively recast words in their own terms. GenX feminists playfully and politically reappropriated derogatory words such as “bitch” and “cunt,” excavating historical definitions and engendering them with new meaning. GenX feminist writer and activist Inga Muscio titled her first book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*. In it, she argues for a restoration of the word “cunt” into a term of empowerment, and calls for young feminists to adopt it as a positive feminist adjective, noun, and attitude. Researching the history of the word, she reports that “In ancient writings, the word ‘cunt’ was synonymous with ‘woman’, though not in the insulting modern sense.” Moreover, “cunt” is often loaded with associations of female

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter two and reference to McGraw-Hill’s “Guidelines for the Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications” were printed in the October 10, 1974 edition of *The New York Times*. Feminists on Children’s Media were addressing the language question as early as 1970 (see Chapter two on their publication *Little Miss Muffet Fights Back*, as well as “A Feminist Look at Children’s Books by the Feminists on Children’s Media,” in *Radical Feminism*, Anne Koedt, editor [New York, NY: Quadrangle, New York Times Books, 1973, 94-106], 97.) I’ve provided numerous examples of this message in chapter two, however, the ubiquitous edict is nicely summed up in the inside front cover of Vivian Sheldon Epstein’s book, *The ABCs of What a Girl Can Be*. She writes, “What I grow up what shall I be to become the very happiest me? People once thought there were jobs a woman shouldn’t do. Now we know this isn’t true, it’s only up to you.” See Epstein, *The ABCs of What a Girl Can Be* (Denver, CO: VSE Publisher, LLC, 1980).

<sup>74</sup> Debbie Stoller (a.k.a. “Betty Boob”), “Tales of Me,” *Bust*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July 1993), n.p.

power and sexuality; the modern predilection for containing women's sexuality was, she writes, "a huge priority to emerging patriofocal religious and economic systems."<sup>75</sup>

Musco calls for the harnessing of "cunt power" as a political stance, an attitude, a state of mind.

"Bitch" and "cunt" were also an affront to traditional standards of femininity; as swear words, they were an affront on feminine purity and submissiveness. Muscio explores the transgressive nature of "cunt" in relationship to the more socially acceptable term, "vagina." In the book's prelude, Muscio implores the reader to say "vagina" out loud. "Strip away the meaning and listen solely to the phonetic sound," she says, "It resonates from the roof of your mouth. A vagina could be an economy car: 'That's right, Wanda! Come within five hundred dollars of the actual price, and you'll win this! A brand new *Chrysler Vagina!*'" Conversely, she contends, "Cunt resonates from your gut. It sounds like something you don't want to tangle with in a drunken brawl in a dark alley... it could be a serious weather condition: 'Next on Nightline, an exclusive report on the devastation in Kansas when last night's thunder cunt...ripped through the state'." Finally, Muscio juxtaposes "cunt" with the etymology of vagina; the latter word, she explains, "originates from a word meaning sheath for a sword." Cognizant of the implicit patriarchal overtones of this definition, she closes the book's prelude with the following adamant declaration: "Ain't got no vagina."<sup>76</sup>

Lisa Jarvis and Andi Zeisler titled their independently published magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. *Bitch* is devoted to putting forth trenchant commentary on the "media-driven world," and features critical reviews and essays on

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<sup>75</sup> Inga Muscio, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002), 5-6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

television, books, music, films, and advertising. The publication's long-held tag line: "It's a noun, it's a verb, it's a magazine," reflects Jervis and Zeisler's understanding of the malleability of language, and like "cunt" they use "bitch" as an affront to traditional feminine decorum. As a noun and a verb, "bitch" is put forth as a form rebellion. "When [bitch] is being used as an insult," they write, "[it] is an epithet hurled at women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don't shy away from expressing them... 'bitch' describes...the act of making ourselves heard."<sup>77</sup>

The publishers have taken their share of criticism from feminists across generations for employing "bitch," even though their goal is to complicate and reframe the term. Jervis and Zeisler recognize the importance of situating *Bitch* within the discourse on popular culture, even when the title of the magazine is being questioned; their decision to use the word has also been critiqued within the magazine itself. In an interview published in *Bitch* in 2004, activist and actor Kathy Najimy expresses her disdain for the word "bitch." Najimy claims that she understands that the magazine employs it as a matter of reclamation. Yet, she argues, it may be too soon in the history of women's liberation to use it:

[It is] used to make women second-guess their being, their success, their drive, I saw a [powerful] woman [in] Hollywood struggle and change after reading an article that referred to her as a bitch... while 'bastard' is a chosen way of acting, 'bitch' [is] an indictment for an entire lifetime of [a woman's] personality.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See <http://www.bitchmagazine.org/about.shtml>, accessed October 22, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Lyz Bly, "Queen of the Hill: Lyz Bly talks to *King of the Hill*'s very three-dimensional Kathy Najimy," *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* (Issue No. 23, Winter 2004, 44-49 and 91), 49.

Ultimately, Jervis and Zeisler acknowledge the tenuous nature of language and meaning, yet they do not claim to have the last word on the subject; their position reflects Hanna's GenX feminist declaration: "We know there's not one way, one light, one stupid truth."<sup>79</sup>

Like "bitch," GenX feminist artists and zine publishers defined "slut" on their own terms, as well. Before live shows, riot grrrl musicians and fans scrawled "slut" and other degrading, sexist words on their arms, backs, and midriffs in black marker as a way to assert ownership of the language. They recognized the paradoxical situation this kind of display created; Bikini Kill appropriated the words of a critic from Hawaii, incorporating them into a live song. The critic saw Kathleen Hanna as someone who was "sadly confused" because she espoused a "feminist agenda" on stage with the word "slut" scrawled in black marker across her midriff. Hanna mockingly recites the writer's critique in a recording of a live performance: "[Bikini Kill] spoke a feminist agenda, but what comes across on stage is...a fanatic rebellion against the world and themselves."<sup>80</sup> Asserting radical feminist ideas on stage with the word "slut" scrawled on your bare stomach is paradoxically revolutionary in that Bikini Kill and their fans sought to control derogatory words, asserting them forthrightly and on their own terms.

In *Catscratch*, zinester Spirit Demerson explains why she proudly wears stickers that say "slut":

"Slut" is a word used to insult girls only, for their sexual actions and for what they do with their bodies...it is used to make girls feel bad about having sex, being sexy, and god forbid, liking it! Boys are commended for their promiscuity, congratulated every time they have sex, and there's something very wrong with that. So I label myself "slut" with pride!

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<sup>79</sup> Kathleen Hanna, "Jigsaw Youth," from *Bikini Kill: The C.D. Version of the First Two Records* (Olympia, WA: Kill Rock Stars, 1994), track 10.

<sup>80</sup> Bikini Kill, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records* (Kill Rock Stars, 1994?), hidden track.

There is as little wrong with that as there is with the way boys get pats on the back for sleeping around.<sup>81</sup>

Both Spirit and the members of Bikini Kill asserted agency in creating and contributing to the production of the meaning of language.

Conversely, Misty, creator of the zine *Just Like a Girl*, undercuts loaded, sexist terms when she lists the following typewritten words in a column: “bitch slut baby hussy girly harlet bimbo chick fox whore cunt broad sweetie tramp dame babe darling.” Misty does not simply reclaim the odious words; she attempts to mollify them with a cool response. Beneath the column, she writes, “your words no longer excite me.”<sup>82</sup> GenX feminists’ engagement with language is not a break from the second wave’s agenda. Like their predecessors, they grapple with and confront historical articulations of ideal womanhood. Gen Xers’ views, however, are shaped by second wave theory and activism, and by the moment in history in which they were born. As heirs of the postmodern condition, they understand language—and gender, as sites of boundless free play and contingency.

However, as white, middle-class, and, in many cases, educated women, GenX feminists had to contend with the master narrative of ideal, virtuous womanhood. Feminine “virtues” such as submissiveness and purity re-emerged in post-World War II American society as part of the project to restore order and establish a sense of “normalcy” amid the Cold War and the social and cultural upheavals brought by the African-American, gay/lesbian, and women’s rights movements. The ideology of “true womanhood” that Welter articulated in 1966 was at the core of the feminist movement of

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<sup>81</sup> Spirit Demerson, “SLUT=SMUT?,” *Catscratch*, Number two, 1990s, not paginated (Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s Culture and History in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University).

<sup>82</sup> Misty, *Just Like a Girl*, #3, circa 1990, 20.

the sixties and seventies. Gen X feminists sought to undermine this hegemonic social construction; they were continuing the project begun by their mothers and grandmothers, seeking to further complicate and unhinge “woman” as an identity category.

***“My Body, The Hand Grenade”: Satirizing and Challenging Discourses on Sexuality and the Body***<sup>83</sup>

In the 1993 inaugural issue of *Bust*, writers Betty Boob and Celina Hex express their angst over how little was being written about “Generation XX – the women slackers.”<sup>84</sup> Central to “Generation XX,” Boob and Hex argue, are young women’s ideas about their bodies, particularly beauty and fashion. “The way you look,” they write, “doesn’t matter all that much...beauty comes in many shapes and colors...” Likewise, they assert, shopping for clothes should be fun and fashion should be based on what one likes, not what the fashion industry dictates. The *Bust* editors project a mindset that was already prevalent among GenX women, who grew up amid a barrage of images of perfectly groomed, physically fit women, and were—thanks to second wave feminism, adept at critiquing socially ascribed beauty standards.

As previously discussed, GenXer Naomi Wolf’s 1991 *The Beauty Myth* greatly influenced young feminists’ views on the ways in which women’s bodies are portrayed and marketed. Wolf places the myth in a broader historical context and argues that it is “not about beauty at all.” It is, she claims, “about men’s institutions and institutional

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<sup>83</sup> Hole, *My Body the Hand Grenade* (Los Angeles, CA: city slang, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Betty Boob and Celina Hex are the pen names of *Bust* editors/creators Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller. Stoller still serves as publisher and editor of *Bust*, which is now a glossy, bi-monthly commercial magazine. One could argue that the writers’ reference to XX – the female chromosome—overlooks essentialist notions of femininity, as opposed to social constructionist ideas of gender, which is what they are ultimately concerned with; the “Generation XX” label is clever, nonetheless. Editors’ introduction, *Bust* (Volume 1, No. 1, July 1993), not paginated. From the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

power...[it] is always...[about] prescribing behavior and not appearance.”<sup>85</sup> Women, she asserts, become preoccupied by the unending task of presenting and maintaining a “perfect” façade and are therefore distracted from more intellectually substantial pursuits.

Before Wolf’s germinal book was published, *Sassy*, a teen magazine that was published between 1988 and 1994, was billed as an alternative to mainstream offerings such as *Seventeen* and *TEEN*. The magazine published articles such as “How We Make This Model Gorgeous (and other tricks magazines use to get teeth whiter, hips slimmer, and breasts bigger)” and “Why Your Breasts Aren’t as Weird as You Think,” which provided lessons on uncovering the tricks and conventions of the beauty and fashion industries. *Sassy*’s staff, led by editor Jane Pratt, also called into question the proliferation of images of flawless, perfectly coiffed bodies; they sought to undermine the idea that such perfection could exist in reality.<sup>86</sup>

Their agenda was paradoxical, as fashion and beauty magazines turn a profit on women’s insecurities and desires, selling women clothes, makeup, creams, and diet aids in advertisements and articles by “experts” on the latest trends and treatments. In fact, because *Sassy* was critical of the industries that it supported, the magazine was eventually forced to quell its subversive tone. The magazine eventually lost currency among Gen Xers after mainstream Peterson Publishing purchased it in the mid nineties, prompting *Bitch* creators Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler, both of whom previously worked as interns at

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<sup>85</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2002), 13-14.

<sup>86</sup> Kara Jesella and Marisa Meltzer, *How Sassy Changed My Life: a love letter to the greatest teen magazine of all time* (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 2007), 60-61.



the magazine, to devote the bulk the inaugural issue of their zine to an essay titled, “Bait & Switch *Sassy*.”<sup>87</sup>

Reflective of Wolf’s theses and the critiques put forth in *Sassy*’s early years, many GenX feminists voiced their anger and confusion over society’s unrealistic standards. In the zine *That Girl*, Kelli provides a window into the mindset of young women who recognized that they were being duped by the media and society into feeling less than adequate if their bodies and faces did not mirror those of movie stars and fashion models. She writes, “No Jenny Craig commercial is going to tell me what to do. That’d be giving into [sic] society’s fucked up standards, right?” She continues: “I didn’t think I had a problem. Yesterday I started crying and I feel fat...my boyfriend [says] he’s sick of me complaining about how fat I am and that I do it all the time. I didn’t think I did!”<sup>88</sup> Despite the fact that she is aware of “society’s fucked up standards,” Kelli still questions the size and shape of her body and speaks negatively about it. Kelli’s sentiments reveal the incongruent mindset of GenX women, who were keenly aware of feminist critiques of the beauty myth, yet nonetheless influenced by a perpetual onslaught of images of “perfect” female bodies.<sup>89</sup>

This kind of self-management and self-surveillance has been studied by a number of scholars through the lens of Michel Foucault’s theories, particularly those he espoused in his geneological works, *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*. Echoing Wolf’s critique, Susan Bordo employs Foucault, arguing that the body is not only a malleable text, but also “a *practical*, direct locus of social control.” In this context,

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<sup>87</sup> Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler, “Bait & Switch *Sassy*,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* #1, 3-9.

<sup>88</sup> Kelli, *That Girl: The High School Magazine for Homemakers and Career Girls* (San Francisco, CA, mid 1990s), not paginated, from the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

<sup>89</sup> See Misty, *Just Like A Girl* #3, 14.

bodies are docile, submissive; they are “regulated by the norms of cultural life,” and young women such as Kelli of *That Girl* are displaying the “primacy of practice over belief.”<sup>90</sup>

While late twentieth century popular culture clearly perpetuated standards of beauty and corporeal normativity, these standards were not wholly totalitarian. Part of the GenX feminist agenda was to subvert and assuage the discourse on “feminine” bodies, and to contribute to what scholar Dorothy Smith identifies as “an extended collection of instances” of femininity. The discourse on femininity, whether perpetuated by pop culture or individual women, is not, writes Smith, a “bound class of events or state of affairs.” Instead, various articulations of gender shape its construction, which is always tenuous.<sup>91</sup> For GenX women, eschewing and embracing traditional articulations of femininity were not mutually exclusive endeavors. They understood, for instance that dressing up—donning makeup and high heels, was and always had been a masquerade; even the most stereotypical performances of femininity were complex, layered, and not easily interpreted.

Like feminists of the sixties and seventies, beauty pageants, the epitome of socially ascribed ideals of beauty and white, middle class “true womanhood,” were the source of serious contention for GenX feminists.<sup>92</sup> Miss America, in particular, the alleged embodiment of the quintessentially American girl, was not only beautiful, but

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 165-167; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), Foucault addresses “power over life” and the “docile body” on pages 139-141 (emphasis in original).

<sup>91</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, “Femininity as Discourse,” in *Becoming Feminine*, ed. L.G. Romanm L.K. Christian-Smith, and E. Ellsworth (London: Palmer Press, 1988, 37-59), 37.

<sup>92</sup> Historically, the Miss America pageant was clearly focused on white femininity until 1983 when Vanessa Williams, the African-American Miss America was crowned. The feminist protest of 1968 Miss America in Atlantic City, New Jersey, is commonly viewed as the beginning of the women’s liberation movement.

also virtuous, talented, and patriotic. Images of smiling Miss Americas of the fifties and sixties are omnipresent in GenX feminist zines. Contestants and winners from this era epitomize the pageant, as it was first televised in 1954, when the initial broadcast broke records; 39 percent of the television viewing audience, some 27 million Americans, watched the pageant, which was then in its thirty-third year. Its popularity continued into the early sixties, as it remained a high-rated television program.<sup>93</sup> *That Girl* features a bouffant-haired young pageant winner with a crown perched on her head.<sup>94</sup> The anonymous creator of *Cutiepie* (whose penname is “Melon”) includes a full-length photograph of a pageant winner from the fifties with an article she wrote on pageant organizers and the potential for eliminating the swimsuit portion of the program. In addition, she penned a simulated interview between a judge and “Miss Virginia.” She writes:

and what is your name little lady?  
im [sic] miss virginia. hee. hee.  
and what are your hobbies?  
well, i certainly enjoy seeing + hearing about  
rapists going to jail. and i love beating up  
assholes that treat me like im stupid.....  
well.....um....no, no [there's] more I like!  
that'll be enough, sweet cheeks.  
what did you call me?????  
aw, sorry darlin, your [sic] one of them tough chicks.  
heeh [sic], heh, heh.  
listen, darlin! call me that again and ill shove  
that microphone up your butt. YOU GOT THAT???  
um....next please....  
hey, a girl can dream...<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> <http://www.missamerica.org/organization-info/key-facts-and-figures.aspx> (accessed June 27, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> Kelli, *That Girl: The High School Magazine for Homemakers and Career Girls* (San Francisco, CA, mid 1990s), not paginated, from the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

<sup>95</sup> Melon (penname/anonymous creator), *Cutiepie* (Issue 1, July 1995), not paginated, from the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC. (Formatting in original).

The simulated interview has an air of teenage rebellion, yet it is also an assault on the feminine ideals put forth through the Miss America pageant, which reinforce the discourse on ideal American womanhood. The “contestant” is from “Virginia,” a state chosen by Melon for its inclusion of the word “virgin”—a point that is underscored by the cynically placed “hee[,] hee,” which punctuates the sentence. Virginity, or purity, is at the core of Welter’s historical articulation of virtuous white womanhood; it is an attribute that is not lost on Melon in the mid 1990s. Melon’s Miss Virginia is, likewise, not submissive, as she indicates with her answer to the “what are your hobbies?” question. The imagined contestant also confronts the interviewer regarding his condescendingly sexist language, further underscoring her aggressiveness.

The beauty pageant as metaphor for virtuous, ideal white, middle class womanhood is at the core of the band Hole’s 1994 hit song, “Miss World.” Written by the band’s front woman Courtney Love, the song and accompanying music video address the stereotypical virgin/whore dichotomy that is part of the ideal woman master narrative. Scholar Mélissé Lafrance hints at this in her interpretation of “Miss World”:

[Love’s] lyrical work conveys [that]...the structure of a beauty pageant is quite similar to a trial: women are trotted onto a stage and cross-examined about their female talents and abilities. This process allegedly provides the (male) prosecutors with special insight into just how womanly these women truly are.<sup>96</sup>

The music video for the song further illustrates this, pointing to the ways in which “true womanhood” is taken apart as masquerade by Love, her band mates, and the video director. When Love refers to “Miss World,” she does not unquestionably adopt the role

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<sup>96</sup>Mélissé Lafrance, “Courtney Love (Hole), *Live through this* (1994)” in *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music*, edited by Lori Burns and Mélissé Lafrance (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2002, 97-121), 120.

for herself, instead she performs it as a burlesque or parody. She implores listeners to “kill,” dismantle, or eradicate the beauty queen archetype and the feminine ideals connected with it. The parodic performance of Miss World is especially apparent in the video, which begins with a shot of Love, dressed in a sequined white dress, powdering her face and neck with a large, overloaded powderpuff. While she appears to be addressing the viewer, she is, in fact, primping in front of a mirror. As she does so, she looks directly at the image of herself and quietly sings the first lines of the song: “I am the girl you know, can’t look you in the eye, I am the girl you know...I lie and lie and lie.”<sup>97</sup> The “lie” of which she speaks is the performance of purity, which is symbolized by the “pure” white powder.

Following this scene, the perspective shifts as the guitar melody picks up and Love appears on stage, where she forcefully sings: “I’m miss world, somebody kill me...” In this shot she wears a slightly tattered, blue vintage dress, and at times she perches her leg on the amplifier in front of her, evoking a “masculine” rock star stance. She and her bandmates perform beneath a glittery sign that reads “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” As the narrative of the video unfolds, beauty-queen Love, who is dressed in pale blue (the biblical color of purity and virginity), enters the hall where rock-star Love performs. The former is handed a bouquet of flowers, kissed by admirers, and eventually walks beauty-pageant-style toward the stage. As the song nears the end, rock-star Love dives off the stage on to the audience, aggressively engaging with the moshing crowd, and her beauty-queen alter-ego climbs on stage and is shown standing beneath the sparkling proverb. As rock-star Love sings the final line of the song—“I am the girl you

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<sup>97</sup> Courtney Love, *Hole: Live Through This* (Fontana Geffen, 1994), track 2.

know, can't look you in the eye," powdered-face Love drops the bouquet and looks down dejectedly at the floor of the stage.

The inclusion of the "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" sign points to the ways in which the ideal notions of beauty and femininity serve as regulators of women's bodies and behavior, as "clean" refers to sexual "purity" and white, middle class standards of ideal femininity.<sup>98</sup> In the mid 1990s, Love's public persona was also an affront to middle-class standards of femininity, as she donned tattered "babydoll" dresses and plastered her face with heavy foundation and bright (often smeared) red lipstick. And she was aggressive—undressing on stage, often trading shirts with female audience members, and frequently dived into the arms of voracious fans and spectators. Off stage Love was known for engaging in drunken or drug-induced brawls with other celebrities or reporters. She blatantly eschewed traditionally acceptable notions of motherhood and domesticity, not only smoking cigarettes while pregnant, but also admitting to taking heroin.<sup>99</sup> The mass media devoured Love's transgressions, ultimately making a spectacle of her public outbursts, arrests, and court appearances (a situation which she exploited and, therefore, exacerbated).

The narrative put forth in songs such as "Miss World" and Love's public persona, in general, were an assault on traditional articulations of white, middle-class femininity. GenX feminists more subtly demonstrated their tacit understanding of socially constructed manifestations of femininity by appropriating and ubiquitously employing a

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<sup>98</sup> This brings to mind Vanessa Williams, who, in 1983, was asked to relinquish her position as Miss America after *Penthouse* magazine published photographs of her that had been taken prior to her involvement with the pageant.

<sup>99</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair* (September 1993, 230-233 and 296-299), 298.

culturally and historically loaded image of femininity: the perfectly coiffed, slim, white apron-dress-high-heeled wearing 1950s housewife.

This feminine caricature was conspicuously infused onto the pages of GenX feminist zines. Samantha and Kim of Hopewell, NJ, who produced the zine *crummies in tummies*, include a vintage image of a mother and daughter duo in matching heart aprons busying themselves in the kitchen next to a typewritten statement on the evils of suburbia (titled “Suburbia=Hell”) (fig. 1). The cover of Emily Barber of Seattle’s zine *Tater Taught* features the generically perfect faces of two fifties clip-art women engrossed in conversation, as their gazes meet, one woman’s hand is raised to her mouth to suggest that she’s passing on a secret. Zannah Marsh of St. Paul, who published *hungry girl*, created a collage comprised entirely of images of fifties women timorously flaunting their curvy, scantily-clad bodies or engaging in domestic activities (fig. 2). The images are accompanied by text clipped from magazines, including a headline that reads: “Power is being restored.” The anonymous creator of *Grll-a-Liscious* proclaims that May 31, 1995 “will hearby [sic] be known as Love Yer Cellulite Day,” urging readers to “love yerself and eat lotsa fattening food [so as to] bring yer fat cells to their fullest potential” (fig. 3). She contrasts the proclamation with an image of a slender, 1950s underwear-clad woman who is gleefully perched on a scale.<sup>100</sup> The generation’s recurrent use of images of mid-century women is paradoxical, as they often accompany both critiques of stereotypical, white middle-class beauty standards, and articles accompanying recipes and craft

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<sup>100</sup> Samantha and Kim, *crummies in tummies*, circa 1990s, not paginated. Emily Barber, *Tater Taught #1*, circa 1990s, not paginated. Zannah Marsh, *Hungry Girl*, circa 1990s, not paginated. Anonymous, *Grll-a-Liscious*, May 1995, not paginated. All of these sources from the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.



Figure 1: Samantha and Kim, “Suburbia = Hell,” *crummies in tummies*, 1990s, n.p.

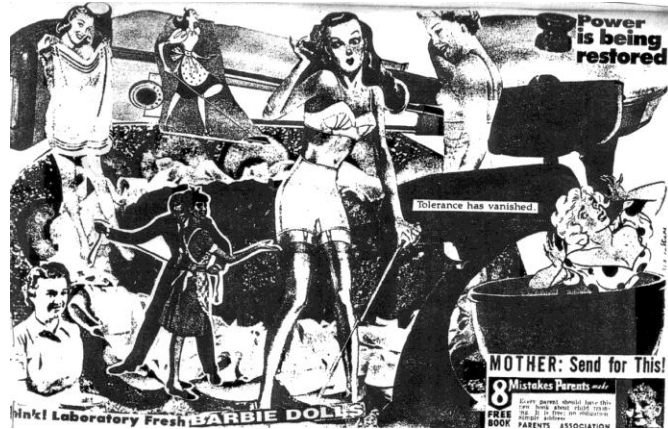


Figure 2: Zannah Marsh, “Power is Being Restored,” *Hungry Girl*, 1990s, n.p.  
(Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC)

projects, which are put forth as an attempt to reclaim and celebrate traditionally “feminine” skills and pursuits. Ultimately, however, GenX feminists employ the 1950s happy housewife or archetypal beauty to signal their rebellion against hegemonic constructions of femininity and “ideal womanhood.”

This vision of femininity was central in the nineties culture wars; it was part of conservatives’ broader vision of American traditions and values, and their longing for a return to a time when their privileges of normative identity were more firmly intact. Marsh’s “power will be restored” collage from *Hungry Girl*, for instance, is a rejoinder to the conservative vision of the submissive, domestic white, middle-class woman. The text is a double-entendre, as the composition can be read as a comment on postwar femininity and the proliferation of this imagery in the nineties. Conversely, in the context in which the collage was created, the text is an assertion that contemporarily (for Marsh), feminine



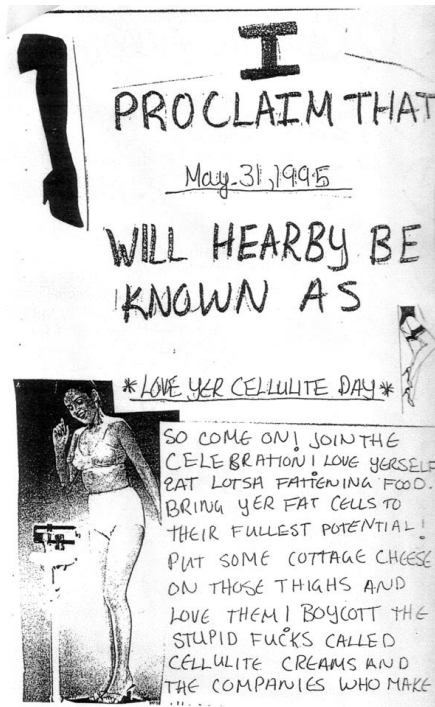


Figure 3: (detail) Anonymous, “Love Yer Cellulite Day,” *Grrl-a-Liscious*, May 1995, n.p. (Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC)

“power” is being restored. The ambiguity of this predominant headline is underscored by additional snippets of text—“Think! Laboratory Fresh Barbie Dolls,” “Tolerance has vanished,” and “Mother: Send for This! 8 Mistakes Parents Make.”<sup>101</sup> The last of these is an appropriated advertisement for a book about child rearing, which she uses to point to the errors of the previous generation, who, in Marsh’s view, more readily accepted prescribed feminine roles and ideals.

Gen X feminists also used iconic images of curvaceous, “sexy” fifties women in connection with quotes, rants, and essays on female sexuality. Donning traditionally feminine accoutrements was a playful acknowledgement that femininity was a performance. Images of fifties pinups and movie stars reference the historical

<sup>101</sup> Marsh, n.p.

articulations of feminine purity, serving as points of contrast and sites of rebellion, particularly as Xers reveal the complicated nature of sexuality following the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies, the rise in divorce rates, the media attention given to incest and child sexual abuse, and the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s. Scantly-clad icons of mid-century sexuality such as Marilyn Monroe, Jane Mansfield, and Betty Page, pepper the pages of feminist zines, as do nameless models whose faces and figures echo those of the famous.

In *Grope #5*, which was published in Eureka, California in May 1994, a photocopied picture of a bouffant-haired young woman in profile shares the page with the following typewritten question: “why are you afraid of me when i [sic] open my mouth but not my legs?”<sup>102</sup> The young woman in the photo covers her mouth; it’s as if the statement that appears on the page near her face shocks her. In truth, of course, the zine creator takes this young woman and her gesture out of its original context, ultimately accentuating her own repudiation of the historically constructed ideal of feminine purity, as the statement is a rebellious affront to stereotypes on feminine submissiveness, particularly as it pertains to heterosexual relationships.

Feminist zinesters also used the images of 1950s women to accompany commentaries on female sexual vulnerability. Amber Panko of Columbus, Ohio, cut and pasted a stern-looking, though well-dressed fifties housewife holding a pistol amid a block of text about fear and retribution (fig. 4). She writes: “I am tired of wanting [men] to think about right and wrong. I want them to fear. I want them to feel fear now as I

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<sup>102</sup> *Grope #5* (Eureka, California, May 1994), n.p. From the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

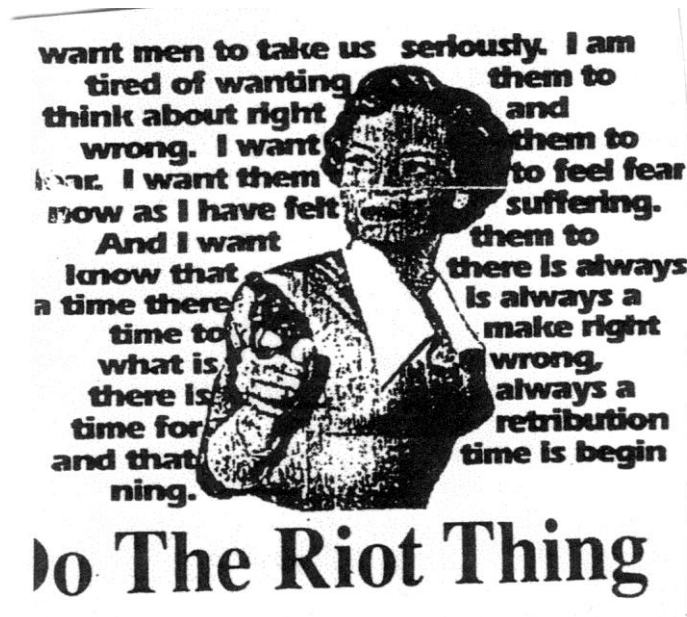


Figure 4: (detail) Amber Panko, “Do The Riot Thing,” *Grrrl Newsletter*, 1990s, n.p. (Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC)

have felt suffering...and I want them to know that there is always time to make right what is wrong, there is always time for retribution and that time is beginning.”<sup>103</sup> Below the text and the gun-wielding woman is a larger “headline,” which says, “Do the Riot Thing.” The text and imagery are a rebellious call for revenge over male physical and sexual violence against women. Her inclusion of the quintessential fifties woman signals a patent repudiation of the “virtuous” feminine submission, as the figure reads as the ultimate sign of ideal womanhood. Here, however, there is a surprise, as even this woman undermines the stereotype by wielding a weapon. Commentaries on female sexual and physical vulnerability are not always as straightforward as the one put forth by Panko in her zine, *Brassy Grrrl Newsletter*.

Jenny, creator of the zine *When She Was Good*, includes an image of a high-heel-clad woman’s feet and ankles, chained together. Surrounding the photo is the statement:

<sup>103</sup> Amber Panko, *Brassy Grrrl Newsletter* (Columbus, OH, undated), not paginated. From the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

“You Can’t Run In These GRRRL.” On the facing page is a cut and pasted image of the fifties celebrity Jayne Mansfield, who is depicted wearing an animal-print bikini and high-heels, and surrounded in a field of hand rendered hearts. Mansfield bends demurely forward, giving viewers an unobstructed view of her scantily clad legs and buttocks.<sup>104</sup> Taken together the bound, high-heeled ankles and the depiction of Mansfield are indeed paradoxical. However, they reveal the tension inherent in GenX feminism and the generation’s understanding of the trappings of femininity as markers of contingency and play. As discourse, gender is not simply a one-way conduit where agents of power categorically create meaning and knowledge. GenX feminism therefore involves undermining the idea that femininity is a “determinate and unitary phenomenon.” In simultaneously eschewing traditionally prescribed articulations of “true womanhood” and reclaiming and re-inscribing signs of femininity, GenX women assert agency, thereby contributing to the contemporary discourse on gender. As sociologist Dorothy Smith deftly explains: “[The] deployment [of femininity] as a descriptive category does not locate a bound class of events or state of affairs. The most it can produce is an extended collection of instances. The more they are accumulated, the more various and wide-ranging they appear to be.”<sup>105</sup>

Bettie Page, one of the most famous pin-up models of the fifties, is the ultimate manifestation of this, and depictions of her were extremely popular among white GenX feminists. Page’s image appeared on everything from t-shirts and jewelry to light-switch

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<sup>104</sup> Jenny, *When She Was Good* (Sand Springs, OK, February 1995), 9-10. From the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC.

<sup>105</sup> Debbie Stoller, “Feminists Fatale: BUST-ing the Beauty Myth,” in *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, Marchelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, eds. (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999, 41-47), 42. Dorothy E. Smith, “Femininity as Discourse,” in *Becoming Feminine*, ed. L.G. Romanm L.K. Christian-Smith, and E. Ellsworth (London: Palmer Press, 1988, 37-59), 37.

covers and lampshades, and pictures of her frequently appear in feminist fanzines.<sup>106</sup> She was popular among white Gen X feminists because she both embodied and subverted traditional feminine norms. Whether she is projected on screen or in still photographs, her performances of sexiness and sexuality are ambiguously complex. She mastered multiple personalities; she was cheeky and cheerful, seductively subtle, and, as dominatrix or submissive “bottom” in sado-masochist photos, she is impish, yet funny. Her poses are contrived—they are archetypal performances of feminine sexuality. Page was the embodiment of camp; she was artifice and parody, the essence of, in Sontag’s words, “things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>107</sup>

From the perspective of the nineties, Page defied the stereotypical fifties beauty queen. Her physical figure conformed to mid-century standards of beauty, but her long, black hair, and signature bangs suggested an antithesis to fair-haired feminine archetypes such as Sandra Dee and Debbie Reynolds. GenX feminists gravitated toward Page because she undermined and complicated the mid-twentieth century master narrative on ideal white, middle-class femininity. Moreover, Page exhibited the complexities of late twentieth century female sexuality. She was dominated and dominant; she was a pin-up model who unequivocally performed and acknowledged her role as a sex object.

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<sup>106</sup> One of the most well known sellers of Betty Page merchandise was *Bust* magazine’s online boutique (The Bust Boob-tique), which sold Betty Page bracelets, necklaces, and cards and stationery throughout the 1990s and early 00s. Cut and pasted images and drawings of Page appear in numerous feminist fanzines, such as *Definition of GRRRL and Other Rants By Skunk: The Hunted* (Zambezi Press, Bleeding Woman Production, 1994), not paginated (a drawing of Page is on the cover); Kelli, *That Girl: The High School Magazine for Homemakers and Career Girls* (San Francisco, CA, mid 1990s), not paginated (a cartoon rendering of Page appears in a collage that appears midway through the zine); and Melon (anonymous zinester), *Cutiepie* (Issue 1, July 1995), not paginated (“Melon’s rant/essay, “breasts, hooters, boobs, milkfactories [sic] and my dad” is cut and pasted on top of a photo of Page, who is seated on a bed, gazing seductively at the viewer) all zines from the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University, Durham, NC. For a comprehensive inventory of “everything Bettie” see Richard Foster, *The Real Bettie Page* (New York, NY: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1997), 193-208.

<sup>107</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Picador, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 275-292), 279.

Page was a living sign or manifestation of what Judith Butler calls the “contingent foundation” of sex. While gender is performed, “sex” is a foundation upon which “principle[s] of production, intelligibility, and regulation” are imposed. Like gender, “sex” was ripe for new interpretations, for new forms of activism. “‘Sex’,” writes Butler, “is under contest, up for grabs.” She places the word in quotation marks not as a “certain sign of deconstruction, [as] the end of politics...” but as a way “to question [its] traditional deployment, and [to] call for some other.”<sup>108</sup> Butler's essay is, in part, a response to the trepidation expressed by some scholars that postmodern, poststructuralist feminism's contextualizing of "woman" as a subjective, malleable, and unstable social category removes feminism from the " 'real' world of political agency and social activism."<sup>109</sup> Butler closes by stating: “If there is fear that, by no longer being able to take for granted the subject, its gender, its sex, or its materiality, feminism will founder, it might be wise to consider the political consequences of keeping in their place the very premises that have tried to secure our subordination from the start.”<sup>110</sup>

As postmodern subjects and heirs of the positive messages generated and proliferated by second wave feminists, GenX women had the means to unhinge the foundation upon which “woman” was historically and structurally grounded. In “the service of [an] alternative production” or manifestation of the signifier (body) and the gendered (socially constructed) self, GenX feminists revered the kind of ambiguity Bettie Page embodied.<sup>111</sup> As historical actors themselves, middle-class white X feminists challenged the foundation upon which gender and sex was grounded; through self-

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<sup>108</sup> Butler, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Gamble, 50.

<sup>110</sup> Butler, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 15.

published zines, song lyrics, as they reclaimed and playfully dismantled sexist language and images. Through knitting and crocheting, they re-inscribed traditionally feminine tasks with significance, honoring the work of women of previous generations, and—in the spirit of the nineties DIY movement—exhibiting the personal as political ethos by hand making functional objects instead of buying mass produced items. Through these and other endeavors, GenX feminists undermined and shaped the late twentieth century discourse on white femininity and feminism.

## CONCLUSION

*Don't kid yourself: We are not liberated just because we have jobs,  
we just have more work.*

Doni-Marie in *Hip Mama*<sup>1</sup>

*We've got equal rights—on ladies' night.*

Le Tigre<sup>2</sup>

*[R]esearchers and theorists diligently propose remedies to relieve the stress women  
shoulder in their dual roles as mothers and employees...They worry about the next  
generation of women who face a similar fate when they marry and  
have children and jobs.*

Mary Frances Berry<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, the media was admonishing feminists—especially doyennes of the seventies women's liberation movement—over their continued support of President Clinton amid his philandering, which reached its apex with the Monica Lewinsky scandal. *New York Times* writer Maureen Dowd claimed that feminists committed “mass

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<sup>1</sup> *Hip Mama* reader quotes from “Notes for the Revolution: The Mamas Break it Down—This is the Maternal Feminist Agenda,” *Hip Mama: The Parenting Zine* (1998-99, 6-7), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Le Tigre, “FYR,” *Feminist Sweepstakes* (Mr. Lady Records, 2001), Track 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Frances Berry, *The Politics of Parenthood: Child Care, Women's Rights, and the Myth of the Good Mother* (New York, NY: Viking Books, 1993), 28.



suicide” for not condemning Clinton for the Lewinsky affair. Editorials in other publications accused them of advocating a double-standard for Clinton, as opposed to conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, whose sexual harassment of Anita Hill galvanized young feminists in the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Feminist thinkers made their positions known; Gloria Steinem and *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt, for instance, asserted that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair was consensual, while Hill consistently shunned Thomas’ advances and incessant descriptions of pornography and sexual encounters. According to Steinem, the difference was clear: “No means no, yes means yes.”<sup>5</sup> Despite forthright responses such as Steinem’s, the media used feminists’ support of Clinton to bolster their claim that feminists were out of touch with the “mundane issues of modern life.” According to *Time*, end-of-the-century feminism was as an identity fit solely for narcissistic, elite women.<sup>6</sup>

Concurrently, Madison Avenue advertisers and music executives “colonized” the riot grrrl power movement, tempering and reframing it as “girl power.” Specialty clothing stores targeting ‘tween and teen girls sold t-shirts emblazoned with slogans such as “girls rule,” “girls rock,” and “girls do it better.” In 1996, the British group The Spice Girls hit the stage and screen in the U.S. with their popular song “Wannabe.” The Spice Girls’—Geri (“Ginger” Spice), Melanie B. (“Scary” Spice), Emma (“Baby” Spice), Victoria (“Posh” Spice), and Melanie C. (“Sporty” Spice)—also espoused a sanitized version of GenX feminist girl power. While many of their songs promoted friendship

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<sup>4</sup> Tara Zahra, “The Feminism Gap,” *The American Prospect* (January 1, 1999), accessed at [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the\\_feminism\\_gap](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_feminism_gap) (accessed August 30, 2009). Zahra provides an overview of the media coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria Steinem, “Feminists and the Clinton Question,” *The New York Times* (March 22, 1998), accessed at <http://www2.edc.org/WomensEquity/edequity98/0561.html> (accessed August 30, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ginia Bellafante, “It’s All About Me!,” *Time*, Volume 151, Number 25 (June 29 1998), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988616,00.html> (accessed August 9, 2009).

between girls and women, men and heterosexual relationships were most often the focus. Each of the performers was a brand unto herself and The Spice Girls' personalities and appearances were emphasized, superficially reflecting GenX feminists' understanding of femininity as a site of contingency and play. "Girl power" was to nineties GenX feminism what "women's lib" was to seventies feminism. In both cases, the social movements were mere shadows of what the feminist activists who inspired them understood or imagined them to be.

GenX feminists continued to explore and expand the boundaries of white femininity. By the end of the nineties, many of their DIY pursuits evolved into established enterprises. Two publications that began as low-budget zines, *Bust* and *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, grew into glossy magazines with ample advertising and loyal readership. They were (and remain) prominent vehicles for inspiring and maintaining dialogue among feminists. And, while riot grrrl music and activism diminished, some of its progenitors engaged in new projects. Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna, for instance, espoused feminism as solo artist Julie Ruin, and later, in the band Le Tigre, and Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein continued to produce music in the band Sleater-Kinney, though the topics of the band's songs changed, often reflecting middle-class adult responsibilities such as motherhood and financial stability.

The new millennium officially began in 2001 and the cultural ethos clearly changed in fall of that year. After September 11, many journalists—including *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter, whose publication had a significant investment in detachment and superficiality—announced the end of irony and postmodernism. *New York Times* writer David Kirkpatrick explained Carter's line of thinking: "The shock

of the attacks is jolting the public out of the recently fashionable skepticism toward anything purporting to be original or earnest.”<sup>7</sup>

The media’s condemnation of feminism also intensified, as politicians and pundits used the terrorist attacks as a way to bolster traditional patriarchal ideology. Writers and reporters denigrated capable women and propagated stories about helpless girls, as they simultaneously valorized “manly” men, particularly New York City firefighters and police officers and passengers from hijacked airliner Flight 93. In the autumn and winter of 2001, the media demonized women writers such as Susan Sontag and Katha Pollitt for raising questions about potential motivations for the September 11 attacks or for questioning excessive American patriotism in a complicated moment in global history. Labeled “evil,” “deranged,” “lunatics,” and “chattering asses,” feminist writers were chided for critiques that were no more disparaging than those of their male peers.<sup>8</sup>

By September 11, 2001, GenX feminists were fully entrenched in adulthood, navigating lives that included families, careers, relationships, creative endeavors, and activism, in what writer Peggy Orenstein characterizes as a “half-changed world.” As they lived and further explored possibilities in the prime years of adulthood, they came to understand the limitations of a society that lacked the structural changes needed to

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<sup>7</sup> David Kirkpatrick, “A Nation Challenged: The Commentators; Pronouncements on Irony Draw a Line in the Sand,” *The New York Times* (September 24, 2001), Lexis Nexis (accessed August 31, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> David Kirkpatrick, “A Nation Challenged: The Commentators; Pronouncements on Irony Draw a Line in the Sand,” *The New York Times* (September 24, 2001); Susan Faludi, *Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 12-13; 27-31, 40. Numerous newspapers and popular and news magazines reported on the alleged death of irony after the September 11 terrorist attacks (see also: Richard Leiby, “But Seriously Folks... Pundits Say Irony is Now Out. Don’t Laugh,” *The Washington Post* [September 27, 2001] Lexis Nexis [accessed August 31, 2009], “Fast Chat: *The Onion*,” *Newsweek* [October 22, 2001 (Atlantic Edition)] Lexis Nexis [accessed August 31, 2009], and Blaine Harden, “Flag Fever: the Paradox of Patriotism,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2001 [clipping file, personal collection]).

support the lives they imagined for themselves and their loved ones. In the late nineties, 77 percent of married women with school-aged children worked outside the home; nearly half of those women contributed at least fifty percent to their family's overall income. Women were lawyers, professors, and managers, however, men still vastly outnumbered them in the highest ranking positions (partners, tenured professors, and CEOs) in those fields. GenX women choosing to eschew the two-parent family model and raise children on their own or remain single and childless were more vulnerable to poverty than their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> By 2000, old patterns and expectations were broken down by two generations of late twentieth century feminism, yet new articulations of femininity made for a reality that was, in Orenstein's words, "fragmentary, unrealistic, and often contradictory."<sup>10</sup>

The situation was presciently described by Julia Kristeva in 1979 in her essay "Women's Time." Kristeva contends that late twentieth century brought a new generation of feminists who were confronted with the task of merging maternal time (what she terms cyclical [repetition] and monumental [reproduction] time) with linear (political and historical) time.<sup>11</sup> Like many of their second wave elders, many GenX women negotiated all of these time-spaces; feminine identity was, therefore, multifarious and complex in the most practical of terms. Unlike their foremothers, however, they grew up with feminism—like fluoride, it was undetectable in the popular culture and children's books that they consumed as children. As adults however, GenX women

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<sup>9</sup> Peggy Orenstein, *FLUX: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, & Life in a Half-Changed World* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi, ed. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986, 187-211), 187-188.

began to understand that they were, in fact, living in a state of flux—in the “wake of monumental but incomplete change.”<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the nineties, white, middle-class GenXers more fully grasped what their foremothers meant by the maxim, “the personal is political.” The 1998-99 “Revolution Issue” of *Hip Mama: The Parenting Zine* included a list of imperatives compiled by readers for what editor Ariel Gore termed the “Maternal Feminist Agenda.” The list included access to quality, affordable daycare, abortion and reproductive rights, equal rights and pay for equal work, state funded alternative education, equal parenting and parental involvement, and state-mandated salaries for stay-at-home parents. While *Hip Mama* readers also called for U.S. de-militarization, de-criminalization of non-violent drug offenders, and environmental justice, their agenda was very similar to those of an anonymous group outlining “What to Fight for Now!” on International Women’s Day in 1970. The women’s liberationists’ list included: equal pay for equal work, no job discrimination, free daycare centers, free, legal and safe abortions, and free health care.”<sup>13</sup>

While the character of white middle-class feminism changed across generations, many of the challenges women faced in their daily lives remained the same. Clearly, neither women’s liberationists of the seventies, nor GenX feminists were successful in undoing historically grounded social, familial, and political structures, which shaped gender roles and ideology and—subsequently, the policies that put women at a

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<sup>12</sup> Orenstein, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Hip Mama* reader quotes from “Notes for the Revolution: The Mamas Break it Down—This is the Maternal Feminist Agenda,” *Hip Mama: The Parenting Zine* (1998-99, 6-7), 6; Authors unknown, “International Women’s Day 1970,” 3. (Type-written document from the Women’s Liberation Collection, materials documenting the contemporary women’s movement in the Pioneer Valley, New England, and many U.S. cities and campuses [circa 1966-1980], Sophia Smith Collection, Women’s History Manuscripts at Smith College – Northampton, MA). Lists such as this one are ubiquitous in newsletters, treatises, and documents printed by independent women’s presses.

disadvantage in the public realm of work and politics.<sup>14</sup> In the nineties, GenX feminists both challenged and maintained discourses on white femininity and feminism, producing and extending the articulations of these identities and inscribing them with new meaning; feminism was a site of rebellion, expression, play, and creativity.<sup>15</sup> As the same women matured from their twenties and early thirties to their thirties and early forties, the parental and financial responsibilities and concerns, coupled with stresses of jobs and careers reshaped their feminist attitudes, thought, and activism.

An objective of this project has been to elucidate the ways in which seventies feminism and popular culture, the eighties feminist backlash, and the postmodern condition contributed to the rise of white, middle-class Generation X feminism. The GenX worldview differs from the generation of women who incited the women's liberation movement of the seventies, yet the social and political problems and concerns of both groups are very similar. Yet, since GenXers invented and announced the advent of a new "wave" of feminism in 1992, the media, in particular, as well as feminists themselves, have often focused on generational differences, thereby dividing women. In the spring of 2009, the intergenerational sparring re-emerged with the publication of Jennifer Scalon's biography of the iconic editor of *Cosmopolitan*, Helen Gurley Brown. As bloggers and newspaper columnists, including GenXer Naomi Wolf, debated whether Brown's 1962 book *Sex and the Single Girl* did more for feminism than Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Katha Pollitt of *The Nation* emerged as a voice of reason. She wrote: "The fine points of sexual freedom...personal choice and social

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<sup>14</sup>See Mary Frances Berry, *The Politics of Parenthood: Child Care, Women's Rights, and the Myth of the Good Mother* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," in *Becoming Feminine*, ed. L.G. Romanm L.K. Christian-Smith, and E. Ellsworth (London: Palmer Press, 1988, 37-59), 37.

responsibility...will all be there waiting for us—after we get childcare, equal pay, retirement security, universal access to birth control and abortion, healthcare for all and men who do their share at home, [and] after we achieve equal representation in government...”<sup>16</sup>

Pollitt’s commentary is exactly right, and it points to important questions that have yet to be addressed regarding GenX feminism—mainly, how might white GenXers’ understanding of gender as a site of possibility and their skepticism of and fluency with mass media images and messages translate into activism that addresses structural change for women? Moreover, how might they transform theoretical propositions such as Judith Butler’s—that we rework the feminine/female subject outside the terms of an epistemological given—into practical reality?<sup>17</sup> In what ways are white GenX feminists using the creative skills that they cultivated as young women in the nineties to address personal-political issues such as universal access to affordable childcare, birth control, and abortion? Finally, despite media tropes about feminist battles across generations, how are GenX feminists’ experiences similar to those of their elders and how can—and, for that matter, are—the two groups working together?

The GenX worldview bestowed X feminists with the capacity for understanding and navigating difference. In examining the history of GenX feminism in the nineties, we remember that energy, creativity, and a sense of possibility accompany youth. Young

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<sup>16</sup> Katha Pollitt, “Amber Waves of Blame,” *The Nation* (June 15, 2009), 10; Laura Shapiro, “Helen Gurley Brown’s Sexy Mistake,” *DoubleX* (posted May 12, 2009) <http://www.doublex.com/section/arts/helen-gurley-browns-sexy-mistake?page=0,2> (accessed September 3, 2009); Naomi Wolf, “Who Won Feminism? Hint: She’s the Diva That Ran Cosmo,” *The Washington Post* (May 3, 2009) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/01/AR2009050101859.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992, 3-21), 14.

activists also bring earnestness and unsullied wisdom to social movements. In the early nineties, a riot grrrl from Washington, DC wrote the following: “We need to build lines of communication so that we can be more open and accessible to each other...because we are being divided by labels and philosophies, and we need to accept and support each other.”<sup>18</sup> If Kristeva is right and generations are less about chronology and more about a signifying space—in this case, a time-space where “second wave” and GenX feminists traverse careers, familial obligations, and a desire for meaningful, creative pursuits and activism—then feminists across of all ages would do well to remember this young feminist’s forthright statement as they continue to tackle the structural problems that limit their choices and independence.

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, “What is Riot Grrrl? Riot Grrrl is...,” Riot Grrrl, Washington, DC, undated (Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s Culture and History in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University), not paginated.



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