

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Papers in Communication Studies

Communication Studies, Department of

12-2010

The Post-Nuclear Family and the Depoliticization of Unplanned Pregnancy in *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress*


Kristen Hoerl

Butler University, khoerl2@unl.edu

Casey Ryan Kelly

Butler University, ckelly11@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Other Communication Commons](#)

Hoerl, Kristen and Kelly, Casey Ryan, "The Post-Nuclear Family and the Depoliticization of Unplanned Pregnancy in *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress*" (2010). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 190.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers/190>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Communication Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



Published in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7:4 (December 2010), pp. 360–380;

doi: 10.1080/14791420.2010.523432

Copyright © 2010 National Communication Association; published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
Used by permission.

Published online November 15, 2010.

The Post-Nuclear Family and the Depoliticization of Unplanned Pregnancy in *Knocked Up, Juno, and Waitress*

Kristen Hoerl and Casey Ryan Kelly

College of Communications, Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Corresponding author – Kristen Hoerl, FC 252, 4600 Sunset Ave., Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA, email khoerl@butler.edu

Abstract

This essay explores three films from 2007, *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress*, which foreground young women's unplanned pregnancies. These movies depoliticize women's reproduction and motherhood through narratives that rearticulate the meaning of choice. Bypassing the subject of abortion, the women's decisions revolve around their choice of heterosexual partners and investment in romantic relationships. Although they question the viability of the nuclear family for single pregnant women, these films represent new iterations of post-feminism that ultimately restore conservative ideas that valorize pregnancy and motherhood as women's imperatives. We conclude by addressing how these movies present a distorted and short-sighted depiction of the politics of reproductive agency and the challenges that single mothers face.

Keywords: reproduction, choice, post-feminism, post-nuclear family, film

Late in the summer of 2008, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin emerged on the national political scene as the Republican Party's candidate for Vice President. While Palin's politics were grounded in her socially conservative values and extreme anti-choice stance, several pundits articulated Palin's own family life, including her teenage daughter's unplanned pregnancy, to personal decisions removed from politics. Attention to Palin's personal responsibilities

as a mother replaced public deliberation about the implications of a vice-presidential nominee who would oppose women's access to abortion, even in instances of rape or incest. Palin frequently responded to her critics by condemning implications that her personal choices precluded her professional qualifications. News commentator Michelle Bernard declared that attacks on Palin's character had energized Republican women who regarded Palin as a "perfect feminist" who "has made choices that the women's movement fought for." Speaking on CNN, Republican National Committee organizer Carly Fiorina also commented on Palin's feminist credentials, "If feminism is all about defining yourself instead of letting the world define you, this is an incredibly accomplished woman who has balanced the demands of work life and family life incredibly well and who, perhaps, disagrees with Miss Steinem on some issues."¹ The presence of the keywords of the Second Wave's sexual politics in public discourse regarding Palin's candidacy, and the absence of a corresponding critique of how reproductive rights policies have benefited patriarchy and capitalism, illustrate how public discourses have taken on post-feminist narratives in which women have presumably achieved the goals of feminism.

A few weeks after McCain announced his selection of Palin as his running mate, political and popular discourses foregrounded Bristol Palin's decision to continue her pregnancy and pursue a more serious romantic relationship with the would-be father. Sarah Palin asserted that she was "proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby."² Mainstream media discourses about Bristol Palin's unplanned pregnancy further obfuscated the politics of women's reproductive agency in the latest Presidential election. In such discourses, Bristol's decision was framed in terms of her ability to *make the right choice* and exercise proper moral reasoning. Corresponding to discourses surrounding Bristol Palin's pregnancy, anti-abortion organizations, such as Americans United for Life, attributed the statistical decline in abortions to the cultivation of personal moral attitudes.³ Political scientist John Seery calls this the *Juno effect*: women's reproduction retreating from the political to the personal sphere in which choices take on a limited and moral character.⁴ Seery refers to a recent Hollywood film in which the adolescent main female character Juno is faced with an unplanned pregnancy. *Juno* was one of several films released in 2007, including *Knocked Up* and *Waitress*, about women's unplanned pregnancies, that created a welcoming environment for Palin's emergence on the political scene and public discourses framing Palin in appeals to women's opportunities and choices.

A number of scholars attribute the prevalence of such distorted appeals to women's choice to the rise of *post-feminism*.⁵ Within a post-feminist paradigm, the meaning of choice is inverted such that even a woman's decision to reclaim her traditional gender roles is coded as a feminist expression of agency. Mary Douglas Vavrus argues that post-feminist discourses work from the assumption that the Second Wave feminist movement eliminated the structural conditions that constrain women's freedom and obviate the need for collective action. Post-feminist discourses transform women's agency into the right to "choose something, anything, as a feminist principle."⁶ Consequently, any decision a woman makes places her beyond reproach.

Feminist critics have highlighted how such discourses tend to ignore the material barriers to economic advancement that many women, including single mothers, face.⁷ Further, the application of choice in post-feminist discourse bifurcates work and family as an

either/or option in which women may choose one or the other, but are destined to fail if they attempt both.⁸ Such discourses confused the relative economic gains of white, middle-class women for the advancement of lower-income women and women of color. As Sarah Projanky notes, post-feminist discourses about choice ignore how lower-class women cannot make the choice between work and family as easily as middle-class mothers who have means of support through a working husband or partner.

In this essay, we consider how depictions of women's reproductive agency in *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress* contribute to cultural meanings of unplanned pregnancy and women's empowerment. In particular, we examine how these films reconfigure discourses of post-feminism circulating in popular media. Suggesting that women may consider both children and work, these films reframe unplanned pregnancy as women's liberation. Although these films depict women's unplanned pregnancy in different ways, each disarticulates heterosexual romance from pregnancy and parenthood. Rather than present parenthood as an outcome of heterosexual romance and marriage, these films present heterosexual relationships as a choice women may make once they are expecting a child. In this regard, representations of white, single, pregnant women and parenthood refigure discourses of post-feminism to incorporate changing family structures. This family model departs sharply from previous media depictions that retreat into nostalgia for the traditional family or call for women to choose between work and family. Although these films challenge heterosexual romance within the nuclear family, they retain the emphasis on white, middle-class women as empathetic—if not virtuous—models of contemporary parenting.

This double movement is a central feature of what we refer to as the post-nuclear family, a set of narrative configurations that contest the viability of the nuclear family but maintain fidelity to a neo-traditional model of motherhood nonetheless. We view post-nuclear family discourses in popular culture as responses to social and economic transformations under late capitalism that have challenged the viability of modern nuclear family arrangements. In recent decades, postindustrial shifts in employment have been marked by a rise in jobs in services and declines in both jobs in manufacturing and the family wage. Judith Stacey observes that these shifts have "led to a replace[ment] of white male workers with women and minority men, but at lesser paid, more vulnerable jobs."⁹ As the male breadwinner model became increasingly outmoded, women also began seeking greater autonomy. The post-nuclear family is thus the culmination of these trends, manifest in changing definitions of what counts as family and in movements for democratic kinship relations. Judith Stacey writes that as a consequence of such trends, the contemporary family is decidedly postmodern, reflecting the "contested, ambivalent and undecided character of contemporary family culture."¹⁰

In our analysis, we explain how the narrative patterns running across these films either consider or advance the post-nuclear family as a preferable choice for single pregnant women. We conclude by addressing how the post-nuclear family image presents an inadequate solution to the challenges single mothers face. The films' revaluing of motherhood outside of the nuclear family draws from the logics of liberal capitalism that premise women's reproductive agency around the logics of choice. By extolling the virtues of white motherhood, these films obscure the ways in which social divisions based on race and class have historically separated women and their diverse struggles for reproductive agency.

Further, the post-nuclear family model celebrated in these films ignores the economic forces, racial structures, and public policies that keep many single-mother households in poverty. Rather than providing an alternative to patriarchy, the post-nuclear family merely expands the range of illusory choices regarding reproduction and heterosexual relationships that have been marshaled to advance white, upper-income women's access to motherhood.

Each of these movies appeared in theaters in 2007; thus, they might have had a unique potential to shape cultural understandings over the meaning of unplanned pregnancy, motherhood, and family life in the new millennium. *Juno* and *Knocked Up* were box office successes that earned praise from the Hollywood industry and film critics.¹¹ Although *Waitress* earned less critical attention and fewer box office sales than *Juno* or *Knocked Up*, independent film associations gave it strong praise. The movie also received press attention after its writer and director, Adrienne Shelly, was found murdered at her office three months prior to the film's release.¹²

Our analysis adopts an intertextual narrative approach. We are particularly interested in the ways in which character types and narrative devices overlap across these three films to give social meaning to unplanned pregnancy. An intertextual approach to interpretation explores how patterns across a series of related texts contribute to a structured meaning system that constrains audiences' interpretive agency.¹³ Although no single scholarly interpretation is going to be shared by different audiences of any particular text, similar themes and images across popular media texts point to the cultural forms by which different audiences may come to recognize the shared values of a culture; likewise, repeated themes across texts may highlight or obscure the disagreements and conflicts over which different groups struggle. As Bonnie Dow notes in her discussion of portrayals of feminism on television, the persuasive function of popular culture "is not so much to provide solutions to cultural conflicts but, rather, to negotiate the parameters of the debate."¹⁴ Our interpretive framework also takes cues from Helene Shugart's analysis of depictions of gay man/straight woman couples popularized in romantic comedy television and film toward the end of the 1990s.¹⁵ Shugart explains how common themes that ran across separate texts established a generic configuration that reasserted sexism and heteronormative masculinity. Using a similar interpretive method, we argue that common themes in recent popular films about young women's responses to their unplanned pregnancies ascribe particular economic and racial meaning to the relationship between unexpected pregnancy, motherhood, and heterosexual relationships. These messages may thus contribute to cultural meanings about women's reproductive options and childrearing among heterosexual parents.

Unexpected Pregnancies in Post-Feminist Films

In *Knocked Up*, a young woman in her 20s, Allison, played by Katherine Heigl, becomes pregnant after a one-night-stand with Ben, played by Seth Rogen. Allison's ambitious career goals and attractive looks present a sharp contrast with Ben, who is unemployed and portrayed as somewhat overweight. The film routinely draws upon hegemonic meanings attributed to body weight and size in Western culture by focusing on Ben's body size as a

point of humor in the film. The film's focus on Ben's size and Allison's relative slenderness draws upon and advances the problematic cultural assumption that an individual's weight is a measure of one's desirability in romantic relationships. Although Allison's pregnancy is the central premise, the movie is really about Ben, who transforms himself over the course of the film in order to become a financially stable father and desirable boyfriend for Allison.

Juno tells the story of a 16-year-old, played by Ellen Page, who becomes pregnant after her first sexual experience with her best friend, Paulie Bleeker, played by Michael Cera. After she realizes she is pregnant, Juno decides to give her baby up for adoption to married couple Vanessa and Brad who advertised for a surrogate mother in the local *Penny Saver*. The rest of the film follows Juno's relationships with her family, friends, and the adopting couple.

The narrative in *Waitress* revolves around a young woman, Jenna, played by Keri Russell, who has a talent for inventing unique and delicious pie recipes in the small-town diner where she works but is financially dependent on her controlling husband, Earl, played by Jeremy Sisto. Early scenes in the film foreground her husband's demands that she profess unqualified support and love for him despite his refusal to allow her to have her own car or bank account. Jenna is devastated by the thought of having Earl's baby, but she begrudgingly prepares for motherhood rather than terminate her pregnancy.

Pregnant Women in a Post-Feminist Age

Leading female characters in these films go against the grain of mainstream media depictions of expecting mothers.¹⁶ Unlike the images of womanhood that conform to a nostalgic image of the nuclear family frequently featured in popular culture, none of these women look forward to motherhood; nor do they profess romantic interest in the men by whom they became pregnant.¹⁷ Allison becomes pregnant after a night of heavy drinking at a dance club with Ben, a man she met that evening while celebrating a promotion at her job at the E! News Channel. The film suggests that Allison would not likely have consented to sex with Ben had she not been inebriated. The film, however, glosses over Allison's impaired decision-making with some awkward humor, ultimately reducing the encounter to a poor choice rather than Ben's ability to take advantage of Allison's vulnerability. As the film progresses, Allison seems to have little difficulty keeping her high-profile job as an entertainment news reporter, even while she is eight months pregnant and has not told her employers she is an expecting mother. Thus, the film suggests that white, middle-class, heterosexual women have opportunities to succeed professionally and explore parenthood at the time of their choosing. Presumably, few structural barriers impede upon these women's opportunities for professional advancement.

Although Allison is hesitant to embrace motherhood, would-be father Ben responds with enthusiasm. This character departs from earlier depictions of men who respond to news of unexpected pregnancy with terror, ambivalence, and dread. Ben has an unusually upbeat response to Allison's pregnancy; rather than bemoan his future as a single father of a child with a woman he has met only recently, Ben approaches Allison's pregnancy as an opportunity to pursue an intimate relationship. After his father emphatically relates to Ben that a child is a blessing, Ben declares his dedication to caring for both Allison and the

approaching baby. Ben's efforts to support Allison flail, providing a key source of humor for most of the film as well as a source of tension that gets resolved during the film's conclusion. Furthermore, Ben embraces the pregnancy without any financial means to support a child, presumably depending on Allison's income. This portrayal defies the typical class demographics of parenting, in which single mothers are more likely to be poorer than single fathers.¹⁸

This character of the sincere, would-be father represents a masculine counterpart to the post-feminist female; as such, this character depiction helps to sustain the myth that women have achieved goals central to the liberal feminist movement.¹⁹ Dow argues that post-feminist portrayals of women would not have garnered traction in popular culture without the portrayal of the post-feminist man who is himself beyond patriarchy and ultimately supportive of women's choices.²⁰ Ben is a post-feminist man who understands that, ultimately, the decision to procreate is a woman's choice. As Ben tells Allison when he learns she has decided to have the baby, "It's my job to support whatever it is you decide to do. So could you please do me a favor and tell me one thing that I am supposed to do here?" Here, Ben's demur to Allison suggests that by virtue of her reproductive choices she exercises a certain degree of agency and authority characteristic of heterosexual romance after or beyond patriarchy.

Knocked Up provides an interesting revision to earlier post-feminist depictions of professional women struggling to manage their careers with more traditionally feminine aspirations of heterosexual romance and motherhood. Rather than present the nuclear family as a nostalgic ideal, this film presents a family model that divorces the myth of romance from the idealizations of parenthood. In this version of the nuclear family, the responsibilities and experiences of parenthood frustrate and alienate romantic couples. In this movie, family hardships are experienced by the film's subordinate characters Debbie and Pete, Allison's sister and brother-in-law (played by Leslie Mann and Paul Rudd). Debbie and Pete fight continually with one another over conflicts arising from their responsibilities as parents. The couple admits that they got married because Debbie became pregnant. Several years later, Pete now feels trapped, and Debbie is resentful that Pete would rather spend time away from home than with her. As Pete reflects, having children mainly serves to remind him of his "inability to enjoy anything." Unlike many romantic comedies revolving around struggles between parents over childrearing, *Knocked Up* never fully resolves this tension. For Debbie and Pete, marriage and children are not necessarily happy events; they turn once loving couples against one another. (Presumably, the prospects are less favorable for people who hardly know each other.)

Juno also resists conventions of traditional romance. Juno's decision to give her baby to another couple for adoption may be read in terms of post-feminism's celebration of women's reproductive agency. Juno flouts socially conservative gendered norms for friendship, dating, and sexual behavior. In one of the film's first scenes, Juno tells the audience that she had sex with her best friend, Paulie Bleeker, one night because she was bored. Indeed, Juno insists that she and Paulie are merely friends until the film's final moments. Further, both she and her parents express certainty that having sex was her idea, not Paulie's. In these instances, the movie codes Juno as socially rebellious and a progenitor of the sexual liberation movements articulated with Second Wave and Third Wave feminism.²¹ Juno asserts

control over her own body, expresses strong opinions, and shows greater interest in friends and hobbies than in heterosexual romance.

While Juno openly discusses her pregnancy, she frequently uses sarcasm or cracks jokes to disrupt adults' earnest conversations with her. When would-be adoptive mother Vanessa offers Juno a glass of vitamin water or orange juice, Juno sarcastically replies that she would rather have a double of Maker's Mark. In some ways, the film suggests that Juno's tough exterior is a means of coping with her feelings of vulnerability, but the film rarely depicts Juno expressing feelings of guilt over her pregnancy. Scenes of Juno's glib explanation of her pregnancy suggest that Juno has rejected discourses that treat unplanned pregnancies of unmarried teenage women as shameful. This attitude, while not typical in films about unplanned pregnancy, was cultivated in television programming of the late 1990s, including *Sex and the City* and (to a lesser extent) *Friends*, that featured single women with active sex lives who had unplanned pregnancies. Juno is the adolescent embodiment of post-feminist sensibilities, the kid sister of the 30-something characters from *Sex and the City* who "publicly repudiate[d] the shame of being single and sexually active in defiance of the bourgeois codes that used to be demanded of respectable women."²² (Although sex and unplanned pregnancy are not treated as shameful, we argue in the following section that this film provides a dismissive portrayal of abortion; thus, sex may not be shameful, but the decision to terminate a pregnancy is; to maintain her moral virtue, Juno decides to carry her unplanned pregnancy to term.)

The film also codes Juno as socially progressive. Indeed, she does not assume that a loving couple for an infant must be heterosexual or married. She describes the ideal parents who might adopt her baby as a "little edgier" than the "wholesome, spiritually wealthy couple" that her friend first identifies. Juno imagines "a couple of nice lesbos" or "a graphic designer, mid-30s, with a cool Asian girlfriend who, like, dresses awesome and rocks out on the bass guitar." Her left-of-center perspective is suggested by a comment that Paulie Bleeker's mom makes to him in one short scene: "You know how I feel about that girl. She's just different." Considered in conjunction with the film's post-feminist celebration of reproductive agency, Juno's expressed support for nontraditional family arrangements suggests that the nuclear family model itself is a vestige of an earlier era that does not resonate with young women who have grown up in a post-feminist era.

At the same time, Juno's comments concerning her baby's idealized adoptive parents reveal the film's significant class and race bias. Although she seeks a socially "edgy" couple, perhaps one that is interracial or gay, she prefers that they be professional and make enough money to dress well and otherwise socially perform their privileged class status. Juno's reference to a graphic designer with a "cool Asian girlfriend" indicates the assumed whiteness of the potential primary caregiver. In this regard, the film exemplifies how whites are given presumption by virtue of their taken-for-granted invisibility.²³ Further, her comment evokes a contemporary racial construction in Western culture that regards particular groups of upper-class Asians as hip, and in which whites attain cultural capital by virtue of association. Her preference is particularly telling given that the film depicts her own background as working-class. Juno's selection of a white, middle-class couple, Vanessa and Mark Loring (played by Jennifer Garner and Jason Bateman), highlights the film's adherence to hegemonic depictions of ideal parenting. Sarah Projansky argues that

the emphasis of choices made by white and middle-class women “reveal the class biases of post-feminism” and, in addition, “illustrate the dominance of whiteness in post-feminist discourse.”²⁴ To this we would add that Juno’s decision to adopt her child to parents who are wealthier than her own also reaffirms class and racial biases embedded within a post-nuclear family model.

Although it offers a less empowered image of femininity, *Waitress* also challenges earlier cinematic depictions of the ideal nuclear family while reaffirming an emphasis on white motherhood. In the movie’s first scene, Jenna takes a home-pregnancy test in the diner’s bathroom as her friends who also wait tables at the diner, Dawn (played by the film’s writer and director, Adrienne Shelly) and Becky (played by Cheryl Hines), look on. In the moment that the test confirms that Jenna is pregnant, Jenna tells her friends she is inventing a new pie in her head called “I don’t want Earl’s baby pie: a quiche of egg and brie cheese with a smoked ham center.” Jenna concludes, “I ain’t ever gonna get away from Earl now.” Several points in the film reiterate her disappointment over the pregnancy, as well as her feelings of dread over the baby’s impending arrival. After Jenna observes several women attempting to discipline their unruly children, one mother informs her, “No one ever tells you how ridiculously hard it’s going to be.” Toward the end of the film, Earl discovers stashes of money throughout the house that Jenna had been hiding until she had enough to leave him. To dispel Earl’s suspicions, she spends the money on baby furniture. As she shops, she imagines a letter to her future child: “Dear Damn Baby, if you ever want to know the story of how we bought your damn crib, I will tell you. Your crib was bought with the money that was supposed to buy me a new life. Every time I lay you down in that damn crib, I’m going to think, damn baby, damn crib.”

Waitress highlights the economic burdens of childbearing and the dangers that women in abusive relationships often face when they become pregnant or have children. Additionally, scenes that reference the moment of conception as the night when Earl got Jenna drunk indicate that their night of intercourse was not consensual. Similar to Allison in *Knocked Up*, Jenna becomes pregnant under circumstances in which her ability to consent was highly impaired. Both films, however, make light of the question of sexual consent and avoid any explicit reference to date or spousal rape. Furthermore, by highlighting the sexual politics of the nuclear family model, the film foregrounds some of the problems that drove feminism’s Second Wave, including domestic abuse, spousal rape, and inequality in the home.²⁵ This film’s attention to heterosexual relationships and marriage as a primary source of women’s oppression departs from the post-feminist orientation of most popular culture portrayals of family life that have ignored patriarchy in the home.²⁶

Although *Waitress* provides the bleakest portrayal, none of these films paint a rosy picture of nuclear family life. Women in these films express disdain for, discomfort with, or despair over the nuclear family. In this way, these movies’ narratives advance a critique of heterosexual romance within the nuclear family. We argue that this jaundiced image of parenting and family life provides a legitimating framework for the post-nuclear family. It is paradoxical that these films articulate women’s decisions to continue their pregnancies within this context; however, we argue that it is precisely this framework that enables these films to offer a compelling vision of motherhood that reconciles the decision to carry an

unwanted child to term with post-feminism's emphasis on choice. In short, these films approach the choice to continue an unplanned pregnancy as a mode of women's liberation by virtue of the fact that their decisions take place outside the oppressive structures of the traditional nuclear family. As a result, the films mystify the social and economic constraints on single motherhood that exist irrespective of alternative family configurations.

Dismissing Abortion

Since none of these women wanted a child and would face significant social, economic, or even physical consequences for having one, each of these women might struggle over the decision of how to respond to their unexpected pregnancies. However, each film treats the subject of abortion briefly, if it is addressed at all. Indeed, none of the characters in *Knocked Up* or *Waitress* utter the word. In *Waitress*, Jenna tells her obstetrician that she does not want the baby. Before the doctor can finish his sentence explaining what service his office "does not perform," Jenna interrupts to tell him, "No, I'm keeping it. I'm just telling you that I'm not so happy about it." Then she adds, "So maybe you can be sensitive and not congratulate me and make a big deal every time you see me. I'm having a baby, and that's that." The only other scene that hints at the subject of abortion takes place midway through the film after Earl discovers that Jenna is pregnant. Earl mumbles, "Maybe I don't want you having this baby. Maybe you might love it more than you love me." After Jenna feebly promises him that she will not love the baby more than him, Earl celebrates the news. The rest of the film depicts Jenna's life through the course of her pregnancy as she negotiates her relationship with her abusive husband, an exploitative sexual affair with her doctor, and her friendships with co-workers and patrons at the diner.

Two early scenes in *Knocked Up* briefly address the subject of abortion. In the first scene, Ben speaks with friends about his news that Allison is pregnant. Amidst lighthearted banter, his friend Jonah states that Ben should just "take care of it." Another friend, Jay, is shocked, "'Tell me you don't want him to get an A word!" Jonah replies, "I won't say it for your little baby ears over there, but it rhymes with shmooshmortion. I'm just saying . . . you should get a shmooshmortion at the shmooshmortion clinic." In the next scene, Allison argues with her mother about why she intends to keep the baby. Her mother tells her she cannot accept Allison's decision to continue the pregnancy because it would jeopardize her career, and she suggests she follow in the footsteps of her stepsister: "She had the same situation as you and she had it taken care of. And you know what? Now she has a real baby. Honey, this is not the time." In the next scene, Allison tells Ben that she has decided she is keeping the baby.

Although none of these films address abortion at much length, *Juno* deals with it most directly. When Juno first learns that she is pregnant, she confides to her friend that she plans to get an abortion. In the next scene, Juno calls a local clinic using her hamburger-shaped phone and glibly states that she is seeking to "procure a hasty abortion." After a few minutes in the waiting room of the clinic, however, Juno decides against it. Scenes at the clinic offer caricatures of abortion activists, both those in support of and those opposed to the procedure. Characters representing both positions are young women roughly Juno's age. The lone abortion protester standing in front of the clinic shouts, "all babies want to get borned." Juno recognizes this person as a classmate, Su-Chin, and the two engage

in small talk until Su-Chin remembers to tell Juno, "All babies have a beating heart, feel pain, and have fingernails!" The receptionist inside the clinic has multiple face piercings and wears thick, black eyeliner; she does not look up from her handheld videogame to address Juno for several moments. When she does, she hands Juno paperwork, and offers her boysenberry-flavored condoms with the recommendation, "My boyfriend uses them every time we have intercourse. They make his junk smell like pie." As the only characters in the film who indicate a position on the controversy surrounding abortion, these two women Juno confronts contribute to the film's depoliticization of abortion by making both sides appear immature and inarticulate. Neither of them offers more insight than perhaps a quick laugh.

The consequences of Juno's decision are also addressed briefly. After Juno tells her friend Leah that she has decided to "stay pregnant," Leah expresses concern that she might not be allowed to graduate from high school or go on spring break. Juno replies, "Maybe they'll like canonize me for being so selfless." Abortion is indirectly addressed a few scenes later when Juno finally tells her parents that she is pregnant. After she announces that she has decided to give her baby up for adoption, her stepmother, Bren, asks her if she has "considered the alternative." Juno simply says, "No." Her stepmother nods, smiles, and declares, "Well, you're a little Viking." As a final note, Bren states, "You'll need prenatal vitamins. Incidentally, they do incredible things for your nails, so that's a plus." Bren's trivialization of Juno's pregnancy as a beauty regimen is the last word on the subject of Juno's decision, thus, the harsh realities of life for pregnant teenagers is dealt with brusquely. Juno's decision is beyond deliberation. Of course, the film does not seriously suggest that anyone would choose to continue a pregnancy for its beauty benefits, but nonetheless, we believe that this humorous treatment of Juno's decision has political undertones.

These films' scant or dismissive references to abortion may be articulated to a post-feminist principle that privileges women's decisions devoid of contextual considerations. In this way, post-feminist discourse adopts much of the language of feminism's Second Wave while stripping it of political force. Within a post-feminist paradigm, to question the choice to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term is tantamount to a rejection of women's liberation. The main female characters' decisions to continue their pregnancies either ignore or background material conditions and other structural constraints outside of individual women's control.²⁷ Presumably, their decision was made relatively easier by the advantages afforded by their class status. Discourses embracing women's choice typically reflect economic privilege, or embrace what Elspeth Probyn refers to as *choiceoisie*, an ideology of choice that celebrates individual rights without the corresponding structural critique of patriarchy and capitalism offered by feminists of the Second Wave. Women's ability to choose between a career and family may be enabled by a particular class status; however, Probyn writes that "one could rightly argue that at a material level the great majority of women still have very little to choose from and that all these representations that fill the air with alluring options are but ideological manifestations."²⁸ Such characterizations of reproductive agency obscure insights of Second Wave feminism that have attended to the ways in which women's choices are limited within the prevailing sex/gender system.²⁹ Ann Crittenden observes that "the big problem with the rhetoric of choice is that it always

leaves out power. Those who benefit from the status quo always attribute inequalities to the choices of the underdog. "To most women choice is all about bad options and difficult decisions."³⁰ The rhetoric of choice is a double-edged sword. Within a post-feminist paradigm, blame for women's struggles may be placed on women themselves on the basis of their poor decisions. The treatment of abortion within each film reinforces the idea that women themselves have full autonomy to make decisions about their reproductive options. Scenes in which each woman declares her decision to bring her pregnancy to term reiterate the post-feminist assumption that a woman's choice is beyond question or debate; thus, the films frame the humorous events and romantic encounters that these women face as expressions of pregnant women's agency.

Pregnancy as the Starting Point for Nontraditional Romance

Each film's early dispensing with the abortion option enables the filmmakers to get on with the romantic comedy narratives typical of conventional Hollywood films. Ben and Allison's pursuit of a romantic relationship for the sake of the baby is the punchline for the film's comedy. Their interaction on the morning after their drunken night together highlights their incompatibility. Over breakfast, Allison learns that Ben has been living off a legal settlement he won during high school after he was hit by a postal worker's car. His only plan for making money is through a website he and his friends have been building that identifies female nude scenes in popular movies. Allison does not contact Ben again until she gives him the news that she is pregnant. Ben's pursuit of Allison is a focal point for the movie's humor. Mainstream film critics noted that Allison is by far more attractive, and more financially stable, than Ben.³¹ Thus, Allison's pregnancy might be construed as Ben's good fortune.

In a tongue-in-cheek reversal of a traditional narrative in which the mother is presumed to be the primary caregiver, Ben confesses his anxiety that Allison might abandon him. "I couldn't take it," he tells Allison, "I can't raise this baby alone." The narrative begins to follow more traditional plot conventions once Allison questions Ben's commitment to caring for the baby and ends the relationship. The film's resolution nears once Ben, determined to win her back, finally gets a steady job, moves into his own apartment, and reads books about parenting. That Ben is finally prepared to accept fatherhood is demonstrated when Allison goes into labor. Incredibly, Ben knows what to do. Ben's fit for Allison is suggested in a scene near the end of the film, in which Ben asserts his role as the head of the family and insists that he, not Debbie, stays with Allison in the delivery room. Furrowing her brow, Debbie admits, "He's going to be a good father. I think I like him." This conclusion more closely conforms to typical romantic comedies in which the male character transforms himself to meet a traditional model of masculinity. Ben assumes the role of family breadwinner in the film's final moment.

Juno also presents unconventional romance as an alternative to the nuclear family model. Although teenage pregnancy is the underlying premise of *Juno*, one critic referred to the film as a romantic comedy about adolescent longing.³² Midway through the film, the narrative shifts from the tensions caused by Juno's unexpected pregnancy toward her conflict with Paulie Bleeker. Juno is brokenhearted to find out that Paulie has asked another girl to the prom even though Juno was the one who suggested he ask the other girl out.

The scene in which Juno confronts Paulie reveals that what has appeared as Juno's adolescent expression of rebellion is really her mechanism for avoiding rejection should other people not reciprocate her genuine expressions of affection. Paulie suggests he knows better as well. He reveals to her that he knows she was not bored the night that they had sex; after all, her favorite movie was playing on Starz. In a following scene, Juno seeks solace from her father, who urges her to seek the person who accepts her for who she is. With newfound understanding, Juno approaches Paulie the next day and professes her love for him. At this point, the film shows greater adherence to the romantic comedy genre. In her final words in the film, Juno tells the audience, "I know people are supposed to fall in love before they reproduce, but I guess normalcy isn't really our style."

The unconventional romantic narrative in these films is perhaps most striking in *Waitress*. Although her husband controls much of her life, Jenna pursues a passionate sexual relationship with her obstetrician, Dr. Pommatter (played by Nathan Fillion). Jenna's willingness to explore this social taboo further reinforces the development of Jenna's character as an unconventional mother-to-be. At the same time, her supposed willingness to participate in the affair obscures the gendered power dynamics and gross violation of the doctor-patient relationship. Indeed, Jenna initiates the relationship by kissing him after she realizes that he is infatuated with her. The last half of the film includes a montage sequence of the two kissing and half-dressed in various settings, including his examination table, office, and car. This social violation is a key point of humor in the film, which is also marked by Jenna's absurd grin in following scenes at her grim workplace and home. Jenna's illicit relationship continues until the film's conclusion.

Waitress prompts audiences to understand these scenes as a lighthearted contrast with the movie's darker images of spousal abuse and as evidence of Jenna's emerging autonomy from her controlling husband. The dominant reading of Jenna's adultery rests upon post-feminism's uncritical celebration of women's agency; however, Jenna's adulterous affair is premised upon a violation of the doctor-patient code of professionalism that functions as a means to protect patients from potential exploitation and abuse. By foregrounding Jenna's pursuit of her own physician, the film elides the power dynamics in the male-dominated medical profession through which physicians have (consciously or not) reasserted patriarchal relations. In this regard, *Waitress's* subtlety reasserts problematic post-feminist assumptions about women's autonomy even as it offers another more critical narrative about patriarchy in the home. Further, by mediating Jenna's blossoming autonomy through her relationship to her married obstetrician, the film reasserts the centrality of heterosexuality and masculinity to women's own empowerment. Unconventional romances in each of these movies resolve the contradiction created by female main characters who simultaneously determine to carry unplanned pregnancies to term yet are resistant to embracing the nuclear family. By engaging in romance after they become pregnant, these characters suggest that heterosexual romance and marriage is but one option available to them. Paradoxically, the movies' challenge to the nuclear family is both enabled and constrained by the themes of unconventional romance. Although the films' plots challenge traditional narratives of romance in the nuclear family, each woman's love affair reasserts the centrality of heterosexual romance and heteronormativity rarely challenged in Hollywood.³³

Resignifying Choice

Knocked Up, *Juno*, and *Waitress* extend the post-feminist depoliticization of reproductive agency by reframing the meaning of choice in terms of heterosexual romance. That is, the issue of choice in these movies revolves around how men respond to the obligations of parenting and how pregnant women negotiate the place of such ambivalent men in their lives. The romantic narratives in these films are unconventional, not only for beginning with a woman's pregnancy but also for failing to guarantee a happy outcome for the would-be parents. In contrast with typical portrayals of heterosexual love, women in each of these movies suggest traditional romance might not offer the promise of transcendent love.³⁴ Although *Knocked Up* concludes with a more conventional Hollywood celebration of Ben's acceptance of adult responsibility, it does not provide satisfying affirmation of the couple's romantic future. As director Judd Apatow noted for a *New York Times Magazine* essay entitled "Judd Apatow's Family Values," "The movie has a happy ending, but you leave thinking they could break up in three days."³⁵

Female lead characters in each of these films express reluctance or refusal to embrace motherhood, but doubt about male characters' willingness to fulfill their roles in the nuclear family provides a primary source of romantic conflict in each of these films. In this regard, these films displace a conception of choice in terms of women's reproductive agency with men's decisions to accept the responsibilities of fatherhood. Several film critics suggest that the most interesting aspect of *Knocked Up* is the film's emphasis on Ben's desire to be a father; presumably, most men faced with an unplanned pregnancy are reluctant to become one.³⁶ But this film does not suggest that Ben has completely embraced fatherhood. During one scene in which Allison and Ben are having dinner with Debbie and Pete, Ben urges Allison to admit that if they could go back in time to the night that they had sex, she would make sure Ben had worn a condom. Allison and Debbie insist that they do not understand what Ben is saying. Even in fantasy, Allison will not consider a thought experiment that would undo her pregnancy. Pete, however, understands Ben well. Later in the film, Pete reveals his biggest problem is that he has trouble accepting Debbie's love and desire for him to play a stronger role in the family. When Debbie insists that she and Pete help Allison raise her own baby, Pete replies, "Well, shit!" This scene amplifies the myth that women's desire to be mothers are beyond question, but men's own parenting instincts are questionable at best.

Pete's difficulty is shared by Mark, the would-be adoptive father of Juno's baby. Toward the end of the film, Mark announces that he is leaving Vanessa. He explains that ever since he and Vanessa met Juno, he has felt Juno's presence as a "ticking clock." Mark then asserts that he is not ready to be a father. In an attempt to soothe Juno's anxieties, Vanessa tells her, "I've read about this. The books all say the same thing. A woman becomes a mother when she gets pregnant. A man becomes a father when he sees his baby." Although Mark has made a different choice, Vanessa is committed to Juno's baby nonetheless. A foil to Juno's character throughout the film, Vanessa reflects many of the traditional stereotypes of maternal femininity. When she meets Juno, she tells her, "I always wanted to be a mom." Later, when she runs into Juno at the mall, Vanessa beams when she feels the baby kick inside Juno's stomach. Although she is conventional in her desire to have a baby with her husband, Vanessa's character unwittingly advances a post-nuclear family model. Once

Juno realizes that Mark is not going to adopt her child, she sends Vanessa a note: "I'm still in if you're still in." The film's final image of Vanessa shows her at home with the baby in her arms. Despite her best efforts to fulfill a more traditional mothering role, she has voluntarily become a single mom herself. At the same time, Vanessa's choice to become a single mother, without becoming pregnant, also reflects the consumer dynamic of choice at work in the post-nuclear family. As a white, professional woman, Vanessa exercises the range of choices at her disposal, to "have it all," so to speak: autonomy, career, and child.

A lesson that may be derived from *Juno* and *Knocked Up* is that motherhood is not a choice that a pregnant woman makes; rather women may become mothers at the moment a child is conceived. Women's maternal obligations pertain even for characters Debbie and Vanessa, who are not pregnant themselves. Men, on the other hand, have the option to decide whether they want to commit to children or not. Indeed, Debbie's husband, Pete, expresses remorse over the effect of his children on his marriage, and Vanessa's husband, Mark, expresses disdain over the potential threat a child might have on his lifestyle. These messages have multiple implications for understanding how these recent films give meaning to abortion, unplanned pregnancy, and heterosexual relationships. That most of the women in these films are committed to children before they are born suggests these films presume a fetus is a child, putting in narrative form an assumption that remains contested in political debates over abortion. Further, this message amplifies and renaturalizes the cult of womanhood that assigns child-rearing responsibilities principally to women based on a belief in an inherent difference between men's and women's roles as parents.³⁷ Presumably, men in these films do not have such instinctual parenting skills. Thus, they are not held to the same standard for childrearing as women are.

Waitress also reorients the concept of choice from the practice of abortion to a father's ambivalence over childrearing. Earl is the only character to suggest that Jenna terminate her pregnancy because he is unsure that he can cope with the possibility of his wife loving anyone more than she loves him. Ostensibly, embracing fatherhood threatens Earl's own sense of security. Earl's statement that he is not sure he wants Jenna to have the baby portrays parenthood as a man's prerogative. Further, Earl's dialogue indicates that, for Jenna, having an abortion would be no choice at all. It would represent another instance of Earl controlling her life.

As the narrative progresses, *Waitress* articulates the notion of choice to a different conflict: Jenna's disingenuous marriage to Earl and her exploitative sexual relationship with Dr. Pomatter. Toward the end of the film, Jenna's frequent customer at the diner, Old Joe, confronts her about her marriage, illicit affair, and dead-end job at the diner. He urges her to get a fresh start on life, and repeatedly entreats her to "make the right choice." Soon after Old Joe speaks to her, Jenna goes into labor. During the process of giving birth, Jenna shrieks, "I don't want no baby, Earl!" But soon after the baby is born, Jenna's character takes an abrupt shift. The moment Jenna looks into her baby's eyes, she gasps, obviously breath-taken. With her baby in her arms, Jenna openly defies Earl for the first time in the film. Looking directly at him, she declares that she does not love him and wants a divorce. To prove she is not joking, she continues, "I want you the hell out of my life. You are never to touch me ever again. I am done with you." After Earl is escorted out of the hospital, Jenna opens a card given to her by Old Joe and finds a check for a substantial amount of

money. Jenna's sudden and newfound wealth obviates the need for the film to grapple with how she could financially support her child on a waitress's salary, a privilege seldom afforded to single mothers. Jenna immediately ends the affair with her doctor. Presumably, the "right choice" for Jenna is to leave her abusive husband and end her adulterous relationship. Before she leaves the hospital with her girlfriends, Jenna announces the name of her baby, "Lulu, the love of my life." In this moment, the film reveals that the real love story is not about Jenna's relationship with Earl or with Dr. Pomatter; it is with her infant daughter. Just before the closing credits, the film shows the following years of Jenna's life in which she bakes pies in her own diner with her daughter at her side.

Although each film depicts would-be mothers as unconventional women with little interest in meeting a traditional model of femininity, the narratives across each of these movies ultimately restore the myth of motherhood. Dislodging the language of choice from discourses about abortion, the films refigure the meaning of choice by foregrounding women's unwavering commitment to carrying their unwanted pregnancies to term. Reproductive agency in these films is grounded in the control that comes from a woman's decision to bear a child.

These films also refigure the meaning of choice by featuring men's ambivalences over childrearing as the central problem constraining women's lives. Romantic idealism attached to the nuclear family is disrupted in scenes that feature men's reluctance to become fathers. In *Waitress*, Earl's ambivalence provides a central explanation for Jenna's resistance to motherhood. In *Juno*, Vanessa remains committed to Juno's baby even though Mark is not. The problem is not that Jenna and Vanessa are not maternal enough to carry their pregnancies to term or to raise children; the problem is that the men in their lives are not equally committed to childcare. Since the choice for these women to raise a baby is a foregone conclusion, their only choice is whether they are going to keep their men. Ultimately, *Juno* and *Waitress* reaffirm an idealized image of motherhood by removing motherhood from the larger myth of the nuclear family. By divorcing fatherhood from the post-nuclear family, these two films put forth post-feminist narratives that decouple women's reproductive agency from discourses about abortion.

Valorizing Motherhood, Ignoring Women

Taken together, *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress* obfuscate the politics of women's reproductive agency and provide a constrictive model of feminist empowerment. While they have sustained the myth that women's progress continues, popular post-feminist texts have crossed a new frontier: into the home. As Dow notes, post-feminist discourses have been premised on a rejection of sexual politics, including the Second Wave's critique of the nuclear family.³⁸ The critique of intimate heterosexual relationships as a primary source of women's oppression fundamentally challenged patriarchal structures under advanced capitalism.³⁹ Dow argues that post-feminism and the backlash against feminism converge around a presumed natural difference between men and women; thus, both responses to feminism advance what Rosenfelt and Stacey refer to as a "conservative profamily vision . . . that assumes the inevitability or superiority of heterosexual marriage and motherhood."⁴⁰ Although these films disrupt nostalgic visions of parenthood within a nuclear

family romance, they divorce the critique of the nuclear family from its structural and political implications by rearticulating post-feminist choice as a neo-traditional concept of motherhood.

These films' depictions of women's decisions to continue their pregnancies to term obscure how growing numbers of women have decided not to have children, including those who have had abortions.⁴¹ By depicting the decision to carry a fetus to term as a choice that is beyond question, these films stigmatize women who have had abortions as unnatural and unfeminine. In these ways, these films naturalize a particular relationship to pregnancy in which carrying a fetus to term is the assumed choice. Thus, these movies ignore the variables that contribute to women's reproductive choices. That middle- and upper-class young women with unwanted pregnancies are more likely to have an abortion than poor and working-class young women suggests that women's decisions are not instinctual or haphazard but emerge out of a complex set of social and cultural factors, including race, age, access to clinics, and opportunities outside of the family.⁴²

The post-nuclear family model in contemporary media also discourages a sustained structural critique of patriarchy under capitalism. Although post-nuclear family discourses challenge forms of exploitation of women in the home such as domestic violence, men's lack of involvement in childcare, and men's control over the family wage, the material structures that contributed to the rise of the nuclear family model remain. Put differently, these discourses rearrange the family but do not change the fact that women still make less money on average than men do. By celebrating the female-headed household as the panacea for women's oppression at home, material exploitation of women becomes more difficult to identify and critique.

By resignifying the meaning of choice to expecting mothers' relationships to would-be fathers, Hollywood's valorization of unplanned pregnancy also reduces the politics of reproductive agency to middle-class women's access to abortion and reproductive options. This reduction of reproductive rights to the rhetoric of "choice" obscures the ways in which women of color have struggled for the right to bear and raise children free of government intervention and control in the United States.⁴³ The presentation of adoption as a preferable alternative to abortion in *Juno* minimizes the structural inequities underlying adoption policies. Vanessa's centrality to the happy ending in *Juno* offers a vivid example of how class distinctions have circumscribed women's legitimate relationships to babies and motherhood around white women with economic privilege. Thus, Juno's commitment to give her baby to Vanessa glosses over the ways in which white, middle-class families have greater reproductive agency by virtue of the constraints that poor, single, pregnant women face. By celebrating Vanessa's decision to raise the baby as a single mother, *Juno* deflects attention from the ways in which Vanessa's own reproductive options actually depended upon Juno's own reproductive vulnerability.

Although the film breezes over Juno's own vulnerability in relationship to Vanessa and Mark, Juno did share some privileged status as a white woman; despite her working-class background, Juno's visibility also positions her as a sympathetic character for white audiences catered to by the Hollywood film industry. In contrast with the film's portrayal of this plucky adolescent, mainstream media consistently position black teenage mothers as systemic social problems and rarely as the premise for romantic comedy. A consideration

of the ways in which Hollywood consistently valorizes white motherhood to the exclusion of depictions of black motherhood highlights the ways in which popular media have obscured the racial politics of reproductive rights.

Indeed, mainstream discourses about women's reproductive options have historically revolved around the interests of wealthier, whiter women who organized the liberal feminist movement during the Second Wave. Rickie Sollinger argues that Second Wave feminism's use of "choice" as a label for reproductive agency is premised on the logics of the marketplace under liberal capitalism. According to Sollinger, the rhetoric of "choice" affirms the principle that motherhood should be a class privilege appropriate only for women who can afford it.⁴⁴ The rhetoric of choice frames women's reproduction as a consumer protection in which only those women with sufficient economic resources are "presumed legitimate consumers to enter the (reproductive) marketplace."⁴⁵ Sollinger suggests that legislators marshaled rhetorics of choice during the 1980s and 1990s to justify policies aimed at denying poor mothers public services. Thus, policies designed to limit public support for single families rested on the premise that poor, single women had made the wrong decision. Assumptions about women's universal access to abortion after *Roe v. Wade* was leveraged as a rationale for blaming poverty on young mothers, single mothers, and mothers of color.⁴⁶

Discourses articulating the post-nuclear family portray the role of men in much the same way as post-feminist rhetorics frame reproduction as a women's privilege to exercise discrimination in the marketplace if she has adequate resources to begin with. The post-nuclear family's suggestion that fatherhood and romantic attachment is a choice that women and men can make reinforces the illusion that, at least for white women, single motherhood is a rewarding alternative to unsatisfying and uncommitted relationships with reluctant fathers. However, women with few economic resources of their own find that the marketplace itself offers few desirable options. The valorization of single motherhood in contemporary media underplays the structural, material constraints of childrearing under the conditions of late capitalism and patriarchy. The dearth of institutional support for childcare in the US, continued wage discrimination against working mothers, and legislation denying public support to poor, single women are factors that explain why the choice to raise a child is a particularly difficult one for single women. Public policies and media discourses that accord primary childcare responsibilities to mothers ignore the material conditions that put mothers at the greatest disadvantage in the paid labor force. Crittenden indicates that it is "mothers' differential responsibility for children, rather than classic sex discrimination," that is the most important factor disposing women to poverty.⁴⁷ Mothers' unpaid labor at home and lower-than-average salaries in the workplace explain why single female-headed households remain the poorest in the country.⁴⁸

The post-nuclear family model valorized in these films ultimately recenters patriarchy by ignoring the structural inequities that leave families headed by single mothers the poorest demographic group in the nation. Thus, the post-nuclear family is not an alternative to patriarchy under liberal capitalism but a set of cultural discourses that reinforces public policies that have blamed impoverished, single mothers for making poor choices. Now, not only may women be derided for making the "wrong" choice about reproduction, they

may also be blamed for making poor choices in their heterosexual relationships (or, conversely, for choosing not to be in such relationships at all).

The depoliticization of reproductive agency in post-feminist cultural discourse marks a shift in how our culture treats the politics of women's rights. At best, the post-nuclear family model provides an inadequate and decontextualized portrayal of unwanted pregnancy that in many ways does not resemble the socioeconomic conditions and tough decisions that different groups of pregnant women face. At worst, this model reaffirms the myth of women's progress that is premised on the denial of women's differential access to reproductive health and childcare. Indeed, current post-feminist articulations of feminist political agency simultaneously disable discussion about the politics of choice and current political efforts to curtail women's reproductive agency. This accounts for the absence of an earnest discussion of abortion, women's reproductive freedom, and the politics of motherhood. In its place is a hollowed shell of feminist politics embodied by a post-nuclear family that looks slightly different than the old patriarchy confronted by Second Wave feminists yet clings to the neo-traditional ideas and material structures that disable the advancement of women's liberation.

About the Authors

Kristen Hoerl is an assistant professor in the College of Communications at Butler University.

Casey Ryan Kelly is a visiting assistant professor in the College of Communications at Butler University.

Acknowledgments – The authors thank Mary Vavrus, the editor, and anonymous reviewers for thoughtful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

Notes

- [1] Michelle Bernard, "Transcript: Analyzing Palin's Convention Speech; More Heavy Weather Crossing the Atlantic," *CNN American Morning*, September 4, 2008, Lexis-Nexis (090402CN.V74).
- [2] Dahlia Lithwick, "Republicans and the Illusion of Reproductive Choice," *Newsweek*, September 8, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/157909/> (accessed February 10, 2009).
- [3] *ABC News*, "Why Abortions are Down in America—But Why?," 17 January 2008, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Story?id_4151508&page_1 (accessed 27 August 2008). The Guttmacher report actually attributes the decline in abortion rates to the increasing availability of sex education and contraception, particularly emergency contraception such as the morning after pill.
- [4] *ABC News*, "Why Abortions."
- [5] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Vicki Coppock, *The Illusion of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds., *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Ann Brooks, *Post-Feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997).

- [6] Mary Douglas Vavrus, "Opting Out Moms in the News: Selling New Traditionalism in the New Millennium," *Feminist Media Studies* 7 (2007): 52.
- [7] See Coppock, *The Illusion of Post-Feminism*; Judith Stacey, "The New Conservative Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 559–83; Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey, "Review: Second Thoughts on the Second Wave," *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987): 341–61; Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992/2000).
- [8] Elspeth Probyn, "New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home," *Screen* 31 (1990): 147–59. Also see Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- [9] Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
- [10] Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 7.
- [11] *Juno* grossed over \$140 million in box office sales. Later that year, the Academy of Motion Pictures awarded Diablo Cody an Oscar for writing the screenplay and nominated the film for four other awards, including Best Picture and Best Actress for Ellen Page's performance as the film's main character. The film also received recognition from other film societies, including a Critics Choice award for Best Comedy from the Broadcast Film Critics Association, Independent Spirit Awards for Best Feature Film, Best Female Lead, and Best Screenplay, and an MTV Movie Award for Ellen Page. *Knocked Up* shared box office success with *Juno*, grossing over \$148 million. It won a People's Choice Award for Favorite Movie Comedy in 2008 and a Teen's Choice Award for Best Comedy. The movie received other nods as well, including nominations for best comedy from the Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards; and acting award nominations for Seth Rogen's and Katherine Heigl's performances from MTV Movie Awards. *Waitress* grossed \$19 million at the box office in 2007. After it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, *Waitress* received an award in 2007 for the Best Performance by an Ensemble Cast from the Chlotrudis Society for Independent Film, and was nominated for an Independent Spirit award for Best Screenplay and a Humanities prize by the Lilly Foundation for encouraging positive human values. This information is archived at <http://www.imdb.com> (accessed August 31, 2008).
- [12] Shelly's death is a stark example of gendered violence in Western society. Although the intimate partner violence that *Waitress*'s main character Jenna experiences is less extreme, a comparison of Shelly's murder and the narrative in *Waitress* highlights the connection between mediated depictions of gendered violence and real life violence against women.
- [13] Dana L. Cloud, "The Limits of Interpretation: Ambivalence and the Stereotype in Spencer: For Hire," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9 (1992): 311–24; and Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 103–22.
- [14] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 8.
- [15] Helene A. Shugart, "Reinventing Privilege: The New 'Gay' Man in Contemporary Popular Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20 (2003): 67–91.
- [16] See Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 8–10. Coontz describes the nuclear family model as a man and a woman waiting until after marriage to have a family and according primary child raising responsibilities to the mother. For a discussion of contemporary media messages that depict motherhood as central to women's lives see Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: The Free Press, 2004), 4; Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

- [17] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151–74.
- [18] Douglas, *Mommy Myth*, 86–87.
- [19] Bonnie J. Dow, "The Traffic in Men and the Fatal Attraction of Post-feminist Masculinity," *Women's Studies in Communication* 29 (2006): 113–31.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 114.
- [21] Jane Arthurs, "Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Post-Feminist Drama," *Feminist Media Studies* 3 (2003): 83–98.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 85.
- [23] See Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 180. In her study of film and television programs depicting deracialized portrayals of rape, Projansky observes what she calls "postfeminism's pervasive whiteness." She argues that postfeminist discourses make no distinctions between the cultural and social experiences of women and mistakenly praise the middle-class, heterosexual women's relative economic success as that of all women. Whiteness can also be understood as what Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek call a "strategic rhetoric" in which "the experiences and communication patterns of Whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked" (293). As we have noted, other feminist scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg work from a definition similar to that of Nakayama and Krizek, that whiteness also functions through marking the racial difference of Others while constructing white identity as nonracial or racially neutral. See also, Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 291–309; and Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- [24] Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 78–79.
- [25] Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: Questions for Feminism* (New York: Verso Books, 1996).
- [26] See Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, and Rosenfelt and Stacey, "Review."
- [27] See Rachel Dubrofsky, "Ally McBeal as Post-Feminist Icon: The Aestheticizing and Fetishizing of the Independent Working Woman," *Communication Review* 5 (2002): 265–84.
- [28] Elspeth Probyn, "Choosing Choice: Images of Sexuality and 'Choiceoisie' in Popular Culture," in *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance*, ed. Sue Fisher and Katy Davis (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 278–94.
- [29] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 95.
- [30] Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 234, 237.
- [31] Peter Travers, "Knocked-Up," *Rolling Stone*, 30 May 2007, <http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews> (accessed August 31, 2008); Robert Wilonsky, "Knocked Up: Judd Apatow Delivers Another Spot-on-Geek-Fantasy-Come-True," *Houston Press*, May 31, 2007, <http://www.houstonpress.com/2007-05-31/film/knocked-up/> (accessed August 31, 2008).
- [32] See Peter Travers, "Juno," *Rolling Stone*, December 13, 2007, <http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews> (accessed August 31, 2008).
- [33] Shugart, "Reinventing."
- [34] For more on portrayals of transcendent love in mass-mediated texts see Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Post-Feminist Age* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- [35] Stephen Rodrick, "Judd Apatow's Family Values," *New York Times Magazine*, May 27, 2007, 37.

- [36] Bob Longino, "Knocked Up Delivers the Laughs," *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, June 1, 2007, 1E; Jack Mathews, "Oh How Cute! Knocked Up Delivers Big Laughs as Baby Makes Glee," *Daily News*, June, 1 2007, 41.
- [37] See Hays, *Contradictions*, and Welter, "Cult."
- [38] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*.
- [39] Stacey, "New Conservative"; and Rosenfelt and Stacey, "Review."
- [40] Rosenfelt and Stacey, "Review," 346.
- [41] In 2008, the Census Bureau revealed that women were waiting longer to have children or choosing not to have children than in any earlier period in the United States. For more see Katie Zezima, "More Women Than Ever are Childless, Census Finds," *New York Times*, August 19, 2008, A12.
- [42] See Stephanie Ventura and Christine A. Bachrach, "Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–1999," US Department of Health and Human Services, National Vital Statistics Reports 48 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001).
- [43] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Rickie Sollinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).
- [44] Sollinger, *Beggars*, 7.
- [45] *Ibid.*, 224.
- [46] *Ibid.*, 189.
- [47] Crittenden, *Motherhood*, 95.
- [48] *Ibid.*, 94, 95. Crittenden notes that "The pay gap between mothers and nonmothers under age thirty-five is now larger than the wage gap between young men and women," and that "in 1991, thirty-year-old American women without children were making 90 percent of men's wages. While comparable women with children were making only 70 percent."